The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Robert Cahill
Conducted by Jason Stewart
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Transcribed by Alexia Romero

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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.

Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Robert Cahill. Today is September 29th, 2009. I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech, and Mr. Cahill is joining my phone from Longview, Texas. All right, why don't we begin, if you could tell me a little biographical information about yourself? First of all, when and where were you born?

Robert Cahill: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio.

JS: All right.

RC: On September 20th, 1948.

JS: Okay, all right, could you tell me a little bit about your parents? First of all, what were their names, and what did they do for a living?

RC: My father's name was John Cahill, and he worked in the steel mill. And my mother's name was Georgina Cahill, and she was a housewife, a home maker.

JS: Yes, sir. All right did you grow up in Ohio?

RC: Yes.

JS: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about growing up? What was that like for you?

RC: Oh well, we came from a lower-middle-income family. But I had a good childhood. My father was real active with us, played sports, teaching us to box, just doing a lot of things with us. And my mother was a good mother. She always helped us with our homework and made sure everything ran well in the household. I had an older brother and younger sister. Like I said we were lower middle income, but I never had any problems with that. We didn't have a whole lot material wise, but we had a lot more things. I'm very fortunate to have the parents I had and the upbringing I had.

JS: Yes, sir. Well as a kid growing up did you have any interest in the military?

RC: Yeah, because my father—he was a World War II. In fact he was a prisoner of war.

JS: Oh wow.

RC: He spent twenty-seven months in Germany. And all my uncles and cousins and everybody joined the military when they came of age. It was like the right of passage. After high school if we didn't go to college, we'd go into the military. And I knew because I goofed around a little in high school and didn't have the grades for a scholarship and we didn't have the money to attend college, so I felt my only avenue to go would be to join the military. My dad gave me some advice on that. Like I said, he said he was a prisoner of war, he was in the Army, and he—because I joined when I was age seventeen right after I graduated, he suggested that I not join the Marine Corps, not join the Army, but I join the Navy or Air Force, so I'd have a hot meal and a bunk and all that stuff. So, I did; I joined the Navy for four years. Turned out I ended up with the Marines for three years and four months of the four years as a Fleet Marine Force corpsman.

JS: Right, yes, sir. Before we get into your time as a corpsman, can you talk a little bit more on the—I guess about growing up as far as—did you pay attention to what was going on in the world with the Cold War and know what was happening?

RC: No, not really. I do remember worrying as a child once I saw Khrushchev pounding his shoe on the table thing, and they were going to bury us. I think that was in 1958. I always had some concerns in the back of my mind that something bad would happen.

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: Of course, the Cold War never escalated to anything else, so my worries were for nothing.

JS: All right, when did you graduate from high school?

RC: In 1966.

JS: In 1966. All right, and what was the name of your high school, if you don't mind me asking?

RC: Struthers.

JS: Struthers?

RC: S-T-R-U-T-H-E-R-S, Struthers High School in a suburb of Youngstown.

JS: Right. Yes, sir. Now once you graduated and joined the Navy at that point, did you have—did you know anything about what was going on in Vietnam?

RC: Yes, I did because my brother was in Vietnam at the time.

JS: All right, would you mind talking a little bit about his service?

RC: He joined the year before me. He was a year and a half older, and he went into the Seabees. He joined the Navy as a Seabee. He took two tours in Vietnam. But he saw very little, if any, action. He is one of the few guys who will admit that. I know a lot of guys—they go to 'Nam and make up all kinds of stories that aren't true. But my brother was true to heart, and he had it pretty good in Vietnam.

JS: All right, you said he served two tours?

RC: Yes, sir.

JS: When did he come home from his final tour?

RC: Well, unfortunately, he was going to be court martialed during his second tour for smoking marijuana. And he got his orders to go stateside, to the brig in Washington State. As soon as they sent him stateside, I got my orders to Vietnam.

JS: Hm-mm, yes, sir.

RC: So, I got him to thank for it.

JS: (Laugh) Right. Well, could you talk a little bit about when—so you joined right out of high school?

RC: Yes, sir.

JS: Okay, all right, where did you go to basic?

RC: Great Lakes, Illinois.

JS: All right, would you mind talking just a little bit about basic and what that was like for you?

RC: It wasn't too bad. At first most of us were homesick, didn't really know what to expect. But I had no problem in basic training. I did what I was told to do and kept my nose clean. You know, just learned what I needed to learn, and got out after thirteen weeks. That was it. Supposed to be in for twelve weeks, but they held me back because they said that I needed glasses, so I was held back a week to get glasses. And after that thirteen weeks, I got orders to the Hospital Corps School. That was in Great Lakes, Illinois, too. I didn't want to be a corpsman. Ironically, I told the recruiter at the time, I didn't want to be a corpsman because I had a cousin who was also in Vietnam, and he was Marine, and I knew many of the corpsman become Fleet Marine Force corpsmen. And I said, "I'm undecided what school I want to go to." And they said, "The test—" the AC's test I passed. They said, "You can just about pick any school you want." And I said, "I'm thinking I might want to be a Seabee." So, when I got to basic training, I looked at the company roster, and by everybody's name had HSHR (High School Seaman Recruit), and by my name had—I mean by everybody's name it had HSSR, by my name it had HSHR (High School Hospital Corpsman Recruit). And I couldn't understand what it was, so I asked the company commander, and I said, "How come I have HSHR by my name, and everybody else had HSSR?" He said, "Oh you're going to be a corpsman." And I said, "No, no, I told the recruiter I didn't want to be a corpsman." And he proceeded to cuss me out and tell me, "You'll be whatever my Navy tells you to be," and all this and that. So, I wrote home to my parents and told them about it, and my dad said, "Stick it out, and maybe you'll get a career." So, I went to Corps School, and I decided I was going to try and flunk out, and I wrote my dad again. And he said, "No, don't do that. That'll just be a black mark in your military record." He said, "Just stick it out. You might learn something." And I was good for following my dad's advice, so I stuck it out and graduated from Hospital Corps School.

JS: Could you talk a little bit about the Hospital Corps School, about what type of training you received?

RC: Oh, well it was kind of like on the job. You had classroom work for like four hours in the morning, and then for the four hours in the afternoon you spent in the

hospital at Great Lakes Hospital, applying what you learned. What you learned everything from pharmacology to different illnesses and how to treat them. You learned about nuclear and biological warfare and how to treat people with that. Just a whole assortment of training related to serving in the military and not so much training for Vietnam. But working in the hospital you learn to, oh, give injections, pass medication, assess patients, treat the patients, even did some suturing, things like that.

JS: Did you feel that this training was pretty good for preparing you for what was to come?

RC: Yeah, as far as working in the hospital. I thought it was pretty intense training. We went eight hours a day every day for four months. So, we had a pretty good sampling of how to work as a hospital corpsman. Of course, we learned nothing about being a field med corpsman for a Fleet Marine Force. That came later. After graduating from Hospital Corps School, our company got orders for Field Medical School at Camp Lejeune. And that's where we got our training on treating combat casualties and illnesses.

JS: This time in the Corpsman School was it—were you working, actually working in the hospital at Great Lakes?

RC: Yes, yes, sir.

JS: And so, once you graduated from that, it was then on to Camp Lejeune?

RC: Mm-hmm.

JS: All right. How long was the field medical training?

RC: It was four weeks long.

JS: Four weeks, okay.

RC: It was down at Camp Lejeune, Camp Geiger on Camp Lejeune. It was run by the Marines. It was pretty tough. You learned how to treat various types of combat wounds, burns, and small arms fire, and we actually would go out and pretend—they would have certain people be casualties, and you'd you have to go up and assess them and treat their wound properly, and you would be graded on that. Plus, you learned about small arms, mainly the M-14 and the .45 pistol, and Marine tactics on how to set up ambushes, and how to conduct yourself with the Marines in combat situations.

JS: Did you feel that this training was pretty good for preparing you for Vietnam?

RC: At the time, yeah, I thought it was pretty intense and pretty good. But I—after experiencing what I did in Vietnam, I wish we would have had more training. There was many times, types of wounds that really tested you. You had to improvise a whole lot. When you lacked the medical gear or something, you improvised to treat someone. But all in all, I thought the training was pretty good, but it could have been better once I got to Vietnam and saw what my duties were going to be. I had wished it would have been more intense.

JS: Right, yes, sir. Were your instructors here, were they combat veterans?

RC: Yeah, most of them had served in Vietnam. In fact all of them that I know. And they were—there were Marine and Navy instructors. The Marines taught us the battlefield tactics and stuff and small arms and a whole bunch of physical PT. Then the Navy, they kind of checked you on, "Did you treat the person right? Did you administer the right kind of medication for this illness or that illness? How you bandaged them up," and you were graded on that.

JS: All right, let's see. Did you find that you were—how did you find that you were adjusting to the military lifestyle?

RC: Oh, I think I was adjusting pretty well. I had no real complaints. Of course, I had talked to my brother and my cousins and stuff that were in the military, and they said, "Just keep your nose clean and follow orders, and you really shouldn't have a problem." I took that advice, and I really had no problem until after Vietnam.

JS: One last thing about the field medical school. Could you, I guess, talk a little bit about the daily routine there?

RC: It varied depending on what you were doing. If you were doing—treating casualties—certain people would have casualties, be the casualties, and they would have—I forget what they called it (moulage)—but put a plastic wound on somebody, like on their leg that had been shot. It looked like an open wound and then you have to patch it up. You do that and maneuver around on the ground trying to patch him up. The Marines are standing around you, "Yeah, if you get up, you're going to be killed." The Marines pounded it into you that you had survive because if you die then seven or eight Marines are going to die from bleeding to death if they lose you, so you can't die. And that stuck with me that I wasn't allowed to die, and it probably led to problems later on.

But then we also had—with the Marines, they would take us out on how to set up an ambush and how to walk in a formation in the jungle environment and how to handle weapons and shoot them and become a better shot, and that was basically it.

JS: And as far as timeframe, when did you finish all of your training?

RC: Four months at the Hospital Corps School, and three—I mean two months or one month at Field Medical Service School. So, I finished all that in a matter of five months.

JS: Okay, and when would the date of this been around?

RC: I beg your pardon.

JS: When would the date of this been? I guess what year and month?

RC: Well, I went to boot camp in December of ’66, graduated from there in March. And from March I went to Hospital Corps School, and that was four months long, and we got a couple weeks leave, and so in ’67 during the late winter—I mean late spring, early summer, of ’67, I was at Field Med School, Camp Lejeune.

JS: Okay, and after you completed Field Med School, at that point were you—did you get your orders to Vietnam then?

RC: No, not right away. I was assigned to Camp Lejeune Naval Hospital, and I worked there for about eleven months before I got my orders to Vietnam.

JS: Did you know pretty sure though that you would eventually be getting orders to Vietnam?

RC: Yeah. Once you go through Field Med School, the chance of going to Vietnam are real high because they aren’t going to give you that training and not send you.

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: Yeah, I had known that I would eventually go, but I also knew with my brother there, they couldn’t send me unless I signed a waiver. But with his early out because of his behavior, I probably got there quicker than I normally would have.

JS: All right. Well what type of duties did you have at the Camp Lejeune Hospital?

RC: Well at first, they put me on the pediatric ward working with babies, and I didn’t like that at all. And I complained almost on a daily basis that I wanted to transfer

because I'm not the type of person that works well with crying, poopy babies, puking on you and crapping on you. So, I kept asking for a transfer, and they kept denying it, and finally I went to the head nurse and said, "Listen, I'm about at my ropes end working in this ward. If I don't get a transfer something bad is probably going to happen." And she said, "What do you mean by that?" And I said, "Well I don't know if I can control myself, with all these screaming babies, and I don't trust myself with them, and I'm afraid I might harm one." So, that night I was transferred—I was assigned to the psychiatric ward midnight shift. I think they considered it punishment, so I worked on the psychiatric ward then, until I left to go to Vietnam.

JS: What types of things would you have to do there in the psychiatric ward?

RC: Mainly monitor the patients, give them their medications, sit in on some groups with the ones that were sound enough to be in groups. But I also remember, we had lock up rooms—basically they were padded cells—for the real violent ones, and most of those were Vietnam Veterans that just come back and just lost psychiatrically. Some of them could be very violent. It was almost inhumane how we treated them. I mean they stayed in a padded cell. Nobody normally went in it. You'd slide their food tray—there was a little hatch in the door, and you slide it in—kind of like at a prison. And I thought that was pretty cruel to treat these guys. Fortunately, psychiatric medicine has improved since then. But I just didn't like how they were treated. But maybe I was naïve, and some of them needed to be locked up to protect themselves or others. But they were so psychologically damaged.

JS: Did seeing these guys coming back from Vietnam and having these problems—did that have any affect on you?

RC: Yeah, I prayed and hoped that I'd be able to endure whatever was going to come my way. What affected me the most was the news media because at that time the Siege of Khe Sanh was going on. I don't know if you're familiar with it but—

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: It was the 26th Marines were up in Khe Sanh on a small plateau, and they were surrounded by, I don't know, forty or sixty thousand enemy, and I would see that on TV everyday. And this was when I was on leave, waiting to go to Vietnam, and I just

said, “Boy, I hope I don’t go there.” But as we get on in the interview, you’ll found out that I did.

JS: Yes, sir. Well did you talk with other Corpsmen, as you were working there in the hospital, about going to Vietnam at all?

RC: Yeah, but I didn’t really know any that had been to Vietnam.

JS: Okay.

RC: We just talked amongst ourselves, what was happening, stuff like that. You know, what we would see on TV, you know, discuss amongst ourselves knowing that eventually we were gonna end up there.

JS: Well, was it—when did you receive your orders then? Was it late ’67?

RC: Really it was—yeah, late ’67. I got my orders—it was around Christmastime in ’67. My orders were for—to report to FMF Western Pacific Marines by March 27th or 28th, something like that.

JS: So, you did you have some leave time—you had some leave time?

RC: I had thirty days leave before I went to Vietnam.

JS: What did you do during that time?

RC: Well, I had my girlfriend, Joyce, and she is still my wife today. I just hung around with my pals and spent as much time as I could with Joyce. In fact, I even got engaged, asked her to marry me before I went to Vietnam. Which I look back at it now, and I thought that was kinda stupid. Her dad wasn’t very happy with that, he being a World War II vet. Later on, my wife would tell me that—after Vietnam—her dad would say, “What are you going to do if that boy come home paralyzed? What are you going to do if he ends up dying? What are you going to do?” He was so strongly against it that he was trying get her to break up with me, more or less, which I can understand as a father. I wouldn’t want my daughter being engaged to somebody who is going off to a horrible war. They might not come back or may come back in pieces.

JS: Yes, sir. Once it was time to report for duty and your leave was over, where did you go to report?

RC: Let’s see—oh I flew to San Bernardino Air Force Base, and I was there for about three or four days. Then we flew out, headed for Vietnam.

JS: All right. And I know you mentioned your girlfriend, now wife's, family's reaction, but what was your family's reaction to you being sent to Vietnam?

RC: I knew my mother was distraught. She had a son in Vietnam for two years now, for about twenty months, and he's coming home and now her other son's going. I knew that worked on her. My dad, he's kind of passive. He just said, "Take care of yourself. Don't take any chances. Come home safe." They took it pretty well, I guess, because they already had a son serve over there. They didn't show me outwardly any emotions. They tried to hide those. But I knew they were saddened I was going to have to go especially with the MOS I had.

JS: Yes, sir. Well, what about your thoughts upon receiving your orders?

RC: Well, I was naïve enough to think, "Well, I'll go over there, serve my year, and be back home, get married and life would be grand." I was that naïve. I thought I had a duty to perform. I'm going to go do it, come back, and everything would be okay. And boy, was I wrong.

JS: All right. When—I should say—how did you get to Vietnam? Was it a commercial airliner?

RC: Yes, sir. I think TWA.

JS: Okay, what was the mood like on the trip over?

RC: Oh, well there was over two hundred guys going to Vietnam, and I didn't know a single one. And none of them knew anyone else either. We were all going to our separate—you know it was Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines all on the plane. And it was kind of somber. Everybody kind of just kept to themselves, read or slept. I was just daydreaming about missing my girlfriend, my fiancée. And you know, just thinking, "Well just one year and I'll be home. It'll be okay." But the mood on the plane was real somber, not a whole lot of conversation going on that I recall. And I just felt alone, you know. I'm on a plane with two hundred plus guys, and I felt like I was alone.

JS: Where did you arrive in country?

RC: I landed in Da Nang, on April Fool's Day in 1968. I'm sorry—I flew from San Bernardino to Okinawa. That was a staging area for the Marines. I spent three or four days there, and then we were supposed to fly out the end of March to Vietnam from Okinawa. But they held us up, and the rumor was they were keeping us back because it

was so late in the month, that if they sent us in March, they would have to pay us a sixty-five-dollar combat pay. I don't know what truth there was to that, but that was the rumor why they held us to April 1st. And that was a hell of an April Fool's joke on me.

JS: Yes, sir. What was in-processing like?

RC: What was what?

JS: What sort of in-processing was there?

RC: Oh, they had to make sure I had my Geneva Convention card that said I was a medic and had a big red cross on it. And they said, "This is so if the enemy knows you're a medic, they aren't supposed to shoot at you," which wasn't the way it was in Vietnam. Medics, or corpsmen, were prime targets. They loved to shoot the officers, the radio men, and the corpsmen. And I learned at Camp Lejeune in Field Med School, they told us once you get into a firefight, life expectancy of a corpsman is seventeen seconds. I said, "Holy mackerel, I got some odds to beat."

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: It's kind of scary.

JS: Well, absolutely. What was your first impressions of Vietnam upon, I guess, stepping off of the plane?

RC: Stepping off the plane—I remember the stewardesses. They gave us all a hug and a kiss, and said, "We'll see you in a year." And we got off, and as we're going down the steps to get off, they had guys lined up ready to get on that were leaving. And I think it was kind of cruel the way they did it because these guys had already spent their year or thirteen months in Vietnam, and they were going home. And they were catcalling us, and saying, "Oh you only got a year to go. Wait till you see what you gotta go through." And you know it was almost like a rite of passage to go through this harassing of the guys that were going back. And then I was in the transit barracks for a couple of days in Da Nang, and that's where the guys were coming in and guys were leaving. They didn't separate the two of us. And so, you'd listen to war stories of guys who had been in there, and even get some advice from some of them once they knew you were a corpsman. You know, it was kind of enlightening, but kind of scary too.

JS: Sure. Do you remember what types of advice they would give you?

RC: Like, “Whenever you hear, “Corpsman, up!” you go. Don’t worry, the Marines will be giving you cover fire,” things like that. Mainly keep your weapon clean otherwise it’s not going to shoot. Don’t volunteer for anything because you’re going to get picked anyway. Don’t volunteer. Things like that.

JS: At what point here did you receive your assignment to the 1st of the 26th?

RC: Well, I spent like two days in the transit barracks in Da Nang, and then they flew me up to Quang Tri. And that’s where I found out I was going to be assigned to 1st Battalion 26th Marines. And it’s ironic the guy that checked me in—he was one of my instructors in Hospital Corps School. And he remembered me. He said, “Well you’re going with 1st Battalion 26th Marines.” I said, “Well, that doesn’t tell me much, sir.” He said, “Well, Cahill, if you make it through this first part, the rest ought to be a piece of cake.” I said, “Why do you say that?” He said, “’Cause the 26th Marines are at Khe Sanh now, and they are under siege, and that’s where you’re going.” And I had been watching the siege the whole month I was on leave before going to ‘Nam, so I knew it was a horrible battle. So, that was kinda scary when he told me that.

JS: Well, given the fact that the siege was going on, how did you get there?

RC: Okay, I flew from Da Nang to Quang Tri, ironically with some reporters. They had a four-seater, piper cub, or something, a small plane. And they knew I was going from Quang Tri to Dong Ha, and I flew with them, which was beautiful. They flew along the coastline, so they wouldn’t get shot at. I noticed the beautiful countryside and beautiful beaches, and I thought, “Wow. Hard to imagine sitting up here in this plane, and it seems so peaceful, and then looking down there and knowing there is a war going on.” Kind of weird. From there I landed and Dong Ha, and I was supposed to catch a C-130 for Khe Sanh, which I did. There were several of us on a C-130, but it was filled with a lot of cargo, and the siege was coming to an end at that time. But we landed, and the plane was taxiing, slowing down. It goes down the runway and makes a U-turn, and then they start kicking off all the supplies down the ramp— they had lowered the ramp in back of the C-130—and then an airman came up to each and every one of us and said, “After all this—all these supplies are off, you jump off too. And if you don’t, we’ll shoot you.” And I thought, “Wow, welcome to the war.” Because the plane was still taxiing real slow. We had to jump off the ramp while the plane taxied, and it never came to a full stop

because every time a plane came in like that mortars and rockets would start raining down. And indeed, they did. I remember getting off the plane, and they said, "Just run off to the left of the runway." I'm running, and I'm hearing all the explosions going on. Mortars and rockets are coming in and seeing all the Marines diving for low ground or diving into a hole. And I saw a bunker, and I tried to make it to that bunker, and I got to the bunker and it was full, so I just lay down next to it and covered my head until the mortaring and rocketing stopped. So, I had a pretty rude awakening landing there.

JS: Sure, sounds like a hell of an introduction to the war.

RC: Yeah, it was scary as hell.

JS: Sure, could you, I guess, give a description of Khe Sanh itself?

RC: Well, mostly everything was leveled, and everything was pretty much underground. There was maybe a building here, standing one here, but very few buildings standing. Red dirt, clay. I noticed everybody else who had been living in the same clothes for seventy-seven days, their uniforms were almost red from the clay. They looked haggard. They had the thousand-yard stare, and I knew I was in for some hell then. After looking at these guys and what they had been through, I thought, "Oh man. This is going to be tough."

JS: Yes, sir. Could you—I guess you talked about the way they looked, but as far as the unit itself, that you were assigned to, could you talk a little about your impressions of those guys and I guess getting to know them?

RC: Yeah, well, they loved their corpsmen. And they welcomed me with open arms. Talked to me, tried to tell me what to expect. They took care of their corpsmen, and they were respectful of me, and they weren't razzing me because I had 360 days to go or something. It was real easy to get to know them because they would approach me because they knew I was the corpsman. And the Marines loved their corpsmen and respected them and know that this guy may be the reason I live or die. They treated me well, and I got to know them well.

JS: Were there other medics in the unit that you worked with—? I mean corpsmen. Excuse me?

RC: Yeah, there was two corpsman to a platoon. And of course, I was assigned to Delta company's first platoon, and when we—I only went on one patrol out of Khe Sanh

before the 26th Marines left Khe Sanh. And there was two corpsmen. We didn't get any action that day, came back to the base, and we learned that we were going to be shipped out in a few days mainly because the 26th Marines had been there since the start of the siege. And they wanted to get them out and get them back someplace a little calmer. So, we left Khe Sanh in the middle of April, probably around the 18th or something like that and went to a place called Wonder Beach because it was right on the beach near Quang Tri. Beautiful beaches, quiet, nice, place. The guys that survived the whole Siege of Khe Sanh said, "Man, this is like heaven." You know, they had hot meals and chow hall and everything. They had a gedunk where you can buy candy and stuff like that. So, it was heaven to them until one day—I was staying in the hooch with the chaplain. We were out near the lines because we were on perimeter watch there. Unfortunately, we got shelled by our own Navy. They hit us with five-inch rounds, which would explode a bunker, and I was with the chaplain at the time. We heard these rounds coming in and we ran out of the bunker to see what was going on, and there you could see these rounds just walking down the line. I saw one a direct hit on a bunker, and the rounds were just walking down the line towards us. Pretty horrifying, then I heard some screams for "Corpsman up." I took off running to where I heard the sound and got to one bunker that was caved in. One Marine was already dead, and there were several wounded in there. Most of them had already lost their hearing—temporarily, I hope. But there were several wounded, so that was really my first experience with treating wounded. And after that ended—it only lasted a few minutes of the rounds coming in before our officers got on the radio and radioed the ship out there in the bay that their rounds were landing on our lines. But after it was all over, I was probably somewhat in shock with what I had just been through. And to be honest with you, I curled up in my poncho, and I cried. I didn't let anybody see me cry, but I thought, "Hell, I don't know if I'm going to make this." It got worse after that.

JS: How long had you been in-country by this point?

RC: About a month.

JS: Okay, how long was the 1st of the 26th at Wonder Beach?

RC: Oh, we were only there like, a week or so. And then the 1st platoon had to go with some tanks up towards Dong Ha. And then the rest of the company met us at Dong Ha. And from there the whole battalion met up. And we were to leave Dong Ha and make

a sweep through an area where the ARVN had been hit pretty bad the day before—the ARVN's were the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. They got hit pretty bad before, so we were on a battalion search and destroy mission from there. And it only took the second day—Delta company was walking point for the battalion, and we walked into a major area of North Vietnamese that were dug in, had machine guns. We were coming down. It wasn't dense jungle. It was just kind of sparse brush and a few trees and stuff. I remember walking down a hill and a small incline sort of. And like I said, it was just little brush around, stuff like that. We were pretty much in the open. And there was this tree line and a small hill, and all of a sudden, the North Vietnamese opened up on us with .50 caliber machine guns, and this was probably the most horrible day—one of my most horrible days in Vietnam. As soon as the shooting started, I heard, "Corpsman up." A Marine not too far in front of me was hit in the arm. And as I was passing him up, he got hit again. And he died right there. I did see the look in his eyes, and all this copious blood and fluids coming out his mouth. He was hit right in the chest. He was, like, dead almost instantly. And I fell to the ground then, and I even remember moaning to try to let the enemy know that perhaps I was dead or shot too, so they wouldn't continue to fire—because apparently, they saw me patching this guy up and decided to do us in. And I laid there motionless for, oh, it seemed like ten-fifteen seconds, and then I heard "Corpsman up" again, and I ran to the next casualty. Patched him up, "Corpsman up" was ringing all over the place. Several guys were getting wounded rather rapidly—wounded or killed. At the end of the day—this happened in the early—late afternoon, probably about four o'clock, and lasted until about six or seven, right before dusk. By the time it was all over, we had ten killed from Delta company and least two dozen wounded. One guy I patched up, he was hit in the neck, and I performed a tracheotomy on him—well it was almost performed by the bullet, just went straight through his adam's apple. I got my surgical kit out and get my scalpel, and I got a hold of his trachea, and I cut off the tip of a syringe, and I tied that syringe into his trachea, put a battle dressing around it, so he could breathe and not be gurgling on his blood. And at the end of the battle, after we had tanks from Charlie company swung around and blew these machine-gun nests out, after we secured the area enough to get medevac choppers in, I was told by the senior corpsman that I needed to go in with this guy with the trach wound to make sure it stays in. And I was

kind of relieved at that, so I got on the medevac chopper, and it was horrible because there were so many wounded, screaming, and crying over the sounds of the chopper blades, and flew them into Dong Ha. I think the 1st Med Battalion was there and flew them into there. And that gave me plenty of time to—because I had to spend the night then because it was dark, and I went and visited a few of the wounded. And then I had plenty of time to think about all of this, and "My God, there is no way in hell I'm going to survive another ten and a half months of this." I just resigned myself to the fact that I'm going to die, so I might as well just do the best damn job I can and just hope for the best. But I knew in my heart that I could not survive this if this is what the rest of the war was going to be like. Turns out that was probably the worst firefight I had been in, but there was plenty others that were pretty much comparable to it.

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: I saw more combat than I needed to.

JS: Was this your first real encounter with the enemy at—

RC: First major one. We had some sniper fire before that, but yeah, this was the first major firefight I had encountered.

JS: Could you, I guess, talk a little bit about the enemy and your impression of them and the way they operated?

RC: Oh, the NVA they were tenacious. They were good fighters. They would stay and fight you to the death. I learned to have respect for them, for their fighting skills, and they were masters of deception, masters of making booby traps out of nothing, literally—they could make a booby trap out of water buffalo manure. It wouldn't do a whole a lot of damage, but it might blow a toe off or something, enough to get you out of the field. The NVA, they were great fighters. Now the Viet Cong, they weren't. They would just snipe at you and run. They wouldn't stay and fight.

JS: All right, what about when you would go out on these patrols? Could you talk about—I don't know, I guess the tactics involved with the patrols and what a general patrol would be like?

RC: Well, as a corpsman I never really knew where we were going. Didn't matter to me. It was all the same from what I knew at the time. But we would be humping in the bush, bottom of the jungle, of a triple canopy jungle, a horrible place to carry try to carry

about thirty pounds on your back and your weapon. I carried a—after the first fire fight, I requested a M-16. They said, "You know you're only supposed to carry a .45." I said, "I know. I want an M-16 as a decoy because I know they want to kill the corpsman first of all, and if I carry a M-16 I look more like a grunt." And then after the first firefight I turned in my A-1 medical kit, because it was too small. I got a demolition bag, so I could carry more medical supplies and battle dressings. But we would hump the bush all day long. Sometimes we would encounter small arms fire, might get one or two wounded. It was hard carrying all this weight and humping through the jungle and the hills, the swamp. It was terribly hard. It toughened me up quick. I was probably in the best shape of my life at that time. And I'm glad I was because I don't think I could have endured much more. And I just walked with these—we split the corpsman—there is two to each platoon, so we would separate ourselves so we would have more accessibility to the casualties because you never know if they are going to hit the point man, or wait until the platoon gets into the opening, and open up on the middle part, or they might try to come up behind and hit the end section of the patrol. So, it was pretty hairy.

JS: Yes, sir. Could you talk a little about the, I guess the types of supplies that you would carry, the medical supplies that you would carry with you?

RC: I carried as many battle dressings as I could. They came in various sizes. I carried two extra canteens of salt water for heat casualties. I carried a various assortment of medications and antibiotics and different medicines to treat jungle rot, diarrhea, dysentery, worms. They came down with all kinds of different environmentally-related illnesses. I also carried a surgical kit. It had a scalpel in it, a couple hemostats and morphine. I carried a twelve pack of syrettes of morphine. I carried two pints of albumin human, which was blood volume expander. You put it in intravenously for those who are losing a lot of blood. Plus, I carried my ammo, and I also carried a round machine gun ammo because that will lighten the load for the Marines.

JS: All right, how often would you be resupplied?

RC: Usually when we were out on patrols or major operations like the one we were on in Operation Kentucky, we'd get resupplied every couple days. Oh, and along with carrying our food too, for two or three days, depended on when we were getting resupplied. It was usually every two to three days. But sometimes, it would be longer

depending on the situation if we were in a heated battle. Some of them lasted all day, and some of them lasted a few minutes. But if we were in heated one that lasted all day, it was hard to get supplies in. Choppers don't want to come into a hot LZ and risk getting shot down. But for the most part we got the supplies we needed. Even—

JS: All right when—

RC: Even some we didn't need. One time they even brought us ice cream. By the time it got to us, it was milk.

JS: When not out on patrol, what would the unit generally be doing?

RC: What would I generally be doing?

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: Just following the Marine in front of me. We'd go, you know—if it was just day patrol like maybe we might set up in one area for a couple days and send out ambushes. If there was more than eight Marines going out, a corpsman had to go with them. And we set up ambushes. On major operations when you had a whole battalion, you just mainly hump the bush all day and set out ambushes at night and LPs—listening posts. Just wait for the enemy. We were just wandering through the jungle waiting for them to shoot at us so we can kill them.

JS: Yes, sir, was there a specific fire base that you operated out of?

RC: No, we just wandered through the jungle most of the time. We were on one firebase once, in An Hoa, for a couple days, but other than that we were in the jungle.

JS: What was the, I guess, area of operations?

RC: I'm sorry. What did you say?

JS: What was the area of operations for the unit? Where all did you operate?

RC: Oh, mostly up near Dong Ha, Quang Tri, up in Northern I Corps. We were never any further south than Da Nang.

JS: Okay, all right. How often out in the field would you run into something?

RC: Sometimes you might run into stuff two, three days in a row, and then you might have a week of boredom, just humping the bush and nothing happen. And then all of sudden all hell breaks loose. It was hard to really say if it happened ever other day or every few days. You always had that anxiety that something was going to happen, always on that adrenaline rush hoping nothing would happen. You hear that first crack of an AK-

47, and your heart goes to your throat, and you just hope that nobody is wounded and that it's not going to last long.

JS: Yes, sir. I know you mentioned earlier working with the ARVN a little bit, at least coming through the area where they were. What were your impressions of them?

RC: Not very high. One episode we had with them, we—I don't know how big of a unit they had, but they were supposed to be with us, sweeping through a certain area, and when we'd come under intense fire, they would duck and run. I didn't think very highly of them at all. They didn't seem like they were willing to do what we were willing to do to save their own country. So, I never had a good impression about the ARVN. I didn't trust them like I would trust my Marines. That's for sure.

JS: How often would you work with them?

RC: Not very often. I can only remember a few times.

JS: How about other groups? Did you work with Koreans, or Australians?

RC: Oh, yeah. The ROK Marines, the Republic of Korea Marines, now they were great. I loved working with them. We worked with them three or four times. The reason I liked working with them—we had so many restrictions on us, like if small arms fire comes from the village, they don't fire back. There might be civilians. Or if a water buffalo happens to walk across the fire zone, you had to hold your fire. You couldn't kill the water buffalo. Some stupid restrictions on us that I thought were ridiculous. Well, the ROK Marines didn't pay any attention to that. They didn't have those kinds of orders. They would—we would go into a village and send one of—the commander of the ROK Marines would go in and go up to the village chief and tell them, "If we get any incoming, any small arms fire, we are going to level your village." And if it did happen, if we did get incoming or small arms fire, that's exactly what we did then. We leveled the village. But the ARVNs would lead the way into that because we weren't allowed to because there might be civilians. It was crazy.

JS: Well, speaking of the ARVN I guess not really pulling their weight, what—how did that affect you guys as far as your— you know you're over there fighting for their country, and they're not doing their job?

RC: You know you had anger towards them, but we had our job to do, and we just focused on what we were to do regardless of what the ARVNs did. If they cut and run, then they cut and run, but we proceeded on to meet our objective whatever that may be.

JS: How about the Vietnamese civilians? Did you have much contact with them?

RC: Yes, we went through a lot of villages. I really didn't trust them either. A lot of them were sympathizing for the north, and lot of them would hide food and ammunition. More than once we would go into a village and find underground tunnels with medical supplies, food, small arms fires, RPGs, stuff like that. I didn't have a whole lot of confidence in the civilian people either. They would smile at you during the day while they're home and working in their rice paddies, and the same damn people at night would be setting booby traps for you when you came back in. So, no, I didn't have much respect for them either.

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: And you gotta remember though we were mostly in the free fire zone. We were no further south than Da Nang, nothing like Saigon or anything. This was where if moved you shot it for the most part.

JS: What would the—could you talk a moment about the tactics of sweeping village?

RC: The tactics? Well, we would go in flanks. We had point people going in and then flanks on the left and the right. As far as the Marine tactics, I can't say I paid a whole lot of attention to it. I just followed the blood trail, I would say. They had their tactics, but I didn't know them. I should've paid more attention to that in field med school, I guess. I just knew I needed to be with the Marines, and if I heard "corpsman up," I had to go.

JS: Did you ever have to treat civilians?

RC: Yes, I did treat civilians some of the villages—they would have sores, maybe a shrapnel wound or something. Take the shrapnel out and put bandage on it. I gave them malaria pills. That's another thing that we carried. I forgot to mention it to you. And mainly we weren't like a CAP (combined action platoon) unit where the Marines lived in the village and took care of the villagers. In some of the small villages we came across, if I see a little kid with—that needed some medical attention, I'd give it to him. Usually, if

we were set up in the village for day or so, I'd go meet the village chief and doctor. And I would give them some medical supplies if I had some to spare. I helped them, and help the Vietnamese doctors take care of people. And they treated me pretty good—the chief and the doctor because they knew they'd get supplies from me. They would treat me to one of their family meals. I'd sit down with the family in the village and eat some rice and octopus.

JS: Did you feel that the Vietnamese civilians that you treated, could you see if they appreciated it or—?

RC: Yeah, they did. They knew who the corpsman was. They called it the *bac si*, Vietnamese for doctor. And they knew how to pick us out even though I did everything to try not to look like a corpsman. Somehow, they knew who the corpsman was, and they would come to. And that gave me some solace that I was doing some good with some of these civilians. But all in all, I didn't have a whole lot of trust for them. I knew a lot of them were communist sympathizers. You know, they'd be nice to you during the day, but at night they were the enemy or supplying the enemy anyway.

JS: Right, yes, sir. You mentioned them calling you *bac si* or doctor, and knowing that Vietnamese term, did you learn much of the language?

RC: No, no, I just knew a few words, like *di di mau,* get out of here. *Com viet*, they'll understand. No, I never learned a whole lot of Vietnamese. Just how to cuss at them and stuff like that. But the little kids, a lot of them could speak fairly good English, so if you're treating somebody that couldn't speak English, they would interpret it for you. So, I felt no need to really learn their language. Didn't have time to anyway.

JS: Well—another thing I wanted to ask you about was booby traps. If you could talk about them for a moment and how often—

RC: Yeah, booby traps they come in all different types and assorted of sizes. Worst one I saw was—we were just setting in, in June I believe, setting in for the night. And I usually hung around the machine gun squad because they would give me the best fire support. Me and the machine gunner, and his A-gunner, we were picking a spot where we were going to dig our hole for the night, and all of a sudden, we heard a big boom, and here comes the—we see a boot land in the rice paddy with part of the leg still in it. I took off running toward this boom, and there were screams for "Corpsman, up!"

and I get up there to the staff sergeant, Staff Sergeant Polentino. Here, he had stepped on a mine, and it must have been a 105 round or something because it was very explosive. It blew his legs off at the hip. I mean, he—there was no way to even put a tourniquet on, so we just packed battle dressing, and got two IV's in him and stuff. He lived about two weeks, and then he died. But other booby traps—they'd use bamboo. Punji sticks, we called them, and they would urinate and defecate on them just so if you did step on them, it would cause severe infection, and that will get you out of bush—they would use any type of booby trap to try to—not kill you but at least maim you enough so that you're out of the war. The scariest ones were "bouncing betties." These were grenades that when you hit the trip wire, the grenade would pop up about three or four feet and then blow. That way you had maximum killing affect. But they would use anything against you for a booby trap, you couldn't leave anything behind, no C-ration cans, because they would pack it full of explosives and have a detonating device or just pressure sensitive. You step on it; it blows; it might blow your foot off. They had booby traps where, in the jungle—this is mostly in the jungle—where they had bamboo stakes tied to a big piece of bamboo, and it was pulled back with tension, and then you go across the trip wire and a big bamboo log with the bamboo spikes on it would come and just (makes wooph sound) and it would hit you—your body and kill you there. I saw one of those once. But they mainly used small explosives, a lot of punji sticks, things like that. Oh, they would booby trap their dead too. So, you go to roll them over, and a grenade goes off. They were pretty sharp, they—I got to admire. They made booby traps out of literally nothing. And they were effective. But not only would it wound people but demoralize you. You always had that constant fear of booby traps or something. Not only looking ahead until you're tired and looking on the ground for trip wires or looks like there might be a punji pit. Booby traps were a problem.

JS: Yes, sir, what would I guess be the most typical types of wounds or illness that you would be treating?

RC: Typical wounds I treated were small arms fire and shrapnel wounds. The typical illnesses would be chronic diarrhea, stomach problems, infection. If you cut yourself, it was bound to get infected, and then it could turn to jungle rot, which just kind of a continues to grow and the infection just spreads. And also, I had to treat some cases

of foot problems, a lot of feet problems, from humping the bush, and being in wet boots all day and all night, snake bites, other critter bites, scorpions and stuff like that. A wide assortment of injuries and illnesses in that environment.

JS: Once a guy was wounded and medevacked—if he had to be medevacked—what would the—I guess where would he go from there?

RC: Well, he'd go probably to the closest medical battalion.

JS: Okay.

RC: Some would go straight to a hospital ship if we were close enough. But most of them went to either a medical battalion—and then they were stabilized there, and then sent out to either out of country or to NFA Da Nang, to the Corps Activity Hospital in Da Nang. That was usually the two or three routes they went.

JS: Would you hear anything about their condition later on?

RC: Sometimes, sometimes not. Like I heard the—we had a corpsman—there was another major battle. He was a corpsman with me 1st Platoon. In fact, I went to corps school with him, so I knew him well. His name was Doc McCoy. He got in 'Nam about a month after me. He had only been in-country for like three weeks, and we got into a fire fight. He went out to the point man, got hit, and the third man got hit. And he was on the left flank, and I was on the right. He was closest to the point man, and he went out to the point man, and I went out to the other one that got hit. He had a chest wound. After I bandaged him, I kept hearing, "Corpsman, up!" and the other corpsman had gotten wounded while he was patching up our point man, Gallagher. And I ran towards him. One Marine tried to hold me back, he said, "Don't go Doc. There's gooks all over out there!" I said, "Well I got to get to Gallagher." And I jerked my arm away from him where he was trying to hold me back, and I took off to Gallagher. On my way, I ran into Doc McCoy, and he was crawling on threes, one hand was holding his guts in—his intestines—and he was crawling back, I said, "Bob where you hit?" and he said, "Don't worry about me. I'll make it back, get to Gallagher. He's hit bad." So, I let Bob go on his way, and I ran to Gallagher and patched Gallagher up. I almost got killed there because this gook was in his spider hole ten feet in front of us. That's how Gallagher got hit. He had sucking chest wound. And as I was trying to roll him over, bandage the wound, gook popped up and shot at me and fortunately he missed. But McCoy got wounded—well,

after I got Gallagher patched up, I called for, "Guns up!" to the gun—machine gunners to come through. A gook popped up one more time, and thankfully we breached him. So, I finished with Gallagher, and we drug him out of there. I got back to where we were putting the wounded and Doc McCoy. I tended to his wound. He said his intestines were coming out. I bandaged him up and got an IV going. It seemed like hours before we got a medevac chopper in because it was such a hot LZ. But we finally got him on the medevac chopper, and the chopper took off. It got about a tree level high, and boom, it just dropped right back down. The gooks had shot the pilot and the copilot. So, the chopper just came down. Fortunately, it didn't explode or anything. We had five medevacs on there. We had to drag them off and wait for another chopper. But anyway, Bob ended up getting medevacked to USS *Repose*, and he did die six weeks later. So, I did hear about that. But if they got wounded then usually we didn't hear much back unless one of the officers got some word or something, and they passed it along. But we had so many wounded, it would be impossible to try and keep up with them and continue to do what we were supposed to do. So, for the most part, no. We didn't hear of what happened to our comrades once they got wounded. Just on rare occasions.

JS: Yes, sir. You mentioned having so many wounded. What do you think about as far as—what percentage of the guys in the unit became causalities, do you think?

RC: In Delta Company?

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: We had fifty percent causalities in the first two and a half months after we left Khe Sanh. In fact, they sent us to Da Nang to try to regroup and get more men. And I was the only corpsman then because Doc McCoy ended up dying, and they never had a replacement because the rest of the time I was in the bush, I was the only corpsman. But we were so diminished in Marines—there was probably half the platoon left, so being the only corpsman was not a major problem. I didn't have sixty-five Marines to take care of; I only had about thirty. The casualty rate was pretty high in the summer of '68. In fact, in the whole 26th Marines, Delta Company took more casualties that summer than anybody else.

JS: Yes, sir. You talked about some the specific firefights that stick out in your mind. Are there others that you can remember that you can possibly talk about?

RC: Yeah, we were—this was in June too. In June it was, it was bad. Well, May was bad too. But in June we were on a battalion operation. We were sweeping an area. I think it was—Elephant Valley I think it was called. And we had one battle that lasted all day long, and it included the whole battalion, all four companies. We lost eight men killed that day and a dozen wounded. We had several wounded from our own friendly fire. They had to give us such close air support that guys were getting wounded from the shrapnel from the bombs. I was with a small group of Marines. We were pushing towards a village, and we came under fire. And we called for some mortar support. Charlie Company was on the adjacent hill, and we called them to lob some mortars into this village. They lob—you could hear them leaving the tube, and I start counting, "One, two," as they are leaving the tube because you have about ten or twelve second before it gets to you. After that eighth one left the tube, I got down into a gully like, and I just laid down in that gully and hear the rounds come in, and the Marines that were standing above that gully—all of them got wounded, and I don't know possessed me to jump down into that gully before the mortars landed, but I did. Maybe I was becoming wiser. I had more time in the bush. But that battle lasted all day and into the next day. We lost—like I said, the first day we lost eight, plus dozens wounded, and then the next day we lost four killed. And the next day—this was June 6, 7, 8th—we lost a couple more Marines. We were getting pretty scant. June 13th, we lost a bunch more; I think it was four killed that day. I know all this because I looked up our command chronology for the years, and kinda have a little history that I wrote, for different operations and stuff that we went through—

JS: When—

RC: Go ahead.

JS: I'm sorry. I was just going to say when you come across the enemy and get into a big firefight and take causalities how long—I know you said that the company would—I'm sorry. It would be a while before you would get replacements. How long would it generally take to get replacements, I guess?

RC: Well, one time they even sent part of another company to become attached to our company to give us enough men. Normally we had guys coming in—new guys coming in, oh, on resupply choppers frequently. Every three or four days, there might be

a new guy come in or a couple of them. But they were dying as fast as they were coming in. It was a terrible summer. I call it the Summer Fight of '68. A lot of the guys that endured the whole siege of Khe Sanh, the seventy-seven days, and bombings and stuff at Khe Sanh, they said the summer was worse than Khe Sanh because it's up close and personal. You see an enemy, and they are seeing you. Where at Khe Sanh, you just lived underground, and they just lobbed rockets and artillery and stuff from the mountains down on us. But, as far as having men resupplied, like I said, it varied. And they never did get another corpsman. Just me. But then again, we were never up to par. We never had our full troop of Marines for that platoon.

JS: Yes, sir. When replacements did come in, would they be readily accepted, or would there be a sort of proving time before they'd be accepted?

RC: Yeah, there's a proving time. In fact, we called them, FNGs. The NG stands for new guys, and you know what the F stands for. You kind of avoid them because they didn't have the experience that you had humping through the bush, and they were always the first to trip a booby trap or do something stupid. Yeah, there was a proving time. That's for sure. I didn't find that with myself. They readily accepted me. But as far as the Marines, you didn't want to walk behind them or in front of them, scared they're going to trip a booby trap. It took, you know, a month or so, before they really got accepted. They'd almost have to prove themselves. And that's just the way it was the whole time.

JS: So, then would it, I guess take about a month for them to kind of learn what they were doing?

RC: Right, acclimate to them and wrap around them what was going on and learning from the older guys, you know, how to direct your fire and set up ambushes, and go out on LP—those were listening posts, and that was probably the worst job a Marine could have. Out in the bush, you go out two Marines out outside the perimeter and just sit there and wait until you hear any enemy moving around. It was pretty scary.

JS: Yes, sir. Those—the new guys, the replacements, did you find that within that first month that they were learning, were they—I guess what I'm asking is would they be more likely to take causalities at that point? Did you find that they had a better chance of survival if they made it through that first month?

RC: Probably. Kind of like Doc McCoy. He was only there three weeks and wounded and died a month later. So, I suspect he made the mistake of having his back toward the enemy, as he was just trying to patch up Gallagher—and we were taught in Field Med School don't get between the enemy and your casualty. Stay behind your casualty and treat them. I think Doc McCoy made the mistake of not doing that. That's how he got wounded and died. Yeah, they were more apt to get wounded in the first few months just because of inexperience.

JS: One other thing I wanted to ask you about here, kind of change the subject just a little bit. Do you remember any of the specific of the big operations? For example, were you involved in Allen Brook?

RC: Yeah. I was in Allen Brook. I was in Allen Brook, Operation Kentucky, Operation Mameluke Thrust.

JS: Okay. All right. Let's see, did you spend pretty much the whole twelve months out in the field?

RC: No. I spent eight months—see corpsmen are—ideally, they are supposed to spend six months in the bush with the grunts and then six months at a battalion aid station, which was usually in the rear area. But I ended up spending eight months because they just couldn't supply enough corpsmen. Corpsmen were getting killed left and right, and they couldn't train them fast enough to get them there. That's why I was the only corpsman for the last six and a half months of my time in the bush. I'm sorry I lost my train of thought. What was the question again?

JS: Just asking about how much time you spent out in the field, and you were talking—

RS: I ended up spending eight months instead of the six. And then I went to the battalion aid station. I almost volunteered to go back with the grunts because they were so petty at the battalion aid station. I came in—the battalion aid station was manned by the doctor and corpsmen E-5 and higher—E-5, E-6, E-7. Most of the corpsmen in the bush were E-2s, E-3s, E-4s. And when I got to the rear, I was a mess. One of my boots had a big hole in it. They told me polish my boots and I said, "You're crazy, I'm not polishing these boots. They have holes in them." And they told me I needed a haircut, and I was not very military as far as uniforms went. So, I stayed in trouble in the rear. Finally I said,

"Screw y'all. I'm gonna go back to the bush." They said, "Good." Then I thought about it overnight, and I thought, "Nah, I'm not going to go back out there and get killed just for these idiots." So I went back in and I told them, "Never mind." They said, "No we already got you scheduled to go." And I said, "No, look at the corpsman board there. Look Doc Cahill at the very top. He's got eight months in the bush. All these other corpsmen only have four months. If you're going to send somebody back, send one of those four monthers back." And it even says on my service record that I had some adjustment problems after coming out of the bush and going to the rear. In fact, I threatened to kill a bunch of lifers. I threatened to blow up their hooch. These were our own people, Navy people. And I told the doctor, I said, "Doc. Don't sleep in the Lifer hooch tonight." I said, "I'm gonna blow it up." He quickly took care of that and sent me to the psychiatrist in Da Nang. The shrink there talked to me and listened to my story, and he said, "Go back. I recommend you stay off of his case about the petty stuff and give him something trivial to do and just stay off his case about polishing boots and stuff like that." He said, "If you'd been through what this guy's been through, you wouldn't take the petty ass orders either." So, they kind of slacked up, but they gave me the crappy job. I had to burn the shitters, which I didn't mind. I'd go pull the shitters out and light them, walk off, smoke a joint. But we never smoked the joint in the jungle. At least I never did. The ultimate high was gettin' shot at. But once you got to the rear, you were a whole lot safer.

JS: I guess, could you talk a little bit about the job here, other things you would do as far as treating the wounded and things like that at the aid station?

RC: After that, that's basically it. You just treat the wounded. We had a small ward where we had malaria patients. Guys would come in with upper respiratory infections and dysentery, stuff like that. We would treat them there and admit them to the ward and get them on their antibiotics, get them well, and ship them back to the bush. We didn't operate on anyone. I mean minor shrapnel wounds and stuff. Pull the shrapnel out and suture it up and put them on some antibiotics. But it was not like what you saw on *M.A.S.H* where we had a surgeon and everything. We had one battalion doctor and then there were several E-6s and a couple E-7s and one E-8.

JS: So, would there be any sort of triage system then?

RC: At the battalion aid station? Not really. Because most of the severely wounded wouldn't come right there. They'd go to a field hospital. We weren't a hospital; we were just an aid station. So, we just treated pretty much the minor stuff and the different illnesses and help sick bay for the people that were in the rear, you know if you come down with whatever. I mean there was no major blood and guts at the aid station.

JS: When you—well first before I ask this, could you talk a little bit about, I guess, your daily schedule at this time? I mean, how many hours would you be working and that sort of thing?

RC: At the aid station?

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: Unfortunately, I worked longer than most people because I got extra duty because of my behavior. Like I said, I had a hard time adjusting. I never really did adjust to it. They knew it. I knew it. So, my daily routine was go pull the shitters out, throw in the fuel, diesel fuel mixture, light it, let burn for about an hour. I'd walk off, go get stoned, and then I'd come back, relight it, walk off, and go visit people. But it was a secure area. Didn't have to carry a gun around or anything. But there were some people that worked eight to four. They worked in the medical records. Or if you worked at the sick bay, it would be eight to four and then somebody would have to go on duty, a couple corpsmen, for the afternoon shift and then a couple for the night shift. But it was pretty routine like an eight to four job, eight to five job. I was delighted doing was I was doing, burning shitters because nobody bothered me. Nobody wanted to be around me because I stunk from doing that. And that's how I liked it. I became a completely different person after Vietnam, after coming out of the bush. My family recognized that, too, when I got home.

JS: When you were off duty, how would you spend your down time?

RC: Oh, writing letters, one guy had a reel-to-reel, listen to music. When we could get supplies, beer—we would drink some beer, play cards, you know things like that. Sit around bullshitting. We'd try to find things to pass the time away.

JS: Yes, sir. Where there ever any racial problems or anything like that in the rear?

RC: Not that—not while I was there. I heard it started after that. But no, I don't recall any racial problems. Out in the bush, you didn't care what color it was as long as they were on your side.

JS: Right, yes, sir. Well, is there anything else we should cover here about your tour duty in Vietnam before moving on?

RC: No, I think we've pretty much covered it. Just saw too much combat.

JS: Yes, sir. Well, when did you receive your orders to come home?

RC: I was—I flew out March 27th, I believe. March—yeah March 27th.

JS: All right. Okay. Let's see. And this is probably a dumb question, but how did you feel about leaving?

RC: (Laughing) That's not a dumb question but a good question. I felt relieved but not totally because I wasn't out of that country yet. I left, went to a transit hut, transit barracks—same place where I came in at—spent two days there, and then caught a flight. It was a C-130. I flew that to Okinawa. Once the plane got in the air high enough, then there was a sigh of relief. You knew you were going to make it. But you weren't even—going down that runway, thinking at the end of the runway there might be some gook just to shoot this plane out of the air. A C-130 doesn't get up very fast. But yeah, it was a happy day.

JS: Well, what type of reception did you receive upon returning home?

RC: Upon returning to the States was different than returning to my home. I remember landing, and there were protesters. They had them separated by a chain link fence, so they couldn't get too close to us. We kind of were in a corral, like you transfer cattle from one corral to the next, and it was a chain link fence. I got my flight out of there, and I got bumped off the plane because I was flying military stand-by. And I know now, today—or at least Iraqi vets or Afghani vets, I don't think that would happen to them. Somebody would give up their seat for them. But I didn't. I made it all the way to Akron, and then I got bumped off the plane, and my family—they were waiting for me in Youngstown. I called the airport there, and I had them page my family, and I told them, I said, "I got knocked off the plane. Can you come pick me up in Akron?" So, they did that. But the homecoming, there was none except for my family, my friends. Even—I started college and had a hard time there because everybody was protesting the war, and

here I am sitting in class—didn't matter what kind of class you were in, whether it be social science class, or biology class—they were talking about the Vietnam War and not in a very positive way. I took three years of that, and I finally I just dropped out of college because I just felt out of place there. The homecoming wasn't very good.

JS: Yes, sir. Did you have any idea when you—I guess you were first getting home that did you have any idea that, that was, I guess, the state the country was going to be in?

RC: Maybe a little bit, not to the extent that it was because my mom sent me some clippings from the newspaper where right down from my grandmother's house they had a National Guard tank because they were having race riots and stuff. I said, "Man, it sounds like they got a war going on there." But no, I didn't think it was as bad as it was, until I got home and saw that they—how everybody was against the war by that time. They were sick and tired of watching it on TV and watching troops die and stuff. Unfortunately, I see the same thing happening today. America doesn't have the guts to stand up and fight the war to the end. They just give up. I'm not saying the Military. I'm talking about the civilians and the government. I still harbor some anger over that.

JS: By the time you came home, and you were seeing this going on with the protests, had you developed an opinion on the war and the way things were going?

RC: Yeah, I kind of wished the war was over too because I saw that we weren't going to win it with the way the government was handling it. I protested my own way. I grew long hair and a beard, didn't shave or cut my hair for several years. I even had a sticker on my wall that says, "Support our boys in Canada." That quickly changed. I don't know why I went through that period. But then I realized these guys went to Canada, and I went to Vietnam. And now they are all home and enjoying life, and I've got these nightmares that I have to live through everyday. So, I learned to detest these "war protesters," and they didn't have the first clue of what was going on over there.

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: And Jason, we won that war regardless of what the government says. We were kicking ass. We won that damn war. The government lost it.

JS: In the case of the protesters, did you think it was—you're turning your opinion against them. Do you think it was because they weren't able to separate the war from the guys who fought it?

RC: Right. In fact, I used to wear a shirt that said, "Forget the war, not the warrior."

JS: Right.

RC: Yeah, they couldn't separate the two. If you were in Vietnam, you were a bad person. You know, "Why'd you go kill them people, blah, blah, blah. You're baby killers. You're drug addicts. A bunch of idiots" That's all I would hear in college. People not directing it right at me but the discussions were like that. And I just kept my mouth shut. I just glued to my studies and tried to get them out of my focus. But it was impossible to do, so I finally dropped out. But eventually I went back and graduated and became a registered nurse.

JS: Okay, did you keep up with the war? Did you follow it in the media?

RC: No. No, my war was over. I may have read a few headlines or something, but no, I didn't keep up on it. I probably should have. I just wanted to get as far away from it as I could.

JS: Sure. Did you—after you're returned, did you hear from any of the guys that you had served with?

RC: No, not until 1989. And now I've met up with several guys in 2001 that I served with. And we have a reunion every year and a lot of mini-reunions. These were guys that I was actually in combat with. I questioned myself for years, "Did I really do that? Did that really happen to me in Vietnam? Did I really get up and run and gooks were firing at me all over the place? And run to that casualty?" I was starting to doubt what I remembered. And then when I met up with my comrades in 2001—I met up with about a dozen of them, and of course they still loved their doc, their corpsman—still treated me like a king. Lost my train of thought again, but that's not unusual for me. Oh, they helped me to legitimize what I did over there. I was having my doubts— how did I do some of this stuff? It was almost like superhuman. And I thought, "How did I exist? How did I make it over there? And did I really do these things, or am I imagining them now? Did I really see this?" And then after meeting up with them and hearing their

stories and talks about me, it's the best thing that's happened to me since the war is meeting up with these guys. We just had a reunion. Delta Company has a reunion every year. Next month I'm going down to Mexico—a bunch of us. We get together quite a bit now. And that's the only friends I have. I isolate myself. I'm not in any social groups or anything. I used to be real social then PTSD hit. I could tell you a bunch of stories about that.

JS: Yes, sir. Well how long then, I guess based on what you're saying—how long do you think it took to adjust to being back, I guess, in civilian society again?

RC: I don't think I ever did adjust. I came home, and I stayed drunk for fifteen years. I was a functional drunk, working and stuff. But I never really totally adjusted back. For a while I was real sociable and everything. And then, I don't know, things just went really bad in 1999. Like I said, I'm a registered nurse, and I was working and had a problem with one of my bosses mainly because I whistle blowed on a bunch of Medicare-Medicaid fraud. And they didn't like it, my reports. And that was my job to check out the fraud. And I'd send reports in, and they didn't like the way I worded it. They told me to change my wording, and I said, "No, fraud is fraud." And they said, "You can't use that word." And I said, "What do you call a wheelchair ramp made out of half a sheet of ply-wood for four thousand dollars? That's fraud." And they didn't like it, and I thought—and then I was having problems sleeping and stuff and getting angry and irritable. I went and saw my family doctor and he said, "I think you need to see a psychologist." So, I went and saw a private psychologist because I wouldn't have nothing to do with the VA just based on what I had heard. And in '99 I saw a psychologist, and he said, "Your problem's not work. It's Post Dramatic Stress Disorder." So, I continued to see him, and he suggested I file a claim, which I eventually did. I filed it. Eleven months later, they approved it. And I was a hundred percent disabled, total and permanent.

JS: Yes, sir.

RC: And I had the evidence to back it up.

JS: Right, how helpful do you—how helpful has the VA been, do you think?

RC: Not very. I could talk to you another two hours about the VA. I do go there for a physical every six months mainly because of the medications that I'm on, you know, to have lab work done. But I had a heart attack a couple years ago, and there was

no way I was going to the VA hospital and trust them with my heart. Anything serious, I go to a private doctor. I just use the VA to get my lab work done and that's about it and get my medication.

JS: Right.

RC: In fact, I got kicked out of the VA once.

JS: All right, well you don't have to talk about this if you don't want to, of course, but could you talk a little bit more about PTSD and what that's been like for you?

RC: Okay, I first got diagnosed in 1984, that's when I was drinking so heavy. And I went to the private psychologist funded through the VA, and he diagnosed me with PTSD, depression, sleep disorder, anxiety, isolation, substance abuse, which was alcohol. And then I went into rehab, alcohol and drug rehab, and after that I was able to get back on my feet. Went back to college and graduated number one in my class as a registered nurse. And for fifteen years everything was going along fairly well until 1999. I don't know if the Gulf War set it off or what happened. Some health professionals seem to think it's an insidious disorder. And what I hate about it the most is how it affects my family. Because from '84 to '99, I mean I was involved in all kinds of things. I started a Vietnam vet club here in Longview. I started a Vietnam vet softball team. We have competed in the city league. Things like that. Involved in helping the community and built playgrounds. And we had a lot of guys with welding experience and stuff, and we built swing sets and donated them to the daycare centers. We were really involved in stuff. But then in '99 when it hit, I was in total isolation. I cried for a week and didn't know why I was crying. I had these thoughts during the day no matter what I was doing. All of a sudden, one of the firefights would pop into my head. Some people call it flashbacks. I call it intrusive thoughts. Just out of nowhere. But it was just like living alone, and you're hurting so bad, and you don't know why—the depression. I worked as a nurse, and I even worked on a couple psychiatric units, and I thought I knew what depression was until it really hit me. And there was a time where I didn't come out of my bedroom. My wife was worried sick about me. And then I would—friends would try to come over or call, and I would chase them away. I said, "No I don't want to talk. Get away." So, the only friends I have now are my comrades that I served with in Vietnam. I still isolate myself, still go through bouts of depression. I'm on medication for it. But

what bothers me the most is how I know its affecting my family. We used to do so much together and now I can't go to Wal-Mart with my wife. I just can't stand being around that many people. And that's what hurts me the most, is my family. They are so great. They are so understanding. I have two daughters, and they both understand and deal with it. I hate that my disorder has affected their lives so much. We're doing all right right now.

JS: Yes, sir. Are you completely retired now? Or are you still working?

RC: No, I'm retired as of 1999, November 4th when my boss told me I couldn't call off sick anymore. That was my last day. I went and went on short term disability. My psychologist said I wasn't fit to work. Then they said I'd threatened to kill my supervisor. So, I was working for the state of Texas then. And I didn't threaten to kill her. I was just on sick leave, and they called me and said, "You got until February such and such to get back to work. Otherwise you're fired." And I said, "Listen aren't you getting my reports from the Doctor?" "Yeah, but you got to be back to work by then or you're fired." And I said, "Listen I'm seeing three different therapists right now to keep from killing people like you." And they took it as a threat, which I can understand. So, I got a letter from the Attorney General saying I'm not allowed in any state offices before they change all the locks on the office I worked, and there were two hundred employees in that office. They changed all the locks and cards, ID cards. And my boss, they said I'd threatened, she—they gave her an armed bodyguard twenty-four hours a day. They changed all the locks on her office, and she's a hundred miles away from me. So, it was a rough ending to a good career. I was a good nurse. Doctors loved me, Ny peers loved me. I was very effective working in the ER. But then the PTSD hit, and I knew I couldn't function as a nurse. I wouldn't want someone like me as a nurse, so I decided it was time to retire. I retired and filed for disability and got approved, and that's what I live on today.

JS: All right, as far as when you were working as a nurse, you worked in the ER the whole time?

RC: No, I worked in the ER about four years, and then I ran a drug rehab for about eight years. Then I worked for the state for six years before I got booted out of there more or less, forced to leave.

JS: Yes, sir. Well before wrapping up the interview, one of the last things I like to do is ask you some general questions about—to get your opinion on the war and the way it was handled and things like that. So, for this you can say as much or as little as you'd like.

RC: Okay.

JS: First of all, looking back on your experiences—your experience in Vietnam, how do you feel about your own service and about American participation in Vietnam in general?

RC: Well, my own service, I'm very, very proud of it. There was a time I wouldn't talk about it. But now I'm willing to talk about it to anybody that would listen. I'm proud to have served with the Marines. I'm proud that they feel just as highly of me as I do of them. I'm not proud of our country. I feel our country abandoned us when we came back from that war. I'm angry at our country even today for different reasons today though. But as far as the way they handled the war, if they'd let the military do what they were meant to do we could have taken down North Vietnam in a matter of months. But they had so many restrictions, and politics got involved. So, I despise the politicians who say we lost the war because I don't feel we lost it. We went by body count. We beat them a hundred to one. I even used to talk at schools about Vietnam, at a high school here in Longview. I wouldn't tell war stories like I was telling you, but just tell them how the whole situation was.

JS: Sure, yes, sir.

RC: Because you won't read it in the textbooks.

JS: Right. All right, well, do you think that the U.S. should have been in Vietnam to begin with?

RC: At the time, yeah, I did. I fell for the domino theory, that we were going over there to fight communism. And I was raised to not like communists. That was a bad type of government, and I thought we went for the right reasons. But then politics seemed to change that. If I had to do it over again, no, I wouldn't go knowing what I know today. I would go to Canada. But I'm proud to have served, and I'm not ashamed of my service anymore. There was a time where I almost was ashamed. I almost fell for these

protestors. You call somebody a “killer,” “murderer,” “rapist,” long enough, he’s going to start believing it. But no, I’m very proud of my service.

JS: Yes, sir. All right, just a few more questions. How’d you feel about—and you said you didn’t pay too much attention to the war after you got back, but overall how did you feel about the way that the media handled the war?

RC: Oh, I think it sucked. I think they were biased. I think they were just like the media is today. They’re against the war, so their going to put anything negative on the TV, on the news, to try to warp people’s minds into thinking we are doing the wrong thing. I think the media treated us wrong just like I think the media today is treating this war wrong.

JS: Yes, sir. What do you think of U.S. policy towards Vietnam today in this developing relationship that we—that the U.S. has with the Vietnamese now?

RC: I’m not happy with it at all. The reason being is look at the child labor in Vietnam. They’re slave laborers. So, we’re having trade with a country that violates human rights everyday. And we are so big gung-ho on human rights, but yet we’re going to buy products from Vietnam that are made by slave laborers? I was a marathon runner, and my favorite shoe was the Nike Pegasus. That’s what I liked to run in, and last time I went to get Nike Pegasus, their made in Vietnam. I didn’t buy it. Because I knew some little child probably six, seven years old, working in some slave labor, for pennies a day, sixteen hours a day, and if we’re so gung-ho on human rights, why are we trading or building up this country? That country? So no, I don’t agree with the way our government is dealing with Vietnam today.

JS: Right, all right just last few questions here. Have you visited the Vietnam Wall? And if so, what did you think of it?

RC: Yep, I visited it several times. I think it’s a beautiful memorial. I think it’s a great place to dump some of the bad feelings you have. I think it’s a great place to honor our guys, our comrades. I have twenty-seven tracings from that wall of guys that I remembered got killed. When they were first building it, they were against it because it looks like a big black scar in the earth, and stuff, but turns out it—to me I could go visit it every day, just to talk to my comrades that didn’t make it. I really like going there. We

were there just two years ago. That was the last time I was there. I've been there three or four times.

JS: Well, is there anything else you'd like to say or anything else we should cover before wrapping the interview up?

RC: No, Jason, I can't think of anything right now.

JS: All right, well I will go ahead and stop the recording, but I'd like to talk to you for a few more minutes if that's okay.

RC: Okay.