Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Randall Kunkleman
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

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.

Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Randall Kunkleman in Las Vegas, Nevada at two o'clock p.m. in the afternoon on the 1st of October, 1999. Mr. Kunkleman, if you would, please begin by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself; where you were from, what was life like growing up, and then we can talk about training and other issues.

Randall Kunkleman: Okay. I was born in Lime, Ohio and I was born on 12-29-46. I was raised by my grandmother. My mother left my dad when I was a baby and my dad basically took me and dropped me off at my grandmothers and she didn't have anyplace to send me. I was raised…she did a very good job. She showed love to me but I was somewhat of a rebellious type person. Fairly rough and caused a lot of trouble. Around the 9th grade I had a life changing experience with Jesus Christ and I started to grow slowly and many of those things changed. I was married a year after I got out of high school. I was in college and working and I was afraid that I was going to get drafted and in 1968 I was drafted so that would start my military service. Is there anything else?

SM: No, no, that's good. You were drafted. Did you anticipate being drafted? What did you think about that?

RK: I was scared to death to get drafted. I wanted nothing to do with the war. I was scared to death to go to Vietnam. I didn't want to be killed. I didn't want to kill anybody else.

SM: Well, were you still going to school and working in '68?

RK: Yes.

SM: What was the atmosphere like where you were going to school amongst the people that you associated with, your friends?

RK: I was going to a branch of Ohio State and at that time it was in a high school. Basically later on they built a campus but at that time I was doing engineering, taking engineering subjects and I really enjoyed college. I liked the engineering part. I wasn't so good at some of the humanities and English and that stuff but I really liked the technical part. I knew that if I dropped below full student that I'd be drafted right away, but I couldn't maintain a full time job and carry the 15 hours so I dropped down to where I was only taking one or two classes and that's when I was drafted.

SM: Were your fellow students, were they overtly one way or another concerned in the war?

RK: In that particular atmosphere. That was like a small town, small. A lot of the students that was there was afraid of being drafted, too, and it wasn't on a large campus so we weren't having riots or anything like that. Most people I think felt that the war was being fought for a good reason, or there was a good reason. I should say there was good reason to be in Vietnam. They weren't sure that was the reason we were there, okay? There was a good reason to be there but I don't really believe that that's why we were there.

SM: Why do you think we were there?

RK: I think it basically was a political war in which a lot of people got rich.

SM: What did you think then while you were in school? Why did you think, in 1968, why did you think we were in Vietnam?

RK: In 1968 I knew that the communist rule is very subversive, okay, and I believe that we were trying to help people who didn't want to live under a communist type rule. Now there are times in this nation right now that I'm scared to death of our leaders, in a sense, but I'm not scared in the same sense that a person in a communist country is. I'm not afraid to talk to you openly. I'm not afraid to say that I believe there is a lot of corruption in our government. In a communist country a person could die for making a statement like I, just talking openly to you right now, so there's a big difference between the kind of fear I have for our country, within our government, and one over there and I believe that we were trying to help them to where they did not have to live in that kind of fear.

SM: Did you, as a college student or just out of your own personal interest, from 1965 to 1968 when you were drafted, you know, from the beginning of when the United States sent forces to Vietnam until you were drafted, did you keep track of things? What was going on in Vietnam? Was that something that interested you or did you just kind of just maybe keep paying attention?

RK: I didn't want to know. I probably was closer to an ostrich because I was afraid I'd have to be there and I didn't even want to know what was going on. Most everything that I had heard or had had any experience with was the people getting killed and I didn't want to have that. I didn't want to die, myself. But the other thing was knowing that you are very likely going to be put in a position where you have to kill someone else and just before I went to Vietnam I wrote my mom a letter and in that letter I stated that I'd qualified expert with the M-16 and then they took that away and gave me a .45 and then took the .45 away and gave me another M-16 that I hadn't sighted in, you know, I was talking little things about that but then I made the statement to her that it's probably good that I qualified expert. Now I'll have to find out if I can actually shoot someone else because I didn't know, and I don't think anybody really knows until your put under that situation. By God's grace I never really had to pull the trigger with someone in my sights but I ended up being in a unit in which I was feeding the ammo and there's very, very small step between the guy feeding the ammo and the guy pulling the trigger. So, in essence, I learned to very effectively kill people. Be a part of the process of killing people. In one fight alone I believe that I, by myself, loaded at least over a ton of ammunitions on Cobras. That's just one fight. I can't tell you how many tons of ammunition I loaded while I was over there. Now those guns fired 4,000 rounds a minute and the rockets were either ten pound or 18 pound rockets and that's high explosive, and there's probably hundreds and hundreds of people that I…well, I have absolutely no idea because I wasn't, you know, watching them be blown away. I don't really like that feeling, but that's just…and I don't feel that I was wrong in what I was doing. I'm just saying that it's something that happened. It's definitely not what I wanted to happen. So, I guess I found out yes, I can take other people's lives very easily or at least be part of the process.

SM: In 1968 when you were drafted, what month was that?

RK: January 1968.

SM: Okay, so this is before President Johnson made the decision not to run for reelection. Were you aware of that, when that happened or did that happen after you left the country or did that even phase you when you heard of President Johnson's decision?

RK: I didn't go to Vietnam until 1969. March 1969.

SM: Okay, so you were still state side?

RK: March. Actually, I went into the service. Three days into the service I had an officer tell me that if I would sign up for an extra year that I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. He asked me what kind of work I did, I said, 'I do drafting type work,' and he said he could get me a drafting type of job, but I'd have to sign up for an extra year.

SM: So that was what, three years or four years?

RK: It would have been…I was drafted for two years. I went in as 'US' which is drafted. three days in, as soon as he told me I could stay in the states because I want to stay here with my wife very badly, you know, fairly newly married, and I vehemently did not want to go to Vietnam. I mean, I'd have done just about anything not to go to Vietnam. Signing up for an extra year did not bother me at all, so I signed up for an extra year. In essence, I really have two hitches in the Army. My first hitch was three days and my second hitch was three years, so I was in the service three years and three days. I got out of basic…

SM: Where was that?

RK: I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina on 'Tank: Hill' 'A-3-1'.

SM: Was that good training?

RK: It was, I can't say it wasn't good training but it sure was a new experience. First day that I got into boot camp they had our company or our squad, whatever we were, we went out to eat and they had us just standing at parade rest. Everybody was just kind of like shivering almost, not knowing what was going to happen next, and this big black drill sergeant walked up to me and looked me right in the eye and the next thing I knew I was lying on the ground. He just knocked me off my feet, and I was lying on the ground and like a tape recording going through my head, it just kept going over and over, 'They said he couldn't touch me! They said he couldn't touch me! They said he couldn't touch me!' and I was lying there almost like in a daze and I heard this screaming about getting back up and getting in line and get off that ground and all of a sudden I was back up. Now that guy treated me great the rest of the time through basic. I think that all he was doing, you know, it could have been any one of the people in that

line, but he was just showing that he was in control and I just happened to be the person that he wanted to show it through. Now the other drill instructor was a tall, lanky white guy and that guy gave me trouble clear through basic. First of all, he didn't like it because I would go to church services on Sunday and the only time he was decent with me was during rifle training and I think the fact that I could shoot fairly well may have, you know, made him think that it was a good time to kind of back off a little. In fact, I think that during rifle training they, as a general…I think they do back off a lot because people have been known to kind of like snap and it is dangerous when you are firing with live rounds. But, when I went through the gas mask training I did everything perfect. Went in, cleared my gas mask, was fine. Made him so mad that he grabbed me by the hair, ripped my gas mask off and shoved my face down into the bucket that they had the CS gas in and held me there. He finally let me go and I run out and I have absolutely no idea how I was able to hold my breath that long but I held my breath through the entire thing and there was people running, when I…there was people actually running out through the woods and people running out of there puking in their gas masks but I remember that experience. And then when we was on the punji sticks, he liked using me as his…I think a lot of times a lot of that is…they were training us to go kill people and most people consider a person who tries to live as a Christian as being someone they can't be dependent on and personally I think that the whole time I was in the service I probably worked harder and tried to do more than a lot of people and it wasn't necessarily that I liked what I was doing, but I was trying to do my job the best I knew how. But, I think that's why a lot of times there were people who just took a disliking to me just because I tried to live as a Christian, tried to be a witness while I was in the service.

SM: Given the strength of your faith, did you ever consider conscientious objection?

RK: Oh yeah. When I first went in, I had a real problem with that because I didn't really understand how someone can take someone else's life. But if you read the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was a very war-like people and when I read of how God literally had them go in and destroy nations it was kind of hard for me to think, 'Well,' you know, 'That could never be expected of you.' I mean, my country was asking me to go. It wasn't necessarily God asking me to go, but at the same time, if it was God, what would I say? Would I say, 'No, I don't want to kill somebody else?' It was hard for me, but I really didn't feel that I was a conscientious objector and the New Testament I remember that there was a time that Jesus Christ told the

disciples to sell their cloaks and buy a sword. For the most part he told them, 'If you live by the sword, you die by the sword,' and it's not a general type of deal where he's telling you to go out and live aggressively, but at the same time I believe that there are times that you can defend yourself and there are times that you're not to defend yourself. But, if the time comes that you are, it's nice to have a sword.

SM: Absolutely.

RK: It doesn't matter if you have the sword if it's a time when you're not trying to defend yourself because you don't have to use it, but if you don't have it, you can't use it!

SM: Right, right.

RK: So, I didn't, I never felt like I had to be a conscientious objector. I could have been very easily, but I didn't really….but I still didn't want to go to Vietnam. I was scared to death. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to kill somebody. That was my main premise.

SM: So after basic training, what was your MOS and where did you go for your basic, your initial training?

RK: Went to Aberdeen, Maryland and the course that was supposed to be like drafting was 45J20 Aircraft Armament Repair working on all of the guns, the electrical systems of all of the gun ships of which Cobras is what I ended up working but we were on gun ships that were also Hueys. I think D model is one that carried some, like the XM-21 subsystem, some French wire guided missile and some different things like that, but what I worked on in Vietnam was all Cobras and I was, I actually graduated top of my class in 45J20. That was another thing that kind of disappointed me because when I went in I was told that everyone in the class who passed would make E4 and we were told that the honor student would make E5 and so there were three of us, I had some college and there were two other guys that had college, were college graduates, and so we really had…it was real close as far as which of the three of us would graduate honors student because everybody wanted E5 and I didn't make it by much but I just barely made enough to graduate honors student and instead of making E5 I made E4 with everyone else and got a plaque.

SM: What was that for? Why did they do that?

RK: I have no idea. Because there was another guy in the same graduating class that was graduating out of NCO training. Everyone else in that class graduated E5 and he graduated E6 and he's in the service less time than I'd been. So, I don't know how those things happen.

SM: What did you do after you did your training there?

RK: Okay, that's when we went out to, or I went out to Fort Hood, Texas at a place called Grey Army Air Field and at that time I was attached to F Troop. That's what we started out as, F Troop, and that was when the old television series 'F Troop' was on. Kind of like the people who did everything backwards and messed everything up, so there was a little bit of kidding around about us being in F Troop. We were training with the Cobras and getting the unit together.

SM: This is the unit that would become B Troop?

RK: Yeah. Then we went to…they changed our name from F Troop to B Packet not too long before we left to go overseas and then on the way over, as I recall, we went from B Packet and became B Troop as we went into country. That was March 25, 1969. I think we became B Troop March 25, 1969. We, at that time, thought that we were the first B Troop. Since then we've found that there was a B Troop, 2nd of the 17th, which was an armored Cav unit that actually stopped or stood down, stopped operating as a unit, they call that standing down, and then we stood up as B Troop, 2nd of the 17th Cav and they went from an armored Cav unit with APCs and we started working as an Air mobile Air Cav unit and the people, I think a lot of the people in the armored Cav didn't even realize. They thought that they were just standing down. They didn't even realize an Air Cav unit stood up in their place. Some of them did because some of the people in the old mechanized Cav came into B Troop. About half of our people were infused into other troops when we went. We went as a complete unit. All of our vehicles, all of the helicopters, all of the guns and rifles, pistols, all of that stuff, they were all shipped over. We didn't even have our M-16s for several days after we got in. I mean, we were sitting in our company area. If we'd have been attacked on that part of Camp Eagle, we had nothing to fight with.

SM: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

RK: March 25th, 1969.

SM: At Camp Eagle? Where was that?

RK: Well actually we arrived at Danang and within about a half hour, or as we were getting off of our plane, within the first half hour or hour at the very most, I think it was within the first half hour, there was this, you know, all these guys hadn't been to Vietnam, been training in the States, don't know what to expect, and all of a sudden we got rockets going off all around

us and we didn't even know where to run to so we just started running with people who looked like they'd been there and tried to find places to get cover. So we hadn't even been in Vietnam an hour and already was starting to realize that this was not going to be a fun trip.

SM: So you went from Danang to Camp Eagle?

RK: We went from Danang up to Camp Eagle, yes.

SM: And that was located, Camp Eagle was located…

RK: Right between Hue and Phu Bai, up on a hill. Our troop was basically in a cemetery, a Vietnamese cemetery.

SM: Did that create any problems?

RK: Not really. People didn't bother us at all.

SM: The locals, the fact that an American unit was occupying a cemetery?

RK: I don't really know. I do know that occasionally they would have to have some Buddhists come in if they wanted to move a grave or something like that but we used a lot of the cement graves for protection as far as second line of defense. One sergeant that hated me over there, Sergeant Flume, he actually had me on the M-60 in one of these graves for second line of defense and I could never understand why he wanted me in with him. He was like command post and then they had the other where they put PSB and everything back behind the bunkers for second line of defense, and after years I think basically what it had come down to is I think he thought I had a charmed life and he wanted to be close to where I was because I think that somewhere in his mind he thought that nothing would happen to him. He was a real chicken. But, he sent me every place it seems like he could. I'm not sure if he was trying to get rid of me or what, but I went out into the field an awful lot. Got sent down to Rock Crusher a lot. Rock Crusher was basically just, there was a real small base that the only artillery they had was a small mortar and it was real small and we were actually outside this little fire base, outside the barbed wire and everything just in a flat area where the helicopters would come in with just a big pile of rockets and there would just be me and this other crew chief. He'd take care of the helicopters, I'd take care of the rockets, and we'd be sitting there talking to each other saying, 'What are you going to do if they attack us?' and I said, 'I don't know, what are you going to do?' I mean, here you've got to imagine we're sitting out in the middle of this big, flat area with a big hill behind us that we later found out was just infested with VC, and the sea in front of us, and the only thing…if they ever attacked us, the only thing we could hide behind was our piles of rockets and

mini gun ammo. We had nothing. So it wasn't really a good place to be. Now, we never was attacked. They never shot at us there, but it just seemed like an extremely precarious spot that he kept sending me back to.

SM: And this was a typical operation that you would find yourself on where you would accompany a Cobra, or a couple of Cobras, and you basically acted as the ammo man for that?

RK: Yeah. That's basically all I did when I was out in the field. Like when I was in the A Shau Valley, a place called LZ Ann, our CO took us out. We flew out with the CO Gary Dolin, Major Dolin, and Ron While and I were the armors to work out that day. He told us to stay there until he came back to get us. Well, when we were flying in the green tracers and the red tracers were going back and forth as the sun was starting to come up, and as soon as we were landing, just before we landed, the green and the red tracers stopped. So as the Cobras come in, they stop firing on this little kind of like bulldozed kind of a firebases, what Rock Crusher would be at, and then they brought in a bunch of infantry. As I remember it was a bunch. I don't know, 150, 200 infantry, something like that to set up a perimeter around where we were at and was working out of, you know, arming these Cobras. Well we worked there all day long and it was starting to get dark again and when it got dark then they didn't care because the Cobras couldn't really see as well so then they'd start back up again. Well, it was too dangerous for all these infantry to stay there and they were pulling out, you know, H Model after H Model and me and Ron While was the only armors out there, and I run over to one of our Loch pilots and I said, 'Hey, what can we do? We can't stay out here! I've got an M-16, he's got an M-79 and a .45! What do we do?' Well he said, 'I can't go against the COs order, but I'll tell you there's no way I'd stay out here if there was any way I could leave.' So me and Ron ran over and asked one of the H Model pilots if we could ride with him. We told him we didn't care where he was going, just, 'Could we ride with you? We'll go wherever you're going.' And he said, 'If you can get on here, you can go with me,' and he was packed, I mean really packed with infantry and Ron was smaller than me. He was able to get in. There just was no more room. I ended up riding standing on the skids all the way back and the ride didn't bother me at all because of the difference between the fear of staying there. Ron and I, if we'd have stayed there, very likely would have ended up either dead or POWs. I mean, the place was just crawling with the enemy and as soon as it got dark we couldn't have done anything.

SM: Did you work much with ARVN units and Vietnamese units at all?

RK: No, no. When I was down at Chu Lai they had some kit carson scouts which were Chu Hoi's that had come over and supposedly, you know, were trying to be on our side. But I don't ever remember working with any ARVNs. We basically were a self-contained unit that went out to find the enemy and tried to destroy them. They had hunter-killer teams. That was our whole operation. The LOH pilots would hover around down in the trees trying to draw fire and as soon as they drew fire the Cobras would come in wherever that fire was coming from. The LOH guys had terrible, terrible…I mean, you get up in the morning and you know all you're doing is going out there to try to have people shoot at you. That's a terrible job. Psychologically, that's not fun.

SM: Were there a lot of LOHs shot down? Were a lot of LOHs shot down?

RK: When we went down to Chu Lai, I believe, when we went down to Chu Lai they told us we'd be there three days until the Americal division could regroup.

SM: Was this in May of '69?

RK: This was in May. We ended up being there three months. It was there May, June, July, came back in August, so the three days ended up being three months, and then the three months, light observation…the OH64, or 69 all of a sudden, I think OH…the LOHs, I think we lost 37 in the three months. There was times that, in fact, a couple of times that our CO had actually taken LOHs because we were losing them so fast that were supposed to go to other units and confiscated them. I'm surprised that Major Dolin didn't…he may have gotten in trouble a few times for it, I don't know, but our CO was very aggressive and he's taken a lot of static for that. Some people really think he shouldn't have been that way. I don't know because if he hadn't been aggressive I don't know what would have happened because our unit really found a lot of the enemy and disrupted a lot of their operations. Now yes, we did take a lot of pounding. I mean, we got beat up a lot. But at the same time, if we hadn't got in there and disrupted, there could have been a lot heavier loss of life had they been able to do whatever they wanted to without our, you know, getting in. So as far as whether Gary made bad decisions, I think that he did the best he could and the only difference between a good decision and a bad decision a lot of times is the outcome.

SM: And what's this gentleman's name again, you commander?

RK: It's Major Gary Dolin.

SM: Now in Vietnam, what were the most difficult actions that you were a part of in terms of engaging the enemy, the enemy engaging you and your unit?

RK: Well there's a couple of times that really kind of bothered me. The one time, well, as far as when the Cobras were, there was one time when the Cobras one fight that I think I covered where I probably armed almost a ton, or probably over a ton, of munitions in one fight. That was kind of bad, but I think that was…when that happened normally someone was down or someone was really in a bad situation and I mean they were just pouring all kinds of fire to help.

SM: Which operation was that during, where you had to load up a ton? Was that the…

RK: That was, to the best of my memory, I think that was before we went to Chu Lai, so that probably would have been sometime between March and May. Sometime, I think just prior to Hamburger Hill maybe. I don't know. I didn't even know what Hamburger Hill was. I'd heard about it for all these years and it was just two or three years ago that I realized that that's where we were working out of and we had what I believe was the first LOH shot down off of Hamburger Hill just prior to the main engagement. That's when Steve Jones was shot down. He'd had two hours and 20 minutes of stick time in a LOH before being shot down, and he'd volunteered from being an H model pilot to become a…because he wanted to see more action. He got two hours and 20 minutes and he was badly wounded.

SM: Was he captured?

RK: No. He's the one that was on that documentary that they…he ended up in Japan in the hospital, but he was very badly wounded.

SM: Did your unit participate in the battle for Hamburger Hill, that whole…

RK: No, we found it and that's when we were sent immediately after finding Hamburger Hill, we were sent down to Chu Lai because the Americal had declared a tactical emergency, and that's why we were supposed to go down to Chu Lai to help them out. Basically, we took over their operation and that's when we, in that three months period, we lost I think it was 37 LOHs. It was thirty some LOHs, I don't know exact, along with H models. We lost some other H models and some Cobras during that time. Not nearly as many. The LOHs were basically just sitting ducks for the most part. They went out there to try to draw fire and if the helicopter had not been as good a helicopter as it was, we would have lost a lot more. The OH-69 - I think is what it was called - was an extremely maneuverable…they could be flying forward and just go almost right, almost immediately and there was a lot that they could do to

evade fire. But still, the job they had, you can't evade fire forever. I mean, it was just a terrible job.

SM: Were they shot at with machine guns and rockets?

RK: Most of the time what they were shot down with was a .51 cal and the Cobras were afraid of those too. The .51 cals, especially if they were radar guided, if a Cobra heard beeping it was doing everything it could because if it gets three beeps you were in bad trouble. By the 3rd time…the Cobras would pick up the radar .51 cals homing in on them and as soon as they heard any beeping they were doing everything they could to try to get out of there.

SM: Now the .51…

RK: The same thing as our .50 cals.

SM: Okay. Was it single mounted, or quad mounted, or for anti aircraft purposes?

RK: Most of them that I saw were single mounted but I think that the radar ones were probably quad mounted. I didn't see but one .51 cal that they brought back to our area and I didn't fly on the Cobras, I didn't fly on the LOHs. I was out at the firebase keeping them armed. I would fly out to wherever we were working out of on an H model, and then I would fly back to our main unit, or our main base, in the evenings. So I had it relatively good. I'm very fortunate. I didn't have to stay out there. I pulled a lot of guard duty but it was on one of the main installations.

SM: In this three-month period at Chu Lai, this was part of Operation Lamar Plane, is that correct?

RK: Yes, that was Operation Lamar Plane.

SM: Was there ever a time when your base was almost overrun or seriously attacked or were you far enough away from any of this?

RK: Not when I was…no place where I was at. Every time that we were hit it seems like I was someplace else and I think that's one of the reasons that Sgt. Flume started thinking that I had some kind of a charmed life or something. It's like he'd try to send me someplace where he thought it'd be bad, and it would end up nothing ever happened.

SM: So you really consider yourself fortunate, lucky?

RK: Very fortunate. I didn't expect to come back from Vietnam, but I would say a very high percentage of the people who were there, especially in our unit, didn't expect to come back. We did, but there was a lot of people, a lot of our friends were killed. A lot more of them were

wounded very badly. We had a lot more people wounded badly than killed. It's amazing how few we had killed for what we were going through, but we did have a lot of guys that were very badly wounded.

SM: And your Medevac was handled by external units or internal?

RK: My what?

SM: Your Medevac, when soldiers were wounded, how were they gotten out of the combat area?

RK: Medevac was a different unit that would go in, but we had our medics were attached to us. Like Dr. [?] who won Congressional Medal of Honor. He was a part of us, attached to us. I don't really know what his unit would have been, but they were kind of like their own special, I mean, like we were attached to the 101st Airborne and then B Troop 2nd of the 17th Cav. Yeah, we were 101st Airborne but they were some kind of a medic unit and then certain elements of that were attached to different units. I really don't know how they did the Medevacing out. Most of the Medevac helicopters were from some other unit. Now, we would, I'm sure that if they needed a B model or an H model to get somebody out they would have done anything they could have to try to get in but you didn't have to be in a specific anything to try to get help or give help. I really don't know how the Medevac worked that well.

SM: When you were in Chu Lai from May to August '69, what rank had you achieved at that point?

RK: I was an E4. I never would have made E5 because of Sgt. Flume. Before I come back to the States, our XO called me up to his office and wanted to know why I'd been in grade longer than anybody else and had never gone before the board for E5 and I told him that there was a personality conflict between me and the sergeant in charge of me and that he would never put me in for E5. The XO asked me if I felt that I deserved it and I said, 'Well sir, if you'll look at my records you'll see that I've made Colonel's orderly a number of times for our unit here in Vietnam. I graduated top of my class for what I was in.' I've got other papers where in other units people wrote up nice things about me for different things that I'd done and I said, 'It's my personal opinion that yes, I do deserve it but I can assure you that I'll never be put in.' Well, the very next time that people went before the board my name was on there and I thought that that was strange but I was happy to go and I scored real high so the very next rank came down I got E5. I came to find out later that my XO put me in for the E5, it wasn't my platoon leader and

I'm not even sure if that's according to military procedure. I don't think that that's supposed to happen but I did make E5 just prior to going back to the States.

SM: What did you think of your NCOs and officers other than perhaps your immediate, your NCO SC, that was obviously one in conflict with?

RK: Well, I really didn't like, I mean, I really didn't dislike Sgt. Flume but he just did not like me.

SM: Were they competent, your NCOs and officers and did you feel confident with them as leaders?

RK: I felt our troop had really pretty good people in it. Really there was a lot of college education and people with…they weren't a bunch of dummies. I can't really say that the decisions weren't good because I can't see what the outcome would have been had we gone other ways. We were extremely aggressive under Major Dolin. Prior to Major Dolin we had Major Pierce was here and you might have a chance to talk with him. But Major Pierce was not nearly as aggressive and then I'm trying to think of the fellow who took it after, took our unit after Gary Dolin. He ended up, he wasn't nearly as aggressive. So when you're not aggressive your people tend not to be beat up as bad, okay? It doesn't always happen that way though because sometimes by being aggressive you keep people from…our line was never hit. Whenever they hit, they always hit someplace else as far as at Camp Eagle. Now I don't know if there was any reason for that or not.

SM: What about morale? Was morale good in your unit?

RK: For the most part. There was a lot of complaining, but I think the morale was pretty decent.

SM: Was it soldier's complaints?

RK: Just hardly anybody wanted to be there in the first place. We did not go over there to try to kill people in general. We went over because our country sent us over and most of the time you killed trying to stay alive yourself. There was no real animosity; it was fear and trying to help someone else. Most of the people that our guys killed probably was just because they were helping someone who was pinned down or shot down. We went out to find the enemy and when we did, then all of a sudden it just seemed like everything would start. I mean, you're finding them and then they start shooting at you so now you're trying to protect yourselves. It

just kind of snowballs. Now if we'd found them and they'd said, 'We give up,' you know, everything would have been fine. There wouldn't have had to have been any shooting.

SM: If only they'd surrendered. Were there any problems with drugs or fragging?

RK: Some of the guys…oh the fragging incident we had. We had one fragging incident. Could we maybe…

SM: This is part two of the interview with Randy Kunkleman. So, would you start by describing that fragging incident, please?

RK: I was sitting in my hooch when explosions started going all through the company. We originally, I thought that sappers had got in and was setting off charges. We didn't really know what to do. We run out of our hooch, tried to get in a trench, and there wasn't near enough room for all of us. Somehow I eventually got up where the shower was and I found one of the guys, a guy by the name of Gustafson, and I believe that's who it was. My memory's a little foggy on that. I talked to Rod Forty a couple of nights ago and he said, 'Yeah, that was Gustafson,' so I'm pretty sure that's who it was. But anyways, he looked like he had malaria he was shaking so bad and I kind of helped him get over. We sat down on the steps that went up to one of the hooches and we sat there for the longest time. I don't know how long it was. I kept talking to him. Slowly, he came out of that. He was in shock and when I talked to him found out that somebody had thrown what he thought was a rock at him and it had landed right between his feet and it made him mad. He picked it up and threw it back and it exploded in mid air between him and the guy who had thrown it at him. Now Rod said that it hit him in the back and bounced down. I don't remember that. I don't know how that transpired. I did talk to Major Dolin last year who is actively involved with this incident and he told me that how they found out who did the fragging is when Gustafson threw the grenade back part of the shrapnel hit the guy who originally threw it at him. So that's how he found out who was actually doing it. There was three guys, two white guys and a black guy that was involved and they had been LRRPs, and getting ready to come back to the States. Basically…one was from Toledo, I knew him fairly well, Toledo, Ohio. Since I was in Ohio I talked to him. They just wanted to be in a bunker for the last couple of weeks that they were going to be in Vietnam, be left alone, and go back home. They spent pretty much the whole year out in the field and they just didn't want to do anything anymore. Well, they refused some orders and they were going to be at a court marshal or an article 15 hearing, I don't know which, over refusing to do some things. They got drugged up

that night as I recall and the one E6 sergeant, Sgt. Grever, who was going to appear before him at this trial the next day, was in his hooch sitting on the edge of his cot spit shining his boots for the presentation and the grenade that they threw inside this hooch actually rolled right underneath where he was sitting and stopped right underneath the cot. Now he'd made it to the door when the grenade went off so the grenade did not blow up into him. It blew, but he was only 15-20 feet away from it and as I remember, when they were getting him ready, I think they took him out in a jeep. In my memory it's like he was in a jeep and from the top of his head to the bottom of his heel he looked like hamburger. But he was only wearing just shorts. His shorts, nothing else when he'd just hit the door of the hooch so that was not too long after we got to Vietnam and these were people who'd been infused into B Troop from other units. Some of the people said that they were just troublemakers. I talked to different people about it and I don't know what the whole story is. I heard that they'd been troublemakers in other units and just weren't really what you'd call good soldiers. I ran into some of those. You do that wherever you're at.

SM: You said they were drugged up. What do you mean? What kind of drugs?

RK: There was a lot of drugs used over in Vietnam. I never took any drugs personally. I never even drank. Generally the enlisted men did a lot more of the drugs and the officers did a lot of the drinking. If you talk, and you'll probably have a chance to talk to a lot of the officers, you'll find out when they were flying a lot of times that they were drunk. But, if you'll look at the kind of jobs that they had, I may be wrong, this is my personal opinion, I kind of look at it from the point that you get up and you knew that your job was to go out and try and get shot at, to find the enemy, if you're head's real clear its hard to pull pitch and take off on your flight. I don't know but what maybe they did that sometimes just so they could motivate. I may be totally wrong on that. That's just…I have somewhat of a sympathy toward them because of the kind of jobs that they had. They needed something to help them to go out and do that kind of work.

SM: Was that a condition or characteristic specific to the LOH pilots versus the Huey pilots or the gun ship pilots?

RK: Yeah, the LOH pilots for the most part. I don't know why people volunteered for that but a lot of the people who were LOH, not everyone, but a lot of the people who were in the LOH, the Scout platoon, volunteered for it and it was really a bad job. Now they wouldn't have told you that. They were the John Waynes. They went out and did things. They were crazy.

Literally, they did crazy things. I mean, a lot of them got shot down but it's because that's their job to go out and get shot at. They were trying to find the enemy and when you're hovering around, going down through a small area of ground, I mean, people can be hit. There's LOH pilots that would be right directly over the enemy just a few feet off the ground before the enemy would start opening up on them. Not a good job, but they seemed to love it. I've never heard a LOH pilot complain, or an observer. Never heard any of them complain about their job, and they had a terrible job.

SM: Did you have a chance to interact with other members of the LRP units?

RK: Very little. Very little, and my casual conversations with the one of these three guys that got in trouble I think was basically because I found out he was from Ohio and I was from Ohio. I only knew a very few of the infantry very well and normally it was, you know, if they were a real friendly type. I tend to be sanguine in nature and try to have good rapport and try to talk with anyone who wants to. I wasn't around the infantry as much as I was around the gun platoon. I interacted more with the Cobra pilots and with the crew chiefs. The crew chiefs and the armored were very close together as far as working together because the helicopter had to fly and the guns had to shoot. Both of us did the arming. But, when the helicopter had something wrong with it the crew chief took care of that. When the guns had something wrong with that, we armors would take care of those.

SM: What were the major problems you had with gun ships or with arming, I guess they were Hueys that were armed as well, correct?

RK: Our unit didn't have any of the Hueys with the sub systems on it. I saw a couple of sub systems. I was trained to work on the armament on any of the helicopters. Now, some of our LOHs had many guns on them and the Hueys, though, we had I think a B model that had a grenade launcher on the front of it and if I remember correctly they took it off as soon as they got over there. The H models were troop carriers. I don't believe, I don't remember any armament sub systems that were developed for H models. They were a little longer and would hold more people. The doors, what I looked at is if the back door looked kind of narrow that was either a B, a C or a D and I never really was interested enough to know what the…there's different engine characteristics. A person who knows the Hueys would be able to tell you, 'Well that's a B model, that's a C model, that's a D.' I didn't know. The H models were the troop carriers and

everything else basically the commanders flew. They did their controlling of the battles or whatever from those helicopters.

SM: Were there ever any consistent problems ever with the gun ship's weapons systems or were they pretty reliable, pretty sturdy?

RK: They were very reliable as long as the gunner wouldn't try to make a short burst. The guns fired slow rate 2,000 rounds a minute. Fast rate was 4,000 rounds a minute, and a Cobra could have up to four mini guns. A lot of the guys liked two mini guns in the front and then they'd have the wings store mini guns. Occasionally pilots would want all rockets on the wings store so you wouldn't have the mini guns on the wing stores. You'd just have the front ones. Each mini gun on the front wing stores had 10,000 rounds and the canisters that fed them. Back to your question about the problems, I was talking to an officer one time and he told me he remembered me because I chewed him out and he said that he was talking to I guess the aircraft commander behind and he said, 'Man,' he said, 'What was he so upset about?' Well, for those mini guns to fire, you couldn't jam them and if you tried to just squeeze off a real quick burst they'd jam every time. They were running so fast, and I don't know what would cause it, but there were these fingers that were real sharp that the bullets would slide up to go into this gatlin gun type, that's what a mini gun was, was basically a glorified gatlin gun, and on a real short burst, I don't know if it was the jerking or what but they would impale and then your guns wouldn't fire anymore and I'd seen it so many times it really aggravated me whenever a mini gun come in and the bullet…and it's not real easy to fix because they want to jam in there. Most of the time I'd have to change that whole unit and then dislodge the bullets off of the mini gun itself. But I guess I did occasionally emphasize, 'Count at least to 1001, then 1002, and don't let off of it until you've counted that. I've told a lot of the pilots that and maybe sometimes it sounded like I was a little over emphasizing that. That was the only problem I knew of with the mini guns. We had 40-millimeter grenade launchers that fired about, I can't remember now, about 340 rounds a minute, something like that which was the equivalent of the M-79 grenade explosive wise. The charge that fired it was a lot higher. It would be kind of like the difference between the powder in a pistol versus the powder in a rifle. If you put pistol powder in a rifle, it would really kick and could actually blow up the magazine. The ones that were on the Cobra gun ships, I guess they wanted more range or whatever, but it was a lot higher charge. I heard, I never saw any, but I heard of people taking those and they would actually cram them because

there's just a little bit bigger, the casing, than your regular M-79 grenade and I heard of people actually forcing those in and breaking the stock from it. It was a whole lot higher charged. Whether that happened or not, I had been told that that had happened, and I believe it because there was a little difference. You could not easily put in one of those rounds. It was basically the same kind of round, though, and they fired that fast.

SM: And they had, what, high explosives and other types of rounds? Flachettes, did they have Flachette rounds for those?

RK: Those are rockets.

SM: Oh, they had Flachette rockets?

RK: The two and ¾ inch rockets were…we, our arsenal, we held, we had Willy Peter which is white phosphorous, we had Flachettes, we had 18 pound HE, high explosives, and that's what most of the pilots wanted was the 18. But, I mean, because everybody wanted those we'd run them out. Then we had ten-pound high explosives that we used for rockets. My personal opinion is the Flachettes was the most devastating round that we had and none of the pilots ever wanted us to load them with it. Now I never could understand why because they, I mean they would saturate an area. If a mouse was going down through there it would very likely not be able to get through a Flachette because it was just so many. The Flachettes are like little finishing nails except they look like a dart. I talked to Ken Barwick when we went over to Vietnam and I asked him, I said, 'Why in the world did you guys not use the Flachettes?' I said, 'They were the most devastating things we had!' and he said, 'Well, we pilots were into big bangs.' The HE's would have a big bang and maybe it's a psychological type thing. The Flachettes was a proximity fuse and we had other proximity, we had, I think, ten pound proximities too that would also explode but they would explode up like a Flachette so many feet off the ground. The Flachettes, when they exploded, there was almost nothing. It was just a 'poof!' and so apparently the reason they didn't use them is they were into big bangs. I don't think they really understood, though, how effective the Flachettes were.

SM: Do you recall the area of coverage that the average Flachette rocket would cover as far as square yards, square feet?

RK: No. It would be every bit as much, I believe, as like a proximity HE but it's not how big the circle is it's how dense everything is in that circle because those little finishing nails would be just a few inches or fractions of inches from each other and it was just like a solid

saturation area. So if someone was, I mean, just had a very small portion of his body looking around a tree or anything, you had a very high percentage chance of hitting him.

SM: Did you have any other strange interactions with pilots? Or obviously, you just identified an interesting characteristic of a pilot's desire for a big bang. Your interactions with pilots and crew chiefs, anything else that comes to mind that's like that?

RK: No. I can tell you one time that it was somewhat comical, at the time it wasn't very comical. One of the pilots, I didn't even know who it was until just a few months ago. It was Kincaid, and I through the Internet was able to find out. I had a story on the Internet about when we were at Chu Lai. I was coming out to the flight line one morning and there was one pilot out there and I said he was on an H model but after I talked to Kincaid he was checking out the tail rotor of a Cobra. I mean, my memory is not all that great for 30 years ago. But when I talked to him he said he'd been telling that story for 30 years, too. What happened, and he doesn't know, until I talked to him he didn't know the whole part of the story, but I saw the shooting stars and just something in my mind…it wasn't right. Now, the shooting stars were going up and in my mind I was saying, 'That's not right,' and all of a sudden right at the end of our flight line where the helicopters was was these balls of fire that were spinning and like the Mexican where the sparks are coming up kind of at an angle and everything, it was beautiful. And the first thing that come to mind was, 'Wow, look at the pretty balls of fire!' and I got out, 'Wow!' when all of a sudden you could feel the concussion and hear the noise and then I woke up. But because of sleep deprivation I was just not functioning. I could have yelled, 'Incoming!' way before when I saw…I knew what it was but my mind would not comprehend it. I was there a long time, I understood. I was just so out of it like a zombie from sleep deprivation. Anyways, he dove, cleared the PSP, and hit the sand. I just laid down in the sand. The 2nd 122 landed right between us and a Marine, closer to the Marine mess hall and the 3rd one went over us into where the CBs were and I had heard that it had gone into a hooch. So everybody in that hooch had been killed. They took the entire explosion with all the sandbags keeping that all in there. But then after it was all over this Kincaid got up and he walked over and I thought he was going to punch me. He looked mad and he grabbed me by the collar and pulled me up into his face and he yelled, 'Next time yell, 'incoming,' not 'wow'!' Well, when I talked to him a few months back, he thought I was on drugs and it made him mad. What had happened, I mean, we had three 122 rockets that basically triangulated right around our flight line. I believe they were aiming at our

helicopters because all of them, they went all around us. That was somewhat funny, but it wasn't funny to him at the time and it wasn't until just a few months ago I told him, 'No, I wasn't on drugs, I didn't take drugs,' but there were times that I had had so little sleep that I did not function mentally correct.

SM: Did that happen a lot?

RK: Yes.

SM: Sleep deprivation, with other members of your unit?

RK: Everybody. The two hardest things I believe I went through in Vietnam was number one loneliness, missing my wife, wanting to be with my wife, and number two being so tired. I had another time that we had a red alert and the sirens were going off and they actually had C140s circling up over. It was firing mini guns, all kinds of stuff just around the post. There was all kinds of firing and I was sleeping through it. The last guy going out of our hooch realized I was still laying in my cot and he came over and literally shook me and told me, 'You got to get out here on the secondary defense!' Well that woke me up, so I went out on the slit trench we had at that time for secondary defense and I had my M-16 and my helmet on and just propped up. They were actually attacking us just around the corner and they were attacking our line and I was watching all these trip flares going, I mean, not trip flares but the flares that they were sending up going off and it was really beautiful and I was concentrating. It was raining so hard and the water was just flowing off the tip of my helmet where it just come down on that little sharp place and I was looking out through my M-16 propped as comfortably as I could get it with water about halfway up to my knees and I actually went to sleep looking out through my M-16! Like you would if you were driving a car and you're going down the road and you like nod off and all of a sudden, you know, you feel the gravel or something like that? I don't know if I went to sleep for just a few seconds or how long it was, but when I jerked myself back to being awake again, then I was able, I mean, like that scared me and I…there was enough adrenaline pump. A lot of times what made you function was adrenaline pumping and until I realized, 'Hey,' you know, 'I've got to stay awake,' I didn't have enough adrenaline pumping to really make me care. So sleep deprivation, I believe, was an extremely important thing and I believe a lot of lives were lost because of that. Because of people just not functioning the way they knew they should.

SM: Were there examples of that happening to pilots?

RK: I would not be surprised. I think, between pilots drinking very heavily, some I'm sure were on drugs…I'm not saying everyone was like that but there was a lot of people that was drunk a lot and they surprisingly really operated very well under those conditions. I would not be surprised but what when the adrenaline pumps, all of a sudden it takes…you no longer need that effect that alcohol gives, you know, kind of, aesthetic effect from the alcohol. When the adrenaline kicks in, now all of a sudden that kind of like takes over. It's not fun being shot at and adrenaline does kick in very heavily at times. I was scared a number of times over there. I mean, I had big surges of adrenaline. It helped to make, the adrenaline, I think helped you in the short…most everything you had did not last for a real long time. The guys on the Hill 376 down in Chu Lai, that lasted a lot longer than most firefights. Most of the engagements was very, very quick. Was not a real long time. If it went on for several hours, that was a long time. A lot of them was just a few minutes. It wasn't like World War II or the Civil War or something where people just kept coming at each other, you know, and just kept going and going and going. What's next?

SM: What were the other major experiences from the latter part of your experiences in Vietnam? We talked about Chu Lai yesterday. Were there any other major events or experiences that you wanted to relate?

RK: When Sgt. Tovey got killed, that was at Chu Lai. That devastated me because I thought so much of him. I don't know. I cried for a long time, I remember that. I think I was by myself and I just couldn't stop crying because I felt so…he'd been so good to me. When they almost left me in the A Shau Valley, I was scared then. I had one time, I was on guard duty and I was scared of the rats in the bunkers and I would not go into the bunkers. I would pull my guard duty, I'd wrap up in a poncho liner and lay on top of the bunker and have my M-16 kind of holding it like a teddy bear and that's how I pulled my guard duty. And one night I sensed something very close to me and I saw like sparks out f my peripheral vision just above my head and almost immediately an RPG went off back behind me, back behind the bunker. That was a big adrenaline surge. I was off the top of that and down inside that bunker and I had zero fear of those rats at that particular moment and for the rest of my tour in Vietnam I had no fear of the rats. It was like one fear just totally offset the other fear to where there was nothing left of that and when I was, my two hours off, I'd be laying on these plywood boards that they had in there for two guys to lay on and I'd be in a half sleep kind of like not real sound or anything, I don't

think we ever soundly slept when we were on guard duty, but the rats would be rubbing up against my legs, my arms, and just moving in their nightly journeys and I wasn't startled, wasn't anything. That totally changed my fear of those rats. As far as I know, the rats never bothered anybody but I just had a fear of rats up until the fear of RPGs going off behind me.

SM: Were the RPGs one of the most feared weapons?

RK: It was a very, very high explosive, very devastating…it was a shape charge and it was devastating. For a small…I don't even know how much it weighed. I forget what the actual designation was for it. We just called them RPGs. It was like a B40 rocket or…I forget what the…but it kind of looked like, I don't know, just a little cone that went back and probably, I don't know if it was ten pounds. It didn't look any bigger than like a ten pound rocket but the kind of charge it has I think just made it very effective and from my perspective I was laying right directly over the M-60 that night so I would guess that they were just trying to hit the M-60 and it went high. But that I don't know. I don't remember anything else about that night. I don't think that there was any real…they didn't try to hit our line or come through our line or anything, it was just a one-time deal.

SM: When did you leave Vietnam?

RK: March 24th of 1970 with most of everyone that was left in our unit. There was a few guys that extended. One of the guys I had contact with not too long ago, he was on his 6th wife. He has not had a steady job since. When I talked to him, and he was an alcoholic, bad alcoholic, and on drugs for his posttraumatic stress problems, which they don't mix. But he seemed, and he was a LOH pilot, I mean not pilot, but LOH observer, and I think the LOH guys probably have a lot more of the post traumatic stress later on. He said what really bothered him, when I talked to him, is that he went out for a body count one day and he said there was just so many bodies, and he said he never could get that out of his mind and that really bothered him. But, I'm sure there's a lot of other things.

SM: Did you hear complaints like that from other soldiers that you knew as far as having to deal with some of the more gruesome aspects of the war, and in particular that aspect, the body count? To have the emphasis placed on the body counts by the higher headquarters and things like that?

RK: I don't know. I remember one time when they flew several VC, I don't know, I can't remember now, seems like there is about six of them and they actually flew them back. I

think a lot of times the body count, they actually would pick them up and bring them in. I'm not positive what they wanted to do there. I wasn't really active with that. But I think there was like half of them were dead and the others were pretty badly wounded and as I recall I think in one of my letters I wrote that at least I think that two of the people were women that were checking in our workers that worked at our gate just down the way and a lot of times that was kind of hard because these were people that you kind of had, not necessarily I was friendly with but probably the guards, the MPs at the gate probably knew fairly well. John Michael Hendricks who wrote a book has in that book a time where he killed a girl along the Camp Eagle line there that was coming in after night and it was one of the maids for one of the generals there on the post at that time and in the book he indicated that the general was somewhat, he felt anyway, that the general was somewhat put out because he probably liked this person but this person was an enemy. You really didn't know who you were fighting a lot of times when you was over there. People, I had heard, and I wasn't personal with this or had personal contact, but one of the barbers on our post was killed coming through. I pulled a lot of guard duty and one of the things that really scared me about guard duty was how easily sappers could come through that consantina wire and that barbed wire. You would not believe how they would do it. I watched a demonstration once while I was over there from a guy who had Chu Hoi'ed. He'd been in…he had been an NVA for like 20, between 20 and 30 years, a long time, and he gave a demonstration with the sun directly overhead of coming up through, how a sapper would come up through the barbed wire and he went out on the outside and I don't…there was a bunch of us that watched this demonstration and when he come up through that, under that wire, he looked like a snake coming up through there. It was not slow, it was not, 'Do this little bit,' I mean, it was just like a constant movement and if you would move your eyes off of him and then come back, you had a terrible hard time picking up where he was at. This is in broad daylight and after that demonstration I was scared stiff because I couldn't hardly keep an eye on him coming through that barbed wire in daylight, let alone at night and we were out there during nighttime. One time when I was on guard duty I was driving for the guard. Basically I had to go out and set all the machine guns up and take all the ammo to all of the bunkers where I would normally be in the bunker itself when I was pulling the regular guard duty. I got everything set and it's not dark yet but it's twilight where the sun's starting to go down and I went back and I was waiting. The officer of the guard and the sergeant of the guard was talking and so I was waiting to ask them what they wanted. Well, there was

like a command post there where we were at and then there was a twin 40, a 40-millimeter. The gun crew actually lived there and they weren't on guard duty like we were where they had to stay awake, but they had to stay there. If they were needed then they would crank up their twin 40 and that's kind of like the old ack ack, when that thing would start going, 'Bam, ba, ba, bam, ba, ba, bam, ba, ba,' if you ever heard any of those in the films that's the way that thing…and you'd almost get in tuned with it while it was firing because it had that beat to it. But one of those guys was on over the skids or the plume or whatever you call it over the treads, was sleeping out there and I saw one of the guys what I thought had just come out of the bunker that I'd just set the machine guns with and everything and we weren't allowed to leave our post when we were on the bunker. We weren't allowed to walk away from the bunker. We had to, you know, call in or get someone, and that basically was my job. If anything needed to be done I would do it and I would go between the bunkers like that. So I yelled at this guy, I said, 'Hey, you're not allowed out of your bunker! If you need something I'll get it!' Well he just stopped and froze there and didn't move. He was walking over towards this guy that was on the twin 40 and I though, 'Well, he's going to go over there and talk,' or something but all of a sudden this guy just takes off and starts running like a deer between the two bunkers that was closest set together and I don't know, the sergeant of the guard or the officer of the guard pulled up a pistol. Probably the officer of the guard because I doubt if the sergeant of the guard…anyways, they started firing. Well as soon as he started firing two machine guns opened up and I don't know how many M-16s from the two bunkers that this guy was running out of and he ran right straight out through that constantina wire and that barbed wire and he looked like a deer. Nothing slowed him up. I don't know if anybody hit him, I don't think…if he was hit, he kept running and he just kept going until he was on out away from where the perimeter was. Apparently that was a sapper that had come up while we were setting up the bunker line and in my mind I think what he was going to do is walk over and kill the guy who was operating the twin 40. Now whether they were planning on hitting that and they wanted a twin 40 out of there, I have no idea. Sappers would come in and set satchel charges or do their whatever they're going to do and then crawl back out and that's all that would happen, and maybe that's what was going to happen. Maybe he was going to, you know, but that was scary. The NVA and the VC were very, very good at doing that sapper stuff.

SM: So they were as big a concern as RPGs and other weapons?

RK: Yeah. I mean, when you were on guard duty or you were out on a small firebase or whatever, a lot of times you were worried about somebody coming in your bunker. You're looking out over there but at least in the back of my mind was, 'Is somebody in here,' especially after that one incident where a guy was behind a bunker. He could have just as easily probably gone in the bunker and, I don't know. It probably would have made noise if he'd tried to take out those four guys because there's four guys in a bunker. I don't know. I can't tell you why things happen, but that was scary to me. I tend to be scared a lot of times. It's not my nature to want to go out and get shot at. I did my job though and even though you had a fear, the fear didn't over, for the most part, did not over come you. You just did your job in that fear. That's the way I felt, and sometimes the adrenaline would pump to the point where I think it kind of over compensated for that fear to where you almost didn't even, at least for a short period of time, you didn't really, it wasn't bothering you, it wasn't hampering you in any way. You just did your job, and I guess afterwards you think about what could happen.

SM: So when you came back to the United States you came back as pretty much a whole unit? How many people came back with you?

RK: Probably about half of the people that was in the company at the time.

SM: Do you think that helped? Coming back, one of the controversial aspects of the war of course was the 365 day rotation and a lot of that the individual rotations. Maybe one or two people going into a unit and when people's 365 days are up, they leave and they leave as individuals and one day they're in Vietnam and the next they're back in the United States, back in the world and there were adjustment problems. Do you think that coming back as a unit helped overcome some of those difficulties? Being with the people you…

RK: When we came back as a unit we left as a unit. We didn't come back because everybody was going everywhere in the United States. We weren't even on the same planes a lot of the time.

SM: Oh, so you all left at the same time? You didn't come back together?

RK: We left the company area together and then I don't even remember for sure, I think I flew out of Cam Ranh Bay. I don't know how many of us flew out of Cam Ranh Bay, but we weren't even on the same planes. We'd get in however they lined the people up. I can't remember now, I may have had some people on my plane from my unit but I don't remember any. I don't remember. The only thing I remember is everybody over there was throwing away

everything. They didn't want to bring anything back and I started out, I'd already sent two footlockers full of stuff home and I had a little duffel bag that was just a little bit of stuff in the bottom of it and by the time I left Vietnam I had two duffel bags that were packed full of brand new stuff that I'd taken out of dumpsters where guys had…I mean still in the plastic packages. T-shirts and boots and I got poncho liners, I got bunches of stuff because I figured, 'Well, I'll use it.' I was raised poor and I couldn't see throwing this stuff away. Towels, I brought towels, stuff that I knew I could use and I come back with not only two stuffed duffel bags but I had shoes tied on the outside of them. I remember that part, everybody else didn't want to bring anything back. I mean, most of the guys. They were being issued this brand new stuff and just throwing them in dumpsters. So I don't know why I was different in mental attitude from that.

SM: Where did you enter the United States?

RK: Up in Washington, I think Mt. Rainier, is that whatever the airport is? I remember seeing this big mountain that's somewhat…I think, is that Rainier?

SM: I'm not sure.

RK: Yeah. I flew in through Washington. A lot of people I think flew in through Los Angeles.

SM: Where did you end up?

RK: I came back home. I ended up down, I flew into Dayton and then came home from there. When I left there I went down to Hunter Army Airfield and finished out nine months working, actually hauling ammo. I didn't work on the guns, I just took care of the ammo. But then when I got out I went back, I'd been drafted out of Westinghouse and went back and said, 'Alright, I'm ready to go to work for you,' and Westinghouse wouldn't take me back and I thought, well I was drafted and I thought everybody got to go back. That's a very common misconception and a lot of Vietnam vets did not get their jobs back. In World War II a lot of places made jobs. If the job wasn't there anymore, they made jobs for the people coming back from World War II. I believe a lot of Vietnam vets, when they come back, companies looked at Vietnam vets as if they were impaired by drugs, mentally incompetent, and I think, I know that Westinghouse went into a lot of trouble to get it to where I didn't go back because…it's a complete different story. After I come back, I couldn't get work and keep a job for very long. At the time I thought that I was the last hired so the first out. Now, after this last year, I've been treated for a little bit of post traumatic stress disorder and I'm starting to kind of believe, 'Well

maybe it wasn't just that,' but it may have been some things that was in me that I didn't even see because until this last year I didn't think I ever had any problems with PTSD. But I was in and out of work. It was terrible. I'd work for just a very short period of time and all of a sudden I wasn't working again. One time I was out of work for 18 months straight and I only had unemployment for nine months of that, so as a new family my wife and I had a very hard time getting along. My wife, the stress I'm sure from that, she became depressed. She went to a psychologist and he said that a lot of it was childhood related emotional, but she committed suicide and there I was. three kids, no job, and Westinghouse all of a sudden had a job for me. So, I personally believe they felt somewhat guilty as maybe contributing or something. I don't think they wanted me as a Vietnam vet but because of a lot of the things that had happened, all of a sudden I think they thought well, they were somewhat responsible, so they gave me a job back. So while I was working there three years I found out that I had been carried on the roles clear through Vietnam, the Army, and they went back and literally hand marked out all of these progression increases that they had given me and just put in a date and said that I'd been laid off and bumped by this particular person. Well in my investigation I found out this particular person had less seniority than I had, so they're showing a guy who had less seniority as bumping me. Plus they had kept all of the money that was in savings programs and stuff like that for almost a year or something, which they could not legally have done that if I was not on the roles. As it all come out I tried to go through the VA to get this straightened out and actually tried to go through a government lawyer through the justice department, but nobody would help me. Basically they said it was just a paper mess up with Westinghouse. No one had any concern as far as what had happened. My personal belief was Westinghouse did not want a Vietnam Vet because they felt that a Vietnam vet was too much of a liability. We come back with the attitude that, 'Hey, they're a bunch of baby killers.' You know, 'They're ruthless. They're going to go psycho on you,' and a lot of companies did not want to take a chance on that and I think that, and again, that's my opinion, I think it is the media who has caused that whole thing because it is the media who has painted us that way and I think the people of the United States basically were just being fed what they were supposed to think, and they did. I think that's why the Vietnam vet has so much bad publicity.

SM: What about the role of the media in the war in terms of either increasing public support, decreasing public support…

RK: Oh, they totally devastated public support. The media had more to do with that war than anything else. I believe that the people in the media changed the mindset of the United States.

SM: Okay. When you came home, did you run into…you talked about Westinghouse and corporations and the media. What about individuals? People on the street, people that you just come into contact with. Did you find a lot of hostility there?

RK: Yes. Not as much then as I think I do now. I think that the media has so given this bad aura to the Vietnam vet as people who were really were prior to the Vietnam war. As they're coming up, it's becoming more and more of a brainwashing type of thing. People that I work with right now that are ten years or more younger than I, if I try to bring up like Doclapoint who was a medal of honor winner in our outfit, when those kids would come in he would try to help them and do things for them and put Band-Aids on and just…our guys really did a lot of good things for the Vietnamese people. And maybe some of them were our enemies, but it didn't really matter as far as there were a lot of good things that happened. A lot of orphans that were helped by people and different units would take on different causes. This is during the war, and then after the war the same thing has happened by a lot of Vietnam vets. I know our trip this year we ran into some other people who are over there trying to help with hospitals and trying to help with education and everything. Do you ever read that in the media? The media does not point that out, yet the media will take every atrocity that Americans did, and Americans did do atrocities over there, but it was not the way we were taught to fight. We were actually taught to have respect for the people of that country and there was a lot training as far as the way we were supposed to fight and react and we were not supposed to be out there doing a bunch of blood thirsty type stuff. That was not our procedures. Yet, with the NVA and the VC, they fought the war through intimidation. You never hear about their atrocities but their atrocities were not only in many cases much worse than ours, and that's kind of a prejudiced statement. It's kind of like are you dead or are you bad dead? You get hit by an AK round, you're dead. You get hit by an RPG, you're bad dead. But an atrocity is an atrocity. But the atrocities were much, much more frequent because that was their style of war. That was part of the way they fought their war, probably more with the VC than with the NVA. The NVA were more of a trained soldier, more like we were trained soldiers, but still it happened and it was…they wanted to intimidate and so a lot of those atrocities that were going on frequently aren't even mentioned in our press. So I'm

working with these guys ten years younger and I try to say something about some of the good that maybe a medic did and the first thing they come back to me with is, 'Yeah, what about Cally? The way he goes in there, and you guys did the same stuff! And what about all these stories we hear about when you're up in helicopters and you push off one of the enemy so the others would talk?' Did it go on? Yeah. I'm sure it did. It never happened in our unit that I know of. Our unit, I believe, fought a very up front, a very by the rules type war and the media has just totally made the Vietnam vets out to be criminals.

SM: Just out of curiosity, you mentioned the atrocities committed by Viet Cong and PAVN forces. Were there any incidents in particular that come to mind that you recall from your year in Vietnam or anything in particular, specific?

RK: I went out one day. Now this is not something that actually happened, okay? This is a story where I was fairly friendly with the chaplain's assistant and I knew the chaplain fairly well when I first got over there. I kind of gravitated towards him. The chaplain's assistant invited me to go out with him, him and the chaplain, out in the field to have services one Sunday. So we were out going to all these places in the bush and they weren't really very good places and there would be maybe six guys, you know, in a LRRP team or something and we'd have services. Well that day we happened to go someplace and I don't know where it was at but there was an orphanage and I got to talking with, it was a vista worker who was a conscientious objector and that's how he was serving out his time. The man was not religious at all. If anything, he was atheist but he was more like the flower child type where he didn't believe in killing but he was not, he did not claim to be Christian, he did not claim to be religious in any way, shape, or form. I was talking to him and somehow the conversation came up about should we be here or something like that and he told me, he says, 'If the United States would pull out of Vietnam today,' he said, 'that minister that runs this orphanage would be dead tomorrow.' I said, 'Why? What's he doing?' He said, 'The VC are trying to keep some kind of sympathy from the village people. They're seeking some kind of sympathy,' you know, 'And they know how much good that that man's doing, so they don't just come in and kill him.' He says, 'But, if we would pull out, they wouldn't care what the village people thought.' He said, 'That man would be dead tomorrow.' The atrocities that went on in Cambodia, right next door, not where we were at, Laos was where we were, but right next door, I believe we're much worse than what was going on in Vietnam. But Vietnam, the Asian culture, does not have any problems with

torture and I have talked personally with people who have seen. There's a pilot where I work at who I was talking to just recently. He was actually a CO of, he was an officer flew, and he told me he actually saw where they went in and boiled a young child alive in oil. My wife's cousin, who was also in the 101st Airborne at the same time, I saw him. He was in infantry and he was a medic over there, my first wife's cousin before she died. He told me one time that he watched a VC explode a 500 pound bomb over a helicopter which basically just disintegrated it and the people and everything. I mean just one big…and everything's gone. They watched that and then the guy who sent off the charge come out in Chu Hoi, give up, you know, 'Chu Hoi, Chu Hoi!' He says he doesn't understand in that particular instance, and it probably was a very isolated incident, in that particular incident, they actually took him as prisoner after watching their friends…I mean, there's a lot of emotions that goes on and there's a lot of things that you don't understand why it happened. But to me, that is not people who are out blood thirsty who could take someone who you just watched blow up a bunch of your friends, and then take them alive.

SM: Was that a rarity, do you think? Chu Hoi's being accepted?

RK: Under those circumstances. I don't understand how they could have just watched him blow up that myself because there's a lot of emotions. Emotions really run…adrenaline really runs very, very, very strong and you don't know what you're going to do under any circumstances. That's my personal opinion. I mean, you may totally freeze, you may think you're going to be John Wayne, and you may pee your pants. You might just stand there or you might just do your job the way you normally would do it in as good a manner as you possibly can. Under those circumstances, just things happen and you don't understand why. Most heroes, most people who do things, throw themselves on grenades, whatever, I don't believe that that is a conscious, thought out process. I think it is a reaction that just happens and you don't know if it's going to happen with you or not. At the time, you find out.

SM: What was most significant about the Vietnam War for you? The experience of Vietnam, how did the Vietnam War effect your life?

RK: Well I was scared to death to go over. I found out that I can function and do my job even if I am scared to death. So I don't know if you call that hardening you, or what you would call that. I found out that yes, I do have the capability to effectively take lives. I may not have had to be pulling the trigger myself but I very much tried to get those ships armed the very best I could. I don't think it was consciously trying to take lives but trying to save our guys

lives. Trying to do what needed to be done. It was like whenever you're in a fire fight, whenever you're in any kind of fight like that, it's like an emergency type of condition. The things that you do aren't necessarily what you would do if you had time to sit down and think this out. You just react the best you can and you try to do the best you can. You might do a good job, you might do a terrible job.

SM: What are the lessons you think we should take away from the Vietnam war, and what lessons have you personally derived from the war?

RK: Well, I've learned to accept my fellow people much better for just being themselves. Every one of us have all kinds of frailties. Every one of us, like in our association, we're not all liberal, we're not all conservatives, and we don't all think the same way. But we have learned that we can live together and have a love for each other much like a family does. It's not that we don't disagree on some things, but it's not as important, I guess, as before going through the experiences together. When you're young you're right about everything. You know so much about everything. But as you grow older, you realize that a lot of the things that you thought was important are not important. Things aren't important. Relationships are really a lot more important. I think, if anything, that is one thing that I've learned. I love these guys. Some I have more of a thought pattern for and more compassion for than others because we were closer together. But every one of them went through similar things and there's a comradery that you build that you just have an affection for each other, a sympathy for each other, a compassion for each other. So I would say that that is a learning experience. It's good.

SM: Do you think that the Vietnam war can offer us lessons in terms of how we conduct our foreign policy today?

RK: Years and years ago there was a French man. I think it was middle 1700s. I can't remember his name now but he came over to the United States to find out why the United States seemed to be just the…something that Europe could not attain nor Asia or anything, but it just seemed like there was something special about the United States and he come over to try to find out what that something special was and when he went back home he made the statement that, 'America is great because America is good.' When America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great, and I fear that we're going into a period of time where America is ceasing to be great because we've lost our moral boundaries, moorings, we've lost what really counts in individual lives and I don't know that our policy, whether we will go out and start wars or not

start wars, as long as we don't have the right moral base that we need, I don't think we can learn from anything. I think the big problem is not the war, the Vietnam War or any of the other wars. The big problem is how we believe and how we think in America today.

SM: Do you think that the Vietnam war is part of the problem in terms of do you look at our participation in the Vietnam war with criticism? Would you accept it as being a good effort, we were following a good policy? What do you think about American participation in Vietnam in hindsight?

RK: When I went over to Vietnam this year and I talked to the different Vietnamese people, I came back with a feeling. If you can picture a father having a very young child and leaving that child and the mother and not having any contact with that child for years and years and years, and 30 years later he makes contact with that child and that child is grown up loving that father but just totally missing, not having that closeness that he needed with that father, and the father on coming back and having contact again, the child, in love, says, 'Why did you leave me?' and I come back kind of like feeling, from the people who don't want to be communists, who want to live free lives, who want a normal life where they can live and not have fear of what they say or whatever, that they're kind of like that child. They love the United States, they love the people, but it's kind of like, 'Why did you leave me? Why did you let me down? I trusted you.' And if we had been fighting for that, I think that's why we should have been fighting and I think we should have been allowed to win. I believe we could have easily if we had been allowed to fight the way a normal person would fight. Not restricted by all these political…there are all kinds of things they tied our hands with. How do you learn from people manipulating others? We were pawns. We were sent over there and yes it was good. Its kind of like the Mafia. They go out and they kill people and make all kinds of money on drugs and everything else, but in the place where they live they might be really good to the people around them so they think, 'Why would we want to go after this mob boss? He's really good!' It is two complete different things. The people in Washington, I think, tried to get on our sympathies to do the really bad stuff that they want to do themselves; their own goals, their own whatever they're trying to gain, and they don't care about us as peons out there fighting the war. It doesn't really…but they'll try to make it sound like they're trying to do something good. I don't know how they think. I'm very skeptical that it really was for any good reasons. Now some people, I'm sure. I'm sure a lot of the generals and the people who were actively involved, but the

people who really make the policies, I don't know how they think. I'm skeptical that there was any good reason. I talked to a guy one time who said that, and I don't know this to be true, I've never been able to verify, but he said that President Johnson's wife Ladybird Johnson owned Seaway. If that's true, everything that went to Vietnam went on Seaway. You wouldn't see anything else but Seaway in Vietnam. So if that was a true statement, it was a government man who told me that, it may be totally false, I don't know, but if that is a true statement that would be something for you to try and verify. If during the Vietnam War, what kind of…I'd like to know, myself, if that was true.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

RK: I can't think of anything right at this moment.

SM: Okay. Well this ends the first interview. Thank you.