The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Russ McDonald
Conducted by Curtis Peoples
June 22, 2002
Transcribed by Jennifer McIntyre

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.

Curtis Peoples: Basically they tell me that you went in, what, ’63 for the Rangers?

Russ McDonald: Sixty-three or ’64.

CP: Sixty-three or ’64, and when did you go back after that?

RM: Sixty-five, ’66 as rifle company first sergeant, C Company first sergeant, ’65, ’66. Then I went back in ’67, ’68 in the Third—

CP: The previous interview was with Russ McDonald conducted by Curtis Peoples on June 22, 2002.

RM: It was then before the Eighth Divisional Battalion, I went through landing school with them and they told us, the fortify to bush some and I learned a lot from them, can’t save lives from them, like oh and that’s the reason I went back, I didn’t have to go back in ’65 but I was a first sergeant, a first sergeant, in case I’m on a role, so that’s the reason I went back to be with my troops.

CP: So you found the Rangers to be a good fighting force then?

RM: Yes, they were.

CP: How did that compare to later on when you went back with other ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops later on?

RM: I wasn’t around any ARVN troops.

CP: Oh, you weren’t?

RM: No, well very little anyway. The Rangers are by far the most elite troops. In fact we had a linebacker at Texas A&M, Dat Nguyen, pronounced, spelled N-g-u-y-e-n,

CP: Plays with the Cowboys right now?

RM: Yes, plays for the Cowboys. He's the leading tackler on the team, Texas A&M from his freshmen year on. If I'd had a battalion off of Dat Nguyen, hell, I'd have won the war in '63, but the other battalion with Dat Nguyen getting in it.

CP: What was your main responsibility when you first got there with the Rangers?

RM: Advisor.

CP: Just advisor?

RM: Yeah.

CP: Did you all I guess just go out on patrols or was it training?

RM: Oh yeah, all that. It wasn't anything but me and a captain, supposed to a captain and two E-7s, I was E-7 at the time. But we didn't have but me and a captain. I went back to Saigon one time to scrounge medical supplies, found a Special Forces medic there that really fostered through me, but had been levied out of Special Forces and sent over there and he didn't have a job. He said our medic, had a previous tour in Laos and all that stuff, damn good medic. I said, "You want go to the Rangers coming in?" "Yeah, I think yeah, sounds good to me." So I took him out there. They kept sending me messages to reassign, "We need Foster back here, he's not authorized out there." He wasn't authorized as a medic but he was a medic and we kept him, finally sang to it, great kid, he dead now.

CP: So when you went back in '65 what was your responsibilities then?

RM: Rifle Company, first sergeant.

CP: Rifle Company, first sergeant?

RM: Yes, the good troop. At least we didn't take any more casualties than we did, not because of the officers because they didn't know what they were doing either. Because all my squad leaders and my platoon sergeants could walk on water, they knew where the stumps were. They took care too.

CP: Where were you stationed at when you went back in '65?

RM: It was based in front of the range we got laid all over.

CP: What were some of the base camps, other firebases that you went out to?

RM: Most of them temporary.

CP: Just temporary?

RM: Yes.

CP: And you said you went back a third time, what year was that again?

RM: Sixty-seven, ’68.

CP: And once again I guess, same duty as before?

RM: Yes, first sergeant. The war started to perk up a lot more then. In fact we took two hundred—talking to our battalion surgeon which I’ve met—we took 268 casualties, passed through the aid station in three days, that’s a lot of casualties in three days, we killed value by then. Tet of ’68 was by far the worst; ask anybody who was in Vietnam.

CP: How did you find how the war was progressing in ’67, ’68, then what were your feeling on it as opposed to maybe’63, like you said you could have probably won the war in ’63?

RM: If they turned us loose, yes. Well, pulling captain and I back up to Bien Hoa and had General Taylor and McNamara, Secretary of Defense, over there for briefings and all these people got up in briefing and all this crap and they came to the conclusion that the war was over in First, Second and Fourth Corps, they were going to send advisors back to the States. It wasn’t over. They said the only people that were still having trouble was the Vietnamese Rangers and the areas they had us operating in; the Viet Cong outnumbered us four to one. So, of course I had some friends there that owned a bar in Saigon and she said, “I’m going to sell my bar, all of the Americans are going home.” I said, “Don’t do it, the war ain’t over,” and it wasn’t. I don’t know why that guy got up and gave them all the presentations about how they killed everybody in their zones or corps areas, but the war was not anywhere near over. I saw her again, I went back over there, she sold the bar in Saigon and was in the import/export business and she’s crying big tears.

CP: What did you do after your last tour during Vietnam?

RM: Well, after I got out of the hospital they sent me to Waco, Texas as advisor to the Seventy-first Airborne Brigade in the Texas National Guard. I was the first

airborne advisor there. At first I got real disillusioned, after I was there about two months, I went in and made a ten forty-nine, a request for transfer, after watching one of their drills on the weekend, I said I no longer desire to serve p-rockies, they are so dangerous soldiers and draft dodgers and that's what they were, they were draft dodgers. Every company had a fifty-man waiting list to get into it, because the shut down list was all over Texas and after an all that the Seventy-first Airborne Brigade. I finally got them shaped up; they looked pretty good when I left there, two years. I got promoted to sergeant major then. They sent me to Texas A& M, as sergeant major over the Corps of Cadets. While I was there, I got about 175 cadets through jump school, they're still cadets. They had to pay their own way to go to Benning and all that stuff over a two year period and thirteen through Ranger school and sixteen through jump master school, any of their big plaque, old sergeant placard. Sergeant Major McDonald, Airborne Ranger, jump master all the way, raising them, everything, great kids. Then I jumped for the Texas National Guard and it's kind of funny. I did a lot of stuff that I was getting my butt chewed out for, but going to jump master school for example. We had two C-47s for our self, I scrounged one of them to fly them up over Pitchman Holiday, this is when I went to jump master school. I told some colonel there, Fourth or Fifth Army, that I was going to do that. He said, "Oh, yeah." He didn't think I could pull it off, so I scrounged a C-47, flew him up there. They got there and they found out, finally figured out that we had cadets going through jump master school, the program hadn't been approved for all PC cadet and they passed the paperwork around I guess there at Fort Harder, finally the commandant of jump master school said "Jump them." So they jumped them. First time we had a class that everybody graduated, it is very easy to flunk jump master school and I had six officers that went up and did the jump master school too. Then the plane broke down coming back, Biloxi or someplace, I had to scrounge another C-47. I could go to jail over some of this stuff, but I was sergeant major is what I had to do with the airplane. At Ranger school, every university in the nation had two allocation, I had to give all my people swim test and Ranger PT (Physical Training) test all that, I knew they could pass it and I called the sergeant major and said, "Look, when these other schools flunk somebody, swim test or Ranger test, put one of my men in," and I got seven through that year. Six the next year, they shaped up a little bit, still only had two allocations. Then I

decided to jump with the Texas National Guard, jumping thirty before they did, was address against them for the weekend, Fort Hood, so I learned my lesson for getting chewed out, so I put this paperwork in to do it. I went home on Friday after I go up and coordinate the training the night before and hadn't heard a word back from anybody. I was walking out the door; the phone rang, they said, "General Westmoreland personally approved you jumping in with the National Guard." He shouldn't have done that, because if somebody had gotten hurt, of course the general couldn't do that so many pack, but we jumped in and kicked butt all weekend. I didn't give them food, I gave them coordinates where to find their food and C-rations, but it was a great thing.

CP: Kind of motivate them a little bit.

RM: Yes, we had seven Ranger teams, we had seven qualified Rangers, each team was led by a qualified Ranger, airborne jumpmaster all that stuff. Other kids hadn't been, I organized Rudder's Rangers, Rudder was the guy that took Pointe du Hoc, Second Ranger Battalion in World War II, and he was the president of Texas A&M always dies before I got there, he died a month before I got to A&M, and we formed the Rudder's Rangers, so we had a good time, good troop.

CP: And what year was that?

RM: Seventy to '73, I was at A&M. Then I got to go command sergeant major, they sent me to Alaska, 172nd Arctic Light Infantry, now three tours in Vietnam and five years in Texas, they send me to Alaska. The 172nd Arctic Light Infantry, that even sounds cold and it was. I told Jefferson I was up there to.

CP: How long were you up in Alaska?

RM: Two years. And we jumped on the Yukon River and its forty below when we went out the door, we was jumping jets and you couldn't compute the wind chill factor, jumping out of a jet going 125 miles an hour, C-141 is what they were. I mean, forty below outside, and you've got to jump in black leather gloves, you can't jump in your Arctic mittens because you might have to get your reserve out and I landed on the river there, frozen solid there, stuck my hands in the Arctic mittens and warmed them up and hit my crippled knees and got out of it. "I'm going back to Texas; I'm getting too old for this shit."

CP: So are you originally from Texas?

RM: No, we got ready to retire in Alaska, that's where we wanted to go, we liked Texas. I figure I could do something at the university, get a job there or something so I went and worked at the police department, three years I was chief of police, until I got crossed ways with the new president. He was wrong and I was right, but he was president and I was chief and I quit.

CP: So where were you from originally, growing up?

RM: I was born in Oklahoma.

CP: Born in Oklahoma.

RM: Yes and lived most of my life, finished high school in Shreveport, Louisiana. I think we moved there when I started high school, say eighth grade.

CP: What year did you go into the service?

RM: It was '49.

CP: Nineteen forty-nine?

RM: Yes, I was in Japan when everything hit the fan in Korea. We were around making—

CP: And how long were you in Korea for?

RM: Well, I got hit in Korea after about seven months I guess and went back in '52, 53. I got away clean that time, didn't get hit, got hit the first time I was in the radius of a grenade, not bad, nothing bad about it. I took it, the barber there at Fort Camden, a lot of them back in my head and we got the pipe saddle all haircuts and he's getting, "Clink!" And he said, "What the hell is this?" The barber got a grenade fragment out of me. I've had it cut out for years now.

CP: Did you ever get wounded in Vietnam?

RM: Yes, twice. It was raining one day at Da Nang and I got hit through the leg up again in '68.

CP: So after Korea, what did you do in the service before going to Vietnam, or what did you do to work yourself into the advisor position to go over there?

RM: I don't know, they just picked me.

CP: They just picked you?

RM: Yes, I bring the mountain, I mean instructor school and took my share of patrols out in Korea, a couple years combat over there and they just picked me.

CP: What kind of training would you do with the Rangers there in ’63, the ARVN Rangers?

RM: Well, a lot of our patrols, I’d go out with the platoon, we’d hit villages around, we was only five k’s from what they call the Hobo Woods and there was tunnels all over the place. We’d go out and hit durseys in the morning, put a machine gun or a squad, we only had two machine guns in a Ranger battalion, A-4 machine gun, you probably don’t know about it. I scrounged parts and made A-6s out of them. We’d go in there early every morning, sweep through the woods, invite rounds go back to bed. Rather back, come in and see your wife, overnight, they got happy I guess. Drove a lot of ambushes and stuff primarily.

CP: So how many other US servicemen were there with you in ’63, or were just you out with the Rangers?

RM: Me and a captain and then I got this Special Forces medic.

CP: So just three of you?

RM: Yes, the medic wasn’t authorized so if I went back to Saigon, I went back to scrounge medical supplies. I ran across him in a bar, sitting there drinking vodka and he said, “Yes there’s a Special Forces warehouse out near Tan Son Nhut and the motor pool and we supply all the units out in the field.” He knew the two guys that was running it, only two people back there; give me a case of this, case of that, case of this. We spent a lot of medical supplies, not for us but for civic action stuff in the villages, shot of penicillin things like that. Any medication, we did a lot of good stuff too, trying to win the hearts and minds of the people like a big comet already done. It worked out good.

CP: So was it hard to get supplied at that time?

RM: The Vietnamese were afraid the Americans were going to leave too; we couldn’t get anything through Vietnamese channels. We didn’t have jungle boots so our troop had regular boots like you wear in the States, their clothes were ragged, had to beg everything we got, but the captain goes back and he came back and got everybody boots and fatigues, he scrounged that and I scrounged medical supplies and demolition, I scrounged a lot of demolition too.

CP: Were they armed well?

RM: Basic weapon in the Rangers was a carbine, A-1 carbine. We had a lot of automatic rifles, not that many, only had two machine guns in the battalion. The American rifle company has two machine guns in every rifle platoon and we had the older type machine guns, A-4s. After your M-79s which worked out good, but a lot of Thompson sub-machine guns and their wives used to make the vests for them. Thompson man was the heaviest loaded man we had because the 45 ammo was so heavy. His wife made vests for him to put their stuff in. Vietnamese was hording everything, they were afraid we were going to pull out and you couldn't get anything through the Vietnamese channel. We never got a Medevac chopper through the Vietnamese, if we took casualties the rules were you had to call through Vietnamese channels to get a helicopter which they automatically turned down, then you had to call through American channels to get one, so it took you four or five hours to get a chopper in there for a Medevac. Of course we had heat casualties. We didn't eat salt; sixteen, eighteen salt tablets a day really because they had a lot of them passing out in the heat. Our basic diet was rice and that was it. We'd stop at night and they'd cook rice and we'd eat and they'd cook some for in the morning and for lunch the next day and that was another rice bowl wrapped in a banana leaf, which was their lunch. We ate rice and they didn't do anything with rice like Chinese do or Japanese, they just cook rice and that was their lunch, rice ball wrapped in a banana leaf.

CP: How did you find the morale of the Vietnamese troops?

RM: They were good, the troops were good.

CP: Good troops?

RM: Yes, good troops. They had been Ranger companies over there but there was probably as chief bodyguards and district chiefs and all that, and what we did was formed a headquarters and pull four Ranger companies, ordered them, strung them up and put them through Ranger school, so then they were really Rangers, before they were just kind of dogs to the province chief and stuff. They were good soldiers, though. Mean, they cut the heads off all of their kills and put them on a bamboo pole or something, stick a cigarette in their mouth or something like that. I dealt with that because I scrounged all these booby trap devices and they always came back and got their dead. One time, the first time we did it, says don't cut their heads off, we're going to

booby trap them to the—we pulled back about three hundred yards and boom, boom, went back and had two more. Yes, this is better, as far as booby trapping.

CP: Is there any, like a most memorable experience you remember from Vietnam that you might want to share with people or just maybe your view on the war overall?

RM: Well, it might be on the war when I first went there. We operated about forty k's, in a town called Ben Cat, outside of Ben Cat, four or five k's off the main road and never seen a government soldier, they just was not fighting. The regiment stationed at Ben Cat, they didn't do anything and we did so much good, we knocked over four or five NVAs (North Vietnamese Army) in a week, three or four at least. We'd spike factories and hospitals, training centers. I was sitting in a training center one time, didn't have any guards around at all, they was posted on there where they had guards but there wasn't any, didn't leave. Army operator never checked up and because I'm sitting in the classroom, had a graphic training laid up there, we were in the classroom with some kind of weapon and I could throw a grenade far as any of the Vietnamese so we sneaked up behind him. I threw a grenade and hit the middle of it, everybody opened on them and we killed, they shot the head out of the instructor, poor bastard shot all to heck. I think he was Chinese too, didn't look like a Vietnamese, big fat pusty guy. He might not have been Chinese but he damn sure wasn't Viet Cong out working.

CP: No, they were pretty skinny out there.

RM: Yes. They shot the pee out of him; in fact he hadn't got away because everybody concentrated on him. He had blood trails for about—that's the kind of stuff we did.

CP: How did you find the enemy, the NVA, the VC?

RM: We never had any NVA in '63, it was Viet Cong.

CP: What about later on did you see the morale; I guess you really wouldn't know their morale but their fighting strength getting stronger maybe, engagements tougher?

RM: Yes, I believed in the war in '63; I believed we could do some good. I believed again when we went back in '65. What we were supposed to do is relieve the Vietnamese, they was going back to train more, getting re-equipped and everything and then they were going to come back up and take over the war. I still believe we was winning. We went back in '68 and '67, we wasn't trying to win the war, if they want to

put together a combat jump on Hanoi, I'd have been the first man out the door but that wasn't what we wanted to do, I don't know what we was doing. I kind of agreed with Colonel Hackworth, are you familiar with him?

CP: Yes, sir.

RM: I was going to a book signing at Oster Pete for him. Me and another guy was the only two people there from the 101st. There was no active duty officers there, he had a speech and reception and all that, no active duties from Fort Hamblin at all, afraid of him I think or don't want to be associated with him but he was right about the war. We wasn't trying to win it, because the officers we got laid and all they perfumed kisses and hell, they're not combat leaders. He was a combat leader. I don't agree with a lot of stuff he did, of course you know he is the most decorated soldier in Vietnam, two Distinguished Service Crosses, ten Silver Stars, eight Purple Hearts, blah, blah, blah. I guess he passed out decorations to people that I don't think earned them. My standards for decorations are a lot higher than his is, let's put it that way. Maybe I shouldn't run him up for decorations but my standards are different.

CP: What kind of decorations did you receive?

RM: Well, I got a Legion of Merit when I retired. The battalion commander said "I got you a Legion of Merit approved." I said, "I don't want know Legion of Merit, that's an officer's decoration." But they gave it to me anyway. I got a Stars of Valor still, too expensive, Air Medal for Valor, three Purple Hearts, just shit like that.

CP: What was your total length in service?

RM: Twenty-six years.

CP: Twenty-six years. That's a long military career. And what year did you get out?

RM: Seventy-five. I called the other day and wanted to know if I could come back in. And they said, "How old are you?" I said, "Seventy." "No, we'll get back to you." I'm seventy-one now.

CP: So did you retire before or after the fall of Saigon?

RM: I retired after.

CP: You'd mentioned some civic action, where you involved in much of that?

RM: As much as I could, yes. And all these people with scabies and anything all trying to clap in the hood, medically that was a crazy day. We had wounds from shrapnel and stuff like that. Yes, we did that every time we got a chance, that wasn't our job but we wanted to do it anyway.

CP: They seem I guess very appreciative of it.

RM: Yes, one of my medics, this is when I was in C Company was at a place called [?] and he's got one of my Sergeants across the river from him. And one of my Sergeants was killed, the other was shot in the jaw and we drew water for days, a week or so, it was over in [?], a medic who later got killed chasing a chicken, stepped a mine out in the jungle. He delivered two babies that night in [?]. Another Viet Cong baby, it wasn't Viet Cong, it had a choice. The Viet Cong was taking care of it, we wasn't, that's what it amounted to.

CP: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add, I know that you were pointing getting back over and.

RM: Yes, I need to get back out there; we'll hug and shake hands again.

CP: I guess, you were the first to go I guess on the ship of C Company you said.

RM: Yes, I went over in '63, me and a guy named Eugene Hudson were the first two people to leave the 101st going over there. We'd volunteered in '62, they put out a request to possible combat area, they didn't tell you where it was or anything, me and Eugene Hudson. Several others volunteered but we got picked to go. We were the first two people to leave the 101st and go over there. Eugene Hudson should have gotten a Medal of Honor, with the Rangers, he got first Silver Star, he wasn't posthumous, it was poor award, the first one that wasn't posthumous but he should have got the Medal of Honor, but they're saving that for a Special Forces lieutenant.

CP: Well, I guess that will do it for right now. I sure do appreciate it. Thank you sir.