RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT ARBASETTI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Nicholas Trajano Molnar: This begins an interview with Mr. Robert Arbasetti on August 3rd, 2012 in Bogota, New Jersey with Nicholas Molnar.

Robert Arbasetti: Well, listen, I'm very happy, this is exciting to me. [laughter]

NM: Just for the record, could you tell us when and where you were born?

RA: I was born in Manhattan. I think my mom tells me it's Woman's Hospital--which no longer exists--in 1946.

NM: Before we go into your life, I would like to learn a little bit about your family background. Could you tell me about your father?

RA: Well, this is the hard part. My mother and father were married and when I was about two years old, my father left, so I have just a scant memory of my father when I was a child. He was from Ecuador, he was a merchant marine seaman during World War II and my mother, she was born in Manhattan and the unique story about her is that her mother and father got a divorce and there were three kids and they put them in a Catholic home, my mother being the oldest. Then they each got remarried to other people but never took the kids out of the Catholic home so for many years, up until sixteen when they were discharged from the home, my mother had a very kind of unhappy relationship with her parents. … I would assume a Catholic home is not very cuddly and, when you stub your toe, there's nobody there to kind of give you that motherly care. … My mom was kind of estranged from her mother and I think that's the reason why we moved from New York to New Jersey, for distance. … My mom remarried, she was a factory worker and her and my stepfather, Walter, eventually saved enough money and bought a motel in New York State and then a number of years [later] they sold it and retired to Florida.

NM: Just for the record, what was your mother's name?

RA: Christina Casals was her … maiden name.

NM: Besides what you already mentioned, do you know anything about her background in terms of where her parents came from?

RA: Her father came from Barcelona, Spain and he was supposedly a barber, but his family had a lot of barber shops. He was never allowed to cut their hair, so he came to America. Her mother I think Puerto Rico and maybe from there, before that, relatives from the Canary Islands. It's very hazy. I've never checked that out.

NM: How long did you live in the city for?

RA: Till about fifth grade. … That's about ten years old. We lived on First Avenue in Yorkville. … It was kind of an interesting place as a young kid, just trying to find out what life was. … Some people say they're frightened about the city. I just found it kind of interesting.

My mom worked all the time. … I roamed around a lot, went places, not field trips, but I was able to go to the store myself and feed myself. … Everything I pretty much needed or required was in the neighborhood and then I would meet my mom sometimes when she left from work and I'd walk home with her. … It was good, that part.

NM: What are your earliest memories of the city?

RA: Earliest memories, wow. … As a kid, I remember going to school, PS 151 which no longer exists. I remember going to a store and getting candy, five cents to get a bag load of candy. I remember there were gangs there but I didn't seem to be threatened, I didn't know, there were a bunch of guys who looked like they came out of Westside Story, but they didn't bother me. … They were too busy into their own stuff. I remember some people in the neighborhood. There was a guy who had a supermarket or a little small market and one of the ways he dealt with the gangs is that once a year he would have a watermelon party, and all the kids in the neighborhood would come and eat free watermelon and I think that gave him enough respect and credibility that he never got robbed, because people said, "Well, this guy gave us watermelon growing up." … This is good stuff, this guy cared about us, directly he did, and also it affected that he didn't get hassled by these guys. So I remember that, I thought that was pretty cool.

NM: Well, tell me a little bit more about the neighborhood. What types of ethnicities and races of folks lived in the area?

RA: Well, it was Yorkville which started out as a German neighborhood and it was in transition and there was a lot of Hispanics and there were still Germans, but it was tenements and now all the tenements are replaced by these nice high rise luxury apartments. It was a pretty working-class. There were small restaurants … not so much restaurants because I don't remember restaurants like going out to eat, but I remember the small businesses. There were candy stores. … As a ten year old, you don't really do much in the street, you go to school and you have friends and stuff like that.

NM: What were some of the things that you did for fun as a child in the city?

RA: I remember us playing football down by Gracie Mansion where the mayor's home is. There was some stickball, there were some handball, but outside of that I don't remember. There was a Boy's Club that I went to but I didn't always like that. I felt like, I don't know, I didn't feel happy there, I didn't feel like it played to what I wanted to do but I didn't know what I wanted to do, I mean I'm just a kid, what do I know.

NM: Did you and your mother go to church or anything like that?

RA: Well, she was raised in a Catholic home so she had that. We didn't go to church on Sunday until I started going for Communion and Confirmation. … I was very fearful of the church, it was talk about heaven and hell and being good. … Everything was so black and white, but I always felt that I'm somewhere in the middle there. So, it's strange because I was pretty young

when I got my Confirmation and my mom seemed to be getting an idea that I thought I wanted to be a priest, but I just wanted to get it over with. … I didn't have any religious concepts or thoughts. It was just kind of scary, you know, and when you're trying to make your way through life, you don't know what's what.

NM: Would you go and visit other places in the city outside of Yorkville?

RA: My mom would take us to the beach, Orchard Beach and we would visit her mother in the Bronx. I think she wanted to go there out of obligation because it was her mother and my grandma in the Bronx. They were pretty poor, they were in a pretty poor neighborhood and we weren't rich but we were a little bit better than they were. They ended up having all these other kids. There were cousins and uncles but I really didn't have any close relationship with any of them. There wasn't like somebody I hung around with … but we didn't go many places, we were poor, we were working class more or less. My mom was a single mom, raising me, she did pretty good. We went to movies and one of the things though I have to thank her for is her love of music which kind of filtered down to me. She would always have the radio on, they played the top forty of her generation … especially on Saturday and that was good and some of it splashes over into me. Also, she took me to the Paramount Theater, I think we saw Johnnie Ray, we might have seen other people too, but she took me to a concert of her music which was a lot of fun. … I don't know if I particularly liked the music at the time but I liked the idea that all these things were happening, there was the stage and people applauding. There was a certain kind of appreciation what was going on there and I would love to go there now to see what it really was like. … There was another place we went in the Bronx and I have just vague memories. It was in the armory some place, it might have been Kingsbridge and there was some kind of music show there but I don't remember who was there, but she did like music and in later years music has been a great comfort to me.

NM: You mentioned that your mother worked in a factory.

RA: Yes.

NM: What type of work did she do?

RA: She worked in a number of factories. One of the factories she worked was a company who put light fixtures together and then later on in years when they moved out to Western Jersey, she worked for a company that did some kind of Army work and in the factory there was some kind of fire and part of her notion in her head--because she got sicker later on--is that there was some kind of chemicals in the fire. I don't know what exactly, I don't know if it was munitions or whatever and when the fire happened it was kind of roped off for a couple of days and later on in life she had some kind of breathing problems; whether it was related or not, I don't know. She kind of thinks it was and so you got to give her--she was there--but yes she was just basically, she didn't even have a high school education but she got a job like in a factory assembling things or making holes and whatever.

NM: You mentioned that you moved to Bogota. Why did your family move to Bogota?

RA: My mom met Walter (Freeman?), he became my stepfather in maybe 1954 and they got married in '55 which is kind of interesting because, he's like the furthest thing. … I come from a kind of Latin family, you know, Italian last name but my father was originally from Ecuador and his grandfather was from Italy. So, there's a whole kind of mixture here and he was from Maine and he was a kind of like a WASP. … English surname, not Presbyterian, … Protestant I should say. … His family was strict religious people and somehow they were attracted to each other and so they got married. They decided that New York City, it was time for them to leave. I don't know how they came about Bogota but they found a house that was to their liking and it was a big move for me because I had some friends in New York City and suddenly I'm going in to a place where I don't know anything, nobody, very much alone, or I thought I was going to be alone. … It was really the unknown, it was like going in the woods for the first time.

NM: Can you talk about the differences between Bogota in the 1950s to New York where you had lived previously?

RA: It's hard to realize what New York City could have been because I left there at a certain time age but in Bogota, and I imagine a lot of these small towns, they had a lot of community activities, there was little league, there were sports teams in the grammar schools, there were I think all the guys got together around sports. We played softball, kickball, whatever. I think … the schools were pretty good. There were small classes and the people you are with in fifth grade you were with them all the way to eighth grade so they were like cousins and families, so it was good. … There was no crime in the street but Bogota was pretty well, it was a white town, there were hardly any minorities that worked there. Me and there was another guy who was Puerto Rican, we were like a little different, we kind of, I hate to say standout … but we were different in a crowd so you always kind of felt like they were looking at you a little harder whether you're good enough to be average or good enough to be there or stuff like that, but your friends are your friends and they didn't kind of look at you and say, "Hey Arbasetti is an Italian last name but you look more Hispanic, what's going on here?" They didn't judge you that much. They may have judged you on your ability to hit a fastball or if you can tackle, stuff like that. … You always felt like adults looked at you differently and, of course, on TV, and I call it the propaganda they had, the families, they were always white and non-ethnic and father knows best or the mother is a little goofy but there was nobody with a unique name, whether it was Spanish, Italian, or stuff like that. It was all Jones, and Smith, and Johnson, and stuff like that. So, there's a message when you see that, that makes you well, "I'm not part of them," you know, it's subtle but you realize that you're not, there's only white people. … Not that I felt threatened, but after a while you watched this and you kind of don't … see an Italian guy, unless maybe … he had an Italian restaurant [laughter] or a Chinese guy had a Chinese restaurant but it was kind of … like that you know.

NM: You mentioned Bogota was a small town. Was it in a rural area?

RA: Well, it was, it's a suburban area, it's pretty much a bedroom community for New York City. The advertisements, if you ever see the old advertisements is, get on the train and have a home in the suburbs and have that whole fence and whatever that life that they were selling, and it was a pretty good community, it was safe, but as we got older, there was not that much opportunities to do other things. We didn't do sports, it was hard to find a part-time job, there was no place where you can hang out. If you hung out on the streets, the police would chase you because … businesses felt like you were loitering and discouraging customers from going into the building there. One of the things though is that it really wasn't a political town, I knew the mayor … but I don't remember if he was Republican or Democrat. You know, these small towns … they were interchangeable. It was a guy who was liked, shakes your hand, and smiled at you and then he goes on to the next person. So, whatever political stuff, I wasn't aware of … the stuff underneath. … As a kid growing up, I was just trying to figure out life.

NM: Did you participate in any formal sports leagues?

RA: Yes, I was in little league and the second year I was in the little league, we became the town baseball little league champions. That was my first accomplishment that I was part of something, I was part of a team, which it was cheesy trophies [laughter] but it was mine, I earned it, it was good. But after a while when you got older and adults started coaching a lot then it became less fun, and it was more focused on winning and, sometimes you just wanted to play a little bit and, of course, I wasn't the star of the team, I was just a regular player interchangeably put me here or there. There was pressure on the coach winning so that other players got in and they were more favorite. I played a little basketball, we did pretty well, we had fun. … A lot of us rode our bicycles so we thought … bicycles became more like our motorcycles, we were like gang members, you know. [laughter] We wasn't fighting anybody we just liked the idea that we could maybe, in our minds, we had black jackets … and we were Marlon Brando, we were those guys, but we were kids.

NM: When you were in Bogota, did you ever have a job as a teenager?

RA: In my last year of high school I got a job in a big store in Little Ferry called Valley Fair and I worked in the luncheonette there, … served pizza a stuff like that but it was very hard to find a job. I would have loved the jobs. I wanted to buy a car, and it was the only way to get money, was to save up by having a job. … There was nothing locally unless you knew somebody. If your uncle owned a deli, you can work there, which made sense, they would hire family members first, but that was the first job I got was in the snack bar in Little Ferry at the Valley Fair.

NM: Let us talk a little bit about high school. What were your interests?

RA: High school is a strange place because I think high school for me it was very confusing, because I didn't know what I wanted to be, I really didn't, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't have great grades, I didn't go to the academic level, it was more commercial but if you were to ask me as a freshman or even as a senior what I was going to do after high school, I had

no idea. I don't think they prepared us. I think they just wanted us to graduate and go out and we were on our own. … I was a fairly popular guy in high school. I played freshman basketball but … it's the first time that I realized about personal politics. On the team was the brother of the great basketball player of the town and also members of the board of education's children and stuff like that. So, they got to play more than I did in basketball and we wasn't a good team, so at the last couple of minutes, which you call "junk time," you're losing by forty points, they throw you in there, and everybody shoots the ball up but it was really no chance to really compete as a team. It was just garbage time. I realized then that probably one of the earlier times where I realized that your ability to play the game doesn't always give you an opportunity to play. … There's other factors that go in there which you realize in life it happens also that way but that was a real kind of shock. It was an eye-opening that I didn't at least get more of an opportunity to play. I was put on the second team and in practice we would beat the first team a lot because we had some good players, not that I made the difference … but the thing is, that was one of the strange things and then I realized that there's something strange going on because the girls that I used to make fun of in grammar school were starting to interest me in a different way but I didn't know about the evolution of me as a man and them as a woman. So, that's another thing that becomes part of the mix. You throw all that in there, plus I was an average student, but I always … wanted to make sure I did well, well enough to graduate anyway, go to the next grade. So that was it, didn't have a job, didn't have a car, didn't know what life was about. I felt like the guidance program was not designed for me, they never particularly talked to me or what I liked and stuff like that. I think a lot of them were hoping that all these kids they don't know what to do, let them go in the Army and stuff like that. … As far as politics, I didn't know anything about politics, … I was unaware. I remember watching the news and I heard there was some kind of happening in a strange far-off land and I believe they said "Vietnam," but it was so distant to me, so not part of my future. … I would watch the news, I knew some current events but I didn't know the ramifications of this or that, going here or doing that. … High school was okay but there was a lot of uncertainty, a lot of, I mean in some ways I was very fearful of what my future would be.

NM: You mentioned that you were not sure what you would do after high school. Did your mother and your stepfather have any input?

RA: … No, I think my mother wanted me to graduate from high school because she didn't and she saw that as a big achievement. I guess in its own right it was, but they didn't know what I was going to do. … Of course, by that time in '65, the draft was, and Vietnam was starting to pick up, it was still very remote to me and I went to a school called School of Business Machines in Paterson and they would teach you about the collator, pre-digital computers and stuff like that and the IBM cards, stuff like that, and so, I was trying to find a place but I don't know if that really work for me.

NM: How long were you at this School of Business Machines?

RA: I think it was eight months, I think that's the course, was eight months. … They tried to place you, but they didn't place me anywhere.

NM: What happens after you complete this course?

RA: … I got a job at some kind of factory, I don't know if it was in Lyndhurst or something like that but I didn't like it. It was sort of towards the end of 1965, I was already out of high school, couldn't find a job, I had no qualifications, I got this little job and I think I lasted three weeks. You're sort like a virgin of the world, you don't know what to expect. Hopefully, we've learned that our kids are not like this, you know, they're kind of tossed in the abyss, what's going to happen.

NM: What happened after you completed this course?

RA: Nothing happened, there were a lot of strange things that were happening as far as the culture, there was the Beatles, and music and then all that stuff was becoming heightened. … I think I had a girlfriend or two in that period of time, but I didn't know what that all means. Nobody talked about sex, they did have a sex program in my last year of high school, they couldn't talk about sex, the teachers were very frightened, so they talked about amoebas and one separates into two, and two into four and they talked a little bit about sexual diseases but in a vague form like the kid goes to see the coach and goes, "Coach, I have something down there" pointing to his crotch but he didn't say … it made it seem like it's almost deadly but they didn't say what the norm is. … Basically it was telling you, "Don't have sex, and if the girls look bad they probably are." … Everything was stereotyped, the girls were wearing black clothes, and big hair and they were driving around in convertibles so you know those are the girls you shouldn't see, but those are the girls that I wanted to meet. [laughter]

NM: What leads you to join the military?

RA: … I was getting notices from the draft and I decided that, during high school, I took the Air Force aptitude test and I scored very well. So, I said well maybe I should join the Air Force and I could get a school or something and I can learn something. So, I went to the Air Force and the Air Force says, "We're not taking people for another eight months," and the draft board is after me. So, I said, that's not good, so I had this great idea. I said, well, you know what, I want to avoid the infantry. … I'm going to join the Army and see if I get a school. So, I went down to the Army guy, and he says, "Oh, yes, we could promise you this school, you had a course in business, computers and stuff like that." … It wasn't really computers then, I guess there were, but … it was more business machines with collating, and IBM cards. He says, "I can get you a school for that, I can promise you a school." I said, "Well, okay, that sounds great," and so I decided that, I figured it out that I outsmarted the Army. I was going to join, get a school, and not be an infantry guy. So, I got to school, it was in Aberdeen, Maryland, Aberdeen Proving Grounds, which is a beautiful state. One of the things I realized that growing up in this area here, I never was out of state, never west of the Delaware River. … One time I went on vacation with my parents down to Miami Beach but I never was exposed to anything. Maybe Bear Mountains farthest north and then all of a sudden here I am at Aberdeen and it's beautiful, it's green, it's wonderful.

NM: You went to Aberdeen after your basic training?

RA: … Basic training I had at Fort Dix and I learned one thing--I had no idea what the hell I was getting myself into. Being pretty much a lazy person, you go there and they make everybody look the same and I understand that. … They cut off your hair, we have these uniforms that are kind of big or tight or, they're one size, and we meet this first sergeant who was, or the drill sergeant, he was angry, he's yelling at us. It seemed like we couldn't do anything right, everything was wrong and screaming at us and cursing at us. I remember the first night before I even got to my basic training unit, as an only child I was used to having my own room. Here I'm going to share a room with like sixty other guys and people snoring and talking and there's light. I'm used to having darkness, … just all kinds of moans and somebody talking in their sleep in Spanish. I said, "Oh God, what did I get myself into," because there is no comfort when you're away from home. … Even though it wasn't the most happy life, I had my room, I had music, it was a safe place. So basic training was a great eye-opener. There was a lot of physical stuff, you would think that you were somewhat in shape in gym, but we used to run all the time and fire weapons. It was an interesting education. A lot of the stuff stays with me that I remember. … When I meet guys, I have met one guy who I was in basic training with, we still talk about certain things. How it was just a whole different world to us to the point and I think one of the key elements of my life is sort of like naivety. I'm naive and I think that's what helps me go on, they're showing you a bayonet, you learn how to use the bayonet, because you use a bayonet to stab somebody but I don't think about that, I just think about I better do this so the guy doesn't yell at me. I don't think about in the long run, that you have to learn to thrust and parry left, some of those terms stick with me. … Taking care of a wound, a chest wound, it's just not a thing that you learned like in high school, you learned some science, you learned some math. … You learned about that or how to apply, if there's a mustard attack, how to put an atropine Syrette. I never heard of that, but I know what to do. All this information you're given, and you learn how to march and it really … you don't realize it but all of a sudden you're different, you're different than what you were but you're like all these other guys. We all looked ugly, short hair, but we had uniforms on and stuff like that.

NM: Was the physical training and discipline challenging for you?

RA: Yes, there was none of the physical discipline growing up. Here you have to get up and you run and then you do calisthenics and then you march to the rifle range or whatever ranges you're going on and Fort Dix is the strangest place I ever saw because a lot of sandy soil, and it's very hot. … I didn't realize, it was like almost a different state, and you were constantly on the move, you were up early in the morning, you had to clean your boots at night. … There was very little downtime, very little time to call home, or I don't think we were able to call home, wrote a couple of letters, they want you to write letters, my time was not my own, my thoughts were almost not my own. I kept on saying, I can get through this, life is going to be better, a lot of physical stuff, low crawl and climbing the bars, and just, it was very physical, I wasn't used to it.

NM: Was this the first time you had handled a weapon of any kind?

RA: First time I handled a weapon. First time I was away from home. First time I lived with a bunch of people that are guys, so, living with guys is a whole different thing because we have different levels of maturity and it comes out. It's almost like you were back at school, you don't think that you're doing--well you were at school--but you don't think about the weapons. As a New Jersey guy, I never fired a weapon so they show you how to fire a weapon and how to use the trigger, how to put the right pressure, and to breath and not breath to hit the target and I took to that pretty well. I ended up being expert in my rifle, but don't forget nobody is shooting at you at the firing range. [laughter] … You have time to think and concentrate, do whatever you have to do, but there were many accomplishments. Oh, I did that, okay that's good or I know how to do that which was interesting but you still didn't believe that you were actually going to do this in practicality. This is what I have to do before I go to my school in Aberdeen, I got to learn how to do all this.

NM: The people who you were in basic training with, were they just from New Jersey or were they from different areas of the United States?

RA: I think they were from New Jersey, but New Jersey, in my limited world I think New Jersey is five towns around Bogota and they were from different parts of New Jersey. There might have been from New York too, nobody really talked about all that stuff and we kind of lost our identity once they shaved our hair and put us in uniform but it's funny, in my life, I've been lucky, I ran into a guy I was in basic training with, I didn't know him because you're put alphabetically and he's an "S," Salmon and, of course, I'm an "A," Arbasetti, we might have been close to each other, but we wouldn't know it because you're frightened with these drill instructors, "Don't talk, what are you doing?" … Which is a kind of strange story because a friend of mine says, "I want you to come over to this house." … Just prior to that I was at somebody's house and … people tried to sell me Amway, the thing that you buy and sell door-to-door. … No, I wasn't going to do it and there were things in that conversation that seemed like it was happening in this other conversation. I was ready to walk out, I thought maybe this was another Amway party that, make yourself a success sell these cosmetics to everybody but it was just kind of a set up for me to meet this guy and he showed me the yearbook which I don't even remember posing for the photos. There's a bunch of photos of me doing different stuff, even bayonet, there's a photo of me with a bayonet. There's a photo of me which I don't remember behind with the American flag behind, I had the uniform on, and it was kind of funny, it was great. So, he's my only connection of that time, but it was good to have a connection.

NM: You mentioned that you went to Aberdeen Proving Ground. What type of training did you receive there?

RA: Aberdeen Proving Ground is basically … they work on weapons and they prove those weapons are good or not. I was on ordnance supply, which is that I would probably be more like a parts, auto parts, you supply auto parts, you have inventory, you work, inventory control, you worked with cleaning certain parts, they had ways of doing that. It was kind of clerical stuff but

I thought well, this could be okay. … I would get a truck and have my parts and the guy would come and say, "Hey, listen I need a trigger housing," and he would sign a couple forms, give him that, and then I'd go back to my safety, this is my idea of what it was going to be. I had no reality but that's what happens when you're a kid, you have no idea what the world is about. … I went there though it wasn't as tough as basic training, you still had to do like inspections. … You had one weekend where you did, you had mess hall duty, so it was good, the funny thing is that I was getting all these experiences, I didn't realize it but a lot of my friends didn't have any of that and I think they feel a little, I don't know, not envious but, … their life seems to be kind of, they didn't go to college, it was kind of like working and it was like bland. Mine kind of scary, it was … exciting though. [laughter]

NM: How long were you at Aberdeen Proving Grounds?

RA: I was at Aberdeen for about two or three months. I'm not sure exactly and I did pretty well in the course. They gave you a diploma which is kind of nice. Aberdeen was a beautiful post, it was green, the buildings were new, they didn't hassle you like you were in basic training, you had some restrictions but you had movement all over the post so you and the guys got together, you could go to the EM Club--the Enlisted Men's Club--which I thought was kind of odd, there I am eighteen and in New Jersey you have to be twenty-one to drink a beer. … I guess because we were Army soldiers they gave us the benefit and stuff like that. … A lot of us were still, couldn't control our liquor, but you felt a little bit more adult if that could be a situation, you're still a member of the Army. I still had to wake up a certain time, and make formation and classes, blah, blah, blah, so I was very excited, I said, "Well, I can't wait to get to my permanent party where I could really do what I learned."

NM: Where did you think that you would go after Aberdeen Proving Grounds?

RA: I had no idea, I really didn't. I knew Vietnam was happening but still I wasn't clear. The funny thing is that I never followed the news after a while. I wasn't aware of how much military presence was in Vietnam at the end of '65 and '66. I went in the army in '66, so it was already part, … the ball was already rolling without me realizing that it was rolling so I had no idea. There were rumors of maybe Japan, there were rumors of other places in the States--there was always talk.

NM: Where did you go?

RA: I got my orders to go to Germany, I said, "Okay, well, it's not a combat zone, I can learn to do this thing here, that'd be fine." I had a week or two leave. I reported back to Fort Dix and McGuire Air Force base, we flew over to … Frankfurt, Germany. We landed and the thing in my life and I always … hated being in a new place without knowing people and not knowing the area. … They always take you to what they call a replacement center where new troops come in and process and then when somebody has a request for troops, they'll select them and send them out there. So I spent a couple of days, but you couldn't go out in the street, so you felt like you were in prison looking at all these things going on. So, I was sent there. I was there for a couple

of days, I don't remember much about it just I didn't like it. … I felt like in transit, you're always in transit.

NM: From the replacement center where did you go?

RA: We got orders to go, they put us on a bus and they took us down to the railroad station, the railway station and I guess the Army rented some trains from the Germans and there was a significant moment. I saw my first micro-mini skirt and we were all kind of like, "Wow, legs, girls, wow." We were just like shocked because some guys had their girlfriends, their sweethearts, but the culture there was a little bit more advanced as far as clothing. We were still conservative in the United States and here we saw cute little girls walking around in mini-skirts. It was very exciting for us guys, because our hormones are raging and stuff like that. So we got on a train and then we went to a place, a town called Aschaffenburg which is on the Main River. At Aschaffenburg we got on busses and they took us to the, I forgot the name of the place now, but it's called Graves Kaserne. Kaserne is the German word for army base or camps or barracks and we get off the bus and we're all kind of excited and we were in Charlie Company and the guy says, "Welcome to the 7th Infantry." I didn't know what that meant, I mean, though that's the name of the unit, I thought I had a different job. … And suddenly I saw guys starting to cry and they said, "There must be a mistake, sergeant," and they were pole linemen, their job was climbing up poles for communications. "There's no mistake, we need the infantry guys, you guys are now in the infantry." … There was like twenty-five of us guys and of course, I was shocked, I didn't know how this kind of related to me and I didn't know what it all meant. … I mean all of a sudden, everything changed. Everything I thought I had an understanding of completely changed and I became an infantryman.

NM: This is the first time you had left the United States. How long did it take to get acclimated to Germany?

RA: I was in Germany, Aschaffenburg was in northern Bavaria. What I saw of it before we started actually being part of the unit which was like a day or two, it was just this beautiful country, you always wondered how you can negotiate the town, if you can talk to people, something like that. But after a while you felt comfortable, you started to know the guys, those are your guys, the guys you're going to be with, you know where to go in town, you looked at the women, you felt kind of normal even though you're in a different place, you couldn't communicate. You miss home quite a bit but the town was beautiful, the people were nice despite the fact that soldiers tend to be idiots. … They drink too much, they're kind of crude. I liked Germany and I only regret that I didn't have more of an opportunity to see more of the country, and I was young, I didn't know, I didn't realize that I probably would never be back again.

NM: Can you tell me what a typical or average day would be like?

RA: … It's very simple. You have two kinds of days, if you're in the barracks, or the Kaserne, you wake up early, you go to breakfast at the mess hall, and the food was pretty good. Then you

come back and every squad had their area of responsibility to clean and our area was the latrine. We used to get people who used to hide there because they didn't want to go clean their area of responsibility, so the idea was to get them out and I thought of a plan, I was very proud of this. We got ammonia, we closed the windows, threw ammonia on the floor and just close the door and about a minute later they come running out, "Oh, what are you guys doing, this is terrible," because we had to go there, we had to clean the floors, clean the toilets, clean the urinal, you had to do all that stuff and you can't do it with guys taking off their stuff so after a while everybody got the idea, that we're going to get you out one way of the other. So, we had our area of responsibility and then they had a formation and they had, if somebody had to do guard duty or something else, you were called out and the rest had to go to classes and classes were upstairs, and you learned about the machinegun, how to field strip it, you learned about all the weapons or other protocols, if you see a certain vehicle notify somebody, there was a lot of military stuff. First aid, so we do that in the morning and we were infantry but we were mechanized infantry which means we had the armored personnel carriers. So, the afternoon after lunch was … go down there and do maintenance, … or maintenance on the machineguns, clean the barrels or whatever, get the rust off there if there's any rust, and there's always rust. I don't know how the hell it gets there. Work on the PCs, the mechanics would come and do maintenance. So, we're always busy doing and then at around 4:30, five o'clock, we were off. Dinner was at, I guess, five or six o'clock and most of the time you had the night to yourself so you had movies on the place there. They had an enlisted man's club, tends to be where everybody used to go to have a beer, and you can bullshit around and they had foosball games and things to make you feel not so far away from home but if you had a detail like guard duty because you had to hang around for guard duty, whatever details they had, you know, garbage run or laundry run, you would know that you have that the next day. Now, the other part is that we were always out in the fields which is you're out there on maneuvers, you learn infantry tactics from squad to platoon to company, fire and maneuver, fire and advance. … To me it was sort of like a football game, you go here, and we go there, we were out in the field for three or four days at a time, so I kind of got used to that. It was a lifestyle, if I would have thought in high school that I would be outside where it was cold, and there was no heat, surviving all this, I would have laughed at myself, "No, that can't be me," but you learned that you can deal with it, you learn that you could adapt, three days a week and the rest was doing maintenance and occasionally they have what they called "alert," and what that seems to be is that since we're part of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and this was during the Cold War, and we were close to Czechoslovakia which was a communist country, they had these like war plans, what they call alert where everybody from the whole company or the brigade or battalion or whoever you're with have to leave your place within an hour no matter where you were. If you were downtown at a bar, you heard the word alert, you had to get back and change your clothes and load up the personnel carriers and get your weapons from the arms room, stuff like that. You had to be combat ready. Except none of us ever fired a weapon except on the rifle range but you had to do all that and then you go out in the field and you're there for whenever they call the alert off. Could be a couple of hours, could be a couple of weeks. So, you're on this alert and I found out years later that we were only a delaying action, that we would delay if the communists, if the Russians or whoever is coming through, we would maybe delay them for a couple of days, we were relatively, … we didn't have the munitions because everything … started to go to Vietnam, we didn't have new equipment, all

that stuff was going to Vietnam. We were using M14s, Vietnam was using the 16s, we were using the longer rifles that were heavier. … That was sort of like a typical day, unless you got a detail. If you got let's say KP, wasn't bad either because it wasn't like in basic training where you felt like you're getting punished, they treat you good, it was a long day, but you cleaned the garbage can, and the funny thing is that I remember with my son I'm washing the garbage cans, he goes, "Dad, that's for garbage," said, "Yes, but this was what I learned, it keeps it smelling good, it keeps it from rotting out," and he kind of looked at me like I'm strange but I understood it after a while, you just wash those garbage cans out and they're clean. We worked on KP, did a lot of cleaning. I don't think there's ever a place, or restaurant I've ever been that's as clean as the floor in a mess hall, washed it three times a day. I don't wash my floors three times a month. … You learn all this stuff. … In some ways it kind of makes sense. Oh yes, I understand washing the garbage cans. … It becomes part of the fabric of who you are.

NM: How often would you get passes and things of that sort?

RA: I think once a month you could get an overnight pass. It was more restrictive back then. Now, nobody stays on post, I go to Fort Hood, they all live off post, but back in those days you stayed on. … I think we had a club called the fifty mile club, if you run fifty miles in so many days, you get a three day pass, but I didn't know where I wanted to go so that wasn't really a big issue, but going overnight to Frankfurt or going on trains to other places, Wurzburg and (Darmstadt?), all those places where they have maybe a little tour or something, that was pretty nice. You had to be in for curfew but very rarely did I want to stay out, past ten or eleven, I don't remember what the curfew time was but in a strange way there were a lot of interesting characters and as an only child you see a different world. You see the relations between blacks, country blacks and city blacks and suburban blacks and farmer blacks, same thing, it's no different than the same thing with whites, country whites, farmers, and city people and stuff like that. It's kind of interesting, everybody had their own take in life, their own way they lived, music, people kind of shared music, a lot of people were into soul and rhythm and blues but there were people also into rock music. I think I had a very good company commander. Every Friday he would take us down to the field and basically we would play sports, what we end up being very physically, and kind of beat the shit out of each other and not so much in a bloody way but just wrestle and stuff like that and I think that takes a lot of the angst out of being away, a lot of that whatever is built up into you comes out in doing something physical, because at the end of the day, we all go arm and arm, we go get a beer, we, though there were blacks, whites, Latinos, I never felt there was any tension. I never felt but I'm sure there was, they felt they were different than us. It was the first time that I saw black men in leadership roles, as sergeants, as officers, and the first time I ever had an Asian as a sergeant in charge of something. So, you were exposed to different things, and people talking about soda, called it pop, I never heard it, I knew what it was but never heard people use that expression. … It was interesting, you meet strange people. My room had a guy from Minnesota, who had to sleep with the window open and sometimes we'd wake up the next day and there's snow on his blanket. There was a guy named (Tom Pletch?) who was the greatest sleeper, I envied him, because if we had like, let's say we had a ten minute break, he could fall right to sleep, he could fall asleep on a picket fence, this guy was great, then there's people who were kind of difficult, … I shouldn't say difficult, they

were just different, … had a hard time coping or maybe they drank a little too much but we're all in the same boat, so we all had to get along. I always remember Tom because that guy could sleep. He was a good guy but he was the last one up, probably the last one to bed, who knows where he was half the time but always in the field he would fall asleep and he catches up with his sleep, naps here and there and after a while it's a couple of hours.

NM: Did you get a chance to interact with any West Germans while you were in Germany?

RA: Yes, I did. I became friends with this one guy, and this is silly of me because I didn't really appreciate the fact that he was a friend and sometimes I wondered maybe he was a spy but I didn't know anything, what did I know. … They could do is just go by the fence and look at the tracked vehicles and I didn't know all the stuff about that, and I went to folk festivals with him. There were times when me and the guys would go to a folk festival and the strange thing, our thing, if you were a young guy, … like here adults don't want to sit with the young guys, the young teenagers. There, they sat with you, and there's certain songs or customs. There's a song that they play, everybody interlocks arms and you don't even know what this is all about, and you're swaying back and forth but this is what they do and you're part of, you're there, you're the guest at the table there, the big folk festivals had a gigantic tent, the size of a football field. … There's all these picnic tables and people are just sitting, there were bar girls and families and kids and years later I thought about that, and I said, "Boy that's great," you could sit there without looking for people that you feel more comfortable with because you were comfortable no matter who you were, they accept you. They were very family-oriented. I remember being on guard duty. Guard duty is in the middle of the (Warcpacken?) and on Sunday you would see three generations of family walking in the woods, … little kids, mom and dad, and the grandparents, just walking, being together, and you will see that in town or restaurants and I thought that was great too. Especially since I didn't have that ability to have with all my relatives to be that close so, and you would go, of course, in the bars there were girls who were trying to make you spend money, but being naïve, you think, "Wow, I must look really good today." [laughter] "What do you want?" "Cognac and coke, and I'll have a beer," and they take the cognac and coke and [drink fast]. "Can I have another? Can you buy me another?" So, I'm looking, … I took two sips of my beer, I said, "Well, not now." They said, "Okay, see you later," and then they go someplace else. … After a while you realized, this is what happens. Their job is to make you spend money. They come on like they're interested in you, but you don't even know if that's cognac and coke, it could be some kind of tea or something because they go [slurp], but that's part of learning what life is, and some people were very friendly and there were some girls I flirted with, they would flirt back and because I went to some of the clubs downtown, and sometimes I'd meet somebody and I think something is going to happen, and I remember this one incident where I was out a little bit past curfew and a fight started between these women and somehow a woman fell on top of me and I got stuck with a bunch of people and the police came but at that time we had the MPs, military police, the German National Police, and there was a thing called the "courtesy police" which is run out of the battalion and their idea is that they get those guys who are in trouble, get them out, so there's no record, and let the battalion deal with it, and because, I didn't start anything, I was just there and I might have been there when I should have been home, there was a struggle on who's going to take control of

me, the German police, the MPs. Well, the courtesy police won out so I had to deal with the battalion commander who was not very happy. So, they made me do those things you see on TV, like clean the latrine with a toothbrush. I actually had to do that and it was never good enough. The sergeant major says, "Is that the best you can do? You're going to have to be here tomorrow." So, you do … punishment but you kind of learn, in a way, some people would [call it], "Cruel and unusual," no I'm not going back here, I'm not getting in trouble anymore. … I used to try to go out, try to meet women, I was not that successful. I went out with my friends, we would drink, and sometimes we'd get a little too drunk, but we were doing young men stuff.

NM: How long were you with the Third Division?

RA: I was with the First Battalion, Seventh Infantry. I was there from September '66 to December '67.

NM: Were you always with the same group of people?

RA: The same group of guys.

NM: The same group of guys.

RA: It started to feel like a family in a way, you got used to these guys and we all, when somebody got a "Dear John letter," we all got a Dear John Letter. I had a girlfriend who wrote me. "I miss you," blah, blah, blah, I have your birthday present, I was born in December and, "I will send it to you next time." So that was in '66. I never heard from her since then. … I know what happened to her. Years later I ran into a friend of mine who told me that she got engaged, but she had my high school ring. … She worked at a bank in Hackensack and I knew what time she got out so I sat in my car, and I followed her, and at a light I honked my horn and I put my hand up and she turned white as a ghost. I said, "Pull over there," and I knew she was frightened and I knew we were kids, she was seventeen or eighteen and how could you commit yourself to a life and I was a completely different person at that time. I was practically out of the Army. … The first thing I said to her, "Congratulations on your engagement. You still have my high school ring, I'd like to have it back," and I think she was relieved that she didn't, that whole guilt thing which probably built up because she never said anything and I was relieved and I didn't need her to be guilty, everybody, it's time to move on. … I got my high school ring and that was it.

NM: You were in Germany for quite a while. Besides the ones you already mentioned, are there any other experiences that stand out?

RA: … I think it was '66, our battalion commander decided, … we went to this area in Germany, I think it's called Wildflecken. It's a place where infantry guys go to train to see if you qualify as an infantry unit, … combat ready. He decided that he was going to do something different on our way there because we were mechanized. We hardly ever used the tracked vehicles, we walked ninety miles in four days, and he was a pretty interesting guy. …

Everybody hated walking because we were lazy, but each company would lead one day. There was four companies in the battalion and he would come up to me and go, "How are you doing Bob, you look good," and he allowed us to grow a mustache. … This was my first mustache, and he said, "Hey, that mustache looks pretty good." He was like sort of like a big brother and no matter how much you hated it, you couldn't hate him because he was with us all the time, he was walking with us. The jeep was back there in case there was a problem, it was behind us but he was walking with us and he'd be talking with us and I was sore, my legs hurt, but looking back at that I said, "Wow, that was a pretty good accomplishment, that was very good." I did well on some tests, I almost got the expert infantry badge. I missed on one or two parts of the tests and that's pretty good because that meant something. Basically you're out in the field with a bunch of guys and some part of it is an extension of high school. These are guys who kids like me or you or anybody at that time, we would find somebody to get them beer, the German kids would get us beer and we give them money and we have this beer. There was a guy, it's not so much my experience but I was part of this. I was lying in bed, and there was a knock on the door, and it was five men to the room and the captain goes, "You, Arbasetti, follow me" and I said, "Well, I got to get dressed." He said, "You don't need to get dressed." … I'm in my underwear, there were also a couple of guys in their underwear, and we go down to this far room and I know it was the sergeant's room, Sergeant Sheffield, and he knocks on the door and I realized we were going to be witnesses so he knocks on the door and he goes, "Sergeant Sheffield, open up," and I hear all this kind of stuff moving in the background, like tables and chairs are moving. "Sergeant Sheffield, open up, it's an order." … So, he opens the door and, of course, there's nobody in there. Well, Sergeant Sheffield is in there, but everything is quiet and I'm going, "What the hell am I doing here?" Then you hear movement in the … wall locker, and the wall locker is where you put your uniform, and, of course, the captain opens it up and there was this woman in there. [laughter] So, we were witnesses to that which was not good for Sergeant Sheffield and the woman scampered out and Sergeant Sheffield, he was court-martialed and I got put on the detail to take him to the stockade in Frankfurt. They gave me a weapon, they gave me three rounds, and I don't think they told me, but it was implied that if he gets away I have to make sure he doesn't get away. So, I'm thinking, "Do I have to shoot him? Can I hit him with a rifle?" I mean this guy I kind of liked. … Do I shoot him in the back, do I shoot him in the leg, I never shot at a person before so, you know, and you're in the back of this three quarter ton truck, you know, sergeant and somebody else in the front and there I am in the back just me and I'm pondering what the hell I'm going to do. If this guy bolts what do I have to do because it was some thought that if he escapes I got to do his time, his time might have been five or six months, I don't know what it was and that was really, I mean the ride was like forty-five minutes, and the whole forty-five minutes I'm thinking about that. Maybe I'll hit him with the weapon or maybe I'll … just run after him and tackle him. … I can't run that fast with this weapon and he never escaped, never tried. So I was relieved but … you learn something also is they grabbed the MPs from the stockade. Grabbed him, shook him down, and it was kind of rough house, I don't like seeing that, … somebody is kind of rough with them, and then they took him to the stockade and I heard the metal gate close, and that sound--metal on metal that kind of echoes--it was very scary to me, it like echoed in my head and like I'm saying, "This is not a good place, this is not a good place." We got back there. So that was kind of a strange experience. One of my roommates ended up doing special duty at a Nike site, another one of my

roommates, all he did was sports and he ended up being a Major League [Baseball] umpire. Joe Brinkman was involved when George Bret. George Bret hit a homerun in Yankee Stadium and Billy Martin protested because there was pine tar above a certain point. It's only supposed to be like twelve inches and it was like sixteen inches so the umpire nullified the homerun and George Bret went crazy. It's a big incident that you see on some baseball flashbacks, that guy, I was in the Army with him. … He always played sports. … I'm trying to think, people were unusual, one of the nice things is that once a month, we had a barber shop that was illegal because it wasn't part of the table of equipment or jobs. … We hired a tailor, would tailor our uniforms, but with the barber shop and we had an illegal snack bar because you're not supposed to have a snack bar, … and they would sell hotdogs and soda, and the money from that once a month we would have sort of like a beer party Saturday after lunch so it was nice. I think the officers, they understood that the guys needed time to hang out, can't be a soldier all the time or else we'd go crazy.

NM: Were there ever any personal problems between the men in your unit?

RA: Not with me and anybody, I'm thinking back at that. There were guys who had behavior issues with the Army and discipline but basically we were just, it really wasn't much of a problem. … Back then, we were not as worldly as kids are now, we didn't understand things, we just knew that we had this obligation we had to go through. I was in Germany, thank God, I wasn't in combat, even though I was infantry I thought, "Okay, I understand what's going on now," a couple more years I'll be back home and then I can live my life.

NM: While you were in Germany, did you or any of the men in your unit follow what was going on in Vietnam?

RA: No. I mean you could find it on *Stars and Stripes*, there was something. We didn't even know about the protests. We were just at that time everybody had, there was a draft going on, and you had to do that, nobody, most people I know who were in the service realized that their life, their true life was going to begin after their service obligation. So, a lot of us are talking '69, '70, we would see something. Music was a good part and we would get a lot of music from Great Britain, the English bands, and much more progressive than the pop stuff that was happening in the United States. So, that was pretty cool. … We weren't aware of what's going on, really naïve about the war, didn't know anything about it, didn't even know where Vietnam was. Had a vague idea but didn't know exactly where it was. We kind of thought about the Russians coming through, we would have to fight the Russians for whatever reason because our mission was to deal with the Russians in the Cold War.

NM: Can you talk about what brings you to your second unit?

RA: Well, evidently, from my understanding is that President Johnson decided that we would increase the troop strength in Vietnam and I was, where was I, I don't know if I was on a field exercise, … and then I got my orders that I was leaving in two weeks and the funny thing about this, you're in the Army and you train for all these things and I didn't think that I would ever need

it, but you always wonder whether you can deal with this stuff, whether you can be a soldier. … In our society guys are always looking for ways to prove themselves to be a man, whether it's the first car, whether it's their first girlfriend, first time they have sex, first job, whatever, we don't have any clear cut line that we can cross and say, "Here I am, an adult man." So there was always a curiosity, "Well, can I survive all this." We were getting a lot of guys coming to our unit who were from Vietnam, they had a couple of years to serve. And the problem that our unit had with these guys is after being at war they didn't like the discipline that they had in a unit that was a peacetime unit, shine your shoes, do this, do that, you can't go out so there was a lot of talk about that. I was just kind of, I was curious, and I think maybe part of me feels like well okay we're going to do this, this will be okay. Just a whole curiosity, and by that time I was hearing more and more about what Vietnam was like, but these are guys who served in the early part of Vietnam, so it was remote enough. It was sort of like listening to somebody tell me a story about something that happened in medieval times. I didn't think that I can relate to that but, they would talk about stuff and these guys had some pretty good insights about how to take a building, how to use a grenade launcher because they used it. In a strange way, it was exciting. … I was going to go to this place where everybody is looking at. I was frightened because I didn't know what to expect and I didn't want to get hurt or killed. … It's a whole combination of that.

NM: Just before we go on to Vietnam, you mentioned that there were those who had served in Vietnam who came into the unit. Did you get a chance to interact personally with these people?

RA: Yes, I met some of them, some of these guys are "lifers" and they had, and I mean lifer, they were career soldiers and they always felt comfortable being out in the field whether it was in Vietnam or in Germany, they didn't like the inside, the peacetime Army would be all spit and polish, they didn't like all that. These were guys who are real like tough pieces of leather. … The ones I know I felt great confidence in them, they were sort of like fathers, … they could teach you certain things and they never got panicky. … As a young kid I remember when I first got to my unit and they told us we were having an inspection and all those young guys were running around like chickens without heads, "What am I going to do, what am I going to do," and the sergeant who was an old World War II guy, he goes, "Wait a second, listen to me," and he did this very simply, he said, "You're going to do this, Arbasetti, you're going to do this," everybody has their job. "If you have any problem, see me," we were under control, and then I realized that he had control by telling us what we should do, not leaving it open-ended where you don't know what to do, he was like our father, the guidelines that we got from them, and it stabilized our craziness, so we did well under him. … The other sergeants came in, also had that kind of steadiness, they've been in some hot action, some tough places, so they're not going sweat this little peacetime concern, they know how to deal with it, they know what is needed but us guys, because we're kids we never had to deal with that. … The thing I also appreciate is that the Army was the first place I got any responsibility for doing anything, whether it's me and another guy doing some kind of detail, cleaning, or whatever. You get stateside, there is no opportunity to learn anything, to do anything, there was no jobs for me anywhere, I couldn't get a job. … Here I felt less like a kid more like a, I was a soldier, … I didn't have that much rank but I felt like at least I had something.

NM: While you were in Germany, were the enlisted men primarily volunteers or draftees?

RA: It's a combination. It's a whole combination and there were people. What was strange is that there was people in my unit which is an infantry unit, even though they had other jobs like mechanics, that I thought maybe the Army hid them there or somebody hid them there. There was a guy who was like 350 pounds, so I knew even if it wasn't infantry, how would he be able to operate under tough conditions, combat conditions, there were guys who were very weakly, but they were sergeants, they had time. They were supply sergeants and stuff like that, but the bulk of us were young. I would say like eighty-five percent were from eighteen to twenty-one. We were young, we do all the basic Army stuff.

NM: You get orders to go to Vietnam. Did anyone else in your unit get sent over?

RA: Yes a bunch of us did, but I don't remember who, to tell you the truth. After a while, you have friendships with guys, guys you were with in … Advanced Individual Training, AIT, that you were with them for almost two years so they didn't go, but I got selected. There were other guys from other units in the battalion that you know them like other guys from other schools, but yet you're not really that friendly with them. And, of course, you have to clear post which means that you have to make sure all your equipment returned, … you had to go get your financial paperwork and all that in order, … a couple of days and you had to run around and do that. So, it was a lot of anticipation, … something new is happening, what's it going to be like, and plus I was going home for about a week or so. I haven't been home for about a year and a half.

NM: What did you do when you returned to the United States?

RA: I went home. … My mom, at that time they moved to western Jersey, a town called Flatbrookville which is part of Walpack. It's by the Delaware Water Gap along the Delaware and once I got there, I realized that none of my friends were there, so I borrowed my mom's car and I would come down to Bogota and see my friends. It's funny, because they started to have long hair and I have short hair. … The thing is when you leave something, you come back you realized how much things have changed, it's like having a kid. If I don't see my grandson in six months, I realize, "Wow, he changed," he can put sentences together, he has feelings about things, as opposed to a couple of months ago. So, you realize the culturally you're still, you're lagging behind, … people started having long hair, the music has changed a little bit, lifestyles were changing. One of the sad things to me is that people who stayed home they had relationships, they had established jobs, they were established in their adult life. I was in the Army but it was kind of a strange time to be in the Army. You started to get the idea that being in the Army was not such a popular idea and that you weren't appreciated by the public. Nobody said anything to me at that time, but you just got a feeling that, it wasn't the first choice that most kids would do.

NM: What was your family's reaction to you going to Vietnam?

RA: Well, my mom was a little nervous. I think my stepfather who was in World War II, he was in the Army Air Corps, probably thought, "Well, it would make a man out of him, he'll learn something," and it's true, but I think he had problems when he was sent over in the Pacific. I think he had maybe just issues, … post-traumatic stress or something like that, but he never talked about it and I never asked. I have some relatives, my uncle was a paratrooper in, I had uncles who were in World War II but they would never talk about the problems. … They would never talk about their time, they didn't want to relive it and I had an uncle who I thought was going to ask me about my time but he just used that to open the door so he could talk about his time, but this was after I came back from Vietnam. … Nobody really seemed to want to understand what a nineteen or twenty year old [experienced]. I guess I was about twenty at that time.

NM: What unit were you assigned to?

RA: … I wasn't assigned to anything at first, it's like you go in, you have a week or two off, I don't remember. … I took a TWA to San Francisco, to Oakland Army Terminal, which I hated because I didn't know anybody and then they have a detail, I got picked for guard duty. I said, "What, we're in Oakland, California, what's going on here," but one thing being in infantry and you get guard duty all the time. There's a certain procedure where they ask you questions, they ask you sort of like they challenge the guard members to see how much they know, and I was in a lineup, I was like the fifth guy but I was the only infantry guy and the question was, "What are the three sizes of the flag?" Well, the cook didn't know, the mechanic didn't know, this guy didn't know, I knew--storm, post, and garrison because it was like a standard question they asked you on guard duty. So, I didn't have to go on guard, I got to stay inside next to the guy in charge of the place, and I basically sleep most of the night except when I had to go with him looking at post so I thought that was kind of strange, you know, here I am, California in Oakland and I have to have guard duty which I lucked out. There were a couple of days and they took us to Travis Air Force base. … When you're in Oakland you … do your will. What's this all about, a will? I mean I don't remember exactly what it was but you have to do a will, you got all your shots, … your shots for being in the Pacific and then they sent, you took a plane, it was Braniff Airlines and I remember we stopped in Hawaii and the Philippines, and there were all these wonderful good looking stewardesses. … Guys fall in love with any woman that's around there. … 300 guys in the plane were falling in love with two or three of them and they were very professional, they didn't flirt with anybody. … It was a very lonely trip … because you were going someplace that was dangerous and you look over the Pacific and you see the white caps, all you see is water, you don't see anything like ships and stuff like that. I don't know how long it was, maybe twenty hours, it was a long time. We had a couple of hours off in Hawaii, had a couple of drinks and, the Philippines, I think it was Clark Air Force Base. In Vietnam, and the funny thing, I had a window seat, and I'm overlooking and we saw the land, and every place I looked down there there were bomb craters, bomb craters all over the place. It was just kind of scary, it was kind of curious. You wonder who was bombing, what were they bombing at? My novice eyes couldn't figure out anything that was going on, … I didn't see any people, didn't see anything, just craters all over the place. We land at, I think Tan Son Nhut where we landed. … We get off the plane and it was like about 72 degrees inside, outside it was 118 degrees and it hit you, like wow, how

hot this is. … It like punches you in the stomach. Then I see the far end, there's a bunch of guys, and somebody said, "Gentlemen, your plane is here," and they started running and they were running to the plane because they were going home and they were making catcalls at us, but they were just so happy that their plane, they were going home. You keep on saying to yourselves, "What the hell is going on here? Why am I here? This is not a good idea." We got on these busses, the Army had a bus from the airport to the replacement center and I'm in the bus and I looked and they have these grates on the window. I say, "Sergeant, why is there grates on the windows? This is too big for mosquitoes." He said, "So grenades, so nobody throws a grenade inside the bus." I'm still trying to figure out what's that all mean? I mean this is really new to me that somebody would try to hurt me. … I'm puzzled because hey I'm from New Jersey, I'm from Bogota, nobody throws grenades, we don't have grenades, and here it was on the busses to protect you. There were guys, I noticed that everybody had a weapon, I didn't have a weapon because I didn't have a unit. That's another thing that makes things serious, everybody had weapons, everybody had a rifle or something to protect themself, so that was interesting. You go to the replacement center and then you got to wait until they call you.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RA: … I realized that we absorbed a lot of stuff without kind of computing it. You know, you have all these images and once you start thinking about it, it makes a little bit of sense and when I was at the relocation unit, I realized that there was a lot of stuff that's going on that I didn't always understand. … What I always hated … was that you have to wait, you have to wait to be part of something. … Anytime I'm in transit, when I'm not part of a bunch of guys that I become friends with, it's really scary to me, it's really uncomfortable, I kind of feel lonely in a way because I'm used to having a lot of people that I know to play around with so when I got to the unit, when I got to the replacement center, I … became friends with one or two guys that I knew and we would go to, of course there's always the enlisted man's club where you can get a beer or so, and I went to one club, service club and they had a game going on with naming these doo-wop groups. I came in like halfway through and I won and I won a photo album that I sent to my mom and I thought, "Wow, finally something that I know that pays off," because I didn't know that much but I know like the names of the singers and stuff like that but it was just waiting and waiting, you wonder if they forget about you, would it be good if they forgot about you, … and then one day you get a call, … I think they called your name out, he says, "You're going to the First Cavalry Division," and I go, "Oh, I heard of those guys, you should be okay, I guess," but I didn't know anything about it, I didn't know what was going on, very naïve and they put you on a plane and they send you to this town called An Khe which is in the northern part of the country and that was the First Cav's base camp and at the First Cav base camp, you get your weapon but you had to learn to zero it in. Zeroing in is that you got to have a three shot group that could be covered by a quarter, which was very difficult for me. [laughter] I can get two shots but I managed to somehow get that three shot [group] but you couldn't leave unless you were zeroed in, and also that has to do with breathing and pulling the trigger, right way, and you went through kind of a crude jungle school where you learned to, how it's like to walk in the jungle and they had booby traps that would go off and I said to myself, you know what, I think I'm a dead man because I could never find the booby trap, I could never see the trip wire because it was green

and … with all that vegetation, I could be a dead man here, the pungi stakes and things flying, if you were standing here you would have got impaled and stuff like that and then the other thing we learned because … the First Cav with an Airmobile unit, we had to learn to rappel from helicopters, which I didn't particularly like but that you had to climb up on forty foot platforms on these rope ladders with three guys on so it's going crazy as you're climbing up there and I get up there and they show you how to make a Swiss seat out of a rope, and they give you a little hook and I'm thinking, "I can't do this," I look down, it's pretty far, and I said, "I'm not going to jump," and the sergeant says, "You're going to jump or I'm going to punch you." I said, "I'm jumping." … I jumped, and it was fun. I wanted to go again, but I didn't. It's like anything else you think it's going to be difficult and you can do it and then you feel good about yourself, you get a little confidence. So, we were all by that time we know we're part of the division, but we didn't know what unit, so they took us. We ended up, we got orders, and then they take us to a First Cav Staging Area, it was LZ Evans named after a, I guess somebody who died, I think a Marine Corps guy died and the First Cav took over the place which is way up by the DMZ and the plane went to a place called Phu Bai. Phu Bai was hit the night before by sappers so … there was about five or six jets that were destroyed on the runway. … It was very scary to see all this mangled material and I'm thinking, "Wow." It still seems unreal, in some ways I think I'm looking at a movie that I happened to be in, but I think … I'm not part of that. … So we get on a helicopter, my first helicopter ride, it was exhilarating, the helicopters fly slow and low and skimming over the land. Somehow I ended up in Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry. I said, "7th Cavalry, that sounds familiar to me." … I realized it was Custer's old unit. [laughter] That was kind of scary, back in those days the old 7th Cavalry didn't have one battalion or two battalions they just had one regiment, they had different letters so I was in Bravo 27. First thing is you go to the line, and you meet your guys, and they must have looked at me and said, "Oh, God, this guy is going get us killed, he looks like he's never been out any place," and I looked at them, and I'm saying to myself, these guys look haggard, these guys look like they're barely alive, they're going get me killed. It's funny but they were seasoned, they've been out in the bush. The next day we were on patrol, but it was very scary the first couple of days there.

NM: You mentioned that you had rudimentary jungle training prior to going on patrol. Did you get any training about what was going on in Vietnam?

RA: Well, the funny thing, there might have been a lecture, I don't remember that. I remember you had to go through the jungle school. … They try to teach you how to look for land mines and booby traps. You had to learn how to rappel, that was part of the school and the last thing after you zeroed your weapon in, is that you and about four hundred guys go beyond the gate and you spend the night on this hill right outside of the base camp. Probably no enemy around for hundreds of miles but here we are all nervous, all shaky, somebody sneezes here and you open up, [machine gun noise] "Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire," but you don't know. You're starting to get edgy now, you're starting to really worry about this stuff but the school is like three days, … those three main things, you zero your weapon, the jungle walk, and the rappelling, and then you were good to go. They figured you got the basics. [laughter]

NM: I was trying to figure out if they explained why the US Army was in Vietnam.

RA: No, there was no political stuff like that, I don't remember. I mean there has to be something, you thought, the reason why you're there. You're fighting the communism which is kind of strange because Cuba was ninety miles away and they were communists. Here we are like 4000 miles away, and this was more of a threat to us than guys in Cuba. You knew it was the communism stuff. … At that time, I didn't understand the political factors. All I know is 1968 and I'm there, why or how, I don't really know. There was no politics, you got the idea it was not popular but you felt, I never felt like I was with a bunch of guys who were not talking about politics or against the war. They were talking about girls, what they were going to do when they get back--that was their main focus--and cars maybe.

NM: In this three-day school, is it a combination of draftees and seasoned soldiers?

RA: Yes, everybody. By that time, we were all just troops, people who have never been to the First Cav have to go, everybody who was assigned to the Cav had to go to this thing, especially when it comes to rappelling from a helicopter, because we're an Airmobile unit. There were times when you have to get in someplace and that's the only way to get in there because the jungle is very thick. … I think there was a technique where you put some kind of net on top of the jungle and the guys could jump off onto the net and climb themselves down but that's a lot of energy with all that equipment that you have on you.

NM: Can you talk about the differences in the gear in Germany versus Vietnam?

RA: Yes, in Germany, you had cold weather indoctrination. … You're worried about the snow and the ice, you worried about frostbite, you worried about all that stuff. When you had C rations, you got to heat them it up because there were big things of grease on the C rations. In Vietnam, you had, we were a light infantry unit which means … most of our stuff was basically a weapon, water, some food, ammo, a few things like that, we carried with us. … Most of our overnight gear, we didn't have sleeping bags we had poncho, poncho liners, was dropped in a lot of the time, so we didn't carry a lot of that stuff. We basically, we were a light unit, we had a lot of stuff, but compared to like what you see now with all the equipment, we didn't have entrenching tools, we didn't have gas masks. We didn't even have a bayonet. I don't think I've ever seen an M16 with a bayonet. We had water pouches. Water was a big concern that you don't want to use too much water so I carried maybe about a couple of canteens in a water pouch, so maybe a gallon and a half worth of water but I had good water discipline so I was very rarely low on water but sometimes you just can't get it though. … The funny thing is that we had jungle fatigues which had big field pants, which had big pockets so you put socks there or a towel you would have, because it is very sweaty. … The gear was pretty good. … In my unit, everybody had to carry machinegun rounds, so I would have maybe two or three hundred rounds around me, plus all the magazines. I kept a lot of ammo on because I was very frightened that I would run out of ammo and then I would have to go hand-to-hand which I didn't want to do or run which I don't know where to run. … You think of these things, all these things are flying in your head, … and as long as the machineguns have ammo, you figure each guy in the squad had

maybe … a couple of thousands of rounds among us or in the platoon we had a couple of thousand rounds, you don't want those machineguns to go hungry.

NM: You said that as soon as you got to your unit, they next day you were out on patrol?

RA: … I realized later that … every once in a while the unit comes back to the base camp, relaxes for a couple of days, take a shower, and then the holes are filled up with people they need. … We went out right away and when you're a new guy in a unit, they worry about the fact that you may get yourself killed or you may get somebody else killed so they put you kind of in the back and they kind of watch you, and you're assigned to one guy, and he watches over you, and it was just funny because I thought, well I felt like I have to win these guys over. I didn't know what to do, so I just listened to people. Eventually you feel like you're part of them, but a new guy, you haven't gone through all the experience, they haven't gone through the losses that these guys had, you're just a new guy who doesn't know anything because what you learn in the Army, it's different in different situations. A friend of mine, a guy I knew from Vietnam, he says, "You know, you realize Bob, everything is on the job training, because everything changes, once you get there, there's different ways of doing things," so again it was on the job training. … Sort of like you get the basics in Germany but it has to be changed to whatever the circumstances, the environment, and an infantry unit has no comforts, we're out there, we sleep all the time out in the jungle, we're dirty, we don't take a shower, we smell, for some reason we shave every day. [laughter] I have no photos of me with a beard. … I'm clean shaven every day but you're in your own filth, you're sweaty, you got leeches on you, you're out there, and the funny thing is that years ago, I look back and said, "How the hell did I do that? How can a guy live that way?" Then you realize we all had to do that. You just can't say, "Hey, I give up, I'm going back home." There's no place to go. So you're there with the thirty guys in your platoon and you live with them. So you're out there in the rain, you get no sleep. … It's pretty rough and then I didn't realize how rough it was until … I meet my guys they say, "Hey, remember this, remember that," and I go, "Yes."

NM: You mentioned when you go in this initial patrol, you are put in the back and assigned to a person.

RA: A person that's kind of looking out for me.

NM: Did this person try to acclimate you to the unit?

RA: I think initially they give you somebody that can kind of watch over you, somebody who is, who doesn't mind watching over you, we're pretty naïve. … It takes a while to get this going. I'm out there, and somebody pops up, fires a couple of rounds, I'm staring at him, and the guy goes, "What the hell are you doing," and grabs me and pulls me down. Well, I don't have reflexes, I'm just curious what's going on, this is what I got from here, and it took me like two weeks before when I hear a sound, I can hit the ground. Before that I'm just looking. There's facts that people, a lot of people get killed the first couple of weeks because they don't have those reflexes, they don't have that sense of sound, hit the ground, and then look around. So, I

remember, the first person that ever fired at me was a woman. So, I don't know what that means, if it means anything, but I remember staring at the person like I couldn't believe somebody, again, being that naïve, who would want to shoot me, what the hell am I doing, because I'm in an infantry unit that's out to get you.

NM: The person firing the rounds was actually shooting at you?

RA: Yes, I assumed it was. … I was one of the last guys, and she popped up and, "Pow, pow, pow," and luckily she wasn't either a good shot or the weapon wasn't that accurate, and this guy grabbed me. … "What the hell are you doing? What are you doing?" … I couldn't explain what was going on, it was like my mind wasn't processing this quick enough.

NM: This incident happened within the first couple of weeks you were there?

RA: First couple of days. … In an infantry unit your job at that time was to search and destroy, so they would put you in a place where they think there's going to be enemy soldiers, or Vietcong, or whatever. So your job is out there trying to figure this all out.

NM: Let us continue talking about the first couple of weeks you were on patrol. What are some of the things that stand out?

RA: Well, the fact that we were out there all the time, you would sit out there at night. Every night there was an ambush, there was nighttime ambush, and you got into position for that and you would just, wait for your time at guard duty, most of the time nobody comes by, but there are times somebody comes by. … The day in the life is sort of like you're out there and you feel the sweat rolling down, you feel the bugs on you, and you have to be quiet, you have to be show noise discipline. … Then, you have your hour on guard duty and you wake up the next guy, that I remember. In the morning we had this thing called "mad minute." The mad minute is everybody fires their weapon, makes sure everything works. … The odd thing is that every once in a while somebody fires back at us, the enemy was close by, we didn't know it, we were just doing what we called the mad minute. … Because we were an Airmobile unit, we would get helicopters, which means that we would get hot food in the morning … and most of the time hot food at night. We would get C rations during the day and every once in a while we would get two beers and two sodas, they were hot, but if you found a stream and leave it in there, or maybe one beer and one soda, I don't remember, leave the beer there overnight in the morning, … the beer was reasonably cold. So could have that with your eggs. After a while, you start getting accepted and then you know the fact that you're not the new guy anymore, every once in a while somebody new comes so you kind of feel more part of the established family, and since you're there, you kind of proved yourself by being there, not running away.

NM: The men in your unit, did you get to know them personally?

RA: Yes, in a strange way because there's nothing at night or during the day when you stop there's nothing to do but talk, and you talk about what you're going to do in the future, you talk

about your girlfriends, your sweetheart, your wife, you talk about your kids if you have them, you talk about your parents, you talk about your job. … The funny thing is that you don't remember people's last names and very rarely do you remember their first names but you remember their nicknames, like one of the machinegunners was an American Indian and he was called "Chief." I don't know exactly what his name was, I mean I probably could find out but he was Chief, "Give Chief this." The platoon sergeant was Hawaiian so we called him "Pineapple." … Some guys from New Jersey, "Hey, Jersey," or, "Hey, California," or, "Hey, Surfer." So everybody had kind of like a nickname that you refer to them. I mean some of them … I remember because they were kind of odd people. You know in a unit, you're with these guys all the time, so you see some of the guys who are, … it was an interesting bunch of guys, there was a guy who would kind of crawl away when they needed help, and I remember looking him in the eyes, and he had fear, that I felt bad for them. I think they would have punched them or grabbed a weapon and crawled up there for him, and I just looked at how sad he looked, how frightened he looked. ... You meet people. Some people have the same names of people you know so you kind of think of them. I was with this Asian guy, his father was a professional wrestler back in those days, and he would tell me how they're fixed and his father made good money and this is a guy that I would have never been exposed to, he was from California and I don't remember his name but it was interesting. I met my first American Indian, there was a gay guy in the unit, I mean, nobody came out, but you kind of wondered, you kind of knew, the guy was a great shot, he was an Indian too, he was American Indian and you know back in those days, you didn't say. I would gladly have him next to me because he was a great shot, he was a good soldier, but he was pretty effeminate but nobody gave him a hard time because he was, I think if you're able to do the job day in and day out, then you were accepted, and that is whether you're black, white, Asian, gay, straight, whatever, you were pretty much accepted because in the worst days of my life, those guys were with me, and I was with them on their worst days. I mean that says a lot. Here, in regular work, "I'm not supposed to do that, Joey is supposed to do that," everybody passes the buck in real life, but there, there is no place to pass the buck, so you have to stand with each other, and I think that's the major thing that I got out from being a combat veteran is that you're all together, you're either going to die, … you don't want to think about dying but there are times when you do think about it.

NM: You mentioned that when you got to Vietnam it was kind of surreal and that you were naïve. At what point did reality set in?

RA: When I saw people get killed and wounded, then suddenly it became a different deal. When I started getting my reflexes to hit the ground, it started taking serious, there's a point where we all want to know whether we can kill somebody. It was very scary, but mine was not as dramatic as that. I knew somebody was in the hole, and I threw a grenade in there, that point told me that I was a different person. I wasn't a naïve person I was ready to be a soldier and a lot of this you do because you got to protect your buddies, we're not running with an American flag and talking about apple pie, we're talking about these guys who become very important to you, and you do whatever. I remember somebody said to me, he said, "Well, ... didn't you guys kill kids or stuff like that," and I said, "No." I realized that at first you didn't know how to answer that, but I realized, … you do anything to save your buddies, and it might seem very extreme, but

you would do anything to save these guys and they would do anything to save you. So with that kind of philosophy, and the fact that it was pretty physical out there, … you all had to kind of get, work together, you know, and I remember they said to me, I was making some food, they said, "Don't you have any seasoning," and the guy gave me a little garlic salt and some hot sauce, and how it changes the taste, and so I wrote home, but there were guys to teach you along the way. You didn't remain as the new guy after a while, you got to be a little bit more seasoned, you got to have opinions, you got to understand why things are done a certain way. We had different formations in Germany but in Vietnam because the tactics and terrain were different, we had our own formations, we had columns of three that can kind of easily move out, and get on line, but it also protected our flanks. So it was just completely different and after a while it made sense.

NM: How often did you perform search and destroy missions?

RA: 95% of the time. That was our job, infantry guy you're out there looking for the enemy. Occasionally, … I got on a detail where you in the morning, my platoon had to protect the engineers. The engineers would clear the road with a mine sweeper or one of those metal detectors and we had to be on the side so they wouldn't get ambushed but what was frightening about that is that we were in the tall elephant grass and you can't see, it's up to your eyes, you can't see far. … You're hoping that you don't step on some guy with a bazooka, but we would walk, one group on one side, one group on the other side, going through the jungle. So, you're always in the jungle, you're in the high grass. The people walk down the road, and they know where to step, but the trucks couldn't, you know, they would get blown up, so the engineers with a couple of trucks behind them, supply trucks would try to clear the road and our job was to give them some protection. So, that was one of the more unique stuff but most of the time we were out in the jungle, most of the time we were on the offense, most of the time. I would say we spent four to five weeks out in the jungle, two or three days back where we get to change our clothes, take a good shower, have a couple of beers, and then go back, do it all over again, and you never know where you're going.

NM: You said you were in the field for four or five weeks at a time on these search and destroy missions. How often would you make contact with the enemy?

RA: Maybe once a week and it would be fleeting, maybe like five or ten minutes. A day in a life with an infantry unit there is in the morning we would get in a helicopter and fly to a different place, and then depending on whether it was a hot LZ--which means incoming fire--we had to fight there or if not, then we go on patrol and the lieutenant would have a specific area that we would want to cover, and that was basically every day, and then we'd go out and patrol and lunch break and then patrol and then dinner break and then go out a little bit to find our night time ambush, get in position at dark, then we stay there all night. Well, somebody has to be up in case … there's somebody to ambush, and start it all over again. That's one of the reasons why I got an Air Medal. … I was on a lot of the flights. It's just participating in a helicopter flight, some of it was under hostile circumstances, but generally … it's just like taking a car from one place to another except with thirty of your best buddies with weapons. [laughter]

NM: Because you are in the field so much, were booby traps a serious threat?

RA: At times they were. What's amazing to me, there were guys who wanted to walk point. … Point is where you look for, you're like the lead of the unit, and there were guys who have the skill of picking up the trip wire, maybe about three or four times. I don't ever remember a land mine exploding in my unit. One of the things that the Army had, there's a lot of guys that we hear stuff on the radio, somebody stepped on something and they have to be evacuated, they lost a leg, and I don't know how much of that is true, but it keeps you on your toes because you're saying, "Okay, I've got to watch, this happened to that guy someplace else, it might happen to me." The day I got wounded, the point man was wounded too, so.

NM: Can you talk about some of the times that you came into contact with the enemy?

RA: Yes, there's one time I don't know where it was. We landed some place and we had what they call a "Kit Carson," he is a Vietnamese soldier, supposed to be like our scout, interpreter, and we captured some Vietnamese, we assumed it was Vietcong. … You just don't really know. … So they had him, this guy was giving them a hard time. The Vietnamese language is very rough, it sounds like you're really angry at him, and he kept on slapping him and poking him, and me and a lot of guys said, "Let's shoot this guy," not the prisoner but the Kit Carson guy because we didn't like that, I mean we were basically "okay" guys. … "Maybe we should shoot this guy, we don't like this stuff." … The guy next to me, and we were in a rice paddy and we were at the end of the rice paddy, in the middle of the paddy was the Kit Carson and the prisoner of war and the Kit Carson had a weapon and pointed at the guy's head. … It just made us feel very uncomfortable, we didn't like that. We weren't those kind of guys. The guy next to me sees in the distance, there's a big ant hill, he sees a head popping up, … so he passed the word down to the lieutenant, he said in that ant hill over there, there's a head coming up there, so he tells the Kit Carson to tell the guy to have the people come out there and at that time we had every weapon [pointing]. M16 is an automatic weapon and guys fire it most of the time on automatic. Well as you get longer in the unit, you keep it on single shot or you keep it on automatic, but you could fire a single shot because you know how much pressure you can put on the finger. … Every weapon, so there's thirty weapons faced at this and the guy is yelling. … My hands were sweating, I was nervous, I didn't know what to expect. I didn't want to see a guy go down in a hail of bullets, but yet I didn't want any of my guys threatened and finally the guy is yelling, "Come out, come out," and out came out, it was three young girls, six, eight, and ten, something like that, and all of us are like, "Oh, man." … This is different reality there, these are innocent people and they were crying. … I have a son and grandson and when they were young and they would cry, you cared about that, you try to comfort them, and even though I wasn't a parent, here you still felt something like this is like terrible, this is like showing you how bad this thing is, and they were taken away by the helicopter. I don't know where they went to, hopefully they're living a good life, and it's just one bad experience. But I remember that and we were about to open up real bad. One guy opening up would have been deadly to them, which also reminds me, we had some pretty good discipline, self-discipline. You hear about these atrocities, whatever the captain or lieutenant and us, we wasn't at that point yet were we get crazy. There were units

they get crazy. On the way to Khe Sanh we were the unit to be relieve the siege, and basically … the First Cav was ordered to relieve the siege of Khe Sanh with the Marines--the Marines didn't like it--but we get there, we went to LZ Stud, … my unit was dropped off at a place called LZ Mike and it was just three miles outside of the combat base at Khe Sanh. We had to go up Highway 9 and as we're going up the highway, all hell broke loose, and there were enemy up in the trees shooting down at us. … I have never seen such a chaos [in a] place. They talk about the fog of war, I understand it because when this is going on, you don't know what's going on. … All I know is what's in front of me and what's happening here, what's happening there, then you see a couple of guys get wounded. This one guy next to me, a tree fell on him and broke his shoulder. Everybody thinks that you can get hurt by bullets only, and this guy he was under there, there were enough rounds to hit the tree and it came down on him. I hear a lot of screaming, I just don't know what's happening. There's a certain point when we're pulling out and I'm with this guy and we're counting, and we had about thirty-five people in a platoon, and I'm counting sixteen, that's all I can count, and we had about sixteen or seventeen. We lost the point man there, we lost a couple of other guys, we lost our platoon leader. The platoon leader probably got the other people killed because he, we were pinned down, and if you're new, and somebody says, "Come on, we're going to move up," you're just setting yourself up to be killed and they were killed instantly. The platoon leader was a new guy and he was going from tree to tree like John Wayne. Of course, he gets shot, you're right out there in the open. So we were so decimated that the captain came to us, and said, "Okay, who has the most seniority, we're going make you platoon leader." … Another guy had more seniority than me, he was an E4 so he was the platoon leader, and then he thought better of us and they assigned us to another platoon, the whole platoon we got attached to another, and we lost a lot of guys that day. It was unbelievable, and some of them I knew pretty well. There was a guy and he was a very annoying guy, hate to say it. He would sing, you're reading a letter or something, or you're doing something, and he would come to your and in your ear and sing, "I wish I was an Oscar Mayer Weiner." … "Get out of here, come on," and he would just do this all the time that you lost the joke after the second time and it would happen daily. His name is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't remember. He was from … North Carolina and he gets killed that day and I'm kind of confused. Like, I don't want him to sing that but I don't want anybody to die. That's not a reason to die. … You didn't really have a chance to say goodbye to these guys, you didn't have the chance to say anything. Years later when my son was about three years old, he's watching TV and he's singing along with the TV, "I wish I was an Oscar Meyer Weiner," and I'm going, "Damn, this guy is haunting me." … I interpret it, again, as he's saying, "Don't forget about me." That's how I'm leaving it in my head, "Don't forget about me, don't forget about us." It's easier to live that way, thinking about it, but there were guys that I would speak to in the morning and at night they were dead, and I knew they were dead before their family who were probably having dinner and planning his homecoming. So I had a lot of that I thought about. … In Khe Sanh, … I saw a chaplain, we had services for the guys who died, quite a few guys died from the whole company, in my platoon I think we lost five dead. Five out of thirty is a lot, and the rest of them were wounded. … We had the services and he looked very grim and afterwards we're all walking away, he goes, "Son, where are you from?" I go, "I'm from New Jersey." He goes, "You know if God was giving the Earth an anemia, he would stick it in New Jersey." I thought it was kind of funny. [laughter] I didn't take it as an insult, I thought he probably thought that he would kind of

liven us up. We had our own, … that one day going to Khe Sanh, that was a whole day affair and I found out later on it was a delaying action, it was delaying us to get up there, they put about … five or six people in certain places we can't move, while of the rest of their unit leaves.

NM: After this battle, your unit was attached to another platoon?

RA: My platoon was attached to another platoon in the unit. … The next day, we kind of walked into Khe Sanh and we relieved the siege was over and then we started getting replacements at Khe Sanh, so we got back … my platoon leader who was wounded before Khe Sanh, came back. … It was good to see him. … He was a pretty good guy and other people started filling in, but we were depleted, and I tell you that night before, that night of that battle, I thought I was going to die. I had visions of seeing, the visions in my head of my mother getting the telegram, saying that I was killed and that was scarier than getting killed, because I didn't want to hurt her and the next day they were all gone. It's like we lost all these guys and all of a sudden nobody is getting any resistance and we were able to walk in, but it was a delaying action so they get most of the guys out.

NM: During this action you yourself are pinned down?

RA: Pinned down for about six hours, dust is flying around me, I couldn't move, I didn't know who was in front of me, I knew there were some guys in front of me, all I heard was, I mean, it's chaos and noise, complete, where you can't make out anything. I mean there's nothing equivalent to it. I imagine that shooting in Texas where the guy's coming out with the machinegun, it's chaotic like that, but at least you know where somebody is. Here, it's completely chaotic, so it was very scary, very frightening. … I've been in a couple of situations like that but this was the longest.

NM: Can you talk about your experience with your unit when it is back to full strength after Khe Sanh?

RA: It was brought back to strength, we went back to LZ Evans which is our home base and I guess we got new uniforms there. We were at Khe Sanh itself for about three or four days. We took over the perimeter so the Marines could go out and fight and then we went back to LZ Evans and then the next place we went to was the A Shau Valley and the A Shau Valley is this valley along Western Vietnam where the Ho Chi Minh trail runs through--one of the branches in Ho Chi Minh Trail--where they had a lot of equipment and weapons come in. So, our job was to go back to the Valley and clean it up but a funny thing happened on the way there, is that the weather got bad and we got stuck. Half of my platoon got stuck on top of this hill, and there was nobody there, and we were just able to hover in bomb craters while the Vietnamese were shooting mortars at us at night, but we couldn't return fire because we'd give up our positions away. So we were up there waiting for the weather to get better so that the rest of the guys could come in. It was foggy, the helicopter went down. We sent some guys to retrieve the guys from the helicopter. It was really kind of scary. … I never felt like it was the end of the line, I just felt like we're waiting for these guys, it will be okay. So, we would get some fire from the mortars at

night, some sniper fire, and then the next day, well when everybody came back there, then we started going down the hill. It's a valley with two plateaus, and to get down to the valley you have to climb down and climbing down is just as bad as climbing up because gravity, you can't be as surefooted and the guy in front of me, I hear him yelling, what he thought was a vine was a snake. [laughter] So, he yelled, we all yelled, … it's funny because in many ways we're kids, we're eighteen, nineteen, I think … I was twenty-one, so I was the older guy, but they were all kids. We got down there and there was some sniper fire, there wasn't really any serious engagement down there, … but other units had different experiences.

NM: After you get to the valley, what do you do?

RA: We do search and destroy, some units find lots of equipment, we found supplies of penicillin and some medical supplies. Others find weapons, anti-aircraft things, so we kind of cleared that out, so that was our mission was to clear out and see … any stragglers there. I do remember I saw something strange, we were on patrol, we heard voices, sounded Vietnamese, so we got very quiet, we were waiting. There's a lot of tension when you're waiting, but we never saw them, we never know where the voices came from. So, in a way you're happy but in a way you don't, you think they're somewhere along the line. We were working with a dog and a dog handler and dog failed to find a trip wire, and the guy started to punch the dog. … It's funny, you're a soldier with all this hardware, all these weapons, but I didn't like to see like the dog get punched, he wasn't doing his job and I understand what the guy was doing, but seeing that other guy beat the prisoner, a lot of us didn't like that. We weren't at that point where that was acceptable, but basically we just patrolled, and then we went back. I don't know how long we were out until we went back and got clean clothes again.

NM: In these areas that you are operating in, it sounds like it is primarily in the jungle and that there are no civilians anywhere.

RA: Right, it's in the jungle. It's supposed to be considered a free fire zone. The thing is that since I didn't see any civilians, I would assume that anybody there was the enemy. Yes, it was deep jungle and the funny thing about the jungle, when you're in it, the stuff is always rotting, it has this kind of odd smell to it, and you get filtered sunlight at sometimes, but it's very dark, it's very damp, it's very smelly. There are a lot of insects and they're happy to see you. [laughter]

NM: What do you do to unwind when you return back to the base camp after your time in the field?

RA: Well, you go back, first of all, you get a nice shower, I mean that's one of the great things, is the shower, and you get some new clothes because your stuff gets thrown away, you have some beers, you catch up on some of your mail, you write some letters, you go to the PX and maybe replace your razor, the simple, just the simple everyday stuff. Maybe you'll hear a radio about some music, or caught some news. We were out in the field when we heard about Martin Luther King, it was very scary because I thought a lot of the black guys, that they would say, we're not fighting, look at what you did to one of our guys. … Some of them were crying, …

they were there, they were still with us, but occasionally you get some news. We started to hear stuff about these "love-ins" because we all liked the idea, "Oh, free love that sounds great. … I'm going there, you know, when I get back out." … You just winded down, music. … Some people found a place where you could get some pot, so there was some pot smoking but nothing was done on patrol, everybody had their senses, and plus if somebody had a joint, you could smell that, it has a unique smell, and right away, if you had it, either people would say, "Hey, give me some" or they would be pointing the weapons at them because it's so unique, the smell is so unique, and that's it. There was no social club, we didn't get to see Bob Hope or any of those shows because they would never come where we were. Most of those guys were from the hospital, in the hospital, or they were at the local base, but we were out there in the jungle, we were the everyday infantry guys.

NM: Where do you go after you are on the base?

RA: Go back out in the field. … I couldn't tell you where we were anytime we were out in the field. We get picked up and we get dropped in the area and each platoon had an area, they were assigned to patrol and that was our job, and sometimes we would work alongside the South Vietnamese Army. … We tried to be quiet in the jungle. My idea, if I don't know where they are and they don't know where I am, we're good. These guys would bring their families along, they'd bring dogs, their kids, they would bring their pots and pans, they would throw hand grenades in the water for fishing, so the fish would come up, they were just so much noise, I thought well maybe now the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese Army or the Vietcong would hear us and they would run away, but they were pretty wild on patrol. Most of the time, it was quiet, it was just everyday out there, every day, in the jungle.

NM: Can you tell me a little bit more about working alongside the South Vietnamese Army?

RA: Well, that's the only time I ever did. They were on one side of the river, we were on the other side, and we really didn't, outside of that, and the Kit Carson guy, we really didn't work with them at all, and a lot of us are kind of suspicious of these guys. We hear the story that … one day they're with us and at night they're against us, whether it was true or not, you don't know, but you always starting worrying about things that you hear. Rumors went through the unit quickly and sometimes you know what the purpose is. There was a story that one platoon did not clear the spider hole, and as they went by and they spent the night, a guy came out and killed somebody, killed three or four guys. Well, once you hear that, all of a sudden, everything you see, you throw a grenade in. The same hole got twelve grenades as we passed through because everybody is aware of that, and it makes you much more aware of that stuff.

NM: In this one incident where you were working alongside South Vietnamese and their families are with them, how many additional people would the South Vietnamese Army bring along?

RA: Maybe fifty, maybe forty, but they would have their wives, they would have some animals with them, they would have, the funny thing is that I remember, I guess the animals had their

pots and pans, you hear the pots and pans clinking and whatever they had, and they would talk out loud while we were like, "Hey, look over there," and the hand signals. [Editor's Note: Mr. Arbasetti is whispering.] They talk like a couple of guys on the street, "Hey, that, see that Yankee game, I thought that was a terrible play." It was like, we tried to be so disciplined, and they were just living their lives, and we only did that one day with them really.

NM: After working with that unit for one day, what stands out after that? What did you do after that?

RA: We go back on patrol, and … maybe sniper fire here or there, or they might find something here or there. … The funny thing is that I read a film review about some places, "Well, it's not too much action, all they do is talk." I go, "Yes, that's what happens, you talk a lot, what are you going to do, we have no music, we have no films." So, when you're digging a defensive position, you talk, you talk about yourself, you talk about where you're coming from. It was like, most of the time it was mundane, but suddenly something happens and, you know, in the middle of something, you got to account for yourself, where's everybody, you know. So, I guess in the course of things, it wasn't that much contact. They avoided us and we couldn't find a lot of that stuff.

NM: You mentioned that at some point you were injured?

RA: Yes, I was wounded, it was a day of contact, it started as a pretty good day. We were on patrol. Now, I don't understand exactly what happened in what order, but our point guy got pinned down, probably got wounded. We were approaching a little village. I don't know, that's the only time I remember a village, there was a lot of fire coming out of the village, people firing at us and he was pinned down someplace, probably wounded, and we tried to move up to lay down a base of fire so he can come back, but somehow in all this, the guy next to me has the kid of one of the people in the village, holding him down because the kid would get killed trying to run back to the village, so for some reason he's there, I don't know how this all happened, and as we're moving up, I don't know if it was a rifle grenade or what, went off, and it knocked me down and I went to get, I'm knocked down, and I quickly went to get my weapon which fell from out of my hand, but my arm wouldn't move and I looked down and I see blood squirting out, and I realized that I had been hit, so once you're hit you called "Lizard," that was the name, that was the code name for our medic, Lizard, and he responded but I eventually met up with a lot of my guys that I served with and the guy who was to the left and the guy who was to the right, they're still alive, I see them every once in a while, I talked to one guy on the phone on a regular basis, he sees how I'm doing, I'm seeing how he's doing. So that was a strange thing because I don't know where the grenade went off or what it was. …

NM: You mentioned that there was a village in front of you and you were taking fire.

RA: Well, a couple of huts anyway. I tend to think of a village but maybe just one or two hootches.

NM: Your mission was to go through that area?

RA: Right.

NM: Tell me about the experience, if you can, of being wounded and where you go. You mentioned at some point you end up in the hospital.

RA: What happened, I called Lizard, … Doc (Nogle?), his name was Richard (Nogle?) and he responds. The funny thing with Doc, he reminds me of the doctor on TV, on *Gunsmoke*, he looked very old for his age, I don't know maybe he was twenty-five but he looked like he had been there for years, and he had a lot of mileage on his face, and he responded and very quickly, he realized that, … I realized after he told me that I was hit in the artery that's why I'm losing a lot of blood, so he pinched off the artery, applied direct pressure, the helicopter came in, and there was a medic on the helicopter, and they were starting to give me plasma and blood, and I had what they called cut downs, … the little slits in the skin where they don't have time to look for the artery, they kind of know where it is or the vein they kind of put the blood in there. … On each of my limbs, on all three remaining limbs, I had blood and plasma stuff going in there. He asked me, he says, "You want some morphine?" I go, "Yes." … The funny thing is I didn't feel any pain. Probably, I was in shock but I figured that eventually I would. He gave me attention and the helicopters came in, and he told me, I met him for the first time in almost forty years, about two years ago. … He said that, "Because the helicopter and all the noise and all the people on the helicopter," he couldn't get the medic's attention so he decided to, whether this is true or not I don't know, he opened my artery and shot a little blood in the medic's face, got his attention. I said, "Well, gee thanks a lot Doc." … I got on board the helicopter and they had it wrapped up and I had all this blood coming in, but I don't think it's serious. I think I could be back there the next week the most. This is the naïve stuff that's been in my life. I don't think things get that serious and I get to the field hospital and I don't know exactly where it is, and I'm lying there. … When they put you, when you get wounded they fill up a tag, exactly what they know about you, where the wound was. … The doctor came in, it looked like he was up for about, he looked really beat, and he looked at me and he looked at the tag and I go, "Well, Doc I'm going to be okay, right?" He goes, "I don't know." That "I don't know" kind of hollow, it rang through my head, it echoed, and I said, "Oh, God put me under, I can't take this," because it was really freaking me out. I woke up, and I don't know how long this whole thing took, I don't know how long any of the stuff took, but I woke up and it was bright, it might have been a day later or something like that, and the light, coming from the windows, you see the light here, but it was overly light, it was like they had bright lights, it was clear and it's crisp and I remember hearing people talking, kind of giggling, then I remember people like squeezing my fingers and they giggled, it was a man and a woman, maybe they're flirting, I don't know or maybe they're just happy to see that my fingers have pink in them, it means I'm getting blood flow. Whatever it was, it was very strange because I'm coming out of this kind of, this strange drug, I guess anesthetic, whatever it was, and I'm in some field hospital, and I'm trying to figure out what the hell is going on, and then a young lieutenant comes up to me, and salutes me, and says, "On behalf of the President of the United States, I award you the Purple Heart." … He pins it on my pillow, salutes me, and he's gone, probably gone to another bed, and it doesn't make sense to me,

it's like being in a strange dream. What is going on here, and then I realize I was wounded but my fingers are moving so I didn't have to worry about that, because … part of me thought maybe I would lose my arm. The nurse is putting needles in my fingers, they're just trying to make sure the blood was flowing and that was a strange kind of, it was almost like an out of body experience. There I am lying in bed and there's a Purple Heart pinned to my pillow and I'm just trying to figure out what the hell is going on, what's going on with me.

NM: How long were you in the hospital for?

RA: Well, this is the sad part. I was wounded on May 21st, and I wasn't very good at writing letters home, maybe every couple of weeks, so who knows when I wrote my last letter home, and I think I was in Vietnam for about a week in the hospital and they sent me to Camp Zama in Japan. … See, they leave your arm open. They sewed the artery together, but the arm is open to prevent infection, and they would bathe it every day with this brown solution antiseptic, so I had to go to Japan where they closed it. So, I was in Japan for a couple of weeks and they closed it, and I got into Walter Reed, this is August … 6th, I think it was, but the scary part is that I didn't write my parents. I thought the Army notified them that I was wounded. So June, July, part of August and half of May, they didn't hear from me. … I found out later my mom was really going crazy, like any parent would. … I thought the Army took care of it so I wasn't really worried about that, the Army was taking care of me. … We were just doing what we could there, I was still kind of in a daze while all this is happening. The big moment when I got to Japan, because I lost a lot of blood, I was weak, and I was suddenly kind of little strong enough that I had my first shower and the guys wrapped some kind of plastic over my shoulder and they carried me in the shower and there was a chair and I sat in a chair and … showered all over me. It was like one of the great feelings, it was like I was getting clean and … I just felt great. … I was going to put new clothes on, new hospital gowns. I mean that was one of the great experiences, taking that first shower.

NM: Previously, you described your experience in the hospital by saying that no one there was "pro-war."

RA: No, the hospital is a whole different place. … People don't see what happens in a hospital. First of all there's a lot of young guys, guys my age, in pain. A lot of young guys who are missing limbs, or pretty well-damaged. When I got to Camp Zama I made friends with a couple of guys, I end up being with them in Walter Reed. … One stepped on a "Bouncing Betty" which is a land mine, and had nerves in his legs severed, so he had to walk with something on his foot--a brace. Guys, you know, who were missing an eye, guys with scars all over the place. So, it's really a different thing. … Guys are really hurt, guys who are young and just married or now the wife has to face this with these guys, you know. … It takes a lot to deal with somebody who has been wounded and disabled. We didn't even think about the mental issues, it wasn't even thought about. … I remember staying up at nights, guys moaning because they couldn't sleep. You wanted to say, "Hey, shut the hell up," but you know what the guy was going through. Eventually, I got to Walter Reed, and still guys were hurting. There were guys who didn't understand why they couldn't go home. I remember one guy they tied to the bed, he was very, I

guess he used to get in trouble or was hard to control, and I saw him go down the hallway dragging that bed trying to go home, and you realize that this is not a simple thing, it's not simple, ... it's complications, people. I see, first person I ever saw have a seizure in front of me, I didn't know what to do, somebody else knew what to do. … We were like these young guys at one time, and we're very hurt. …

NM: How long were you at Walter Reed for?

RA: I was there for a long time. You get to Walter Reed and then they assign you to a ward, kind of like a dorm, there's about forty or fifty guys in there which is good because these guys are your friends, they become your friends, so somebody says, "Hey, New Jersey," and then they'll all say, "What about those Yankees," or what about those teams. … "Hey Italian guy, what about this," or "Spanish guy." So, it's all that, friendly. … That was good. … I was next to a guy who had to get a blood test every day and he would hear the orderly come down with the blood vials and they would kind of make a noise in the holder, they were like jingling back and forth, he hears that, he's gone, he's hiding, he's running away. I'm thinking well what should I do when a guy asks me where he is, should I turn him in or should I just say, "I don't know," because I know the blood test was important to him. So, sometimes I told them where he was because I didn't want the guy to, sometimes we think we know better than the doctors. In my case, I couldn't use my arm, I had a lot of pain in the palm of my hand. It was very painful, started using, they gave me drugs and it wasn't really successful. It was really rough. Then you had to go to physical therapy because your arm gets atrophied, and they were like Nazis down there, but we wanted to be pampered and they would yank my arm back and forth. … I cursed every word I knew and eventually you understood the benefits of it because it seems like a couple of months and I couldn't use my shoulder, I couldn't use my hand. … I couldn't use my hands at first, … they were like this, … sort of like I was catching stuff. They needed to be worked and moved, physical therapy. … I was still getting a lot of pain and this one doctor came in and says, "Okay, let me try something," and he took a big needle out, and he stuck it into my neck, there's a nerve in my neck. Once he stuck it there, the pain was gone, it was like a miracle. He says, "Well, how's that feel," and I go, "This is great. I'm going to down to physical therapy, this is pretty good," and he says, "Okay, well there's an operation I can do. There's a nerve there," I forgot what he said, "if you sever the nerve," and you wouldn't get the pain. … I said, "I know there's probably side effects," I said, "What's the side effect," … because I wanted feeling in my hand, I didn't want it to be on fire without me realizing it. … I didn't want it to be frostbitten. … He said, "The side effect is your eye." He said, "It will be closed a lot more," and he says, "Well, you know, that's the main side effect." He says, "Do you want to do it?" I go, "Yes, because I won't have any pain," because I could see myself being an alcoholic to kind of calm, … drink a lot of alcohol and vodka. So, they had the operation and I had none of that pain. I have regular feeling in here, so it was probably some kind of nerve damage, it's a little more sensitive to be cold than … the other hand but it's okay.

NM: Can you talk about what happens to you after your rehab and surgery?

RA: Well, the thing is that you go, you get assigned to different wards, where there's a bed opening up, and there is a ward for nerves and there's a ward for … your arteries, arterial ward. So they check you out, they run you a bunch of tests, then there's a point where you're pretty okay, but you need to be watched. So they sent you to a place which is in Silver Springs, Maryland. It's called Forest Glen and the Army owns it. … It used to be an all-girls school and you stayed there. That's like where you stay if you need any food at the mess hall, there's a bus that takes you from Forest Glen. … The Army has a bus to the hospital, you need to see a doctor, you get on the bus. … You're living basically off the base in a Army facility but you're … kind of on your own, … not while you're with a bunch of other guys. … It's good because you feel like you're starting to ease out … back to normal life and by then I knew I wasn't going back, I knew that I was going home, this is all behind me. I didn't want to think about it too much because most people didn't understand, but the hospital itself is kind of interesting. … I saw Lyndon Johnson there, he was getting his physical, the President gets a physical, and he looked very haggard. I was there when Dwight Eisenhower, President Eisenhower, he was in the hospital, he was dying, but it was his birthday and the Army band played on the lawn there, and you're looking up, they built a special patio for him. I couldn't see him, I saw maybe the edge of his head, but they're playing, the whole 110 guys playing "Happy Birthday" and we're all out there. There were people who'd come in and sing to us, or visit us. … It's funny because you think about the anti-war years. You never felt that in the hospital, but the other side of that too is that I'm in the hospital where it's well-known, where everybody knows where it is, didn't see the American Legion, didn't see the VFW, didn't see any veterans' organization. Didn't see them at all, we were down there, we saw some of the girls from Georgetown would come there and talk to us, but you didn't see any of that stuff. The City of Baltimore threw us a party which was great. They had models, they had some *Playboy* models, they had some football players, baseball players, basketball players. They had some musicians, they had officials and they had this gigantic party at Forest Glen, they had the beer trucks with the beer spigots on the side of it, and they had these big barbecue pits where they made roast beef and it was nice, we got attention, we got somebody to talk to us, it was good, it made you feel like you did something and every once in a while there was something interesting like that that would happen for us. But when you got sent to Forest Glen, you were pretty much on your own. We were able to explore a little bit. … We get a car, and we go downtown and we get part of the night time scene. … We're still young guys, we're still looking for fun.

NM: How long were you at Forest Glen?

RA: I don't know, I would get home every three or four weeks for a week and then I go back there because they still had to check on me, they had to check that I'm still getting enough blood flow and I have nerve damage, and I couldn't move my hand, I couldn't write, and back in those days they didn't have the nerve surgery, so the guy says, "Well, we could explore in there," I don't know what that meant at that time--thinking about it, I still don't know what it meant. He said, "But it takes two years for the nerve to regenerate," and I have still some nerve connection, but he was right, it took about two years before I started, first I started, like my bank account, I wrote left-handed, but eventually this hand came back to I went back to right-handed again. … I got most of the movement in my hand, though it's not as strong and I can't throw a football more

than ten yards as my son would testify. … It's not a bad thing but when you're with your kid and he says, "Go on Dad, throw me a pass," and he's running down the field and he's going further and further, I said, "No, you got to come here." … I was trying to be careful with my arm because I didn't know what it would be like but the guys in the hospital, the doctors were pretty good, I felt very comfortable with them. So, most of the time I was at Forest Glen, but I would come down to the hospital, to the mess hall, and the rule is that if the general wants something, if he's in the hospital, … it should be available to everybody, so I had like pork chops and eggs, I thought that was kind of neat, pork chops and eggs, I don't remember how, you know it was just, you know, you're like little kids, we're really kids in many ways. … Along the way even from Japan to Washington, DC you stop in Alaska and the Red Cross was there. … They gave you breakfast and they give you little toilet article kits. So, I felt, you know, I heard stories about guys not being appreciated, but I felt that we were well taken care of with like the Red Cross.

NM: At Forest Glen, did you have any roommates?

RA: Yes, … we became very close together. … Four guys--two guys from North Carolina, myself, and a guy from Baltimore, Maryland, and we would hang out together. We had different wounds but we hang out together because we knew each other from … our time in Japan, and we would go out in the town, and, you know, do a little drinking and flirting with the girls and what's great is that we didn't know anybody there so we didn't, like home, when you go out with your friends, you can't do stuff … because you don't want your friend's disapproval, … "Should I dance with that girl?" "I don't know, she looks pretty bad." … There you just go, and we had a lot of fun. We met some women who were pretty nice to us, and we hung out with them which was, we were starting to get the inklings about the anti-war movement, but it still didn't affect us. … Washington, DC is really most of the people you meet are not really from Washington, they're all over, they come to work for the government, they're interns, so they're pretty pro-soldier, they don't have ideas about the war, so it was a safe environment, and we would, stay out at night and hang out with them. … It was a nice way to ease back to what's happening, at least I thought it was. … Back in those days you could go down to Washington and they didn't have all the security, so you could walk right into the Senate, and you could listen to some of the tours or just you can take the train from the Senate building to the Senate office building and be on the little subway with like some of the senators that you see in the news, some of the historical figures. So it was really kind of nice to go around, it was pretty cool.

NM: You know that after you leave the hospital, you will not be going back in the Army.

RA: Well, it's a strange thing, here's what they had said to me, they said, because I had about six months to do, seven months, the guy said to me, he goes, "Well, what do you want to do? You want to go home or do you want to stay in?" I thought that was the oddest question, of course I want to go home. I couldn't use my arm, I didn't want to put a uniform on, I didn't want to do any of that stuff. So, they said, "Okay," and I went through whatever it is to clear the post, and nobody tells me what they're doing to me, I mean I leave, and I realize what they did is they retired me. I didn't get a medical discharge, I got a regular retirement, and I only think because I joined, that's how they retired me, so I'm sort of like the same status as somebody who served

thirty years. I have an ID card, I can go on to the PX--the Post Exchange--stuff like that, but still nobody tells me the benefits of this. I'm still a guy with a bad arm. … I just thought they were just discharging me, I didn't understand what it all meant till years later that I realized, I mean I knew I was retired, but I really didn't realize what it all meant.

NM: What did that mean?

RA: What it meant is that I have certain benefits. I can go take advantage of the Army medical system, at that time, it was a lot simpler, I can go to the PX, go to the commissary. At that time those were very inexpensive places to buy goods and it's easy for me to get on post. I can use some of the facilities on post. If I could use my arm I can go bowling at a West Point bowling alley, there's all kinds of stuff that the guys can use, it was the furthest thing from my mind then, but I have used the hospital up at West Point for some things at one time.

NM: Did you have any thoughts of what you would do after you left the Army?

RA: No, I didn't at all. I mean here I am, sort of like where I came full circle, look around, nobody's around, what am I going to do. … I went to some agency in New York City, because I knew I needed a job, and I figured I'd work in the city with lots of people and they got me a job at Chemical Bank so I was actually working at Chemical Bank before I was completely discharged and I worked at Chemical Bank till about the next five or six months. … I worked in the foreign currency exchange in Chemical Bank in New York and I also worked in the lottery division they had the contract for the State Lottery at that time, you filled out your name and address and you put it like in a ballot box, and then the people would collect it, and then we would run it through machines to make sure all the counterfeit ones are out and then we box it, and send it to Albany, where they would draw. … This is 1969, … way before anything digital happened. So, I worked there, and it was a good place, there was a lot of people. I felt I got enough attention, there were a lot of women there. So, it was good. Had a suit, wore a suit and tie every day. I had some of my friends that I knew from school worked on Wall Street, nothing big time but I was just starting out while a lot of my friends were already much more established than I was.

NM: Basically you were away from civilian life for four years. What were some of the challenges of returning to civilian life?

RA: Well, first of all, culture has changed, the way we dress, the way we look changed, the music changed quite a bit. Some of my friends started doing drugs, everybody did alcohol in one form or the other, but now some of the stuff, … because education is poor … I don't know what these drugs, what it all means and if somebody does pot does that mean he's a drug addict, it's all this kind of strange stuff. I realize that I liked women a lot but I couldn't meet any, and you look at them and you see the sexual being, you don't really see the person. It was catching up with what has happened. … I'm coming back, I have a typical clerk job in a bank, people have middle level management, something more, they're in more senior positions in other industries, people come back, or they come back from college, they have a degree and they're able to work into

something better. Strangely, I was at the bank, and the people were talking, most of the girls, there were some guys, says, "Well, we should get a house this summer down the shore. Where were you last summer?" … Everybody is telling me where they were last summer. Last summer, the summer before that, I was in the jungles, I can't tell them that because I started to realize that if you were a soldier, a Vietnam vet, the politics of the war have turned against the soldier. So, you weren't very popular, and saying that I was a soldier, you were kind of like a pariah, they kept away from you. So, I would change the subject. … I never was able to talk about it so I could not share my experiences and plus there were things I was going through, the Army was trying to say that I was no longer disabled. So I had to appeal my case, I had to go get an Army lawyer. I went to Valley Forge, and we went to the Judge Advocate so they had to rule whether I was permanently disabled or not. I couldn't use my hand, but the Army determined that I was okay. So, we had to solve that, but I didn't want to tell these people about that, it's like I was living this conflicted life. I wanted to be liked and be part of everything, I want to be part of the music, part of the fun, but I was still kind of on the outside. I thought when people looked at me, they saw a real mean guy. I even had long hair, my hair was starting to grow, but I couldn't leave Walter Reed because the sergeant major made sure I had a haircut. … I was trying to grow sideburns, I had to cut the sideburns off. So I was kind of pushed back to a certain point but the culture changed. The people were wearing more colorful clothes, bell bottoms, bell bottoms where did they come from, love beads, where does that come from? Long hair, you know, girls with miniskirts, this was all kind of puzzling, how do I deal with this kind of life? How do I get some of this fun?

NM: You mentioned that the Army tried to say you were not disabled. How soon did they determine that after you left?

RA: … A couple of months later I get a letter in the mail saying that I had been reclassified. … I was temporarily discharged as disabled, temporary disabled retirement or something like that. So, that was fine, I mean, I didn't know what it all meant. Then all of a sudden … I get this letter saying, "We can see you're no longer disabled." … At first I kind of laughed, then I realized, "Well, you know, maybe in the long run I have to make sure that they understand this." … I do have problems in my arm and I was barely writing with this arm. So I got in contact with an Army lawyer, an advocate from the judge advocacy took my case. I had to go down to Fort Dix, I had to get my scars measured, which is a strange thing. My scar, it looks worse than it is. [Editor's Note: Mr. Arbasetti shows the interviewer the scars on his arm.] They had to cut it open to put the artery together, so the scar is a lot bigger. … I had to go through a bunch of tests and then these tests were forwarded to Valley Forge where their doctors and the lawyers kind of dicked around with this and they interpret it. … At the end they said, "Okay, you're permanently disabled, 30%." I thought it was low, but I didn't want to go through the whole system again so I accepted it and once I accepted the 30%, in a week or two the VA says, "We got your case, we're going to make you 50% disabled," that's a lot better. But I had to figure out … since I was retired from the Army, I couldn't take their checks, I had to sign off on that and take the VA checks so the money helped a little bit. It helped quite a bit, actually.

NM: What are your feelings towards the war after you returned to civilian life?

RA: It's funny in the next year or two as I got better, I started watching more of the news and I started seeing how these guys are doing, and I'm pretty upset because I hear that everybody is blaming the soldiers, now they're called "baby killers." Eventually, I find people I know who were there, and I don't know why this happened but in San Francisco they allowed the demonstrators to come almost onto the tarmac, and people I know like nurses were, they were cursed at. There were always stories about people being spit at, I don't know anybody who has been, but I think once you come off a plane after those experiences the last thing you need is people yelling at you. See, I didn't have any of that because I went through the hospital, I went to Walter Reed. … But you will see that on the news, and you would see, I would watch my unit, the 1st Cav go someplace else. These are your guys, they're like your family, your family tree so you watch them, you're part of them, but the politics got worse. Soldiers got blamed for the politics, and we're just doing the job. Nobody, if you asked the soldiers, we didn't want to be there, we would have got out. It's kind of odd because I started with being in a hospital, I started to realize that the war was really, has no benefits. … It didn't help those guys in the hospital, it didn't help the really disabled guys, I don't see if we're getting anything out of this. … Vietnam doesn't look like it's going to be a free country, what I would assume what a free country is. So I think a lot of soldiers were starting to turn against the politics, not so much the soldiers, soldiers will support soldiers because they've been there, but it's all that crap that comes with it, and plus the culture was really anti-war, we're in the love-boom, everybody loved everybody, everybody had long hair and the music was powerful. … There was a kind of a counter-culture in a way is that kids kind of unite under music and art and clothes and there were some people who were kind of straight lace, who looked like they, they didn't like any Beatles music or Rolling Stones.

NM: I understand that you eventually get a job with the US Postal Service?

RA: Yes, well, here's what happens. I'm at Chemical Bank, and I'm reading this thing in the paper, and my friends are talking about it, there's this thing happening up in New York State, they call it Woodstock. I said, "Oh, that sounds interesting. I love all these bands, I think I want to go there." So I go to my boss, my supervisor, and said, "Listen, I want to take this day off because I want to go away." He says, "No, you can't." I said, "What do you mean I can't?" I'm not the most vital guy in the place, there's like 500 people in the whole place, and I have a job that it's not that vital, I don't have to figure out equations or logistics about anything. I said, "What do you mean I can't?" He said, "No, no, we can't give you off." I said, "Well, you know what, I don't want to work here, I'm giving you my two week's notice." … He goes, "Okay." Then he comes back to me, and he says, "We want you to stay, how about if I gave you a raise?" I said, "No, I want that day off." He said, "I can't do that." So, that's how I left Chemical Bank, they would not give me that day off. I didn't want to get paid, I just wanted to be able to, I would have gone there, and probably would have been back Monday or Tuesday and I would have been, still been there, but no. So, I hooked up with a couple of friends of mine and we went up there, no idea what a big event it would be, because we went there for the music. People now say, "Oh, you went there for the girls, you went for the drugs." No, it was just somehow you knew it was going to be exciting and a lot of the bands I liked, the Who, and Santana, and all these things--Crosby, Stills and Nash, Ten Years After. I just liked the music. Music was

becoming my drug to like get away from the everyday mundane stuff and all that painful stuff. I get into the music. So, that's how I left, couldn't give me the day off, the hell with you, I'm leaving, and the funny thing is that I did have, I was doing okay, and I was getting a little money from the VA, so I wasn't, and I was young enough, … I don't think that I'm going to starve to death, and I was having a good time. I decided that I deprived myself of three years of living, here's something that's unique that I want to go to, I think it's going to be cool. So, I left there and never looked back.

NM: Can you talk about your experience at Woodstock?

RA: Well, what happened is there were two friends, Mike and Tom. I don't know how we decided but on Thursday night because the festival was on Friday, we got together in the back of Tom's dad's van. Tom's dad was a construction guy, stoops and stuff like that, so I went back there and he had a flag on there, and he had all kinds of stuff in the back, and we started driving to Upstate New York, and we stopped at some supermarket, the old A&P. Those were days you were able to go in the store barefooted. So we walk in the store barefooted, for some reason we were into that kind of thing, and people were going, "Look there's hippies, there's hippies, look, look, Mom, there's a hippy, see he's barefoot." It was kind of funny. They didn't say it like they were going to beat us up, but they said it like, you know, "Wow, it's a hippy, I saw one on TV, now there's one here." So it was kind of a funny thing. So, I'm in the back because only two guys can sit in the front so I'm kind of dozing off in the back, and I hear somebody go, "Oh, man, look at this shit." I said, "What could it be?" So I get up towards the front, tons of people, I mean I never saw so many people. … I was in operations, that one time it was the most helicopters ever used in an operation ever. … It looked like mosquitoes in the sky. Here, there was much more people, and we were just trying to get in there and we were luckily, we got to an area behind the main stage, and that's where we were going to stay. … We would hear at night, we would hear the hammers hitting and the loud speaker, "Testing, one, two, three," and there was kind of a buzz in the air, and I don't know how much it was drug induced, I don't know. … I think we had some pot, but we had some beer, we had some alcohol. So, it was just, it was really strange and the next morning, I think I woke up about eight o'clock or something like that, and you still hear hammering and the loud speaker going off and you get out and you look and there's all these people. I mean in my wildest dreams, I didn't think there would be that many people, I thought maybe five or ten thousand, I thought, "Hey, I discovered something unique, this is a good place to listen to good music. … There would be some people, but it wouldn't be that many," and there's like a half a million. It all depends on who you listen to, 400,000 to 800,000, I don't know, just so many people. So, we hear them talking, and suddenly people are starting to go to the area for the concert, I think the concert started at one or three or five, I don't remember what it is. … Suddenly, people are knocking down the fences, they're not taking tickets, because there were so many people they couldn't control the security. I still have my tickets, and it was a great deal. I think it was six dollars a day, you can't beat that, and so we get there, and we're hanging out, that's all. … Some people are doing pot, some people are doing all kinds of stuff, and the music came on, and it was, the first time night it was kind of folky stuff but it was good, it was kind of neat, it was really neat, and the second night was more rock which was pretty good, but by that time, with the exposure, the rain, all that stuff started to wear on you

physically. I mean you can sit through like a group like Creedance Clearwater Revival but you're exhausted and you're starting to fall asleep and suddenly … The Who comes on, and you go, "Oh" and you get into that, and then you doze off in the middle, somebody else is on, … but these are bands that I really like, and one after another. So it was really pretty wonderful, to tell you the truth, the situation was pretty grim, really muddy and really wet. I think what changed everybody's opinion is that people who never went there saw it in a movie. You were in a comfortable theater seeing these great acts, great music, you see people acting bizarre in the mud and stuff like that, you say, "I got to go to the next one," but it's never as good as the movie because in the movie you're comfortable, you're not hungry, you don't have to find a place to pee, you can't find a place to drink, find weird characters, but everybody looks at all the highlights and it was pretty interesting. The papers kind of treated it as kind of a strange phenomenon. They didn't know how to play it. The *New York Times* said that the thruway was closed, … yes, the exit getting off on the thruway was so backed up with cars that people just left their cars or tried to find a way to get in there, it was ten miles. People just left their cars on the side, because they were so eager to get there. I don't know any way to describe it, it was just like, they were refugees, just going down the road, tons of people except people are happy, they're excited, and the smell of pot is whiffing through the air. … There was something about the culture and the people there, that they were more sharing, they were more friendly, now I don't see that as much but, hey you got long hair, I got long hair, I have a joint, have a puff, we're all brothers and whatever this is in, and you got a real sense of that, that we were all part of the same fabric and there was helicopters coming in, they brought medics in for some of the people who were overdosing, there was a couple of babies being born there, I mean it truly was a happening that it only would happen that way like this, now it would be commercialized, "Budweiser brings you Woodstock 2012," and the official hat, the official this, and the official that, and broadcast by this and everybody would be wearing a Coca-Cola T-shirt. … I think people appreciate that this was just a bunch of guys who ran this, they tried to make money, of course, but it wasn't that commercial, it was just, it worked, for that rare moment, there was no fights, it worked. So, it was a great experience. I didn't realize how much it was until afterwards you see all the papers, they said, "Hippies come back," and of course the word, the connotation of hippies is a little like you're dirty and you don't care, and you're drug infested, love infested, and even when my son got older, I said, "What does hippie mean?" "It means that you're dirty." Well, I don't know, people were dirty there because there was no facilities but people had a good time. The townspeople were very nice, some of them made sandwiches and they were very friendly. It was one of those unique American experiences that it worked out well.

NM: After you returned from Woodstock, what did you do?

RA: … I had to find a job. [laughter] But, what kind of resume do I have? Some time in the jungle, six months at Chemical Bank, three days at Woodstock. … So, I met this woman, and the funny thing about this woman, she was going to go to Woodstock with me, and then at the last moment she got frightened, I don't know why because she was in a relationship with me or whatever, so she bolted, she went on vacation with her parents, they went to Missouri. So, I thought that was kind of odd, so I had this extra ticket and I gave it away. So when I got back from Woodstock I was living in a rooming house, and she came back and she hugged me … and

stuff like that and she said, "Oh, I wish I was there, I heard it on the news in Missouri they had a whole thing," blah, blah, blah. So, we were hanging out and she went down to the post office and see … if they were going to hire for Christmastime and they said no. It was like October or late September and I said, "Well, by the way, do you have any other jobs available," and they grabbed me in the office, and they took me in, they were short of help, they wasn't paying much money but they had pretty decent benefits and they would hire me temporary before I took the test. … Back then you had to take a, well now you still have to take the civil service test, so that was like a Wednesday or Thursday, on Saturday I started. I took the test like three weeks later and I passed the test, it was only me and two other guys took the test, and I was the only one that passed. … The test wasn't hard but it was there, and I had a job and it was good, it was local, but not in my town where I lived, so I didn't know all the people there, but I felt comfortable. There were World War II guys who understood what a veteran might go through and it was okay, I mean I don't know … anything beyond that, it was a job, it paid me good, it paid me fairly decent money, and it had some good benefits but I was still a kid, … I didn't know where I was going in life.

NM: How long were you with the Postal Office?

RA: For about thirty-five years. [laughter]

NM: You retired from there?

RA: I retired there, yes, I was able to claim my military time as part of my seniority. … What you had to do is buy back your time, the retirement would have been, so I was able to buy that, two and a half years or so, about three years of that time was added, … gave credit for my retirement. So, I retired at fifty-five but it was three years more work. … I stayed there, yes, … I met a woman there and married her, then we got divorced but we have a kid, and it afforded me the opportunity to support the kid. I also, taking the classes at the New School and NYU Adult Ed. I was into film making, I was into photography. I didn't know what I wanted to do with that and since I had a son I wasn't going to go to Hollywood and abandon him. … I enjoyed film and photographs. … The funny thing is that when you go someplace like the school, you run into very interesting people, people who are off-Broadway actors, social workers who thought they were communists. They were just angry people, people, all kinds of people and New York City had all those people. Anyway, it was just a great place. There was a woman, all she wore was purple. I don't know what it meant, she was a nice person but all she wore was purple, some kind of statement, but it was cool, everything was cool. … I took this photo class and I was next to this woman, she was the most beautiful woman I ever saw, she was married to the … Bank of Mexico's president. … She was like a princess, I just marveled at looking at her, I couldn't stop looking at her, I hope I didn't freak her out but … you meet a lot of people, off-Broadway actors, and just people who have interests. In the suburbs you don't get that, suburbs, everybody is here, and they may join a bowling league but there's that energy, the city has that energy.

NM: Where was your post office located?

RA: Ridgefield Park, it's about a mile away, and every time I move away but I always come to the same place and my last divorce I moved here which is in bad weather, I could walk there, it's like a little bit over a mile, but in good weather I could just get there in five minutes and come back. … The funny thing is when you work in the town you live in, people start knowing your business, it's not that strange things were happening, … but you just don't want to, if people say, "Hey, who is that woman that went in your house?" They come up, you don't want that. "What's in the driveway there?" "What's underneath the tarp," or a lot of that stuff is going on, … but you don't need people just kind of prying in and stuff like that.

NM: That is why a lot of teachers do not like living in the same town that they work in.

RA: Yes, I can see that.

NM: Did you always work at the Ridgefield Park Post Office?

RA: Yes.

NM: You mentioned there were some World War II folks who worked there. Did you share your experiences with each other?

RA: We'd share experiences, they accepted me, they said, "Okay, this guy, we were in war," not all of them in combat, don't forget, most guys are not in combat, but I was in combat, and they said, "Okay, come here," and I had my hair grown long and one guy called me "Bushy." So, that was my nickname, it looked like if I was next to a hedge, you would have to trim it, that's all. … It was okay, it was good, it was fun. … The strange thing is the war is winding down, and I'm keeping an eye on this, I'm keeping an eye on. I know I remember watching when we left Saigon … with the helicopter on the roof and I felt so sad, I felt like all those guys I knew who were hurt and dead, it was like all for nothing and there was something terribly wrong with what I saw, I couldn't process it. I knew something was bad, I didn't feel good about it. I didn't feel good about any of it and I think a lot of us who were veterans didn't feel good about it and we couldn't talk about it, we couldn't not so much celebrate it, but we couldn't deal with it, and I was, the people were marching against soldiers, people marching against the war. The country was very divided back then. It's hard to believe that because now, I mean we're more divided Republican/Democrat, but here it was like really, … the generation gap, young people were against the war, old people were "All-American," but nobody liked the soldiers.

NM: You mentioned that initially you did not talk about your experience because there was nobody you could talk to about it.

RA: There was nobody to talk to, nobody understood the language, what are you going to say, you're on a date and say, "Honey, last year at this time I was in a fighting position and I was getting sniped at." They would look at you and go, "I think I'm going to leave this guy." … It doesn't mean anything to their life, it's just a distant abstract on TV. So, there was nobody to talk to, and unlike other wars, or at least, I thought other wars, I didn't see anybody who said, "Hey,

I'm a Vietnam vet," we were just quiet about it. Eventually, I would come across someone but, here I am around for five, six years later, nobody ever talked about it, the early part of the post office.

NM: When did you meet people that you could to relate your experiences too?

RA: You know it's a strange thing, it seemed to be somewhere in the '80s. Now I had to go back to Walter Reed every once in a while to get a checkup and if anything was wrong I'd go back there, and I had carpal tunnel. … I thought it had to do it my arm but it was a different thing, never heard of it before, so they operated on me, and people were starting to build the Vietnam Memorial, and once I kind of understood what that was all about, I felt, I started feeling different, there's an evolution in thought, that, "Hey, we wasn't bad guys, we just, our country sent us here, we did what we could," and suddenly I started realizing, … some of the people I knew were Vietnam vets, but nobody wore a pin or anything, nobody says, "Hey, look at me, I was a dog handler," or something like that. So it was still kind of laid back. … When they started building the memorial I started getting more interested in it, I still didn't know what it all meant, what it was going to mean. I think the wall was dedicated early '80s, I'm not sure but when I started seeing on TV, people congregating down there and kind of acknowledging their service. I started to realize, I said, "Yes, we were okay," people don't understand it, girlfriends didn't understand it, my mother didn't understand it, she was just happy that I was home but I started feeling a little bit easier in that skin. … It still was different, you look at the movies and they portray Vietnam veterans as kind of crazy, scatter-brain guys. I remember there was a movie, I think it was called *Distant Thunder* (1988), that's the term they had for artillery fire, and all these guys were living in the woods, they were Vietnam vets who were kind of like out of it, I didn't know any of those guys, I'm sure there was guys like that, but these weren't my friends, they weren't living in the woods hiding away from civilization. Everybody I knew who eventually I knew they were Vietnam vets, came back and tried to get a job, and try to have a relationship with, and have a girlfriend and a family. They wanted a regular life like everybody else does but they couldn't say they were veterans. I was at the post office one time and the VFW guy comes in to me, he was in VFW and he says, "You a Vietnam vet?" I go, "Yes," he said, "Well, you guys lost the war, you guys are a disgrace." … I didn't lose the war but there was anger from them too, they're sort of like, part of me thinks that maybe they were feeling, we were starting to get a little more attention, and maybe taking it away from them. I don't know, but there's a sign in the VVA, now, the Vietnam Veterans of America office down in Newark. It says, "Never again will one generation abandon another," and that's what we felt, that those guys abandoned us, those guys never, nobody ever said, "Hey, join us or be part of us," … or do that. We were the guys who didn't win the war, we didn't have the glory, we didn't have the parades coming home. We didn't have any of that at that time anyway.

NM: I understand that you are the head of your own organization.

RA: Well, I'm head of the chapter.

NM: Could you talk about your involvement?

RA: Well, this chapter started, the history of the chapter is, the association started in World War II, where the guys in the Pacific said, you know we liked each other, we have to find a way to connect so they formed this association and it's been from World War II on, and prior to my understanding of this, but in the '40s and the '50s and the early '60s there was a New York Chapter, and they used to meet in New York City and go to dinner, have a speaker, and it was pretty good. Somewhere in the '60s it got dissolved, nobody is keeping up, those guys are getting old, they have other things to do. When they started having the parades, welcome home to Vietnam veterans, the guys in New York City said, "You know, why don't we start a chapter." So they couldn't figure out whether to have a New York Chapter or a New Jersey Chapter, so they settled on the New York/New Jersey Chapter so it could be both and they got together and they realized we had something in common. This is before I got there. Something in common and they liked each other. So, it slowly grew, you know, we're a fraternity, we don't have dues, we don't have platforms, we don't have cake sales. It's just purely you come there and you hang and you have something to eat, we have a guest speaker, and the guy who originally started the chapter here, Fred Robbins. Well, I joined them in the late '80s, I still was kind of new to all this and I joined them in the late '80s, he was getting burnt out and in the '90s, I became treasurer but it really is only a figurehead because the guy who runs it really keeps the money. It was never a big deal, we just pass the hat or have a 50/50. Somebody else took over and they burnt out in a year, then somebody else took over and they burnt out, and then I said, "Well, I can do it," and I like it, I get a little attention, I get to control things, I tweak it so … it's better for us, and 9/11, we used to meet at the armory on Route 17 in Lodi. They said we couldn't meet there anymore because of security. So I went around and I found out the Elks would let us use their room, their room is very big, and they said sure, and we've been there ever since. Guys like it, I didn't know if the guys would like it, but it's close to highways, it's between 46 and Route 80, quick by the Turnpike, and then I like the response I get, and I'm a pretty sociable guy, I can bullshit, I can work a room, talk to guys, and guys feel happy if they kind of connect with somebody, and as you come there, we only meet twice a year. So you go there in the spring and by the time the fall comes around you're ready again. We don't have dues, but … we pass the hat. … The idea is that some guys have money, some guys don't, so we don't want to make any one feel bad, so some guy will drop a twenty, some guy will drop a dollar or two, fine, it's anonymous. We have a 50/50 which always works and one of the things I institute is that people have all these old books and videos about war, so we sell them for a buck or two, and whatever we don't sell we donate to the old soldier's home in Paramus. We have World War II guys, Korean War guys, people sit down, and share their experience, sort of like I'm sitting with my grandpa, but you have a relationship with these guys, they show they respect you because you were in the service, they understand you, you understand them, you know. They're old guys now but they were there, in World War II. One guy still has his saddle, he was a horse soldier. … Two of my guys were horse soldiers before the cavalry went to mechanized. … It's unbelievable, they're close to their nineties and they like to show up. It's truly amazing, some Korean War, mostly Vietnam guys, but some younger guys and we try to do things in the community. We'll go up to the old soldier's home or if a friend of ours son is having something at the armory. He's a soldier, we go, you know, there to honor him but we're not your typical American Legion, VFW. We're a bunch of guys.

NM: I want to give you the opportunity to add anything to the record before we conclude the interview.

RA: Well, you know, I think we covered pretty much, the thing is that being in the service, I was really frightened even when wounded, what I would do after life. I always thought that life somehow was going to be really serious and I wasn't serious enough. I didn't have the education and I did try to go to school but I was too distracted. I tried to go to Fairleigh Dickinson and I just couldn't concentrate on that stuff. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was taking liberal arts. I think eventually if I had of gone I might have liked to have been a history teacher, I enjoy history. … I'd like to do something with film but it was just too late for that, you had to be a young person to go to Hollywood, but I do appreciate those things. I do appreciate the fact that I was a veteran, I understand what war is like, I understand all the tragedies of it. People watch TV and they think, oh, it's great, look those guys go in and they kill everybody, but people have been affected by it. Some of the people I respect most have problems dealing with it. I think that's a lot of that is not well understood. … When I've gone down to Walter Reed, I feel that the younger soldiers appreciate us Vietnam vets because we've been through some of the stuff and they appreciate that they can talk to us. I mean they don't talk in depth but they know we were there. … We kind of joke around with them too, you go see them and you ask them how they're doing, and that's really frightful too because I've seen now women who have lost their arms, lose their legs, that's kind of foreign to me, that they're part of the military, guys who are blind. … I think with the IED [Improvised Explosive Device] there are head traumas, their loss of limbs are much more than mine. … When I was in the hospital in Walter Reed, one of the wards I was in was the outside ward was the plastic surgery ward, guys who got caught in the tank that blew up and they were disfigured and you didn't want to look at them but you had to look. I often think of those guys, how they came back because if you know a guy who has been that way, … after a while you forget to see the burns, you just see the personality and I'm sure they had a difficult time getting back. I wonder about them, I wonder about all these guys. One thing good about being the president, I've been a president for like twelve years now, nobody wants the job, but I've gotten to where I wanted to go back and see what happened, what was the real effect on those guys I met so by being in the First Cav they have reunions and the first couple of reunions I didn't meet anybody. … In the recent years I met my platoon leader who has been really affected by the war. I met about fifteen or twenty guys who were in my platoon, you know, overlapping so that was good. I had a reunion with my medic who saved my life, and I was able to tell him, thank you for saving my life and he said, "Well, I'm just doing my job," but I explained I have a son and a grandson and what I do. … You don't know what to say, it gets emotional. I've gone, I went back with a bunch of guys to Vietnam and it's different because you leave with one image of Vietnam, and Vietnam is a different place now. … Parts of it are very modern, the women look like they could be out in California. They don't have like the computers we do, but they have internet cafes and the kids are playing video games and they're screaming like my son used to scream when he played video games. People were friendly, and I got to see some of the countryside. I got to see some of the young people and they were nice to us, they were very friendly. … It just makes you feel bad about war and how people suffer. Like I said before, the hospital is anti-war, you go in there there's no way that you can endorse what happened to guys.

I was fortunate because I was wounded in the arm, but because where it was, you can't see it and I've been online with guys, … no arms, guy's lost an arm or a leg. I don't feel like I sacrificed as much as these guys. That's the thing that I felt a lot of times, I was there, I survived it, and I'm pretty normal, but some guys really sacrificed a lot physically and mentally. I was able to reconnect and I've had, I get guest speakers, one of my best guest speakers is a nurse. She wasn't a nurse that I was with, but because I understood what nurses did, she came and spoke and she's a good friend of mine now, and it helped her come out of her thing, because nurses don't get together, guys get together and they say, "Oh, you were in the First Cav, you were in Vietnam." Nurses don't do that. Now, they're starting to do it because they experienced it, and truly they've seen more blood in one day than I see probably in a month in Vietnam because they're dealing with wounded and people are dying. So you see other perspectives too. It's sort of like I'd gone back and relearned not my experience but the other experiences. I've read some books to give me an idea how we got there, you know, it just didn't start in 1965 when I got off the plane or '68, how we got there, all the mistakes that, you know, from after World War II, and the French, and all that stuff. So, it puts things in a different perspective. I've met some people, … Hal Moore of *We Were Soldiers Once… And Young* (1992) who wrote the book and there's a movie. I met him, I actually had him come up to an event. The guy on the cover is Rick Rescorla who died in the World Trade Center. He was one of the guys in my chapter though I didn't know him that well. You come across people, friends of ours, a friend of mine, his son is deployed in Iraq so he kind of, he's like your nephew, you watch out even though he was officer, you care about him, you watch. I ran into the guy who was the last guy, one of the last guys in Saigon, in the helicopters with the Marines and I learned from these guys, I learned what they were feeling what they were going through. So, when I think of Vietnam, I think of not just me but I think about this whole complex episode and I think it's always going to be there because there's always new stories I'm finding. Going back to Vietnam was really great because we made peace with the country, we made peace with whatever those dreams were, we were friendly, we walked around, we went to the DMZ which I was always frightened of, and it's quiet, the wind is blowing like almost it's hauntingly quiet but you get to see what was really horrific, places where soldiers are dying, … got to see the people. People in South Vietnam seem to be a little more optimistic than the North, seems a little grimmer but I could be wrong about that. I realize that I didn't feel so much like a tourist, I felt like I was a traveler when I went back to Vietnam. I felt like I could hang out with some of the places where people. … Most tourists just don't deal with people, they go into their hotel room and I can go outside, there was a hotel in Hanoi, I go outside, and there's a young guy, his job is to guard, he has the uniform but he was like any other kid I knew. He was maybe twenty years old, his friends go by, they pretend like they're boxing. He would flirt at girls and this is not an enemy, this was just another kid. So, you can put things in perspective. I once told a guy, I said, "You know, I came back from Vietnam, and things are different," and he started getting angry and crying and I realized that it's still all caught up into him. He needs help to get some of that anger loose and a lot of us got that anger loose through guys that we meet, some of us went back, but people that we can talk to. … In later years we've talk to high schools, gone to hospitals, there's things in Fort Dix. West Point allowed us to use the Yacht, well they call it the Yacht, it's more like the Dayliner but … we got to be sociable. We're just a bunch of guys who had one time in history had this one experience. … We feel a little safer with each other than we feel with other people.

NM: I want to thank you again for having me here today.

RA: It was good. You're the only guy who would listen. … It's a strange thing that some guys who were infantry guys who were out in the field and there's other guys who were not infantry guys, and they feel kind of guilty because when people see a war guy, they see an infantry guy, a guy running into the jungle getting shot at, and they were in support, they were vital, they gave us supplies, but a lot of them kind of feel a little less than a Vietnam vet. To me, they're a Vietnam vet. … I have a friend who was a stevedore. … His job was to bring, take the beer off the boats, other supplies, but beer meant a lot to us when we're out in the field. … I see somebody, "Oh, I don't know, I was only an MP." MPs got shot up, a lot of people were in danger.

NM: Thank you again.

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Reviewed by Kyle Downey 4/2/13
Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 4/17/13
Reviewed by Robert Arbasetti 5/7/13