

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD F. PLECHNER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SANDRA STEWART HOLYOAK

and

MARY LOU STRAHLENDORFF

METUCHEN, NEW JERSEY

JANUARY 16, 2008

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

[Editor's Note: This begins the second interview with Richard F. Plechner on January 16, 2008, in Metuchen, New Jersey, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Mary Lou Strahlendorff.]

...

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: We were talking about your favorite professors when we last spoke and you had talked about the military strategy teacher. Was that John Paul Vann's title?

Richard F. Plechner: No, he was just associate professor of military science and he handled the infantry cadets. At that time, at Rutgers, you branched when you went into your junior year. In other words, you're assigned a branch, and you were given choices.

SH: This is for Advanced ROTC.

RP: Yes, and I chose infantry and he was the infantry teacher.

SH: How long had he been there? Had he been in World War II?

RP: He had been in at the end of World War II, I believe, and he had been in Korea, and then, he came to Rutgers. I think he was there two years, and, as I say, he was a young captain at the time and graduated, in '54, from University College. [Editor's Note: University College was one of several undergraduate colleges within Rutgers University before the reorganization of 2007.] He was a very charismatic leader, which became clearest during the Vietnam War, apparently. There was a very good book about him called *A Bright Shining Lie* [John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam] written by former New York Times reporter, Neil Sheehan, (Vintage Press, 1988)], and a movie, [HBO (1998)]. I have long been trying, together with some other members of my class, and the ROTC Department, some people there, to get him selected for [the Rutgers Hall of] Distinguished Alumni, but, apparently, he was a hero in an unpopular war and they have never done it. Every year, we submit; every year, they turn it down. Here is a man that won the Medal of Freedom, because, when he died, he was working for the CIA, for USAID [United States Agency for International Development], which is the CIA, and he also won the Distinguished Service Cross. [Editor's Note: The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest honor a civilian can receive. The Distinguished Service Cross is the second-highest military award for those who risked their life in combat.] He could not win the Medal of Honor, because he was not on active duty. He was retired, as a lieutenant colonel. He was the first civilian since the Civil War to command an Army Corps. I can't remember which corps it was [II Corps], but ... it is the equivalent of a lieutenant general, a remarkable man, but, unfortunately, the University has never recognized him. The ROTC Department has recognized him. They have his picture hanging in their conference room.

SH: When did he die? When did his helicopter crash?

RP: He died almost at the end [of the war]. He spent ten years in Vietnam, which is a real risk, and he died, I think; I'm not sure; I'd have to look in the book. I think some time around 1971, toward the end. [Editor's Note: Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann was killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam on June 9, 1972.]

SH: When we do the editing, you can fill that part in.

RP: But, he was such a charismatic leader and all the guys who studied under him liked him. He knew his stuff, and his record, later in life, bore that out. So, the other teachers, as I say, Dr. [Richard P.] McCormick, the present President's father, [President of Rutgers University, Dr. Richard L. McCormick], was a terrific history teacher. ... Dr. [Guido G.] Weigend was geography, he was just a great guy, and Dr. Fergusson was a very brilliant teacher. I think he finally left Rutgers and went to Princeton, but he was the first one to receive the title of "Distinguished Professor" at Rutgers and he was like a department unto himself, [laughter] in comparative lit [literature], and I enjoyed those courses, which probably had something to do with it, too.

SH: I know that you have a love of opera. Did that flourish at Rutgers, or was it in your home with your mother and father?

RP: No. Well, I had a lot of records from my great-grandfather, who'd loved opera, and my grandparents did, my parents did, and so, I did. That's what I [listened to]. We didn't listen to pop records, really, at home at all as a kid. I also liked jazz, because I used to listen to that ... when I was away at prep school at night. I forget the name, I think it was WOV was the name of the station. [laughter] That's not around anymore either, and I liked jazz and, later, when I was in college, I saw a lot of the jazz greats, like Louis Armstrong, like Erroll Garner, people like that.

SH: Were they on campus or did you go to New York?

RP: No, I went to New York.

SH: Okay.

RP: But, you could go in, take the train in or drive in, either way. The door charge, or cover charge, would range from a buck to three bucks. Even a college kid could afford that, [laughter] and drinks were a dollar a piece. So, it was a different world and we'd go into Birdland, Bop City. [Editor's Note: Birdland and Bop City were popular Broadway jazz clubs during the 1950s.] The first I really heard it, time I really heard it live, I was only about seventeen, but they'd serve me anyway in New York. [laughter] Eighteen was the age, and I think it was my mother [who] took me to Bop City and I went in to see Louis Armstrong, because I liked him from records and things. ... I don't know what you call it, but the number two band, that would spell the number one, wasn't a band, it was a trio or quintet, I can't remember, [but] it was George Shearing, this young guy over from England, [laughter] at that time, and that really blew my mind. So, I kept going in by myself after that, ... whenever I could afford it, and saw a lot of the really great jazz players, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, you know, and I enjoyed that.

SH: Did you play an instrument?

RP: No, no. My poor mother tried to teach me to play piano, because she liked to play piano, but I'm all thumbs. [laughter]

SH: Had you taken any art classes, because I also know you collect a lot of art?

RP: No. I took music appreciation. You had to take one of the appreciation courses, which I think is a good idea. I think an educated person should know something about music and art and whatnot, but I couldn't fit art appreciation into my schedule, so, I took music appreciation, because I like music as well. We had Dr. [Howard D.] McKinney, again, one of the great professors at Rutgers. My mother had had him.

SH: Really?

RP: When she was at NJC, [New Jersey College for Women, now the Douglass Residential College at Rutgers University], and then, I had him. He was there forever. [laughter] I'm surprised he's not still alive and teaching at Rutgers, [laughter] and he was a Rutgers graduate and really a great professor. No, my interest in art came [from], again, my parents used to take me in, as a little kid, into the Metropolitan Museum [of Art] in New York and that was my favorite place. ... I remember, when I was in prep school, ... we went to Washington for a few days, as part of our social studies class, and, while there, one of the things we did was go to the National Galleries and that knocked my socks off, too. So, I pestered my mother over and over until she finally took me to Washington for a week one time and we spent most of it in the National Gallery ... and at the Smithsonian, and I've always liked art and I've always liked music. Also, at Rutgers, ... they used to have a concert series and we always subscribed to that, and they had some really great orchestras. The one that comes to mind most, or [rather] the two, one was the Boston Symphony, used to come every year. Sergei Koussevitzky, [Russian-born, later becoming an American citizen, conductor from 1924 to 1949], was the conductor at that time. They were incredible, and the London Philharmonic, I guess it was called, was [conducted by] Sir Thomas Beecham, and I remember, the night of the performance, Sir Thomas Beecham got sick and the concertmaster had to lead, but, back then, people were, I think to some degree, more conscientious; I don't know, may just be my age now. [Editor's Note: Sir Thomas Beecham founded the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 1932 and conducted the LPO until the beginning of World War II, then, briefly after the war ended. In 1946, he founded the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, which he conducted until his death in 1961. He performed with many American orchestras during the war.] When he [Beecham] recovered, he came back to Rutgers and gave a lecture, because he felt he owed them something by not conducting, and they packed the old [College Avenue] Gym [with] people coming to hear Sir Thomas Beecham, who, again, was one of the greats. So, anyway, I've always liked music, I've always liked art.

SH: At any time, because you were already in the National Guard, was there any chance, because of what was going on in Korea, that you would be pulled out of school to go fight?

RP: Well, my attitude was, if they did, they did, you know, if they sent us. I think, mistakenly, the government did not activate the National Guard as a whole. They activated some units, but very few. I think two divisions did fight in Korea. We were ready to go. They just felt that, politically, this was not a war, this was a police action, which, again, makes absolutely no sense, and I was ready to go. If we had to go, we had to go, and finish school when I got back then.

SH: As you were in the ROTC, and then, especially when you got into Advanced ROTC, were you still having to report to your National Guard unit on a regular basis?

RP: Oh, yes. ... You didn't have what they call the dual status program, I think they call it now, or something like that, or I forget what they call it, but, [at] any rate, at that time, they were totally separate. I was a corporal when I finally was discharged from the National Guard. They discharged you one day to accept your commission the next, so [that] there'd be no break in service. ...

SH: In other words, you were discharged the day before graduation. Can I assume that was when you got your commission?

RP: Yes, day before commissioning, whenever it was they gave a commissioning exercise. ...

SH: Where did you go with the ROTC? I know, in Advanced ROTC, you go to camp during the summer.

RP: [I] went to Fort Meade.

SH: You went to Fort Meade.

RP: And then, [for] a week, I believe, out of the middle of it, we went to [Fort] A. P. Hill, [near Bowling Green, Virginia], which was a bivouac area, [a temporary encampment made of improvised or little shelter], and we lived out in the woods and had all kinds of tick and chigger bites. [laughter] That's in Virginia, and, in warm weather, they've got more bugs [than you] could shake a stick at. [laughter]

SH: Were you aware of any of your classmates who were taken out because of the draft, for the Korean War?

RP: I don't think so. I don't. In fact, they did not draft college students. If you were in college, you were exempt from the draft.

SH: Were you?

RP: ... As I say, ... one or two [of them] were in the National Guard. Paul Lowman, who was a friend of mine, was a year ahead of me in [ROTC] at Rutgers. He was a geology major. He was in the National Guard with me, and there might have been one other, I'm not sure, but they never activated any New Jersey units that I know of, or that I can remember, I should say. I would have known at the time, and certainly no large units [were activated], but I'm not sure they activated any.

SH: With Korea going on, can you say now, looking back, that perhaps that was one of the reasons why you were not really serious about your studies, because you thought you would be going to Korea?

RP: No. I think being lazy was the primary reason. [laughter]

SH: That is a very honest answer as well. When did you decide that you wanted to go to law school?

RP: Well, I think I had always considered that. My grandmother's brother, my great uncle, had gone to NYU [New York University], graduated from NYU Law School before 1900, I think around 1898, or something like that, and he lived with my grandmother and my grandfather, because he had pernicious anemia. I remember, he used to have to eat liver something like three times a week. Now, I like liver, but three times a week would be a bit much, [laughter] but I was fascinated by him. He spoke something like seven languages and he read tremendously in history. Every night, he'd come home from work and he'd read or study and, when he graduated from law school, he was too young to take the bar [exam]. He was only, I think, nineteen when he graduated from law school. He didn't go to college first, there. He didn't have to. You'd just go and get your law degree, and he couldn't take the bar in New York, which was where he was admitted, until he was twenty-one. So, then, he went and lived with different immigrant families and learned the languages, and I always kind of admired him [for that]. ... I had learned, early on, that I was not going into science, like my parents had. So, I decided to go to law.

SH: How did the decision to go to Rutgers Law come about? Was it Rutgers Law in Camden or Rutgers Law in Newark?

RP: Newark. Basically, I applied to three schools, which everybody did. I applied and I was accepted at all three, and then, I saw what the costs were at the other two and I decided to go to Rutgers, which I felt was a good school. I never regretted it, and one advantage is, you meet people there that you're going to practice law with the rest of your life. So, it did have an advantage in that respect. So, I went there, which was about ... half the price of the other schools. I had been admitted to NYU and to University of Pennsylvania, but, when I saw the cost, plus, at Penn, I would've had to live down there, which would have been even higher. Here I commuted to Newark, and I could have commuted to New York, I guess, to NYU, but that was very, very expensive, and it would have been a more expensive commute as well. So, by and large, the decision was made for me, and made it easy. [laughter]

SH: Did you go by train or did you drive again?

RP: Train, mostly.

SH: Just to finish up Rutgers, before we start talking about law school, what do you remember about being a senior? What were you looking at? What was going on?

RP: Well, nothing in particular, had a lot of parties, went to class, you know, the usual thing. One nice thing [about] Rutgers, then, we only had about four hundred and fifty graduate in our class and you knew everybody, not necessarily well, but you'd normally say "hello" walking down College Avenue and what-have-you, and it was a smaller, friendlier place than it is today. My wife graduated in 1984 and it's a whole different world, when she graduated from when I graduated. We also used to mostly date what were known as "Coopies," which were Douglass

girls, named after Cooper Hall over there, and that was something, particularly your senior year, you did a lot of, and going to different functions, Military Ball, Soph Hop, you know, the usual stuff. ...

SH: Did you help organize the Military Ball or any other activities?

RP: No, no. I just organized most of the Crown Club functions. [Editor's Note: The Crown Club offered athletic and social opportunities to those students not living in a dormitory or a fraternity.] I recall we got a very good deal on a gross of quart bottles of Iron City beer, from a dealer who was in New Brunswick, who was the local representative for them, and he cut a deal with us because they were trying to get it popular here. That's a Pittsburgh beer, and a gross of cases is a lot of beer and my whole wall, down in the basement of my house, was piled high with cases of beer. [laughter]

SH: You were ready for any party.

RP: Yes, all from Bodner's Liquor Store. He [the beer distributor] pulled up one day, my poor mother, they pulled up one day with a truck and started unloading beer. [laughter]

SH: How did someone dress to go to class in 1954? Did you wear a coat and tie?

RP: I don't think so. In prep school, we had to wear a coat and tie. ... In college, we wore slacks and a regular shirt, and I guess, sometimes, we wore a jacket, or we'd wear, like, a windbreaker, that sort of thing. ... You know what I used to wear a lot? I had an Ike jacket, which I wore because it was, you know, cheap and comfortable, didn't like it as a uniform jacket. Later on, I had to wear it, or even at that time when I had to wear them, in the National Guard, later, on active duty, because they always gapped between your pants, at least with me. ... You had to have the perfect build, and I never had the perfect build, to wear these things and make them look good. They looked good on Eisenhower, but I don't think they did on anybody else, but he was the commander, so, that's where they got them from. [laughter] ...

SH: As a commuter, were you also part of the mandatory chapel?

RP: We didn't have mandatory chapel then. We did in prep school, but we didn't in college at that time. We had various functions, from time to time, in the chapel, and, of course, the chapel had the regular chapel services, but they were not mandatory.

SH: Do you remember who some of the speakers were?

RP: Yes, Robert Frost, I remember, used to speak every year and was very popular, and I went to hear him every time he spoke, which was once a year. I don't recall any others offhand, except I know I went, if they were of interest, but I don't really remember.

SH: In the summers, did you work?

RP: Yes.

SH: Did you work at that same place?

RP: Always worked at the same place. A lot of kids worked down at the shore, which was a lot more fun, but it didn't pay as well, and so, I continued working at National Lead, and I did all different kinds of jobs in different summers. ... I worked in a medical unit there, I worked as a mail boy, I worked in the paint lab. The only thing I didn't work at was the smelter, which is probably just as well. [laughter] [Editor's Note: National Lead was established in 1772 and, by the mid-1920s, was the biggest lead company in the nation. National Lead also helped build atomic bombs during the 1940s and 1950s.]

SH: That is probably why you are here today.

RP: ... Well, that's a funny thing about that. You know, working in the medical unit, I was supposed to be there for a couple of weeks while the regular aid man was on vacation, and then, he got sick and went in the hospital, had his appendix out, or something. So, I worked most of the summer there, and the company was very sensitive to people getting "leaded," as they called it, lead poisoning, and they issued masks, goggles, greaves, which are these aluminum things you wear on your shins, [and] special shoes with metal reinforcement. ... The people that wore all this equipment, it was uncomfortable [for them], but it was safe, but it was hard to get the men to do it, even though they ... threatened to fire them if they didn't wear the stuff. They still wouldn't wear it, and then, they'd end up with lead poisoning, and it always puzzled me. ... To me, that would be kind of scary, because I saw people getting calcium treatments, by the doctor, for lead poisoning, which is extremely painful. ... They'd take an enormous syringe and stick it in and they put a little bit in at a time, and then, the man couldn't stand it anymore. He had a very burning sensation and they'd stop and let him rest, and then, they'd put more in, and you're never finished with the lead. It deposits in the bone marrow and doesn't affect you as badly as in the blood, but that's not a good thing, [laughter] and, you know, we act now as though this is all something new that was recently discovered. Well, they knew about it back then and they tried to take care of it back then, but it's very difficult to get people to do what they should do. ...

SH: It is. Even now, I think they are having difficulties. After you got your commission, did you have a choice as to when you went active?

RP: Why don't you put it on pause for a minute? ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: You got your commission right at graduation. Did you have a choice then regarding when you went active? Could you defer that? Did you go straight to law school?

RP: Well, you could apply for a deferment to complete law school, which I did, because I felt that would be a benefit for me. I would stay in the [Army] Reserve during that time and probably make first lieutenant. So, it would be beneficial to me, [but] the Army saw fit to do otherwise, [laughter] ... but they did put me on the last group going in. They divided the classes up into twenty-four segments, not only the class at Rutgers, but this was national, because they

couldn't handle the basic infantry course, or whatever branch you were in, your basic course, with everybody going in at once. So, I was in BIOG [Basic Infantry Officers' Course] Class 24, which was the last, which was twelve months after graduation. So, I figured I might as well start law school. So, I did.

SH: You started in September then.

RP: Yes. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: When did you start at Rutgers-Newark? When did you go?

RP: September 1954.

SH: What did you do that summer?

RP: Between?

SH: Between graduation and the start of law school?

RP: I worked over at Woodlawn, as sort of a telephone answerer. ... I had a desk over there, answered the telephone, took care of people that came in, was like a night watchman. I'd go through the building at night. [Editor's Note: Woodlawn Mansion, built in 1830 by Colonel Neilson, currently houses the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Rutgers University's Douglass Residential College Campus.]

SH: Woodlawn is where?

RP: Over by the Douglass Campus.

SH: That is part of the Rutgers campus.

RP: Yes. ... I'm getting confused as to time. That [working at Woodlawn] might have been at the end of my junior year. I'm not sure, because it got to the point where they weren't hiring people at National Lead anymore. I think I worked three summers there [at National Lead], Woodlawn one summer, and then, one summer, I worked in the admissions office at Rutgers, doing research on my own class, SAT results, all that sort of thing, for the assistant admissions director, or he might have been admissions director, I'm not sure which, but he was [the] assistant at the time, who was doing graduate work in that area. ... I did the research and turned it over to him, and it was kind of interesting.

SH: That sounds like it was. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Please, continue. We were talking about your decision to stay back, to try to get into that later class and go right into Rutgers Law.

RP: Yes. ... I'd finished my first year at law school and I think, the same week, I went off to Fort Benning, Georgia, and entered BIOC, which is Basic Infantry Officers' Course, and, after I completed that, I remained at Fort Benning and was assigned to the 29th Infantry Regiment, to, first, Company I, as a platoon leader, and then, Company K, as company executive officer, and with parts of that time TDY [temporary duty assignment] to Regimental Headquarters as regimental legal officer. I had not graduated from law school. I had only one year of law school, but that was one year more than anybody else in the regiment had, because it was an infantry regiment; I was an infantry officer. So, they put me up there for awhile, and then, they decided I'd better get more infantry training. So, they sent me back to my company, and then, to Company K. So, I spent two years at Fort Benning.

SH: Then, you returned to Rutgers Law School.

RP: Then, returned to law school.

SH: How did that affect your law school experience, taking this two-year hiatus?

RP: Well, the ... first semester back, I did the worst I'd done. I was number two in the class after my first year, and then, when I came back, I dropped to number seven, in the first semester, because I hadn't been studying. I brought books with me. You know, you always do these things, "Oh, I'm going to study while I'm away." Forget it, I didn't open them once. [laughter] I didn't spend one hour on it. So, I got back and that was a tough semester. After that, things got back to normal and I came up [in class rank].

SH: You stayed in the Reserves.

RP: Oh, yes, and I finally graduated, I think, fourth in the class. ...

SH: Congratulations.

RP: Well, part of it was, I was married at the time and ... you begin to get more responsible, I suppose, and do some of your work. Plus, another big benefit when I went to law school was commuting on the train, believe it or not, because I used to do most of my homework on the train, going in and out, because there's nothing else to do on the train.

SH: You were still living here in this area, in Metuchen.

RP: [I have] always lived in Metuchen, since I was three years old, as long as I can remember.

SH: Did you have a favorite professor at Rutgers Law in Newark?

RP: I guess [C.] Willard Heckel, who was the dean, or associate dean, or whatever. I don't know the different titles or [that] he was one [dean or associate dean] part of the time and the

other part of the time. [Editor's Note: Dr. C. Willard Heckel served as dean from 1963 to 1970 and as acting dean from 1973 to 1975.] Lehan [Kent] Tunks was dean, originally, [from 1953-1962], at least we had him for corporations, and Heckel was constitutional law, and I liked constitutional law. ... I liked Heckel. He was very dramatic, or charismatic, and he gave me good grades. That may have helped. [laughter] I got the Con. Law [Constitutional Law] Prize. I got the Con. Law Prize and I think I got the Property Prize ... and they meant money. They didn't mean much money, I think like twenty-five bucks for each, or something, but, you know, that was a long time ago. [laughter]

SH: That was money.

RP: At graduation, they handed me these checks. ...

SH: You said you liked constitutional law. At that time, was law school narrowly focused in different areas or was it a general law education?

RP: Well, ... as with college, you had more required courses, which I think is good. Maybe you think of that as good which you're used to, I don't know, but you had to take so many credits in each of so many areas. So, you didn't have nearly as many electives as you do today, but it focused you in better if you wanted to practice law, which was the ultimate desire, at least on my part, and then, you had so many that you could pick and choose. ... "Constitutional Law 1," for instance, was required of everyone, and that was a one-year course, two semesters, one-year course. Con. Law 2, you didn't have to take. That was an elective, but I took it, because I liked con. law. ...

SH: What were you hoping or planning to do after you finished with your law degree?

RP: Get finished going to school, go to work, make some money. [laughter]

SH: Were you planning on opening your own practice?

RP: Yes. ... It's so different from the way it is today; back then, I'd say the majority of people did that. We have more lawyers in Middlesex County today than there were in the entire state when I graduated, and I opened my solo practice and stayed there until I was appointed to the bench, and I did all sorts of law. I did not do certain things. I didn't do bankruptcies, I didn't do tax, you know. You can't do everything, but I did the general broadband, and that was pretty typical. Now, more of the graduates go to work for big firms. I did not want to work for a big firm. We had clerkships that were mandatory then, which I think was a terrific idea. I think I was the last class to graduate that had that, but you learned more of the practical aspects, and you could do some clerkship after your freshman year. So, you could clerk two summers, and then, clerk, maybe, six months after you graduated. ... The first semester I was back from the Army, I clerked, in New Brunswick, for Pincus and Shamy and the summer after that and after I graduated. I didn't know anybody to clerk for, so, I had written, I guess, to Dean Heckel and said, "Got any suggestions?" and he suggested that I work for them. Now, the reason it was done away with [was], you didn't make any money, but you don't make any money going to school. You could do away with school, too. I mean, I could never understand that argument. I think,

... when I was in law school, I made fifteen dollars a week, clerking, and then, I got an enormous promotion of thirty-five dollars a week after I graduated, [laughter] but everybody had to do it and everybody went through it, and it's no more hardship than [school]. At least you didn't have to pay for it, like you do with college, [laughter] and I did get a scholarship after I got out of the Army, because I had gotten great grades my first year. They gave me a State Scholarship. Now, these were based strictly on academics. They didn't have anything else and they didn't have many of those [State Scholarships], either, but I lucked out and I got one. ... It amounted to somewhere in the neighborhood of five hundred dollars a year. That paid for my tuition and my books, give you a comparison [to] what it is today. [laughter] ... Times have changed, [laughter] but, yes, I think it was five hundred dollars a year and that covered tuition and books, and I lived home.

SH: Unbelievable. Every student who reads this will not believe that for sure. You decided to stay in the Reserves then. How do you work that into opening up your own law firm? How were you able to do that?

RP: Okay. At one point, while I was still in law school, I found I just couldn't do both. So, I went inactive in the Reserves, but still remained in the Reserve, for a couple of years. When I first got out, I was in the Headquarters Company, Second Battalion, 311th Infantry, which was part of the 78th Division, then, later, became a training division. At that time, it was an infantry division, and I was A&P platoon leader, which means ammunition and pioneer, and I was also acting adjutant, because they didn't have a slot for adjutant. So, that was beginning to take time, so, I had to drop [it], but I didn't leave the Reserves. I stayed in the Active Reserve, but in inactive status, and that remained through my first year or two of law school. Then, through a lawyer in Metuchen, who's dead now, Bill Eichling, who said, "Why don't you come back active and go into the JAG [judge advocate general] course?" which was at Kearney, New Jersey. So, I did that and had regular drill. That was a drilling status, going to USAR School, and then, I met Lenny Hornstein, who, subsequently, became a judge in Hudson County, is now retired. He's older than I am, 78th Division Headquarters, and I went to 78th Division and I branch transferred to JAG and I was in JAG for awhile, and I was an assistant staff judge advocate. ... Well, then, I left drilling, ... at [Camp] Kilmer, and was assigned to ... MTC, Maneuver Training Command, at Fort Dix. I was there for a year and we would plan and referee, or umpire, I guess they call it, training programs for other units. I was there a year, and then, I went back to Kilmer as staff judge advocate. I was promoted to lieutenant colonel and, after about a year as staff judge advocate, a vacancy opened up for division G-1. So, I moved into that, which is personnel, ... plus you're really in charge of the special staff, all the "spare parts," so-to-speak, [laughter] and I was G-1 for about three years. During that period, ... I had already completed Command and General Staff College, I applied to the Army War College and was lucky enough to get selected and I went to the Army War College. ... [Editor's Note: The Army War College is the Army's highest military educational facility for senior military personnel.]

SH: Where?

RP: Carlisle Barracks, and ... I went in the; oh, what did they call it back then? It was corresponding, which meant active/inactive, active-slash-inactive. We would go two weeks in

the summer, to school out there, plus, I had my regular duties with my division, when I had to go with them, too.

SH: Really?

RP: Well, I had a key slot, being on the general staff, so, you know, if I was going to keep that slot, I had to do it, and I'd go out to Carlisle. ... I put in a lot of extra time in the Reserve, and, as I say, I'd already completed Command [and] General Staff College, which you have to complete before you can go to Army War College. The Army War College is selective and it's tough to get into, and, frankly, is one of the best educational experiences I had. Over the winter months, we did a lot of papers and you had to write short papers. They would give you the topic and you'd write and you'd end up with at least seven or eight pages or more, and then, you had to cut them down to two pages. ... It teaches you to write concisely, and we had to do, like, one of those every two weeks the first year.

SH: Were you on site in Carlisle?

RP: We went out to Carlisle two weeks, living there two weeks each summer.

SH: Okay, but you were able to do the coursework ...

RP: The papers and everything were by mail. ... That's why I say it was a corresponding course. Now, they call it something different, but it's the same thing. It's basically a master's level course in strategic science, very, very well taught, and I graduated from the [Army] War College, branch transferred back into infantry and took over a battalion in Edison. ... The battalion I took over had been an admin battalion and I had to convert it into an OSUT, means one-station unit training, infantry battalion, and that's a hard transfer. We had to get rid of a good many of our NCOs, who were not really capable of doing that, and I'd build up, restructure, the entire battalion into an infantry [unit], and I did that, and then, I got promoted to colonel and there were no vacancies. So, I was in the, what do they call it? Standby Reserve, and I used to go to summer [duty] and I'd do an extra, like an extra week or so, in the summer and put in as much extra time as I could, and I was down at the, ...it's an adjunct to the Pentagon down in Washington, the Hoffman Building.

SH: Okay.

RP: Down at the Hoffman Building, in the summers, for three weeks or whatever, and I also spent some time down at Fort Dix in the summers, and then, an opening came. ... When I went up to the 1182nd, I found out about the 1182nd RTU, which is reinforcement training unit, and I joined that ... up in Hackensack. ... I was only in Hackensack for a couple of months and they made me executive officer of the 1182nd back at Kilmer, and then, commander of the 1182nd, and then, I did that for a little over a year, I guess, and then, they retired me, because you have to retire after five years as a colonel or thirty years as a commissioned officer, whichever comes last. It's only about six months' difference, frankly, and I stayed to the bitter end--you know, I've been thrown out of more jobs for getting old, I tell you [laughter]--and retired. ... I liked that. I built the unit up, went out recruiting. I liked recruiting when I was in the G-1. G-1, one of their

functions, they're in charge of recruiting and we used to set up recruiting booths in the shopping centers, out here in Menlo [Park Mall] and, also, down in East Brunswick, [Brunswick Square Mall]. I had a funny incident out at Menlo. I'd bring a jeep in and there's a door where you can drive vehicles in. You know, they have automobile shows in there. ... I'd have the jeep with a pedestal-mounted machine-gun on it, and my driver and I pulled up one day and we had to go push a button or something, and then, the people came out, opened the door for us. Just as we pulled up, so did an armored car, delivering money to Macy's, and this guy starts to get out and he sees our machine-gun on this jeep. [laughter] Well, this was about the most scared guy I'd ever seen. He thought his time had come. He stopped and he's, like, looking, and he's scared to death. We [say], "Don't worry, we've just got a recruiting booth inside," but he thought we were waiting there for him. [laughter]

SH: In all of this time, being in the Reserves, with all the different conflicts and wars, were you ever thinking that you would be called to active duty and have to report?

RP: No. Well, when I went on active duty, it was right after the Korean War. ...

SH: You had done your two years by then.

RP: The Vietnam War, they activated some, again, ... Reserve and National Guard units, but not many, and this war, the Iraqi War, is the first time since World War II that they have massively activated the National Guard and Reserve. In fact, they couldn't fight the war without them, and I felt then, and I feel now, they should have done it during those periods, too, but, unfortunately, it's not the military that runs the wars, it's the politicians in Washington. ... I think there are some politicians there [that] would rather lose the war and win the election than the other way around, which is very, very unfortunate.

SH: That is true.

RP: I mean, that's what you have a reserve for. You're there, you're trained, you're ready to go, and you expect to go.

SH: Do you feel that the military, from the time you were first involved with it to when you retired, continued to get better? Were there any parts that you were disappointed with?

RP: Oh, I think the Army today is as good as it's ever been. I have tremendous respect for the young men that are going into the military, that are serving. I'm still very active in supporting the ROTC at Rutgers. The officers there are very impressive, and the young men that are in there, and [they] are better quality students than the average for the University, looking at grades, majors, every other darned thing. I think, for my money, you get the cream of the crop, and I think it's always been good, but it certainly is as good now, or better, than ever before, but they don't get the credit for it. The press is never going to say that.

SH: That is true.

RP: With, you know, a few exceptions, ... and I try and keep touch. I'm very, very active with the Association of the US Army. [Editor's Note: The Association of the United States Army (AUSA) is a non-profit organization that promotes national support for the Army and provides career development opportunities for former Army officers.] I read all the military publications that I can and I try to keep up on what's going on. Unfortunately, I'm too old to do much else, but they don't want any seventy-five-year-olds. [laughter]

Mary Lou Strahlendorff: If they would take him, he would be over in Iraq now, believe me. [laughter]

SH: What about your involvement with Rutgers? Can you talk a little bit about that? I know, personally, that you have been involved, but it might be nice to put it on record.

RP: Yes. Well, ... I've been reunion chairman [Class of 1954] since we graduated. There go the parties again, [laughter] and I've always been active with the Alumni Association, still am. I feel a duty to Rutgers, they gave me an education, and I feel one should participate in the activities of one's *alma mater*. I don't necessarily agree with a lot of stuff that's happened over there, and is happening, but that has nothing to do with it. I'm still very loyal to Rutgers and I work with, as you know, the Oral History Archives, I've tried to help where I could, and I take an interest in ROTC and trying to help them. We get them involved with AUSA and with the Metuchen Memorial Day Parade and all these things, and I'm very active trying to help the New Brunswick Junior ROTC [JROTC]. I was basically the founder of that. For ten years, I was on the Secretary of the Army's Advisory Panel for ROTC. That's another thing I was with during all these things, and ... Junior ROTC came under our jurisdiction, as did [college-level] Senior ROTC. I asked for [this], and they held monies, to start an ROTC, Junior ROTC, unit in New Brunswick High School, and it took awhile, not because there was any opposition, [there was] just plain inertia in the school system, and, finally, we got them to accept ROTC. I remember going to a meeting we had with faculty and we brought a bunch of kids from Trenton up, Trenton Junior ROTC, and General Hamlet, James [F.] Hamlet, who has since died. ... Anyway, we went down and presented our case, ... and this was after, like, a year or more of struggles, to the faculty. We brought ten kids, in uniform, from Trenton, and these kids were out in the hallway and each one of them's going to say a few words about their experience. Well, the kids from New Brunswick High saw these kids in uniform; they were fascinated, they were thrilled with it, and they wanted to know, "How can we do this?" and that helped us enormously, and they have a very good unit now. This past semester, they had 265 students, which is a lot, in this relatively small high school. They're getting kids into good colleges. They've got a kid now at Georgia Military, North Georgia rather, sorry, North Georgia College, which is a military college, they've got a kid up at Norwich University, they've got a kid in Annapolis, they've got a kid, I think, in Cornell; never had kids go to schools like that before. They have a kid at Rutgers in the ROTC. Other kids that have not gone to college have gone on active duty and they can start in as, I forget, I think maybe E-4s, but I'm not sure, or E-3s, PFCs. [Editor's Note: The E-3 rank is private first class; E-4 is either a corporal or a specialist.] It's had a tremendous impact on the student body, all to the good. So, I'm very proud of that, and ... they're also in the Metuchen Memorial Day parade and they were also in the New Brunswick-Highland Park one, and we have them at our meetings, post the colors, and it's a good group. Major Woody, who

was the principal instructor, has done a wonderful job with those kids, and I think that's a very, very important thing. I really am very proud of that. So, I keep active.

SH: Sounds like it.

MS: You were also, for a number of years, involved in the Zimmerli Museum. [Editor's Note: The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum is affiliated with Rutgers University, located on the New Brunswick Campus.]

RP: Well, our class, for a number of years, contributed every five years to the Zimmerli. We have a room named after the Class of '54, we bought several pictures for their collection, which have gone up enormously in value, and been very active, when [Phillip] Dennis Cate was the director there. No, I've tried to keep involved at Rutgers, and I think it's important that alumni do that.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Can I put this on?

RP: Yes, you might as well.

SH: Besides your involvement with Rutgers, I know that you have been politically active. Would you like to put a little piece on about that?

RP: Yes, I have been ever since I was young, [laughter] which was a long time ago.

MS: Many, many moons ago.

RP: I was president of the New Jersey State Young Republicans at one point, as well as the ... NJYR National Committeeman before that. [Editor's Note: The Young Republicans is a national youth organization, established in 1859, with state clubs that educate registered Republicans on current political issues.] I ran in a primary contest, in 1964; I ran to support Barry Goldwater for President. My opponent supported either [New York Governor Nelson] Rockefeller or [Pennsylvania Governor William] Scranton. They were both the liberal [liberal wing of the Republican Party] candidates. I won, and, in fact, in Middlesex County, if you [say], "Oh, you can't do that," well, as it turned out, I won by four, four-and-a-half or five-to-one and went out to San Francisco, which was very exciting. Back then, conventions were much more exciting than they are now. They did not have unit rule, [Editor's Note: Where the majority decides who the state's delegates will support]. There were two of us that had run in primaries who were hardcore Goldwater supporters, myself and a delegate from Union County. I managed to talk the other delegate [into supporting Goldwater], and, well, we had two delegates and two alternates from Middlesex County. The other delegate was Fred Hermann, from North Brunswick, who'd been Mayor of North Brunswick, oh, I don't know how many years, twenty years or more, and he decided to support Goldwater and he was very good to me. He was an old man, probably younger than I am now, [laughter] you know, seemed like an old man at the time, and he was very nice to me. The alternates were Mary Maine, who was a good friend of mine and a

Goldwater supporter from the beginning, and I forget who the other alternate was, frankly, and the same thing was true in Union County; there was a [Goldwater] delegate. We were the hardcore. Then, there were about eight that were committed to Goldwater. Mark Anton, who owned Suburban Gas, I think it's called, [Suburban Propane Gas Corporation], was the chairman of the Goldwater ... team, because he was a name; he was a retired state senator, what-have-you. There were eight of us that went out there supporting Goldwater, but what it ended up [being], with the politicking back and forth, and I was one of the floor leaders, we got twenty out of forty, which was amazing, from New Jersey, and a big cheer went up when New Jersey announced twenty/twenty, and twenty went, I guess it was for Rockefeller, and twenty for Goldwater. I remember, one time, they had a party on a boat, went out under the Golden Gate Bridge and back and around, a pretty good party, and I went to it, it was a Young Republican-sponsored party, and I had my briefcase. It was all full of stuff that was supposed to be ... secret, for the Goldwater people. After imbibing a good deal, [I] went back to my hotel and left my briefcase on the boat. [laughter] So, poor Joe Leo, I had to be in the Cow Palace, [an arena in the San Francisco area], which was where they had the convention, early the next day. So, I couldn't go out looking for it. So, poor Joe Leo, who's our Republican County Chairman now, Middlesex County, and who was a Goldwater supporter, he had to go out there and find the boat and get my briefcase back. ... I ran, I won and I figured, "How am I going to afford this?" you know, because ... they don't pay anything, the party. So, this is a problem. So, I talked to a friend of mine, who's been dead many years now, an older man, Lou Timolot, who lived down on Navesink River Road in Middletown Township, and anybody who lives on Navesink River Road in Middletown Township is loaded. ... He gave me enough money so [that] I could afford to go and I could bring a group with me to politic for Goldwater. He was a big Goldwater supporter. The state chairman of the Republican Party, who, at that time, was Webb Todd, Webster Todd, subsequent Governor ... Whitman's father; that's probably not good English, anyway, the father of our recent governor. [laughter]

SH: Christine Todd Whitman.

RP: Yes, her father, and her daughter, [Kate Whitman], now, I see, is running for Congress, for Mike Ferguson's seat, because Mike Ferguson has left, has retired, or is retiring, I should say. Any rate, he gave me ten visitors' passes, so that I could get these other kids from the Young Republicans in, which is very nice, because those things were hard to come by. They were badges you had to wear. I've got my badge as a delegate still inside, and I was in the last one. I was an alternate delegate into New York City, which was dull, but, so, we had more than ten people, and it was all young people, in their twenties, early thirties, but what we'd do [was], we'd have a runner and we'd get in a bunch of kids with the badge and we'd take the badge off and send the runner out to bring in more with the same badges. [laughter] So, we got all our people in every day. ... Of course, they all had Goldwater all over them, Goldwater hats. I've got a picture of myself in there with Barry Goldwater, and with Walter Jones, who was a state senator from Bergen County and the Bergen County chairman, and I've got a Goldwater hat on, [laughter] but that was a very exciting thing and I still remember it. [laughter]

SH: You continued to stay involved with the Republican Party here.

RP: Yes. I've been county Republican chairman. I stayed active until I was appointed to the bench, at which time, of course, I couldn't be active anymore, and, when I retired from the bench, ... I went back, got active again, ran for the State Senate, lost. Again, this is Middlesex County. [laughter] It's tough, but I did get forty-two percent of the vote, which was better than people before or after, and I'm still active. I'm the Republican committee man from First District in Metuchen and I'm very active, really. [Editor's Note: Judge Richard Plechner was recalled to the Bench in 2010 and is no longer involved in politics.]

SH: Have you been involved in local politics or just in the Republican Party?

RP: Yes, I ran for council, at one point, in Metuchen, lost. That was years ago. As I say, I'm committee man for [the] First District, you know, just been generally active, helping out in campaigns. I can't do as much anymore as I used to, to some degree, because, with my back, I can't go door-to-door, used to do that sort of thing, and I was ... a participant in the Sharon meeting, which founded Young Americans for Freedom, YAF. [Editor's Note: In September 1960, the Young Americans for Freedom was established in Sharon, Connecticut, at conservative writer and political commentator William F. Buckley's estate, and its founders issued the Sharon Statement, which spelled out the group's founding principles, on September 11, 1960.] I always kid Joe Leo, because he was active, too, and was up there, ... he's our county Republican chairman now, I say, "It used to be we were YAF, Young Americans For Freedom. Now, we're 'Old Americans For Freedom' or 'OAF.'" [laughter] We're OAFs now," [laughter] but that was very exciting. I was up at Bill Buckley's estate in Sharon, Connecticut ... and met a lot of important people there and that was really the beginning impetus for the Goldwater [Campaign], at that time, "Goldwater for Vice-President," and I was very active in that, and Young Americans for Freedom. Now, they call it the Young Americans Foundation, I think. [Editor's Note: There are two conservative youth groups that use the YAF acronym, Young Americans for Freedom and Young America's Foundation, founded in 1969 at Vanderbilt University. There is also the Young Americans for Freedom-affiliated YAF Foundation.] It's a college group, college and young people's group, and I was active, I became a national director of that, one of the national board members, board of directors. I met a lot of very interesting people, not the least of which was Goldwater, of course, himself.

SH: That must have been very exciting.

RP: And Bill Buckley, who was a fascinating guy, and he was exactly the same in real life as he was on TV and whatnot, brilliant, brilliant man, with an unbelievable vocabulary. [laughter]

SH: He will always be known for that, I believe.

RP: ... He had this huge mansion, of course, on this huge estate, and they had other mansions on the estate, [laughter] which belonged to other Buckleys, and they had a guest place and all this stuff, and they had a huge, I don't know what you call it, an arboretum or what, attached to the house, which was their party room. ... When the smoke got too heavy; of course, that was when people smoked. I didn't. I smoked a pipe, but I wouldn't smoke indoors, but I started that when I was in college. That was one of the things I got from Rutgers. Freshman year, they always had a pipe sale and all the kids went out and bought pipes, because we felt it made us look older.

Now, I'd rather look younger; back then, you wanted to look older, you know, and the roof would open up on this to let the smoke out.

SH: Like a conservatory.

RP: Yes, and Buckley, who was, you know, an absolute genius, would stand around talking politics with us, and a fascinating guy, and Bill Rusher, who was editor of the *National Review* at that time, the *National Review* was like our Bible; [M. Stanton] Stan Evans, who was not much older than I was, maybe around the same age, who was editor of the *Indianapolis News* and the *Indianapolis Star*, I think it is, and ... Frank Meyer, who was quite a writer and philosopher; [I] got to meet these people, Tom Molnar, again, an important writer in conservative politics. So, that was a very fascinating part of my life, and I'm still a conservative and still active politically.

SH: Are there other aspects of your life that you would like to share or put on record?

RP: I don't think so. I can't think of any offhand.

SH: I certainly thank you, not only for participating, but for your support of the oral history program here at Rutgers. For now, I will say this concludes our interview; thank you.

RP: Okay, thank you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by William Nesson 10/7/09

Reviewed by Kristie Thomas 10/7/09

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 10/10/09

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 10/17/09

Reviewed by Richard F. Plechner 2/9/11