

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RONALD STOKES

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

MARCH 27, 2015

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Lieutenant Colonel Ronald Stokes, US Army, Retired, on March 27, 2015, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth ...

Siri Nesheim: ... Siri Nesheim ...

Andrew Sutphen: ... Andrew Sutphen.

SI: Thank you very much for being here. I really appreciate it.

Ronald Stokes: No problem.

SI: To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

RS: I was born in East Orange General Hospital on 10 June, 1946, at 12:12 PM.

SI: Very specific, good. Tell us a little bit about your family, maybe starting with your father. What do you know about the family background?

RS: My father was born in Carrsville, Virginia, which is near a little town called Zuni, which is where his father had a farm. There were nine kids in his family and, basically, they were all farmers until they left the farm for other endeavors, with four of the boys moving North, like my father did, after the war. His grandparents had a ninety-acre farm, back in 1907 in Southern Virginia. There was, I think, fourteen kids, including my grandfather and his siblings. In Southern Virginia, I always found it remarkable, [in] that year, for a black farmer to have that much acreage on a farm. In fact, while the farm is in other hands now, there's a small cemetery on that plot that the family still maintains, where my great grandparents, couple of my great uncles, are buried. My father, his father, my grandfather, married a woman named Gertrude (Mitchell?) and the two of them produced my father and his siblings. Living in Zuni, which is in Isle of Wight County, they paid taxes to a local, government, which included school taxes, but the black kids were not allowed to go to the school. So, my [great] grandfather, my grandmother's father, had a large farm. They cut all the timber and they built their own school, two-room school, and they hired a separate teacher to teach the kids. So, my father, basically, had maybe a sixth grade, seventh grade education. In 1941, he went into the service. I could never figure out whether he was drafted or signed up, but, in 1941, he went into the Army, signing up out of Richmond, Virginia. He was in several different types of units, but ended up being in a tank destroyer outfit. The army kept changing the equipment that these soldiers were getting. So, you had a bunch of guys, black guys, that some who went to high school in the North, one or two had college educations, but the preponderance of them were Southern guys that were farmers. So, they had no real mechanical aptitude, but the Army kept giving them different types of mechanical equipment to learn and they had difficulty with it. As a result, ratings for the units were very poor, which was understandable, at least from my perspective. His unit was one of the few units, tank destroyer units, that actually went to Europe during World War II. As they were transferring to Europe, they had been training with what's called an M-10 Tank Destroyer. They ended up being issued the M-18 Tank Destroyer, the Hellcat. So, they had to learn that. My father ended up being a loader on the main gun and his particular company, which was Bravo Company of the 827th Tank Destroyer Battalion, actually fought

with the Twelfth Armored Division in the Ardennes and that general area. They had a fairly good record in destroying German tanks. As soon as they were detached from the unit, they were all sent back to the rear and given menial tasks to do. During the course of his training, at one time, he was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland. His cousins knew some other relatives in other families. Somehow, in all of that, he came to New Jersey and met my mother. She wasn't my mother then, but they started dating. So, he actually got married before the war was over.

SI: Okay.

RS: So, when he was in Europe, he was actually married at that time. Shortly after he returned home, then, I was born, all right. So, after the war, he ended up working at the Bayonne Naval Base. I don't know how many of you remember, there was a little, small naval base in Bayonne. It's where all of the Navy hardhat divers were trained.

SI: Yes, like in the movie with Cuba Gooding, Jr. [Editor's Note: The interviewer is referring to the 2000 film *Men of Honor*, starring Cuba Gooding, Jr., and Robert DeNiro.]

RS: Right. The military goes through a lot of changes, a lot of reorganizations, a lot of restructures. So, at some point, the Navy base became a joint transportation base and it was run by the Military Traffic Management Command. Now, the entire base is gone. I think currently a small movie studio is there and some other businesses that have taken over the property. Basically, while that base existed, after the war, my father worked there, basically in a motor pool, driving cars, driving trucks, using forklifts, stuff of that nature, until he retired.

SI: He was in the service up until the time he retired.

RS: No, no, he actually got [out]. He went in 1941, he got out 1945.

SI: Okay. He was working as a civilian government worker there.

RS: Right.

SI: Did he ever talk about his time in combat or did you only find out about it later?

RS: Well, people liked to tease my father--he's a very quiet country boy. He didn't really talk a whole lot. One thing we learned as kids is, "Don't get him mad," though. Especially if he came home after a hard day's work and Mama said, "Those boys did this and those boys did that," we were in for a bit of a disciplinary lesson. No, he didn't talk that much about it. The two things he did is, he had a few ribbons and he used to show them to us. He mentioned how cold it was when they were in combat and that, sometimes, even though they didn't have a target, they would fire off the gun, just so the heat from the gun barrel, they could stand around and warm up. Now, I don't know how true that was or not. Sometimes, when you fire when you're not supposed to you, too many other people start firing. Basically, that's all he said, outside of--I don't know if you know the very first black general in the military.

SI: Benjamin Davis.

RS: Benjamin Davis, Sr. [Editor's Note: Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., (1877-1970) was promoted to brigadier general in the US Army in 1940.]

SI: Senior, yes.

RS: During World War II, he was assigned to the IG's [Inspector General] office out of Washington. His job was, basically, to go around, make sure troop morale's okay, investigate little complaints by the troops, and so forth, regarding black troops. My father remembered seeing him on Fort Huachuca [in Arizona] one time, when he was stationed there. He saw him off at a slight distance. He said, with the entourage around him, he decided he wasn't going to go over there, he just watched them walk through an area, but that was the only other thing he really mentioned about his military service.

AS: When he was discharged, do you know what rank he was?

RS: PFC [Private First Class]. Funny thing about him, in those days, when they took pictures of the units, they took the ones that are real long that lay out the whole unit. Well, he didn't have a picture, but another guy had a picture of his unit that was taken. My mother's youngest sister and her daughter went to school, college, in Ohio and she met her boyfriend, now husband. He was from Indiana. She went with him out to visit his parents. While she was at the house, her soon to be father-in-law rolled out this picture of him in the Army. She pointed to it and she was looking, all that, and she says, "Jesus," she says, "this guy over here looks a lot like my Uncle Joe." He said, "Joe Stokes?" She said, "Yes." [He] said, "That's him." So, small world, she was on the phone right away and called and said, "Hey, here's a guy from your old World War II unit," and blah, blah, blah, and so on. So, my brothers and I, we went out, got some tickets for my mother and him, sent him out there to visit for a while, which was good. I think that's the only guy he ever visited from his old World War II unit before--both of them now have passed--but small world, sometimes.

SI: Absolutely. Tell us a little bit about your mother and her family background.

RS: Well, her parents, her mother, can't remember exactly where she was from, but she ended up in New York, and then, New Jersey. Her father was born in Maryland and there was a whole host of them, too, like twelve or thirteen kids, boys and girls. Part of them moved, part of them stayed with other relatives. So, it wasn't a cohesive family in that sense, but a significant number of them went to New York to stay with relatives, and then, eventually, came to New Jersey and stayed with relatives and ended up where some of the older ones were actually taking care of some of the younger ones. In any event, my grandfather, while he was in New York, joined the 15th National Guard unit. They were located up in Harlem. Of course, they had their issues--no equipment, no training, all sorts of issues that they had to deal with--but I guess the most significant thing he ever told me about his service was that, as World War I approached, the whole unit was put on troop trains and sent down to Spartanburg, South Carolina, I think it was, to train. There was some incident in the local town where the local people, guys, started beating up a couple of the black soldiers. Apparently, in those days, soldiers used to keep their rifles in the barracks. So, all these black soldiers grabbed their rifles and started heading to town.

Fortunately, the commander caught up to them, stopped all of them; he said, the next morning, they were all back on troop trains, sent them back up to New York to finish their training. [laughter] So, that was a significant thing he used to tell us about when we were kids, and the fact that when they actually were designated to go overseas, they were put on the--think it was the USS *Pocahontas*--out of New York, a troopship. [Editor's Note: The USS *Pocahontas* was originally a German ship, but was in port in New York City when the United States entered World War I. It was seized, renamed and used as a transport ship.] It got out about a half a day and the engines broke. So, they had to bring them back into New York Harbor and they spent a few more days hanging around until they fixed it and took off again. They landed in Northern France and, at the time, General [John "Blackjack"] Pershing was the overall commander of the American Expeditionary Forces. Like many officers of that day, he didn't have a very high opinion of black soldiers. So, notwithstanding how they were trained, and my grandfather's unit was trained as an infantry unit, they were transferring them all into building buildings for the other guys and unloading ships, and so on, but the French had been in the war so long and had had so many losses that they were really in a situation where they needed bodies to fill the ranks. So, my grandfather's unit, along with about four other black units, were all re-designated and they went from being the 15th New York National Guard unit to the 369th Infantry Regiment, along with the 370th. I forget the designations of the others [the 366th, the 371st and the 372nd], but the 369th was sent to the French Fourth Army, I think it was. [Editor's Note: The 369th Regiment, nicknamed the "Harlem Hellfighters," served on the front lines longer than any other American regiment during the war.] They occupied trenches in the Meuse-Argonne area. Every war you hear about from World War I, they talk about the Meuse-Argonne; well, that's where his unit was. White units had enough in depth, as far as the amount of troops that they had, that once you were on the trenches for a period of time, they would take them out, send them to the rear for a rest and bring a fresh one up, so that you had this flow going back and forth. They didn't have that same situation with the black troops. So, his unit stayed 190, 180 days in the trenches, with no relief.

SI: Wow.

RS: Okay. They did well enough that the entire unit was awarded the Croix de Guerre, which is the French highest award. So, in fact, the Croix de Guerre that was given to my grandfather during World War I, I've got it hanging at home in a shadowbox. It looks a little beat up, and so on, but it's hanging in there. Two guys in his unit, who he personally knew and, in fact, came to his house--by this time, he was back home, he was living in East Orange--these two guys came to visit him and had dinner at the house, talked to my aunt and my uncles, who were young kids then. They remember seeing these guys. One was called [William] Henry Johnson and the other one was Needham Roberts. In the trench warfare, you'd put guys out front at night, kind of like a listening post, to look out, to alert the rest if the enemy was trying to get into your ranks or your trenches during the night. Well, these two guys were in a bombed out crater, watching out forward, when a German patrol, estimated about twenty guys, attacked them, first by throwing grenades. So, they had a long battle between the two of them. The one guy, Needham Roberts, got incapacitated to the point where he couldn't fight any longer. The other guy fought until he ran out of ammo and he was beating guys with his rifle and he took out a bolo knife and he cut several of them. Finally, the Germans just figured it was too much of a fight. They grabbed their wounded and dead and drug [them] off and went away. I bring this up because this guy was

wounded twenty-three times during the war, never got a Purple Heart, all right, but one of the white commanders in his unit ended up getting the Medal of Honor and a Silver Star, okay. It just shows you the disparity that goes on, at that time, between how they looked at black service versus white service. He [Johnson] eventually got his Purple Heart; unfortunately, he had deceased some number of years. It happened when President Clinton was in office. He was awarded, I think--I can't remember--one other medal plus his Purple Heart. There was, I read recently, a document on the desk of Secretary [Chuck] Hagel [Secretary of Defense from 2013 to 2015] to sign retroactively awarding him the Medal of Honor. So, I don't know where that stands, but at least it made the Secretary's desk. It made things kind of real to me. As a kid, we lived four blocks from my grandparents. You couldn't go up to my grandparents' house without seeing the American flag flying out there, every day. We called my grandfather "Pop." Pop would have that out there and, [if] it got raggedy, he'd make us untie it and tie a new one up there. So, you grew up figuring you had to be a patriot, just because of the way he was. In fact, when they told these stories about these guys and you read about them later, about their heroics and that they personally knew them, it just made all this a little more real to you. Anyway, my grandfather came out of the service, he worked a lot of different jobs. He drove, at the time, one of those old, raggedy trucks for Breyer's Ice Cream, delivering ice cream to the stores. Apparently, stories in the family have it that he, sometimes, he'd come home with the truck after work, when it was real late and he didn't turn it in. There'd still be ice cream left on the truck and all the kids on the block would be running down the street, [laughter] trying to figure if there was leftover ice cream. Eventually, he left that job and he became either the first or among the very first black toll takers on the New Jersey Turnpike. They had a picture of him, in 1957, I think it was, in the *Star Ledger*, showing him standing at the Carteret toll booth collecting money. Of course, in those days, they wore the suit with the hat and all that stuff.

SI: Yes, a uniform.

RS: Yes. So, that was kind of him. He was, at that time, kind of the town busybody. He knew everybody in town. No matter what church you went to, he knew the minister or the pastor of that church or the priest in charge of that church. He knew everybody in city hall. Some of that was pretty good, because, when I decided to get a New Jersey firearms card and I went to the police department, he went with me, everybody in the police department knew him. So, it made my acquisition of the firearms card a very smooth and pleasurable operation. He kind of put together a VFW post in town and got a charter. They never had enough money collected to be able to build a building, so, they kind of met in public buildings, private homes, and so on. He made sure what veterans he knew, he got them out for Memorial Day, marched in the parade in town. So, that's kind of the way he was. He was born in 1898, died in 1980. When he was in the hospital--I guess I'm the oldest grandson, so, I was, I like to say, the favorite--so, I had to go up every day to the hospital, shave him, but he was an inspiring guy.

SI: Absolutely.

RS: Not to mention my father was inspiring, too, because even though he wasn't a well-educated guy, you look back and say, "Well, what do you learn from your parents?" he was an honest guy. He went to church, he went to work every day, didn't have a lot of money, had to juggle things with his kids, put us all through Boy Scouts, went on camping trips with us, did all those kinds of

things. We played Little League baseball. He'd come watch the baseball games, and so on. So, he was a very strong presence in my life and my brothers' lives. Unfortunately, it was six boys and one girl--we tried to sell her, but it didn't work. [laughter] We were going to trade her for a boy, so [that] we could get a baseball team together.

AS: Did he speak of the conditions in World War II, maybe out in the field?

RS: No, not really. My grandfather was more vocal about that than my father was; like I said, he was very quiet. He just kind of let us know that the world we were living in, there were inadequacies and that we had to take additional precautions to guard ourselves against harm. Every year, he would pile us in the car and drive us down to Virginia to visit with my grandparents on their farm. I remember those trips, because, back in the '50s, as we were traveling, he'd pull in to get gas, but we couldn't use the bathroom and we couldn't go in the store. We had to stop the car along the road somewhere and relieve ourselves. I remember my grandfather down there had extremely heavy drapes across the front of the house. As soon as it got dark, he'd pull those closed, he said because Klan would ride down the road and shoot into your house if they could see light. He kept loaded shotguns by every door, double barrels. I don't know if you've ever seen one of those guns, but I was a young guy--I couldn't lift the thing, it was so heavy.

SI: Yes.

RS: So, those are the kind of things that I remember. I remember my grandfather walked with a distinct limp and, apparently, that came from having a fight with two white guys in town. He was in the store, the local store, and they walked in. The guy was going to service them ahead of him and my grandfather was an ornery guy. He wouldn't stand for it. So, apparently, some knives were pulled on both sides and people got to fighting. He walked away with a limp and I don't know what happened to the other guys, but, according to my uncle, who observed it, said, "They didn't want to bother him no more." So, I guess he got his licks in.

SI: This was your mother's father.

RS: No, my father's father, down South.

SI: Down in Virginia?

RS: Yes. So, you hear all these things and, of course, today, with cellphones, iPads, computers, instant TV, twenty-four-hour TV, everything that happens is instantaneously broadcast to everyone. You know what went on in Missouri and down in South Carolina and wherever--they saturate it with you. So, if you don't understand the environment you're in today, then, you're just not listening.

SI: Tell us a little bit about where you grew up, your neighborhood, that sort of thing. You were born in 1946, so, you would have been brought up in the late 1940s, early 1950s.

RS: Truman was President [from 1945 to 1953].

SI: Yes. That was in East Orange.

RS: Yes, like I said, I was born in East Orange General Hospital, raised in East Orange, I went through all the public schools, elementary school, junior high school and high school, in East Orange. All my brothers, starting with me--I was the oldest--we ended up in the Scouts. In fact, I ended up one rank below Eagle Scout. My brother next to me actually became an Eagle Scout. My sister was in the Scouts. We had a small house. To this day, I have no idea how we lived in that house. It was six kids, my mother and father and we only had six rooms in the house and that includes the bathroom. There's a lot of queuing up for the bathroom. I guess the mind has a way of blocking out those things that were not the most pleasant of your conditions growing up, [laughter] but, somehow, we all survived. We all got fed every day. My brother next to me and myself, we worked a lot of little odd jobs. We made our own shoeshine box, used to go out and shine shoes, used to work at the corner store, stacking shelves. Wintertime, like this, you couldn't keep us home--we're out shoveling snow. Of course, in those days, you got five dollars for doing a driveway; today these kids want twenty-five, thirty dollars nowadays. [laughter] We would go out and hustle a buck wherever we could, an honest buck. A lot of kids on the block--and it was a very mixed neighborhood, between Polish, Italian, black, primarily--we all played stickball in the street. My mother was a den mother for all of us when we were in Cub Scouts, so, the den meetings were held at our house. So, we'd have eight or nine little boys in there, punching holes in the wall or whatever. So, you got to know everybody in the neighborhood. Sometimes, I'd be eating dinner around the corner at Joey's house, because Joey was Italian. I'd end up eating an Italian meal there and, occasionally, he was at my house, even with six of us, seven of us at the time. So, that's the kind of neighborhood we grew up in. All the kids kind of played. We were black, we were white, didn't make a difference--we had a lot of commonality of things we did. We all collected baseball cards. To this day, when I left home to go in the Army, there was five shoeboxes full of baseball cards, I have no idea where they went and what happened to them, but, if I had them today...

SI: You would be a millionaire. [laughter]

RS: I'd be phoning this in from Tahiti or Acapulco somewhere, but we did those things. We shot marbles together, we played red light, all those games. The girls would be braiding the ends of the ropes and they'd be doing jump rope all day long and hopscotch. When you go back and think about it, it was kind of like a Norman Rockwell kind of environment [laughter]--not to say we didn't have our little days where I got mad at this guy and he got mad at me and we have a little tiff, and so on. We even had a girl there in our neighborhood. She lived around the corner from us. She was probably one of the best baseball players we had in the neighborhood. So, when we were choosing up teams, she was always picked very early. We called her Cookie. That's all I ever knew; I never knew the girl's real name. One day, someone asks me if I met (Yvonne). I said, "Who the heck is that?" He said, "That's Cookie." He said, "Oh, she's an Evangelist now." I said, "Well, I don't want to see her," [laughter] but, anyway, that's the tone of the kinds of neighborhoods we had. You could walk around the corner to go to school, but we would rather go down the street and wait for the lady in the house to turn her back. We'd go up her driveway and climb between the two garages and the next house and walk down the other

driveway. Why? because we were boys. It's like you walk down the street and you stomp in the mud puddle.

SI: You said that you and your brothers worked a lot. Would you have to give that money to your family or would you just be able to use that for recreation?

RS: Probably a good portion of it went to the family. I had an uncle who had a cleaning crew and they used to clean the local theater. In those days, people threw everything on the floor, so [that] you had to sweep up under the seats and scrape gum, clean cigarette butts out the urinal, change lights, and polish brass. I was a teenager in high school. So, on weekends, or when school was out, my uncle would take me along with his cleaning crew. So, we'd start and it'd be four hours to get the movie ready to open; four hours, I got two dollars. Then, my mother would say, "Can you buy a loaf of bread on the way home?" [laughter] or the manager of the movies would come in and he'd give me two free passes to the movies. I was a kid--the movies that were there weren't things I wanted to see. So, Mom and her girlfriend got to go, [laughter] but you didn't mind that. When I went in the Army, we were, basically, compelled to buy savings bonds. Now, you didn't have to, but it was the lesser of two evils. So, you bought savings bonds. So, you're making ninety-five bucks a month, they're taking money out of that for a savings bond. At the time, I was married, so, part of that money went home. So, you really didn't have much money left, all right. Out of that savings bond, initially, when I went in the service, I wasn't married, so, I listed my mom as the co-beneficiary on my savings bonds and used the home address and the bonds went there. I stayed in the Army nine years, buying those bonds. When I came home, there were zero bonds there. They were all spent, because my brother needed books, everybody went to college. So, by hook or crook, by loans or whatever, if my brother needed a book for this class, Mom would cash that bond in and send him the money for the book [bonds]. It wasn't there. She didn't tell me up front that's what was happening and it was like, "I don't care. This is family and we don't make issues out of that stuff. We share what we can with each other for the benefit of all of us." So, that's the kind of environment that they established with us. Of course, some of them drifted a little bit when they got older.

SI: You described it as "the lesser of two evils" to buy the savings bond. Does that mean, say, your commander would say, "Why aren't you doing it?" Was there any kind of punitive measure if you did not buy the bond?

RS: I wouldn't say punitive, but, if they needed somebody for extra details or they needed someone on KP [kitchen patrol] or something like that, somehow, your name would come up a little more frequently.

SI: Okay.

AS: Going back to your parents, did you see in them habits that they may have developed during their experience in the Depression? Did they ever talk about the Depression? Especially with finances, were they big money savers because of how they experienced the Depression?

RS: Money savers, no, they didn't save anything, because the amount of money they had and the fact that they had so many kids, the cost of living, basically, overwhelmed them most of their

adult life with all these kids at home. Then, sometimes, it was, as the saying goes, "rob Peter to pay Paul," and then, later, you pay that back. So, that's why, realizing that, and it was almost unsaid, when Mom said, "Buy a loaf of bread," and I only made two dollars at the time, there were no qualms about it. I bought the loaf of bread, took it home. There was no issue. What I found is, she was very frugal about some things. She would buy things at the market that would go a long way, pastas and things like that. When we had, like, let's say a Friday or Saturday where we had, I don't know, let's say a roast and some other kind of meat on Saturday, whatever didn't get eaten went into a big pot on Sunday. Come Monday, you had this huge pot on the stove of homemade soup and rolls and that would last you a few days. Then, like I said, my grandparents lived four blocks away, so, frequently, I would walk up to my grandparents' house. Because my grandmother was a very obese lady, she couldn't do a lot of things. So, I would go up, climb up, wipe tops of shelves off for her, do all the little things like that. So, somehow, just before it was time to go, it was right at dinnertime and Grandma would give me a meal to eat before I left. [laughter]

AS: Were you and your friends interested in the Moon missions and the first Moon landing?

SI: Was that of interest to you later on? I would guess *Sputnik* went up when you were about ten or eleven. [Editor's Note: *Sputnik I*, the world's first artificial satellite, was launched by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957.]

RS: I remember hearing about that and seeing a little something on TV, but it wasn't a thing that really clicked at that early time. We were into athletics, football, baseball, just kind of hanging out with the guys in the street, at school. The elementary school I went to was around the corner from us. So, often, we would go around the corner and play in the big playground by the school, when school was closed. It made my mother mad, because she liked--in those days, it was one of those, "When I call you, you'd better be in earshot, [laughter] not too far away." Another thing we did at that time is, we read comic books, we read comic books and we read comic books, thousands of comic books. So, you would read Archie and Jug Head and Looney Tunes, Sergeant Rock of Easy Company, I read a lot of that kind of stuff, Batman, Superman. So, where kids may see it on videos today, we read about all this stuff in comic books. Reading was something that, I guess, we all kind of gravitated to, because my mother, she dropped out of high school when she was a teenager. She went to beauty-culture school to learn how to, I guess, do hair, and so on, then, got married, started having kids. She never really worked in the beauty-culture field, but, for all the black girls on the street who she knew, she would do their hair for, like, on a Friday night or a Saturday. So, sometimes, the kitchen was off-limits, because she'd be in there doing hair with kids in the neighborhood, who'd give her, like, two, three bucks doing that. She worked a lot of years as a nurse's aide at East Orange General Hospital. She worked the drunk tank until she got tired of that, because they used to have the drunk tank in the hospital, and then, she went in with the newborn kids, the babies. While I was in high school, my mother decided that she wanted to go back to school, so, she went and got her GED. Then, she went to Essex County College and got a degree, and then, she went to Upsala, which no longer exists, and got a four-year teaching degree, to teach--what do you call them, the hard to learn, the disciplinary types of kids? [Editor's Note: Upsala College operated in East Orange from 1893 to 1995.]

SI: Right.

RS: All right, and she got half of a master's degree from Seton Hall. She actually got a degree from Seton Hall with her name on it. The reason I say half is because one of my brothers had graduated from Seton Hall and my mother was an obese woman, also, so, my brother used to do a lot of running to the library to get stuff for her. [laughter] I used to say, "Paul, you go up with Mom and get that degree." She ended up getting a master's degree. Pop never did anything educationally like that, but my mother did. So, a good portion of my young adult life, my mother was going to school along with my younger brothers and sisters. Everybody's toting schoolbags.

SI: It sounds like that really translated to you and your siblings--everyone went to college. She was working while raising the family. Was she working nights?

RS: Yes, she would work from three to eleven or eleven to seven. Three to eleven was a bad time for her to work, because, at least for me and the three of my brothers next to me, I remember, we very distinctly had to have our homework laid out in age order on the kitchen table. When she came home at eleven o'clock at night, she would sit in the kitchen and go through all that homework. If there was something wrong, which, sometimes, I didn't pay a hundred percent attention to what I was doing, you were taken out of bed, you were sitting in the kitchen in the middle of the night correcting that before you went to school the next day. I think it was to save her embarrassment, because her and my father went to every PTA meeting there was. So, I guess they didn't want to hear bad stories about us when they got there. [laughter] So, that's kind of the way she was. Also, going in the Army, they always have lists, duty rosters and this and that. When I was a kid at home, my mom had a chart next to the kitchen sink with all our names down and across the top was, like, "Wash dishes, dry dishes, hang out clothes." Those days, you didn't have dryers, so, you hung them out on the line or you bring them in off the clothesline. Coal furnaces, it was my job to take care of all the coal in the basement and keep the furnace going during the wintertime when my dad wasn't there. So, we all had duty roster jobs, along with everything else going on. That was her kind of way to manage when she wasn't there, because if you didn't follow the chart, there was some disciplinary action coming your way.

AS: Were your parents politically active?

RS: Yes. My grandparents, all of my aunts and uncles, my parents, they all voted. They were all Democrats, but they all voted. I was never interested in voting until, I guess it was somewhere around February, March 1969. I was laying in a drainage ditch and mortar shells were falling all around me and I said, "If I get out of this, I'm voting," because I figured, "Whoever voted put that guy in charge that put me here, so, I'm going to vote to put the next guy in." It sounds crazy, but that's when I consciously remembered, "I'm going to vote." Since then, I've voted in every election I can, local school board, local politics, state, federal, whatever, I vote. I don't vote in the primaries, because I'm not a declared Democrat or a Republican or an independent. I like to listen to everything, weigh it out and make a decision. So, the preponderance of votes have probably went to Democrats, but I have voted for Republicans and I've even voted for independents. I don't know if you [know]--what's the guy's name?--Ralph Nader. [Editor's Note: Ralph Nader ran as an independent candidate for President in several elections in the 2000s.]

SI: Yes.

RS: I was even following him. I didn't vote for him, but I was close to it one time. [laughter]

SI: In 2000.

RS: Yes.

SI: In high school, what were you most interested in, whether it was in the classroom or out of the classroom? What did you see for yourself in the future?

RS: Scratch girls? [laughter]

SI: We get that answer a lot.

RS: Yes. I took mechanical drawing for four years. I loved mechanical drawing. Today, what I did in mechanical drawing, these youngsters today don't do it. Everything's on the computer. I mean, we had the charts, you had to lay the paper out, you had T-squares, you had angles and all sorts of forms. You had to measure the part, lay it out on the sheet, draw it the way it's supposed to be drawn on the sheet, with all the little holes in it and everything else. It's a lot of work, and then, if the instructor wanted you to ink it, you had these little narrow pens that you used to put ink on the side and you drew it. You had to be very careful, because, if you got the points too close, you got nothing; if you got it too far apart, you got a blot of ink on it and that messed up your form. You had to start all over from scratch. Mr. Weaver, he's the only guy who taught that at East Orange High School and I went there four years. I loved it. I remember, I guess us students probably gave him a heartache, a kind of balding guy, older guy, a little rotund, nice guy, very firm, but he was always swallowing antacids, I remember that, all day long, swallowing antacids, but he was a good instructor. I enjoyed mechanical drawing, probably one of my favorite classes I ever took. I liked biology. That was fun, part of it because a lot of the students I was in there with were a bunch of clowns. [laughter] Those were probably my two favorite ones. Now, in those years, when I was saying it was like Norman Rockwell kind of times, there was about four teachers there in the high school who started teaching when my mother went to school, initially, and my aunts and uncles went there. So, when I walked in and they knew who I was, it was like, "You can't mess around in my class. You can't get away with anything, because I know your mom. I'll get right on the phone and call her." [laughter] Outside of that, I guess cross-country and track were my other favorite activities. I ran on the cross-country team for three years, lettered all three years. I ran the half mile on the track, that was good. When I got out of high school, they used to have Shore relays, and so, I used to go down to the Jersey Shore and run. I went briefly to school in Ohio and I was running the half mile and I ran the fastest time I'd ever ran, 1:59-and-a-half, all right--came in eighth place; talk about your heart being broken.

AS: That is very fast.

RS: It was a very fast time and I didn't even place. So, that kind of really took the wind out of the sail, but, then, shortly thereafter, I was in the service, so, it didn't matter.

AS: In high school, with mechanical drawing, did that give you any ideas about what you wanted to do after high school, if you had not known you were going to go into the service?

RS: Initially, I thought this would be cool, to be a teacher and teach mechanical drawing, but I quickly learned being a teacher's not what I wanted to be. [laughter] It's a brutal life.

SI: As a teenager, were you free to go into Newark or New York or did you mostly stick to East Orange?

RS: There was an organization in Newark called the Leaguers and it was a thing for all high school students in the county to come to. They kind of--I can't even remember what the heck they do--it was a big social club to me, because you got to meet kids from all the Newark high schools, kids that would come there. So, I would go to that. It was, like, every other week, I think, they had a meeting. Then, you'd have a cotillion at the end of the year. My only problem was, I got stuck with a lady I didn't care to get stuck with for the cotillion, but her mother knew my aunt and I didn't have a choice. [laughter] So, I had to take this young lady to the cotillion. You practice all that crazy dancing, and so on. So, I got to meet kids from other schools; also met them because of being on the track team, when you ran, like, Essex County would have meets with all the schools in Essex County, several of the schools went to the Penn Relays. I ran in the Penn Relays twice. So, you get to meet people from all over, the Jersey Shore, all the Newark schools, Jersey City, and so on. The guys from [Jersey City's Henry] Snyder and the guys from Asbury Park were the two you had to watch. You'd put your sweat suit down to go to run, they'd steal it on you. You always had to have someone watch it. [laughter]

SI: Do you have any questions?

SN: I believe you went to school in Ohio for some time, correct?

RS: When I graduated from high school, I had applied to Central State University [in Wilberforce, Ohio]. My aunt, my mother's youngest sister, went to school there and, eventually, after me, her daughter and son went there and graduated. She met her husband there. So, it was kind of a school that we knew about. So, I went out there the first year, some paying, working and paying. I remember I was working at National Cash Register in Dayton, Ohio, at night, and then, trying to come in and do classes and everything during the day. Plus, you're getting loans to help pay for some of your schooling. When I left there at the end of the first two semesters, I was paid up. So, when I came back for the third semester the following year, the school was in financial straits and they required that you pay the full tuition amount just to register and get in. I tried to plead my case, that I'd work and pay it off over time. I had maybe half of it, not all of it. They would not let me register since I didn't have all of it. So, I came back home, took a job at Western Electric. They were kind of--you remember Western Electric? So, I worked there and I worked on the New Jersey Turnpike. I used to drive a truck and the grass cutting tractors at the Jersey Turnpike. In Western Electric, I was the young kid there. All the old-timers that were working there, my job was to go to the bays where they welded different components, like big

frames, and so on, put them on dollies, and then, take them over to the paint line. I would find the appropriate hooks, hang these pieces up and they'd go through. One guy'd paint one side, one guy would paint the other side, and then, it would go into an industrial oven to dry. When it came out of the oven, I would stack them on a pallet, take the order and take it to wherever they wanted, usually somewhere on the shipping line, this dock or that dock, because they were pre-designed to go out to a certain location. I worked there for about a week-and-a-half. My first two nights, I did about fifty of these little racks, hanging them up. Being young and strong, I kept going and going and going. So, like, Monday or Tuesday of the second week, it was up to, like, seventy-something racks, and then, the whole racks stopped. A couple of the old guys walked over to me, said, "That happens once in a while. So, here, take this hammer, go in the industrial oven--it's not that hot--and bang on the line. It'll free it up and it'll come out." I never forgot this--I walked in that oven, there's about thirteen guys standing in there. They looked at me and said, "You know what? We do fifty racks a night. We don't do any more. If we want more, we'll tell you. No matter what the boss says, that's what we do." Now, I'm not going to fight all these guys on the line. So, I ended up spending a lot of time in the bathroom, reading a book in the stall in-between all this stuff, right. Then, when I got to Rutgers, I'm a management graduate and you learn that the level of production is set by the workers, not by management. [laughter] That always came back to mind. Professor (Fendrock?), I always remember him telling us that stuff.

SI: Was there a union there?

RS: Oh, yes.

SI: Okay.

RS: Yes, and they were taking money from me. While they were taking money, I couldn't be in the union until after X period of time, but, before that actually happened, I was gone. I went from whatever the draft code was to A-1, which meant you were eligible for the draft, and went and took the physical. One day--I wish I'd kept this--one day, there was a letter. Mother said, "You got a letter from the Selective Service Board." I went in, I opened it up and the line said, if I remember it correctly, "Dear Mr. Stokes, your friends and neighbors have selected you for military service." I'm thinking, sometime later, the President didn't even have the guts to say, "I want you," blames it on my friends and neighbors, first line of that letter. [laughter] So, I ended up receiving the draft notice with a date to report for basic training. Prior to that happening, my test scores were so good, I figured I could do something other than that. So, I went and saw a recruiter and signed up for what's called Wire Maintenance School, which was, at the time, at Fort Monmouth. My idea was, "Just stay in New Jersey, go to Fort Monmouth, take whatever they're going to teach me there." That didn't pan out, but anyway.

SI: In the Summer of 1966, how much awareness was there of what was happening in Vietnam?

RS: Oh, lots of awareness. I mean, everybody was aware of it. Some people were more towards one side of it and others to the other side of it. At the same time, there was a lot of activity going on in the Civil Rights Movement. When I was in the service and when I was at Central State, I participated in some marches. Thank God, they were all peaceful. The people

who were observing us yelled and screamed, but nobody got violent, because I was probably the very last person who can ever participate in a march, because I can't take anybody hitting me without hitting back. So, guys like Martin Luther King and John Lewis and the rest of them, man, God bless them, I'm just not wired that way, yes.

SI: Where were the marches? Were they in Ohio?

RS: Ohio, right. We marched from the campus into Dayton, and then, a couple around a couple churches that were having some problems with the minority people. I organized a boycott of a barbershop outside of Fort Meade, Maryland, because they refused to cut my hair. So, I organized a boycott. Basically, the white soldiers went in there and got a haircut and my attitude is--I tell this to black barbers and everything--if you're going to be a barber or a beautician or whatever, you should be able to do everybody's hair that walks in your door, notwithstanding who they are. If you can't, then, because we segregate ourselves--blacks go to black barbers, whites go to white barbers, you go to white churches, black churches, white funeral homes, black--that's ludicrous. I mean, the science of cutting hair, doing hair, or burying someone or embalming somebody is the same for everybody. So, you should have your door open to any customer, I would think, make money. Anyway, this barbershop refused to cut my hair. So, in the vernacular of the day, I got the brothers together and we just protested. We just kept walking around, yelling at guys that were going in there, and so on, until, one day, the MPs came out and asked for my ID card and got on the radio. The next thing I know, I had to go see some colonel somewhere in some building on the post and explain to him what the problem was. To my happiness, they put the barbershop off limits for all military. So, the guy went out and hired a black barber, gave him the last chair in the row, but it was re-opener to everybody after that. So, I felt kind of happy about that, vindicated.

SI: I was going to ask if there were any repercussions from protesting, but it sounds like you gained support.

RS: Well, I'm sure--they did the right thing--but I'm sure my name was laying on somebody's ledger somewhere.

AS: Going back to high school, what were the reactions to the assassination of President Kennedy? Do you remember?

RS: Well, we were all students. I guess shock was the biggest thing, shock from the fact that here's a great symbol of our country, the President of the United States, and he got killed and the wonderment of, "Where else is this all going to go? How far is this going to reach?" I don't think we were sophisticated enough to understand all of the political ramifications of this, and so on, that went on. So, it was more of an awareness, I would think. [Editor's Note: John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.]

AS: I know the Red Scare was a big deal in the States during that time.

RS: Well, that was kind of before--yes, well, it was after World War II, with McCarthy, in that era, but you've got to realize from '46 to '50 something, I was a little kid, so, I didn't really know

anything about it. [Editor's Note: Senator Joseph McCarthy's accusations of Communist infiltration in the US government led to a nationwide witch-hunt in the 1950s to unearth alleged Communists. Many institutions required employees or members to take oaths of loyalty.] Nobody in my family was in politics or in the movies. They were the target audience of Mr. McCarthy and his [witch-hunt]. One thing is that the scare that he did, just by saying it and people reacting to it, is a lot like what I see of many Republicans today, saying things and people reacting to it without stopping to think, "What is the validity of what he's saying? Is it true or not?" If you say too many things that are not verifiable, then, after a while, people stop--I stop--believing them. Everybody's going to tell--I mean, there are politicians on both sides--going to stretch the truth, say some things that may not be factual. You have to call them on it, but some people make more of a way of life of it. The real damage is the people who react to what's being said and how that hurts some people.

AS: What was your reaction, while you were in high school, to the Cuban Missile Crisis? [Editor's Note: In October 1962, the United States demanded that the Soviet Union remove its nuclear missiles from Cuba. The United States placed a naval blockade around the island nation, creating a tense standoff between the superpowers that many feared would lead to nuclear war. The crisis was averted when the Soviet Union agreed to remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba in exchange for the United States removing its nuclear missiles from Turkey.]

RS: I can't speak too much to that to people--my attitude was, "Kill them." I was the kind of guy, I was waiting for them to start dropping bombs. That was my attitude, because I just felt, "Hey, I'm an American--don't be pushing me around." That was my youthful, uninformed attitude, okay.

SI: To go back to these marches, outside of the South, a lot of protests were focused on the segregated chains that operated both in the North and the South. I think Woolworth's was one of them. Was that one of the targets of your activity?

RS: No, there was only a few that I participated in. They were more in response to some local rules or action of the local police, how they were treating blacks. In one case, I remember, a church wouldn't even let black students in as visitors to sit and have Sunday service. So, that was, basically, it. We weren't embroiled in the larger arguments that were going on at that time and the marches that took place. We were almost very uninformed and naïve, when you look back in history, at the scope of all what happened; makes you feel like you missed out on something.

SI: When you decided to go into the Army, did your father and your grandfather give you any words of wisdom or try persuade you one way or the other?

RS: No. Dad took me. The Armed Forces examination and qualification station was located on Broad Street in Newark, I think on the corner in the building where McKinley Street goes down. Now, it's located, I believe, in the Federal Building, which is right down the street, but went down there, went in the building. They stood you up in the building. Everybody had to raise their hand. We took the oath. They gave us some papers in a little bag and you had your own personal toilet articles and stuff like that. You marched outside and they put you on a bus and

took us down to good, old Fort Dix, New Jersey. There's some buck sergeant yelling and screaming, cussing high hell at us. Somebody, we never knew who, went in and made a complaint that the sergeant was cussing at the group. So, the next morning, I remember him distinctly saying he talks to his kids worse than he talks to us and, for that reason, we were all going on a gigantic police call. [laughter] So, you learned not to complain too much. No, I didn't get any advice from them, but I did get a lot of--I'm trying to think how to say it. My grandfather was extremely ecstatic when I got commissioned an officer in the Army. I guess, looking back on his World War I experience and the way blacks were treated, being the oldest grandson wasn't enough, this was, I mean, it was like icing on a cake with a couple of cherries for him. So, whenever I was in town and I had civilian clothes on, he would urge me to put my uniform on and go with him somewhere. So, I was like a Barbie doll, I guess, being shown around here and there to different groups that he was involved with.

SI: Let us pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Ready?

RS: Yes.

SI: You go down to Fort Dix. You had both your basic and advanced infantry training there.

RS: Right.

SI: Tell us a little bit about what that was like.

RS: The year that I spent at Central State, I was, I guess, a plebe with the Persian Rifles, which is a military fraternity drill team. So, I guess, with all of the other things that was going on and that knowledge, when we left the reception area, they take you over to your basic training company. There were four platoons. Fort Dix, at that time, had brand-new brick buildings for basic training, but they could only accommodate three platoons. So, the fourth platoon for each one of the companies was across the street in the old World War II barracks. That's where my platoon was. We were across the street in the old World War II barracks. The platoon sergeant that we had, Sergeant Eutis, I remember his name, he picked me, I'm assuming, because I knew how to stand up straight and I knew the left from right and all that kind of stuff. Some of the guys had a problem keeping up with that, initially. He made me his platoon guide. So, I was kind of like his--I was a trainee, like everybody else--but I was the guy that he would get extra things for me to do for the group, like, I would pick up the mail from that orderly room and take it over and distribute the mail to everybody. It was my job to tell everybody to fall out and be in formation, so [that] when he showed up, we were all standing there ready to go, those kind of little things. We got to basic training, I became this platoon guide. We just followed the training roster. You start learning first-aid, how to march with a rifle, physical training every day, how to read maps, basic stuff on map reading. You had to learn your eleven general orders. You had to know them in order and you had to know, when they snapped at you, "What's your seventh general order?" you snap it right out, without error; marching out, going out to the field, learning

how to set up pup tents, how to use your rifle, hand-to-hand combat training, the whole schedule of what they put out for basic training. I guess, in one of the marches, we went out, we set up pup tents, stayed out in the field overnight. You've seen the pup tents that the guys, soldiers, sleep in. When they issue you your equipment, you only get one half of that and you get three tent pegs and one rope; everybody gets that. So, what they do is, they marry you up with a guy and you take your two shelter halves and you button them together to form the tent. I got half the tent pegs, he got half the tent pegs, and then, I got one rope and he's got the other rope. So, you roll out your sleeping bag and, thank God, we were all small, little guys, because I could never fit in there with anybody today. [laughter] On this second or third time we were doing this bivouac out in the field, I remember it was August and it was nighttime and I was sweating like a stuck pig. The guy in the tent didn't want to stay in there with me and he told the Sergeant and the Sergeant looked at me, he said, "All right, we're going to put you on a vehicle, send you into the hospital." So, I go into the hospital and there's maybe fifty guys in this room, a big room. A male nurse came around and he took everybody's name down in order, came back, stuck a thermometer in everybody's mouth, came back in with another nurse, a female sergeant nurse, and he was yelling out the temperatures as he went through. Then, someone came back in and said, "All right, you can go. You can go. You can go. You stay. You stay. You can go," okay, went around the room like that. So, I left. I'm walking back out to the bivouac area, which was quite a walk. Somewhere along there, an MP car pulled up, asked for my ID card. I was informed that I was supposed to be in the hospital and not out here walking around. I thought they told me to go. They said they told me to stay. So, anyway, I go back to the hospital and I'm in there for, like, three or four days with this upper respiratory infection. I had, like, a 104 temperature, something like that. I remember, the next morning, in the hospital, I got up and they take our uniform and all that stuff, get a little robe to wear. They give you a little bag that hangs on your armchair, [for] your wallet and your personal items like that. So, I go in the latrine, you wash up, relieve yourself. I go over and I open up a window and I light up a cigarette. I was a smoker at the time. So, I'm standing there, I guess like in high school--you probably didn't have this experience--where you sneak one in the bathroom and you're blowing it out the window. [laughter] A couple guys came in, "Oh, you got cigarettes." As soon as the second guy heard, it's like, "Nobody ask me, because you're going to take all my cigarettes." So, we're in there, guys are sitting on the toilet, guys are relieving themselves at the urinals. A female nurse sergeant walks in. To my surprise, it was a female walking in there and she looked at us and said, "Oh, you guys are well enough to smoke? Good," took us out and, for the rest of the day, we were mopping floors in the hospital, until we learned you don't smoke in the hospital. You stay in bed, you drink the juice that they give you, and so on, but I went through that, stayed at good, old Walson Army Hospital, got out, I remember, on a Saturday, got back to the company. My company had went to the field for qualification on the rifle. That comes once during basic training. Your unit gets to the ranges, you go out, you have to shoot and you've got to get a passing score on the target. These are targets that are in different lanes. They're all dark and they pop up. If you shoot it, it'll fall down. If you don't, it won't fall down, but you have to get so many hits in order to qualify. Well, I'd missed all that. Plus, it was seventy-two hours or more that I was away from the unit and the rules were, if you missed that much training, they'd recycle you. They'd put you back to a company whose training cycle is right at the point where you left your current company. So, the First Sergeant said--some other company was going out to the field--he said, "I'm going to get you a ride out there." He says, "I know the first sergeant over there. He'll let you fire with them." He says, "If you get at least a minimum passing score, we'll

keep you in the company. If not," he says, "there's nothing I can do for you." So, I went out, took my rifle and the score I got ended up being the second-highest score for my company rifle qualification. I had been shooting since I was a little kid, too. So, if the sights are off, you see it hitting low right, you aim high left, whatever. So, I did that, and then, come Monday, I was asked to fall out and report to the Company Commander. He reminded me of those same rules again, about the seventy-two hours. Even though the First Sergeant gave me a break; [the Company Commander] wasn't bound by that. That's when he said to me, for the third time, he said, "If you would consider applying for OCS," he said, "maybe I can keep you in the company," because I had been asked twice about it and I told them no. I had scored real high on some of the tests. So, I don't know whether he was getting points for having guys apply for OCS or not, whatever, but, in order to stay with the company, I said, "Fine." I didn't think it was going to happen anyway, but, so, I did the paperwork and did all the other stuff I had to do and you do the fingerprint card. I think about a week-and-a-half later, when we came in from training, I was told, "Call home." He said, "Your mother just called." I'm thinking, "Oh, Jesus, I don't know what happened at home that she would call." I get on the phone and call collect. We weren't making much money then, so, I had to call collect. She says to me, "Are you in trouble?" I said, "No, why?" She says, "The FBI was over at the school this morning asking questions about you." [laughter] I said, "Oh, they're doing a background check." I said, "To apply for OCS," I said, "you can't be a commissioned officer in the Army unless you can have a secret clearance. So, they've got to make sure you're vetted in order to be given a secret clearance." So, she said, "Oh, okay." She had no idea what it was for. As long as I wasn't going to jail, she didn't mind. [laughter]

SI: Why did you turn down OCS the other times?

RS: Well, I kind of figured I was going to be a draftee for two years, I had signed up for this wire maintenance training course, that's three years--my vision, at the time, was three years and out, without any great idea of where I was going or what I was going to do, but I didn't see a military life beyond that or I didn't envision one at that time. Anyway, I filled out the paperwork. I mean, you've got to sit in a room like this, with a big table, a bunch, five or six guys, there shooting questions at you for about an hour as part of the interview process. All the paperwork, you've got to take another physical, you've got to be vetted by the FBI, and then, someone takes all that and makes a decision. The Army's good about one thing--they will, many times, at least when I was in, give you choices. They will say, "Which school do you want to go to?" As long as you have passed the basic qualification test, you can ask for--sky's the limit--but there's the caveat down below that says, "But, they always reserve the right to assign you for the good of the service." So, no matter, you can make your choices, you may get them or you may not, but you have no qualms about not getting it, because that little caveat is always somewhere in the document. I figured everybody's going to Vietnam, I've been in basic, infantry basic, I went to infantry AIT, I said, "Send me to Infantry School." Then, I thought about it for my second choice and I said, "Being a cop may not be a bad idea, because you can always take that skill and go to a civilian job somewhere." So, I put down MPs, and then, comes the third one and I didn't know exactly what to do. So, I just wrote Transportation in there. So, that's my choice, Infantry, MPs, Transportation. When I got the orders, "Transportation School." So, that's how I ended up in the Transportation Corps, but, to answer your question, some of these things weren't, like going to

OCS, well thought-out plans that I had to do things. Some of it was happenstance, just I was at the right place, right time and decided this was my decision and went with it.

SI: In advanced infantry training, was there any part that really focused on the war in Vietnam, such as training you how to go through a village or what jungle combat would be like?

RS: No. The training that we went through really didn't get in it. Some of it was more higher level skills in certain areas, like map reading. There was a lot of talk about Vietnam, about paying attention to the various things they were training you on because failure to be able to execute these things could lead to your death or the death of someone else. I'd have to look back in more depth; I can't remember. Maybe it wasn't that great of an experience. I can't remember some of the details of what those trainings were. One thing I do remember is that, since we were in the advanced class, they would assign you to be on guard duty in different locations around Fort Dix. So, that was one of the extra duties you'd get. So, the two times I came up for guard mount, they call it, people from different companies all report to an area. The guy looks at your uniform and inspects you and he inspects your rifle, asks you about different general orders, and so on. He picks two guys and they're supposed to be the two strack guys, the two really topnotch guys from his inspection. The very top one goes back to his unit, all right, and he gets to just hang out at the unit. In case there's an emergency and they need another guy, they will call him. The other guy is not going to be assigned a guard post anywhere, but, instead of going back to his unit, he gets to hang around in the guard mount house. So, you watch TV and shoot pool and stuff like that and just be ready if they call you. So, the first time I went on guard mount, I ended up being the guy that was in the guard mount building. I was the second one picked. The second time, I was the second one picked, but a guy got sick, so, I had to go on to duty. My grand duty was, they took me over to the base finance building. They unlocked it, I go inside, they lock it up and I just sit in there and make sure nobody breaks into the finance building. So, they had a coffeepot, I made coffee, turned on the radio, lay back, put my feet on someone's desk and just kind of chilled until they came back to get me. The only other time I came up on duty roster for something, I had KP twice. Both days were duty days, where we'd go into the field. So, it was marching to the field with your uniform and, both of those days, it was raining like cats and dogs. So, you've got this equipment, it's getting all wet and they're soggy out in the field and I'm in the mess hall. I learned very quick, go to the mess hall, go to the mess sergeant, volunteer to do the pots, because, as long as I kept all his pots clean when he needed one, I was the guy, "Don't give him nothing else to do. Just keep them pots clean." So, when they were done, if they didn't need the pot again, you kind of almost worked yourself out of work. So, it was pretty good.

SI: Yes.

RS: I lucked out. [laughter]

SI: Tell us about OCS training at Fort Eustis [in Virginia].

RS: Well, Fort Eustis kind of was my introduction to a lot of my military assignments. I was the only black in the whole company. The company behind me had two blacks. The company ahead of me had one. So, there wasn't very many blacks being selected to go to OCS. I really don't

know the reason; could be academics, failure to pass the test, or get vetted by the FBI--whatever it may have been. So, there was very few of us and I had never thought that my performance would be reflective on how people may view other blacks. It did, but I never was--I guess I was so wrapped up in trying to just get through all of this, because it's six months and it's every day [that] you're in a uniform. Even if they gave you time off and you could go into town or anywhere, you had to wear your uniform. If you got caught in civilian clothes at any time, you're out. There was no discussion. So, there were guys who were, like, in their last week of OCS who got caught in civilian clothes off base--they're out of the program, just like that. So, you learned to just obey the rules a hundred percent, but, every day, it was you get up. It was a double bunk, so, it was two guys in a cubicle. All the cubes opened to a center walkway. You had a footlocker. You had a desk. The desk drawer was opened so many inches. You had to see a pencil here, a ruler here--everything was choreographed on how it had to look--open your footlocker, your socks had to be rolled a certain way, in a certain position, your deodorant. Everything was in a scheme of how it had to appear and your scheme matched everybody in the whole building, all right, that whole company. Your bunk had to be made a certain way. It had to be a certain tightness when they checked it, as far as how tight it was. Your uniforms in your locker, when they opened up the locker, you have patches on your sleeves, the top edge of the patch had to be horizontal across. So, you had to make sure, when they sewed them on, they sewed them exactly at the same point on every uniform and that you hung them on the hanger so that they were all straight across, all right. We had a TAC [teach, assess and counsel] officer who would come in and these are kind of the actual lieutenants who were in charge of each group. Our TAC officer is the guy--you know what a grease pencil is? Okay, he'd take a grease pencil and, [if] he'd see something somewhere, he'd draw a circle around it, just like that, and then, he'd see something over here and he'd draw a circle around it, like that, and he'd draw a line from that to that. He'd do it on walls, floors, everything. There were a couple days he came in, I mean, it looked like spider webs all over the place. Then, he'd say something like, "Inspection in ten minutes." Well, there's no way you're going to clean that up in ten minutes. So, you all flunked the inspection. That means you get extra training at night. To me, it was part of the harassment of the program, I guess. So, that was a constant going on, along with the routine stuff. You got everything done in the barracks, you fell outside, got in line, went down to the mess hall. You stood at parade rest, come to attention, you move one step forward.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were talking about Fort Eustis and how everything had to be exact.

RS: Yes. So, the morning, the routine for all meals is, you stand at parade rest, come to attention as the guys move into the mess hall. When you get to the overhead ladder, you have to do the overhead ladder, get off, stand back in line, and then, when you get up so much further, you do push-ups before you go in. That was every day before you go in. You walk along the line. They had all civilian employees there. So, all of us guys going through the line were part of the student body. You get your meal, you go to a table, tables sat eight people. So, the first guy went to the first table, to the furthest seat, and you fill up in that order. So, whoever was in front of you or behind you, that's who you end up sitting with for a given meal. So, you go in, you put your tray on the table, and then, you stand at attention behind your chair. When the table is full, eight people there, the last guy says, "Bow your heads." Everybody bowed their heads, silent for

a few minutes, and then, he said, "Take your seats." Everybody'd sit down, we start eating. No extraneous chatter, you eat; you can say, "Please, pass the salt," this and that. When you get up, you grab your tray, say, "Gentlemen," and you go put your tray in and go back out. You try to eat fast enough, especially like me, being a smoker, [so that when] you'd get outside, you'd maybe have a few minutes to grab a quick puff on a cigarette.

SI: Did they ever have you do square meals?

RS: No. One of the females, young females, working in the mess hall, one of the civilians there, there was about three young black girls working there. Like I said, there weren't many blacks in OCS, at least in my group going through and the groups in front of me and behind me. One day, girl says to me, "Hi, how you doing?" You're not supposed to talk to these people. I didn't say anything. She just said to me, "Hi, how you doing?" That cost me 125 push-ups. You do what you can and, when you fall down, you rest; they don't let you get up until you start again. They let you pick up, you kept the count, but, man, I'll tell you, if there's anybody you wanted to wring their neck, that was that girl. So, we got through that. Once in a while, on a weekend, like a Sunday, they may say, "Have a relaxed meal." So, you could skip all that stuff outdoors, just go right in and get your meal, go to any table, sit down, kind of eat like a normal person; not too many of those, but there was a few of them. Training was every day, six days a week. Sometimes, there was something light on Sunday. In classroom, you sit, you take your notes. If you fall asleep in the classroom, the instructor makes you get up, go stand at parade rest in the back of the classroom for the whole duration of the class. What other good stuff did they do besides this grease pencil and that? If they ask you a question, if they didn't like your answer, you'd get push-ups. You always got push-ups. We had one lieutenant who was--you ever watch this show, *NCIS*, Tony? I had this one lieutenant, Tony reminds me of him. He had an MG convertible. He would ride down the street and all these cadets would be walking, all walking down the street. He'd just put his hand up over the windshield, point towards you. That meant drop and do twenty and he'd go down the street doing this over his car. It'd be nothing but buttocks and elbows [laughter] when this guy came along, but you get all kinds of little harassment like that. Every Saturday, though, there was a regimental parade and every OCS company had to go to the parade field at Fort Eustis. You would march in a mass formation. You've seen those old World War I pictures of guys marching down Fifth Avenue in a big square, a big mass formation? The American Army actually got that from the French. It's the way the French used to march a lot. We used to do more in ranks, and so on, but the big mass formations, we would end up doing. The people who were observing, the officers observing this parade every Saturday, would grade the companies and my company would always be the last or near the last. We never did very good or very well, excuse me, get my English. One day, in morning formation, the TAC officer says, "You guys can't do that, you can't do this." He says, "Candidate Stokes, why can't we do that?" do any better or whatever, how he phrased it. I said, "The Formation is unbalanced, sir." He says, "What the hell do you mean by that?" I said, thinking, "Put me right in the dead center, it'd be a balanced formation," right. So, that was what I told him. He said, "I've got a better idea. Next parade, you're the parade captain," which means, the parade captain is the guy that has to stand out in front and march the guys, all right. You have to spend extra hours at night over in the gymnasium to learn how to do all the movements with the sword. They'd practice you with the sword. So, I did all of that. We go out next Saturday for the regimental parade and came in second. Our company officers were so ecstatic, they gave

everybody the rest of the day off and Sunday off, except for me, because they had some dignitaries coming. They were going to be showing them off, bringing in--whoever these people were--they were coming through the gymnasium. So, all the parade captains had to be in the gym, because we had [to] stand in line and salute this guy when he came through. [laughter] So, it didn't work out so well for me. Anyway, it was an interesting time, a lot of classes, a lot of extreme detail, I think, because they're cramming a lot of information into you over a short period of time. Six months is really not a long time, but, don't forget, you're doing training and activities from, like, six in the morning to seven, eight o'clock at night. We also had a thing--this is one of my favorite things--pogey bait. Pogey bait was where, every night, you had to take the trashcans out to dump them in the big dumpster from each barrack building and you always had a few minutes after the evening meal to make phone calls, [if] guys wanted to call home. So, one guy would get an order from everybody for (Carol's?), which was a hamburger place. You'd order hamburgers, fries, drinks, and so on. The guy from (Carol's?) would come out and he would open the side door on the big trashcan, the dumpster, and climb inside. So, when our guys came to throw the trash in, they'd put the trash in and he'd put all the food into the trashcan and they'd pay him, and then, he'd sneak back out. They'd come in with the food and divvy it all up among everybody who ordered it, but the big thing was, you knew, in the morning, you carried all that trash with you out of there. You dumped it outside somewhere before you hit the mess hall, so that the TACs didn't see it in your local trash, except for one guy, somehow, a tomato slipped out and was under his--he'd made up his bed with a pillow over a tomato. [laughter] That kind of blew it for everybody. I didn't know how sore muscles could be [laughter] with all the training we went through, a little punishment for violating the rules. We also had one big incident, and you talked about race relations, we had one guy, he was from one of the Southern states. For some reason, he just did not like me. He gave me a hard time. Whenever nobody's around or the other candidates were around, as long as the officers weren't around, he harassed me a lot. Of course, you had the honor code there and they have all these rules in the honor code and, if you violate any of them, you're out, uniforms being one of them, civilian clothes verses uniform. Fighting was one of them. So, we're sitting in our little cubes doing our homework one night. This guy, he's, like, a cube down and across from me. He was just going on and on and I just couldn't take it anymore. He was laying up on his bunk and I went over and I snatched him off his bunk, taking him to the floor. Well, by then, a bunch of guys grabbed us and pulled us off. So, next morning, I got up, instead of going to mess hall, I walked in and reported to my TAC officer that I'd been involved in a fight. He said, "With whom?" I said, "I'm just reporting myself." I figured, "Look, I'm the only black guy. Somebody's going to tell him anyway." So, I just went and turned myself in. So, he put me in what you call a front leaning rest position. You know what that is? That's how you get down for push-ups; you just don't do the push-up, you just stay there. So, he put me in that and he was gone for about twenty minutes. Obviously, I couldn't stay up that long, so, I lay on the floor a little bit until I heard him come back. When he came back, he told me, he says, "The unit's over in such-and-such building in class. Get over there now." I got up, went, got my books, went over to class. During break, I didn't see this guy anywhere. By the time we came back for noon meal, his area was cleaned out, mattress rolled up--he was gone.

SI: Wow.

RS: So, whatever he found out, he thought that, even though I was involved in a fight, it wasn't anything that he was going to charge me with. So, that was the only time I thought I was going to be put out of OCS, but I made it.

SN: I was going to ask, before you went into that story, you were obviously a minority during OCS.

RS: Do tell. [laughter]

SN: Except for this instance, were you ever made to feel like a minority or was there a sense of camaraderie among these men?

RS: For the most part, most of the guys I went to OCS with were a very congenial group. We had some guys out of Philly who could rhyme, so, they would call rhymes for us while we were marching and stuff like that. No, it was a pretty congenial group. We leaned on each other to help each other get through classes. Some guys were extremely [good in an area]; I was extremely strong at map reading. So, guys who had a little problem with it, I would work with them on it; other guys would work with me on stuff. So, we helped each other along when we had our little study period in the evening. No, outside of this one guy, I really didn't have any problem. The reason why I said it prepped me for my assignments--nowadays, it's quite different--but just about every unit assignment I had, I was the only black officer. Vietnam, in the battalion, during the time I was there, I was the only black officer. My assignment in Korea, I was the only black officer in the battalion until we got a couple of warrant officers in, but they were assigned to other companies in the battalion. So, obviously, I'm a big Motown fan in music, and so on, but I had to learn to listen to a lot of country-and-Western music. [laughter] The blues, I gravitated to a lot, because my family listened to a lot of blues. One of the other things that happened in OCS was that the service club on the post, they contract with outside entertainers to come and entertain the troops. One night, when we had time off one night, they were having the Count Basie Band over at the service club. You like [jazz composer and pianist] Count Basie?

SN: I listen to Count Basie.

RS: So, me and one other guy went over there. Now, he was a black guy. He was in the company ahead of me, but he had really muffed some tests, so, they gave him a break and put him back in my company and let him try to get those tests over again. He never made it. He eventually got put out, but he and I were the only people from the OCS program that were there. There was three guys from the base itself, other units in the base, and the only reason they were there, they were MPs assigned to be guards during this show. So, that was it. Nobody else showed up. I was very kind of dismayed. I said, "Wow." So, you figured, guy looks around, nobody's there to hear him play, that's it, he's gone. He played a full set, had us all sit up around the piano with him, bought drinks for all of us. I even took a picture of us all as a group. I've got it at home.

SI: Wow.

SN: Wow.

RS: With Count Basie, yes. Now, I have an uncle, my grandfather's brother, he was a Count Basie guy. He tried to take that picture from me, but I wouldn't let him. [laughter]

SI: In Transportation Corps officer training, were your classes focused on logistics?

RS: Yes, we had to learn the different modes of transportation--rail, highway, water, air--did a lot of things, like how to load plan for C-130s, how to load cargo on ships, realizing that, while we have container ships and all these nice ports, a lot of places around the world, they could only take the smaller vessels with the old slings and cargo nets and that kind of thing. You kind of learned how to run a railroad--not to build it, because we use standard gauge in this country. Other countries around the world use narrow gauge, so, you couldn't take railcars from here and put them somewhere else in the world and they'd work, even though the Army did experiment with cars that had axles on them, where you could move them in and out, but that never [took off]. The big thing was, take the railroad that was there and learn how to run it to move military cargo. So, that was, yes, the thrust of our training, to be good logisticians from a transportation point of view. Then, you had the Quartermaster people who were your supply type of people, maintenance, and so on. We had--I'm trying to think of the other ones--two or three of these different separate fields that people went to school for, which are really combined fields now, overall logisticians. In fact, they have a new insignia for people who are logisticians verses the old Transportation Corps, Signal Corps, Quartermaster, Ordnance, was the other one I was trying to remember, even though a good number of the assignments that I had were with the Ordnance. So, [when] I was in Vietnam, as my ex-executive officer from the battalion liked to say, (Ramsden) says, "I was the only Transportation officer in the ordnance company," [laughter] but I did a pretty good job.

SI: You received your commission in May of 1967. Can you tell us about that experience?

RS: Well, basically, it's just like a graduation. You go out in your dress uniform. They call you out. The day before, they give you a document to discharge you from the military service, and then, you're brought back in as a commissioned officer. One thing is, when you go to OCS, there are some sergeants who go to OCS and they may have, let's say E-5, E-6 grade. So, they're making more money than a private's making. So, when I went to OCS as a private, they automatically, on paper, promote you to an E-5, so [that] you have more money. The reason is, it costs you more to go through OCS, because some things, papers and stuff like that, you have to buy it. So, uniform items, you start buying. Officers don't get uniforms, enlisted do. So, you have to buy your own uniform. So, before graduation, we're out buying uniforms, because you had the old green jacket, but, now, you've got the black piping on it and the same thing on the pants and all that kind of stuff. You've got to buy the insignia that goes on it. The first person that salutes you when you get commissioned, you give him a dollar. It's a custom. So, we all had to make sure we had our dollar with us. Well, you're in an auditorium and they call everybody to attention and they have a few words and people speak, blah, blah, blah, like a normal graduation. Then, they call you to cross stare and they hand you your papers for your commission. Then, of course, you all get a group swearing in, and then, you pick up your orders for your duty assignment and you go from there.

SI: Did any family members come down?

RS: Well, my wife--she was my first wife, I've been married twice--she came down with my son. While I was in OCS, my son was born. So, I hadn't seen him until then. So, she brought him down and one of my brothers came down with her, and so, they attended the ceremony. Then, they gave me a couple days off, so, I came back home for a few days.

SI: What was your first duty assignment as an officer?

RS: Fort Meade, Maryland. I got to Fort Meade and Fort Meade is fairly close to Aberdeen Proving Grounds and they have the Ordnance OCS program there. So, there was a whole herd of second lieutenants at Fort Meade, Maryland, not every one having a viable job to do, just so many of us, that, initially, I was assigned to a battalion and I was in the S-4 shop, which are the people who do all the maintenance and the ordering of supplies and stuff like that. It was, like, three lieutenants in there and a captain, who just came back from Vietnam. So, he was a short-time guy. I remember, he spent most of his time worrying about his antique cars. He was into buying old antique cars and fixing them up. It was pitiful. I mean, we would look for things to do like, "Oh, I'll empty the trash." [laughter] You volunteer to do something. There just wasn't enough work to do. So, they took me out of there, for whatever reason, and they made me a company commander. Now, I'm too new to be experienced to be a company commander, but they made me one. They assigned me a company. They gave me a building with no equipment, nothing--there wasn't a desk, there wasn't a chair, there wasn't a bed, there wasn't anything in it. I had to work like a dog to try and get some of that stuff. The only way I got it was sitting in the officers' club at night, crying in my beer, and some warrant officer's standing next to me one night, saw my peril on my face, I guess. We got to talking. I found out he was, like, one of the muckety-mucks on the post. He told me what to do, who to see and where to go, and things just started falling into place as far as equipment was concerned. The only reason the company was activated was that they had all these guys coming back from Vietnam and they had, like, four months, five months, six months left on their contracts with the government. They didn't have anything for them to do. So, they just opened up a company and stuck them all in there, no mission, nothing. So, obviously, disciplinary problems were quite high. If a guy didn't show up this morning for formation, you'd pray that he'd show up some time today, so [that] you could at least put a checkmark on the duty roster or the morning report, that he showed up. The other thing was, being young and naïve and not being too smart, I got assigned a senior sergeant and he was going to be my first sergeant. He took me in the office, he said, "I don't mean to get out of line," "but I don't really think you know what you're doing running this company." [laughter] I said, "I think you're quite right, Sarge." He said, "I'll tell you what--let me run it." He says, "You come out to formations, stand behind me, look like you know something." He said, "When I think you're ready, you take over." I said, "Fine." I wasn't proud. So, I had a good senior sergeant show me how to, basically, run a company initially, and so, that kind of saved my bacon on that. Shortly after that, I was assigned as a detachment commander for a maintenance detachment to leave Fort Meade and go up to Fort Drum. We were to provide direct support maintenance to the Sixth Armored Cavalry Regiment, which was doing training before they were assigned overseas. So, I left there and we convoyed up to Fort Drum, spending some nights on the drill hall floors of some of the National Guard buildings on the way up, because you couldn't

make that run with Army equipment in a day. I remember, when I first went up on recon, to see where we were going to stay and all that, they flew me up in one of the old single-engine planes the Army had called an Otter. I didn't think we were going to make it and that plane was--[T. Colonel Stokes puffs] and it would blow this far away. [laughter] Anyway, we got up and back and we had a two-month assignment up there. That was probably, after OCS, my first really good assignment, as far as me knowing what to do, me running a group of guys and doing a good job and your unit doing a good job. One of the guys I met up there was an engineer officer, a black officer, Oliver Best. Ollie and I became good friends. He was from Brooklyn. When I was in Vietnam, Ollie ran across me. He had gone before I went. He was in an engineering brigade. He saw I was in the First Cav. He said, "Oh, man, I want to be in the First Cav." Guys are young and stupid--they look at different key points, think that it's a litmus test on who I am in the world. So, he took--you could extend and stay in your unit or go to another unit. They'd give you, like, thirty days' free leave, and then, you come back. Well, he eventually got into the Eighth Engineers, which is part of the First Air Cav. I remember, two weeks before I was to come home, he got hit center mass with an RPG, just blew his body every which way. I didn't see it, but another guy I knew saw it. So, then, I was ready to come home after that, but I always think, when I think of Fort Drum, I think about him all the time. [Editor's Note: First Lieutenant Oliver Adrian Best, while serving with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Second Battalion, Eighth Cavalry, First Cavalry Division, was killed-in-action on May 6, 1969, in Tay Ninh Province.]

SI: What kind of vehicles were you and your company responsible for at Fort Drum?

RS: We did two-and-a-half-ton, five-ton trucks. We did quarter-tons, which were called jeeps. We had a small-arms repair guy repair machine-guns, rifles, pistols. We did some track work. They had a lot of armored personnel carriers, so, we did a lot of work on the tracks on those. So, that was probably the preponderance of the equipment we dealt with.

SI: You were at Fort Drum for two or three months.

RS: Yes.

SI: Was it preparing you to go over to Vietnam?

RS: No, we were supporting, providing direct support maintenance, to the Sixth Armored Cav Regiment, which they were training to go overseas. We were just there to provide direct support maintenance for them. The Army has levels of maintenance. First echelon maintenance is the operator. So, if this is your rifle, there's certain things you're responsible for on it. Beyond that is direct support, comes back to a direct support maintenance unit. We take care of certain things above that. Beyond that is general support maintenance and it goes to a higher level of maintenance. So, the more severe the problems or the issues, the level of applicable maintenance would eventually get that piece of equipment and deal with it. Sometimes, some equipment is mission critical. So, for example, I may have, let's say, a couple M-16s and a forty-five [pistol] in a supply situation in my unit. So, you'd bring your pistol in and, I mean, it's really bad. We can't repair it. It's got to go. We'll give you a good one, and then, take this one in, with the idea that that eventually gets repaired and replaces my float (spared) item.

AS: Did you oversee this operation or did you physically work on vehicles and weapons yourself?

RS: When I was up at Drum?

AS: Yes.

RS: No, I was the boss. I oversaw. [laughter] Obviously, [if] you walk out somewhere and a guy is struggling with something, they're trying to lift something there, you may throw a hand in there, but you know what? They're the technically qualified ones. They're the ones trained to do that particular work. I know I believe in what General Patton says, that he would never ask a soldier to do anything that he's not willing to do or wasn't capable of doing. Now, a lot of cases, that applies in my mindset, but you've got to realize, there's so many different skills that are needed, I can't do everything. So, some things, I just can't do. I'll just have to be capable to understand that it's being done in the appropriate manner.

SI: After those few months at Fort Drum, where were you assigned next?

RS: Well, I returned back to Fort Meade and, shortly after I got back to Fort Meade, I wasn't with that company I had. I went back to the same battalion and I was there for a short time, a few months at the most, I can't remember exactly. Then, I came down on leave for Vietnam. Vietnam was kind of--I kind of volunteered for that. I didn't like Fort Meade. I wanted to do more viable work. So, I applied for other schools and other activities. For example, I applied for Deck Officer and Harbor Craft School--to, learn to run boat companies or something. I got a nice, polite letter back a few weeks later saying they had just closed it down, the school, to commissioned officers. They were only doing warrant officers. Everything I asked for was, like, one reason or the other. One of the guys in my OCS class was working down at unit assignments, in personnel assignments, in the Pentagon. He saw my name a few times. He called me up at Fort Meade. He said, "You want to get out of there, the only place you can go is Vietnam." I said, "What kind of assignments you got?" gave me an assignment to a logistics operation that was going on in Saigon, basically with boats. So, I said, "Fine, give it to me," and got the orders. You take the long plane ride over there, with a little trouble, by the way--got to Hawaii, where they had to stop to refuel. Everybody deplanes and you go in a certain area and everybody stays right there until you re-plane, because they're just putting new food and fuel on. Me and another guy decided, "The hell with this." We went to the bar. [laughter] That didn't go over too well. Somebody found us there and we had a little ass chewing, let's put it that way. I figured, "What are they going to do, send me to Vietnam?" [laughter] So, I get there and, when you fly into Vietnam and you land in Saigon there, you go to a place called the 90th Replacement Depot. Everybody goes there. Then, they take your orders and they verify your assignment with the unit that you're supposed to be going to. So, normally, it's like an eight to twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen hours tops, you're out of there, because you're either being transported to your unit or someone from your unit comes and get you. Twenty-four hours later, I was still there in 90th Replacement. So, they didn't know what to do with me. I don't know what happened to the original orders I was assigned on. Later, after almost twenty-four hours, I went out and looked at the board again and I saw my name there. It just said, "Up country." The next thing I know, I'm

on the tarmac, on a plane, fly all the way up to An Khe, which was the First Cav base camp rear. Then, you do some paperwork there, like they give you your weapons and jungle uniforms and stuff like that. They lock up your stateside uniforms and boots, and so on, in big bags in lockers, fill out the death notices. That was always fun, "Do you want your relatives, your next of kin, notified if you're lightly wounded?" Seriously wounded, you have no choice, that kind of thing; some of the little, morbid things that happened. From there, they flew me to the base camp forward, which was in Camp Evans, which was up north of Hue, which is pretty [far north]. Hue is probably the biggest city close to where the DMZ was, okay. I flew in there. They had just undergone a firefight, mortars and rockets. The ammo dump had gotten hit, and so, it was on fire and rounds were exploding all over the place. So, we were exited off this aircraft very quickly, because the pilot never really fully stopped and he just went back up and got the heck out of there. So, [I] crawled around on the ground a little bit, ducking this exploding ammo, and so on, and went through some in-country lectures on booby traps and that kind of thing, and so on. Now, they still didn't know what to do with me. So, the DISCOM [Division Support Command] Commander just took me and flew me around. Wherever he went, for the next day or two, I was in the bird with him flying around. He landed one day at the maintenance battalion, 27th Maintenance, and he says to the Battalion Commander, he said, "I've got this guy following me around. Anything you can do with him?" [laughter] I felt like a piece of meat or something. The colonel was Colonel [Frank P.] Ragano. He ended up being a two-star, major general, before he retired. He also had an extremely large contract--he's out of Tampa, Florida--as a civilian, he has a company and they'd have a large contract. They were cleaning up the battlefield after the First Gulf War, all the unexploded ordnance and stuff like that. The guy made tons of money. Anyway, he says, "Sure, I can find something for him to do." The next morning, he took me in. I was a second lieutenant at the time. He pinned first lieutenant bars on me and, at that day and time, you have two criteria. You have what's called a time in service, the total time in the service is one criteria, and the time from your last promotion. Those two criteria have to meet certain set points before you can even be considered for the next grade. Well, in wartime, time in service criterion is very narrow. So, in a year's time, I went from second lieutenant to first lieutenant, spent a year there and, when I was leaving Vietnam, before I got out the door, he promoted me to captain. So, I always felt like I was being promoted to a grade that I didn't know what I could do in that job, like I didn't have enough experience yet at the other one, but, somehow, it all worked out for me. I became the S-2-3 of the battalion. S-2-3 is the intelligence and operations officer for the battalion. Now, most battalions, that's the guy that really calls the shot for the Battalion, for the unit, for the battalion commander. Unfortunately, it wasn't the case in my assignment, because they have what's called a materiel officer and he's the guy that actually keys in all the key maintenance operations. So, my big job was scrutinizing a lot of intel reports and doing the intel brief every morning before the guys got out, going anywhere, especially if they were leaving the base to go up to another unit and this and that, let them know if there was hostile activity going on or had gone on and that kind of thing, what roads the engineers were sweeping for mines and things like that. So, that was a big part of what I did at that time.

SI: When did you arrive in-country?

RS: May of 1968.

SI: This was after the first part of the Tet Offensive.

RS: Tet Offensive. Yes, in fact, for that year that I was there, it broke up the Tet Offensive in three different segments and there was one other segment after that. So, in my records, it gave me credit for four Battle Stars, yes.

AS: When you first arrived in Vietnam, the very first time you stepped off the airplane, what were your initial feelings? What did you see?

RS: It was hot. I could hardly breathe. [laughter] I'd just got off an air-conditioned plane after all those hours--that heat hit me. It took me a few days to get adjusted to breathing in that hot air, that, and then, the odors. You look at these travel pictures all over the world, every country, what you can't get from that is the odors that take place from it. Some of them were pleasant, some of them are not so, but what may be unpleasant to me may be a norm in that society. They had this thing called beetlenut and I forget exactly all where it came from--it was a plant-oriented thing--that the women a lot, and some of the old men, they chewed it and it made their teeth and their gums and everything red. So, sometimes, they'd smile at you and it's just big red stuff and it's very juicy coming out--just images, some of the images, that I still retain--but that's kind of the initial things I saw. Then, of course, I don't like taking medicine and, unfortunately, in this day and time, with all my medical issues, I take medicine every day, but we had to take pills for malaria every day. So, that was something to get used to.

SI: Were they still using Atabrine?

RS: To tell you the truth, I don't know. They had two pills, a little white one, which was a daily pill, I had that for a while, and then, we moved to an area where we didn't need that. Then, they had a big, round, orange one that you took once a week and, of course, that was kind of like taking an orange-looking piece of Ex-Lax. [laughter] A lot of guys, man, first [pill] and they're off.

AS: Was it given to you every week by someone or did they give it to you and you took it on your own?

RS: Yes. Oh, no, when you go, we used to get them at the mess hall. Assuming everybody went to mess hall in the morning, you'd take the pill and you'd take your food and you take it. There are guys who got malaria over there and there are guys who didn't. I would just assume the guys who didn't took the pill, but, [if] you look at the Gulf War and Iraq, and so on, some of the medications that the troops were taking to guard against chemical weapons and stuff, some of that has a negative effect on people. Several guys I personally know have all had prostate cancer. That's one--you get prostate cancer, go right to the VA, because they take care of it. That's one of the designated outcomes of Agent Orange exposure. For me, I told my wife, I said, "I don't know what the hell's going on." I said, "Agent Orange, I can remember, you couldn't hear the planes go over, but you could feel this, like, mist hitting your body and this foul taste on your mouth, because it's landing on your lips. You could see splotches on your arms where it landed," and so on. So, exposure was there. You look at the list of everything that the VA says, "If you've been exposed to Agent Orange, then, these diseases are an outcome and we will take care of it,

all right." So, I got colon cancer--that wasn't one of them. Now, I've got bladder cancer--that's not another one. I'm catching everything that Agent Orange [does not officially cause].

SI: Wow.

RS: The funny thing about the bladder cancer, I ended up with two blood clots in the arteries in my arm. I couldn't lift my arm. All the tests they did, they did DNA tests and everything, I've got a factor V Leiden. A factor V Leiden is--Leiden is the name of a town in Norway or wherever [the Netherlands] they came up with this thing--it's an inherited blood clotting problem. In other words, I have a five to ten percent greater chance of having blood clots, okay. My hematologist looked at me, he says, "This is amazing." I said, "What?" He says, "I have never known, in all the years, forty years of practice, an African-American who's had this." [laughter] He says, "If someone told me a patient had this, I would think they were European." I said, "Well, outside of our outer coverings, we don't know what's inside us." So, anyway, that's a sidebar.

SI: Tell us about your first few weeks at Camp Evans. Was that the final place you were assigned?

RS: No. From Camp Evans, once I got assigned to the maintenance battalion, their headquarters was located in a place called Phu Bai. So, I was basically working in Phu Bai, the same mundane thing every day. You get up, you go eat, go up, pull the intel reports, spend some time reading over them. You look and [see] if there's some operational things that I need to run by the staff. I'd go do my briefing, and then, I'd go back from that and, sometimes, I may leave the base and go visit one of our subordinate units. So, we had three subordinate units and they were all located at different landing zones within that area of operation for the First Cavalry Division. So, I'd go visit them, check on things from their point of view. I also had this ancillary or secondary duty of being the battalion S-5, which was the civil affairs guy. So, the Cav guys had built a little jungle gym type of thing for kids in a local village. You could climb up a ladder and go inside and it was all enclosed, kind of like a little treehouse with an open top and everything. The local kids, for some reason, were using it as a bathroom. I remember my first time through the village, I'm climbing up the ladder and my head went through the bottom of this opening. I looked around, I mean, there was nothing but excrement everywhere. I came right down. I never returned. I looked at it from the outside, from the ground, but I tried to explain to the village elder that that's not what it was for and see if he could get people to clean it out. Then, we listened to maybe some problems that may be coming from the military being in the area that maybe we could do something about; so, kind of did that for six months. One day, we were in the [camp]. There was a road, like this, dirt road, and then, we had three tents, big GP mediums, the personnel guy, my tent, the S-2-3, and then, the S-4, and then, the tent catty-corner to it, which is where the Battalion Commander and the XO and the materiel officer worked out of. One day, I was sitting at my little desk in the S-2-3 tent. Your ear starts picking up sounds. You learned sounds, what's good, what's bad. I picked up this sound and I told the guy that was in the tent with me, my clerk, I said, "We'd better get down." I said, "Something's going on." We went down beside the sandbags and, a few seconds later, a CH-47 [Chinook]--that's the big helicopter with the two top rotors--crashed right on the other side of this road. The explosion went up, and then, out, knocked down everything behind our row of tents, all the living quarters and stuff like

that, knocked over our latrine and all that. This row of tents was unscathed, but you could feel the heat, because of all the aviation fuel that was on fire. When I went out the front of the tent--of course, the heat was tremendous--the pilot was sitting in the seat. The back of the aircraft was gone and the front was engulfed in flame and couldn't break the Plexiglas in front. We took some entrenching tool, couldn't break the thing. Flames were just coming up everywhere and I always remember seeing that guy in there burn to death--something you don't forget. It used to bother me a little bit. I used to wake up some time in the evening just picturing that guy. I don't have that anymore, but, sometimes, I talk about it or I think about my experience. Time has dulled that feeling a little bit that I had watching that guy burn up, but, anyway, by then, the crash truck had showed up. I jumped on the top of that, took the microphone and I just kind of directed people doing things, shoveling dirt in the ditch to stop the flow of burning fuel, keeping people back away and not to touch certain things, because, normally, when something like that happens, the inspectors for crashes come in. They want to know what happened, why it happened. Apparently, the helicopter--afterwards, we found out--it was sitting on the helipad, kind of across from where we were, maybe a football field away, and they had just got done doing some maintenance on it. They asked the pilot to rev the engines up, so [that] they could see how it was going. When the blades are flat and they're going around like that, the helicopter's sitting on the ground with no problem. When they pitch, what they call a pull pitch, pitch it down, it slices into the air and that's how you get the lift. Well, apparently, the tail rotor went into pitch. The pilot did nothing--it just did it on its own--and the back of this thing started lifting off, like that. He didn't know what to do, so, he just pulled pitch on the front, trying to get it up, until, I guess, he could figure it out. Instead of leveling off, it just kind of went across that field, about a hundred yards, and nosedived right down in front of [us], across the road from our tents. Sometimes, you don't know how close you are to tragedy. So, that was one big incident that I was there to observe. Then, I guess it was about six months--yes, I went there in May, so, this had to be probably November, sometime, of that year--I got called out to do a special detail. So, I flew from Phu Bai to An Khe and there was another Cav officer there. They gave me twenty thousand dollars in--we used scrip. Your green dollars were taken from you, because of the black market. They didn't want it to flood the black market in South Vietnam. So, they had military payment scrip. That's what they paid you in and that's what you used in the commissaries and PXes and stuff like that. Somehow, you could spend it in the local village. They would take it, because they knew where to go, to a money guy who would change that over for greenbacks. He knew how to get into a military system somewhere and get it converted from that. Every system you invent, somebody finds a way around it. Anyway, they had this payment scrip and they gave me all of this money. It was another guy from my unit that went with me, a sergeant went with me, because they wanted us guys with the money to have a guard to help us out. So, they gave me a list of places to go. They were basically hospitals and, when I got to these places, I would find out who from the First Cavalry was in there. Let's say, like, the 123rd Evac Hospital was one of the ones I went to. So, I get there and I asked the people in charge, "You got any people here from the First Cavalry Division?" blah, blah, blah, find out who they are. You'd go to each one individually, you'd find out if their pay officer from the unit came out to see them on pay day. If not, we were empowered to give them a partial pay of fifty dollars. So, it was a nice outreach to guys in the hospital. So, one of the hospitals was right up there where I just came from in Phu Bai. So, I went back there, did that. The next day, we took off, went down to--oh, I can't remember the place in-between--went to one location, paid some guys there. Then, I went to Da Nang and Da Nang was a fun spot. First of all, we couldn't find a

place to sleep. So, we snuck into a motor pool and slept in the backseat of a jeep, with your gun cocked like this. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

RS: The payment I had to do there, I went to a place called III MAF [Marine Amphibious Force] Brig. It was a brig, a jail, run by the Marine Corps and they had a couple of guys in there from the Cav. Of course, when you go into a jail, they take away your guns and ammo and all that stuff. So, you go in there without this. Outside of paying these two guys, the only other thing I learned is, I never want to go to jail. There are guys in there that I was afraid of even when I had a gun on me. [laughter] So, there's some bad people in jail. So, if nothing else, it was a good lesson learned. I also had to pay people who were on the hospital ships, the USS *Sanctuary* and the USS *Repose*. The USS *Repose* was tied up to a dock in Da Nang. So, it was a matter of just going to the pier and going up on the ship, and then, paying these guys. The good part about it was, being an officer, because, most of the time I traveled around, I didn't have any rank pinned on me, I'd pin my rank back on and go down to the crew's mess for the officers, get some good chow for once, anyway. The hospital ships, one would be at berth, the other one would be ten to thirteen clicks, miles, out in the ocean, travelling up and down the coast. That way, if you had wounded, by traveling up and down, you'd try to shorten the flight that they'd have to take to get to medical care. Usually, they'd been to a local hospital, medical facility, so, they're somewhat stabilized. So, it's not like they're going to die in route, hopefully. So, we had to wait to get out there and that took a long time, because most of the "birds" going out are carrying wounded and they were all full. So, we finally found one that could accommodate us two and we got out on the back end, the stern, of the vessel and the chief came out. Of course, he took the weapons and ammo and all that stuff from us. Then, he had two guys come out and they took firehoses and hosed us down, because we were too dirty to go inside their nice, clean ship.

SI: Yes.

RS: They wouldn't let me eat in the officers' mess. I had to eat in the crew mess, but you know what? From the food I was eating, again, C rations, it was all good. There were some horrendous, horrendous wounds, guys wounded and the odors from their wounds, and so on. God bless them doctors and nurses, because I don't know if I could've been there more than the few hours that I was there. That was the other significant duty I had. So, when that was done, we got back to An Khe, I gave them the pay slips, I gave them the remainder of the money, they did the balance. We flew back up to Phu Bai, got to Phu Bai, got a ride in a jeep over to where our unit was, got there--everything was gone. All the tents were knocked down, everybody was gone. There was one guy sitting there in a vehicle and he was waiting because he had to take that vehicle somewhere. He was waiting for me to get back and he says, "Here's your orders." He said, "First Cav's been alerted. We're moving." I said, "Moving where?" We were in I Corps, which is the northernmost corps area in Vietnam. They were moving us down to III Corps, which is down in the Saigon area, out of that area. Everybody had been alerted. In these few days I was gone, they'd packed up and moved, all right. So, they gave me a fresh canteen of water, I had two more C rations given to me and told to go back to the airport. There was a group waiting there and I was supposed to be in charge of that group to go to Saigon. We got on the plane and the plane went to Cam Ranh Bay, because that's where the pilots were from, and

they weren't going to go any further. That was their decision. So, we're stuck at Cam Ranh Bay for a day, trying to figure out how to get to Saigon. We finally got to Bien Hoa, which is northwest of Saigon. So, we finally got there. When I got there, I told the Battalion Commander and the Executive Officer I didn't want to do that job anymore. I said I wanted to go forward to one of the detachments. So, he [the Battalion Commander] brought a guy in, made him the S-2-3 and sent me out to B Detachment, which followed behind the Second Brigade of the First Air Cav, doing direct support maintenance. It was a forty-man maintenance group with two lieutenants and a captain.

SI: That was in November, you said.

RS: Yes.

SI: Was that the same time you made the switch?

RS: Well, yes, it was November, because we spent about a month--when I left there, B Detachment was in a place called Phuoc Vinh and I got to Phuoc Vinh and we were setting up. It takes a while to get all your tents sandbagged, and so on, and all that stuff, but you're operational. You're doing maintenance at the same time. We were there for about a little over a month. In fact, of all the guys that weren't off somewhere on duty, I got them all together on Christmas Day and took a big group shot. I've got it and I keep that down in my archive. Somebody said, "Where were you?" I said, "I was taking the picture." [laughter] Anyway, so, we were there a little over a month or so, and then, we relocated from there to a place called Quan Loi. Then, I was at Quan Loi until I went back to the battalion headquarters, which was in Bien Hoa, and came home.

SI: When you were in this first place, which I have trouble trying to pronounce ...

RS: Phuoc Vinh.

SI: Phuoc Vinh, right. What were your day-to-day activities there?

RS: Trying to decide where we were going to put the supply tent, where we're going to assign these different guys to sleep, making sure--we didn't have a mess hall, so, we had to eat with one of the units that had a mess hall--make sure of that. Each place you go to, you've got to make sure you get assigned to somebody's mess hall; so, doing those little mundane tasks like that, every day, checking to see what items came in to be repaired, what items have been in, passed whatever standards we had. I can't remember what they were--like, you bring a radio in and, if these particular things are wrong, you should be able to get that radio repaired and back out to the unit within a set number of days, which means you've got to have adequate parts in store to be able to repair within those times. So, it's a constant battle marrying those kinds of things up.

SI: Did you ever have trouble getting the supplies that you needed? Did you face shortages?

RS: Sometimes, yes. When we moved into Quan Loi, you talk about supplies, I found two brand-new engines for M-48 [Patton] tanks. We didn't have tanks. The Vietnam (Army) unit

that was there had tanks; they left. Somehow, they just left these engines. So, I found another unit, an ARVN unit, a Vietnam unit, that could use them. So, man, these were cheap, brand-new, but they were cheap, because I got a pallet of beer for one and a pallet of soda for the other one. [laughter] So, the guys had beer and soda for a while, but every day is kind of mundane. Once in a while, you get some weird stuff going on. When we got to Phuoc Vinh, they sent one of our trucks, a two-and-a-half-ton truck, with empty sandbags out to a point where the engineers had said, "This is where you go to fill your sandbags," with the dirt, and so on. The guys were gone for quite a long time and the commander expressed some concern about it. So, he asked me to go check on them. So, I go out there, I see our truck and there's trucks from about five or six other units all backed up and a bunch of just local people, the local Vietnam people. They were filling them and tying them and stacking them on the truck--couldn't see my guys anywhere. Then, all of a sudden, I see a couple guys coming out of a tree line over a little distance from where the trucks were. So, I walk over there and there's my guys, all with some local ladies--we'll leave it at that. In fact, there were some officers from some other units over there with some local ladies. So, needless to say, those guys were punished, because, while most of those people were probably good people, you don't know whether there's a VC sympathizer in there or not. They could've been sticking a bomb or anything in one of them bags. You don't know. That's why you're there. Even if you get local people to do the work, you've got to watch them. So, anyway, that was the only other excitement. My battalion commander came for a visit one time; before I got smart, he came for a visit. We were standing in the yard, me, him and my company commander, and I told him, I said to him, I said, "Sir, you need to get over to the bunker." He said, "Why?" I said, "We're being shelled right now." Rockets were coming in. About five seconds later, rockets go off, maybe about fifty yards from where we were. So, he runs to the bunker, because I knew my battalion commander and XO did not like being shot at. If they knew you were in a forward unit and you were being shot at, they didn't come to see you. They liked to come in mild times. So, anyway, because I warned him of this and he got to the bunker, there was nothing I could do wrong that I would get punished for from that day forward. So, that was a good thing.

SI: Yes.

RS: You'd take little liberties here and there, but, like, when we were at Quan Loi, it was a nice, calm, peaceful day. They [the battalion officers] were flying, they radioed in they were going to stop by; radioed back, I said, "We're under fire. We're under fire," and hung the radio up. They never showed up. They found out, sometime later, I lied. [laughter] So, yes, you have all these little things that go on. I mean, we weren't an infantry unit, in infantry contact, but we got mortared and rocketed. When you do retrograde moves on the highway, when you're running in a convoy, you got shot at sometimes. It's all part of the experience, I guess, and then, you're fixing things all the time and all the administrative stuff that goes along with it. I think the whole time I was there, I saw a Catholic chaplain twice. He came out to the unit to do service and, both times, he'd come in the tent and he'd look at the *Penthouse* and the *Playboys* before he ever went out there. [laughter] Once he had his fill of reading the magazines, then, he went out and did his service, but he was a good chaplain.

SI: Yes. [laughter] Do you guys have questions about Vietnam?

AS: How did you feel the first time you experienced enemy fire? It must have been a scary experience.

RS: Not really. I didn't know what environment I was in. When you're--you've got to realize, I went to OCS, I was twenty years old. When I got commissioned, I was twenty years old. When I went to Vietnam, I was twenty-one years old. Shortly after I got there, I turned twenty-two. So, I'm a young guy. Look at some of the things you see on the news today, people at that age bracket, the lack of common sense and some of the trouble they get into. Some of these people worried about, "Oh, we put too much on these guys," or women, "at such a young age." Well, I had a whole lot more responsibility and concern at that particular age. When you're at that age, in my opinion, you never see the inevitability of life coming to an end. We're young, virile guys and ladies. Now, we don't see our own demise. So, it never bothered me. It may if it had been more extensive, but the rockets and mortar attacks I underwent--I even was standing next to a two-and-a-half-ton truck one time, about four feet away from it, let's say on the side where the cargo bed is, and, all of a sudden, I heard [Lieutenant Colonel Stokes imitates gunfire]. It was a bullet going through the air. You could hear it going, and then, next time I heard it [Lieutenant Colonel Stokes imitates a gunshot] and it hit the side of the truck. That's when I knew to get down low, but it was just, like, I'd throw you the ball and you have to reach a little far to get it. It's just part of the day. It didn't bother me. You sit in a helicopter, fifteen hundred, two thousand feet, your feet are over the edge of an open door, you're looking straight down, the only thing that's holding you is the little belt--all right, no problem. I don't know if I could go up on my roof today and do work. [laughter] You get older--and certainly now, I've had more medical problems--you see that life has run a long course, you hope it runs a lot longer, but you can more fully realize there's going to be an end, all right. You don't see that, at least I didn't, as a young guy, all right. It's like you hurt yourself--you get up, you shake it off. You know what the coach'll tell you, "Walk it off, walk it off." It just doesn't happen like that today. So, my perspective between then and now is quite different, but being shot at never bothered me.

SI: Did your unit suffer any casualties? You said you worked with forty men and three officers.

RS: Yes, we had three detachments. Each was forty men, and then, you had a main headquarters company, which was much larger, but they'd work in and around, staying where the battalion headquarters was, so, it was a much larger group. There was a guy who was killed--it was in the unit, in the battalion--there was one guy killed before I got there. I think one or two got killed later on, after I had left the unit. My own unit, B Detachment, we had one guy wounded while I was there, Earl (D), works out of Northern Virginia. He doesn't like anything to do with veterans' groups or anything. He's like, "I went there. I'm done. Don't even remind me of it." He probably wouldn't like to see me anyway. The night he got wounded, he was in the latrine and, when mortars, in pitch dark, land and they explode, you have three things. You have the sound, the crash of the explosion, you have light, a flash of light, and you have a heatwave that rolls out. He was in the latrine and, when these mortars started landing, he was going to--he ran to the bunker. I mean, he had his boots and his underwear. That was it. I mean, we're out in the field, so, he didn't need much more to get to the latrine. So, every time a mortar landed, Earl was like this, he was like that, because you can't see him in-between, but you see the flashes as he was running to the latrine. I ducked back in the building, because there were sandbags on the outside of the building. It's a Quonset hut that me and another guy were staying in. Somebody

yelled out loud, "Earl got hit." So, I grabbed the first-aid kit, went outside--of course, I was in my underwear and boots, that was it--and I crawled through a ditch, stayed low and got over to the bunker, got down in the bunker. He had a shrapnel wound in the shoulder here, a little shrapnel wound, a little trickle of blood. I mean, the guy was extremely upset. He was, "Oh, God." So, I dabbed all the blood out, and just put a patch over it and said, "Look, you get to the medics, they'll take it out," but you wait for the shelling to be over. He was going. I said, "Earl, calm down, calm down." I said, "I had a worse wound stepping on a rusty nail when I was a kid," the old cheap sneakers and you're climbing on boards. I was just saying that to calm him down. It just excited him even more. Oh, he went to the commander the next day, how mean I was to him and everything. Anyway, he was the only guy wounded, got his Purple Heart. He couldn't wait to go home.

SI: It sounds like the conditions were not the greatest. You talked about eating C rations often. Did you ever have any better meals than just C rations?

RS: Well, C rations, basically, when you were leaving and going on a road trip or you're going to fly out somewhere, you don't know where you're going to eat, so, you carry Cs with you, so [that] you know you have some food to eat. While we're on the compound that we were assigned to, we were always assigned to a unit for mess. So, we would eat at one of their mess halls, unless something was going on and we missed a meal. Then, maybe, we'll grab a C ration to eat. Then, of course, if I got up and went over to the mess tent in the morning and they were serving powdered eggs, then, I'd go get a C ration. The powdered eggs, man, they were big. I mean, when they mixed them, they weren't too bad, but the problem was that nobody ever could mix them a hundred percent. So, when you start biting into them, you hit that dry powder, God, it's like biting on metal, the aftertaste, ugh. In fact, if you served me a powdered egg today and I lived up to my oath I took in Vietnam, I'd have to shoot you. [laughter] So, sometimes, it made sense. We had a guy, who I heard that his father, uncle, somebody, had some kind of political office, but another young lieutenant, lives in Ohio now, if that tells you anything about his politics, but we were riding one day, going from Phu Bai to Camp Evans. Well, before you get to the City of Hue, there's a lot of just open ground and a lot of rice paddies. We were eating these Cs while we're in there. It's a box and you open it up and there's a can in there and maybe a package of stuff. They have about three inches of toilet paper, some chewing gum, one of those little packs with two cigarettes in it, cookies, maybe. The C rations would be, like, maybe ham and beans and you open it up and, of course, you eat it cold or you eat it hot, if you could cook it. Anyway, he had eaten his C ration and he was methodical, put the lid back down and he put everything back in and he put it back in the box. He held the box up when we were riding by this rice paddy and all the kids saw him out there in that rice field. He's waving it like that and he heaves it over. Now, it's an empty C ration, nothing's in it--heaves it out there, lands in the water in this little rice paddy and all these kids were running through the water, and so on. They get over there and you could see them giving us the finger, like that. [laughter] I'm sitting there thinking, "These are the guys that are going to be shooting at us when we come back, because you taught them a good lesson."

SI: Yes.

RS: These are, I don't know, what do you call them, anecdotal little stories?

SI: No, this is great stuff.

RS: Everybody goes to war, or to other significant events, and they see it through their own eyes. We all have our own biases, we have our own way of explaining things. So, even though we see the same thing and we try to explain it the same way, the language we use, the words we use, it may come out a little bit different. So, basically, anything I'm saying is just how I saw it through my eyes and how my limited memory can recall some of these little anecdotal things that happened, which all was part of the overall experience there. I can't say that I was ever really frightened the whole time I was there; been shot at on a lot of days. Most days, you don't get shot at, but the ones you do, especially if something significant happened, like when Earl got wounded, those kinds of things you tend to remember. I remember when the Battalion Commander was up and I warned him about the rockets coming in. I remember, the day after that, somebody found a gigantic beehive in our little supply tent thing and nobody could go in there and get supplies. So, we threw smoke grenades in there and smoke grenades come in different colors. So, somewhere, someone took a picture and you had all this orange and purple and yellow coming out of the flaps of the tent, but it drove the bees away.

SN: Did you have an opinion on the Vietnam War before you enlisted? If you did, did that change while you were actually in Vietnam, and then, when you came back?

RS: I can't say that I was politically aware and, based on the political awareness, took a stance. I was aware of the fact that we were there, that some of it may not have been on a good basis. I was leery, somewhat, about going, because I don't think our politicians do a good job in who they vet around the world and who they involve us with. People they tend to involve us with end up being bad guys. I mean, look at South America and Africa and other places where we've gotten involved and the CIA has gotten involved with Patrice Lumumba and Che Guevara and all these other folks, Noriega. [Editor's Note: Patrice Lumumba was the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo. After reaching out to the Soviet Union for military aid, he was killed by a military group in 1961. Che Guevara was an Argentinian Marxist who aided Fidel Castro in his rise to power in Cuba. He was killed in Bolivia in 1967 while attempting to incite a revolution there. Manuel Noriega was military dictator of Panama until the United States removed him with military action in 1990.] We always seem to be on the wrong side of the ballfield a lot, and so, because of that, once I got there, I was a little bit leery about what they were getting us involved in, because there were rules for things and, some of those rules, I didn't like. It was done, in part, not necessarily, I think, for military reasons; maybe for military reasons, but also for political reasons. This may be right or wrong, but, for example, at Quan Loi particularly, because that's where we spent most of our time, there was a perimeter that went all the way around the base. There was an airstrip, but for aircraft that had short takeoffs, not the real long runways, okay, and then, mostly helicopters coming in and out. So, it was significant, but it wasn't all that big, a little base. So, at so many feet around the whole perimeter, there were bunkers. So, every night, a unit had to provide people to man the bunkers. So, we had a bunker that we had to man every night. So, a couple guys, they would get off during the day, maybe around noon, told to go get some rest, because they were going to be on duty that night. So, they get out there and you're on this duty at night and they have a starlight scope where they could see a little bit at night. It gives you green images, and so on. Well, this, not our bunker, but another

bunker, identified some NVA, VC, whatever they were, carrying a mortar tube and reported it into the Tactical Operations Center, which everything gets called into, the TOC. So, the TOC said, "Observe and report." So, every so many minutes, they observed and reported, never gave them a clear field of fire, all right. If they had, it would've been done; never gave them a clear field of fire because of waiting and observing. Guys set up the mortar tube, they fire at all of us, they'd take the tube down, went home, I guess, had a drink and went to bed for the next day--who ever knows what they were doing--and, all of a sudden. The TOC gives, "You now have a clear field of fire." Well, hell, they were done. So, I'm not a high-level tactical guy, but my attitude is, if I can identify the enemy and he's there, I'm going to shoot him. That's me, but we have rules of war. I understand there's rules of land warfare, which we learned in school--you see people, an enemy soldier, takes his rifle, throws it down, put his hands up, you can't shoot him. Unarmed civilians, you can't shoot them. You've heard the story of My Lai, that Lieutenant Calley? When Calley's unit was going by that village and they got shot at, if they'd had returned fire right there or, called in the airstrike, nobody would've said anything. [Editor's Note: On March 16, 1968, a platoon led by Lieutenant William Calley entered the village of My Lai and killed hundreds of civilians. Calley served some jail time and was released in 1974.] They went past that, went back to their base, sat around, drinking, got mad about being shot at and went back out there and shot up all those people. Well, they were clearly wrong. They violated the laws of land warfare. So, whatever punishment came their way, that's their problem. Now, I understood the rules of land warfare, so, I would never--if I had an opportunity to shoot at anybody, I would only do it within the scope of those rules. I'll just put it this way--I got shot at a hell of a lot more than I ever got the chance to shoot at somebody.

SI: Were you in situations where you would have to fire a weapon?

RS: Twice.

SI: Okay.

RS: But, I never did. One time, we were at Camp Evans and my unit was a small unit, so, when we got on the road to go somewhere, normally, we'd wait for the normal convoys that run between these locations and we'd just get on, trail on with the convoy, so [that] you have other people with you. We were coming back from Camp Evans, going back to Phu Bai, and it was two trucks. One of my trucks broke down just as we cleared the City of Hue. The convoy kept going, so, it was just me and the two trucks. We got on the radio and we called for a wrecker to come out. So, we waited and, while we waited, there was little local kids coming down, giving candy and gum. Everybody's friendly, this and that, smoking cigarettes and joking and carrying on. As soon as it's almost getting dark, the wrecker showed up, we got the truck hooked up. We start to pull out and, all of a sudden, we see machine-gun fire going across the road, in front of us and behind us. Now, I have no idea who was shooting or why they were shooting. The decision was, "Run it. The hell with it, I'm getting the heck out of here." So, we just put as much power to the engine as we could, took our weapons and just had them at the ready. So, by the time we got to a fork in the road, there's a break in the machine-gun fire, we got out of there unscathed. That was a pretty good time. The other time was at Quan Loi. The VC, NVA, attacked on two sides of the compound and they broke through the wire. Off to one side of us was a self-propelled 175-[millimeter gun] battery. These are big artillery pieces, but they're on self-

propelled, full tracks. The guys who went in the bunker because of initial shelling, they didn't realize guys were breaking through the line. By the time they realized it, they got up and they tried to lower the elevation of the guns down and just fire, big guns like that, point blank. As the VC, NVA, were coming through the area, they just scooped up rocks and dirt and just threw it in the open tubes, in the open end of the tubes. So, when they fired the gun off, the ammo, the big round in there, hit all this stuff and exploded inside the tube. Chunks of metal just went up and rained down--I've got pictures of it--all over our immediate unit area, big chunks of metal, laying there all over. Nobody got hurt from that. Nobody in the unit got hurt from that. Of course, then, you had VC inside the wire and you've got your guns at the ready and anybody who looks like they weren't tall enough, I'd have shot them. [laughter] It always reminded me, in advanced infantry training and in OCS, one of the things they used to talk about in training was called "Final Protective Fire" and it immediately came to mind. "Final Protective Fire" is when the bad guys' inside your wire and it's just "cowboys and Indians" time. You're running and shooting. Fortunately, I had a weapon, but I didn't have to shoot anybody.

SI: What kind of weapon did you use? Was it a carbine or did they give you a rifle?

RS: I had a forty-five and I had an M-16 and I had a Stevens shotgun and I had an M79 grenade launcher. So, when I went on these moves with the convoys, I carried an array of weapons. If we were getting breeched too close, shotgun, if they're off at a distance, grenade launcher, anything else, it was for personal protection, kind of like a cop being attacked, and, if they're not that close, get the heck out of there.

SI: On a convoy, if you could see the enemy out there, would you fire the grenade launcher at them or was that just in case?

RS: Well, first of all, I've never been on a convoy where you could look and see identifiable enemies.

SI: Okay.

RS: So, that was never a consideration, but I was on convoys that took fire. Sometimes, you'd take fire, there'd be a guy, a couple guys, they may fire a few rounds and they'd go. One of the big things in convoy movement is, usually, if someone sets up an ambush on a convoy, they've already identified this particular ground. It's what's called a kill zone. So, they're all set up to put maximum fire on you. So, the best thing to do is get out of there, if you can. Now, if they're smart and let's say there's a big ditch and there's a small bridge, blow the bridge--that way, you can't keep going forward. I've been on a couple convoys that took fire, but it was minor. I was at Quan Loi one time when a convoy was going out or coming in, I can't remember which. They came under attack and the brakes on the trailer, you've got this guy driving, locked up. He kept going. So, you've got the wheels aren't turning and he's dragging this thing. All that heat built up that, by the time he got to the compound and stopped, it was so hot, it just burst into flames, the whole trailer. That was fun to watch; [laughter] take pleasures where you can.

SI: Wow. Did you take R&R while you were in Vietnam?

RS: Yes.

SI: Where did you go?

RS: Hong Kong, yes, went to Hong Kong. There was a guy, two brothers that were on the same plane--there were a lot of brothers on the plane--but these two in particular, they went on R&R. The next morning, they were back in Vietnam. They, in that short period of time, got in trouble with some local girls in Hong Kong. [laughter] You take guys somewhere, boy, you can't trust how they act, some of them, anyway, but Hong Kong was nice. I'm in there, checking into the hotel [I am] supposed to be in. While you're checking in, there are guys measuring you for suits, while you're standing there trying to check in. [laughter] Before you get in the elevator, they've all got their books out, showing you this and that. What the hell? I picked one, the cloth I wanted, blah, blah, blah, went up to the room, took a hot shower, which was nice, hot running water, flushing toilets, before I got cleaned up to go out to eat, and so on. Before I could get that all done, they had the first cut of the suit. The guy was knocking on the door with the first cut of the suit, God, but that was a good [time]. I enjoyed that. The only thing I didn't like about Hong Kong was that I stayed at a place called the President Hotel. You come out of the hotel, I remember, turn left, go down a block or so and there was a big avenue. You cross that street and there was, like, a little teeny mall/restaurant kind of thing. You walk up some steps and you walk through a series of little stores and open-air markets and such, but upstairs was a nightclub. I went in there the first night and every GI that must've been in Hong Kong was in that place. I didn't come there to see these guys. So, I started trying to find places where I could see local people and see local things and experiences, because you're only there a couple days. I mean, I've gone in a restaurant and everybody's speaking Chinese and all the menus are in Chinese. I look at the menu and the guy'd come over and, the first night, I pointed to something. The guy nodded and he went off and brought it. I had no idea what I was getting, but it was good. The next night, I point to something in another restaurant and the guy looked at me. He points to something different. I said, give him the okay sign, "Go." [laughter] So, I wanted to kind of experience that, go down to--you've got Hong Kong Island, and then, you have the other part, the mainland part, which is Kowloon, which is where everybody, basically, goes. I took the ferry over to Hong Kong Island. I went to what's called the China Fleet Store. In fact, I bought a huge reel-to-reel tape recorder, yes. I'm struggling with this thing off the ferry boat, trying to get it back to my room, and some old papa-san come on--I mean, this guy had to be older than ten grandfathers--and he's going to be willing to carry it. I'm thinking, "I can't carry that. How's he going to carry it?" "Whoosh," up on his shoulder and I got in a rickshaw, so, he's running beside the rickshaw with this thing on his shoulder, all the way to the hotel. Jesus, I gave him a good tip. That was impressive.

SI: Wow.

RS: Also, you think about it and you think about the Vietcong, the VC, and so on, the lives that they were able to make living in tunnels and caves and the things that they could move coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail carrying on their bodies or bicycles that they rode along, carrying stuff. We're in here with these big dirt roads and concrete highways with trucks and we still had as many problems moving supplies, sometimes, as they did. So, it goes to show you, where there's a will, there's a way. Some people can get things done. Bob, who's been here, I guess,

[Robert Arbasetti] and a couple of the other guys, they've been back to Vietnam and toured around. I'm not opposed to it, but I just haven't gotten around to trying to do that. It's kind of impossible for me to travel and stay away for a long period of time without taking my wife and she just can't go everywhere, I'm telling you. She has a very narrow diet. So, I know the food there is not going to be agreeable to her. Plus, things that would be of interest to me would not be of interest to her. So, maybe, someday, we'll see, go back, but, like all wars, you build up this hatred towards your enemy, and rightfully so, maybe, at the time of war, but, some time, time heals all wounds, those things get behind you and you may become friends. I mean, look at all the stuff we get manufactured now in Vietnam.

SI: Right.

RS: Yes.

SI: Let me pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RS: Andrew, do you have a question?

AS: Yes. In Vietnam, were there any notable or good experiences that you had with the locals on your own?

RS: Yes, but you have to figure I didn't spend a lot of time with the locals, except for that one time at Phu Bai, where I was the S-5. The local policeman that was in charge of that village and some other areas, he had invited me to his house for dinner. I didn't really want to go, but I went because I felt it was a duty. It was a pleasant experience. It was a bit tough getting around some of the food. Some of it didn't set well with my system, so, I spent a lot of time in the latrine for the next day-and-a-half. On a convoy move from Bien Hoa back out to Quan Loi and back, about halfway, where we usually stopped to take a little break, there was a little series of stores. There was a lady that ran one of the stores. She sold beer and other stuff like that. She was always very pleasant to everybody. She was a younger woman, but she was always very pleasant to everybody. So, I remember that and I assume that, like everywhere, you're going to find people that were friendly, sympathetic with the US, and there were some that were not. I just never ran into any personally, one way or the other, outside of those two incidents.

SI: Did you have much interaction with the ARVN or the "Ruff-Puffs" [RFPPFs, Regional Force/Popular Force]?

RS: No, not really. Being in the unit assignment I was in, it pretty well was just Americans, outside of someone you may see when you're out on a convoy move, if you make a stop, or, if ARVNs came through, like they did when we were at Quan Loi, that one unit looking for help and they discovered we had these tank engines, which we were able to do some trading with, but, no, not really.

SN: Did you write home when you were in Vietnam or did you keep any journals or any written accounts of anything?

RS: I should've kept a journal. There were guys who did. I've never ran across any, but, in hindsight, you look at some of the things people have. Yes, I wish I had kept a journal, but I didn't, but I did write home. I did get letters from home. I had an aunt that used to send me the local town newspaper. My mother would send a care package every once in a while. She'd make these brownies. They were blonde brownies. She'd make those and put sardines--I used to eat sardines a lot then--and crackers and stuff in there. Everything was fine except for one package, one time, some rodents had gotten into. When I picked up the package, you could feel them running around in there. I dropped it, opened it up, let them out. Since the blonde brownies were in an old, metal tin, I figured, "Well, those are going to be okay. Just wash it off real good." [laughter] So, you kind of had that going on, but the problem is, when I got back, you felt--I felt--way out of place, because a lot of world and country events that have taken place, I just didn't know about. I just felt out of place for a while.

SI: You went over to Vietnam around the time Martin Luther King was assassinated and many other things were happening in 1968. [Editor's Note: Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee.]

RS: After I left Fort Drum and got back to Fort Meade, Maryland, I had this temporary duty to go with some people. We rode around Washington, DC. We were supposed to take a map and indicate certain routes that should be blocked off in case of riots, and so on. We were just doing it, I guess, as a preventative measure or exercise. Then, in April, because I went to Vietnam in May, April, when Martin Luther King got killed, I imagine somebody actually exercised those plans. It was, like, a few weeks after we'd wrote this up, so, I don't know whether they were using it or not, but we were all on alert. I never left the base.

SI: The literature points to that as the starting point of deteriorating relations between black and white soldiers in Vietnam. How did you view the situation between people of different races in the service while you were there?

RS: Well, yes, I read some of the stories and heard about some of the incidents, but that wasn't necessarily my experience. The blacks in our units, I mean, if they were in trouble, they were in trouble for the normal things GIs get in trouble for, and the same thing with the white soldiers. The only thing is, just like in the civilian world, where a white would get a pass on something or get a lesser punishment, a black wouldn't get a pass or he would get a more severe punishment. There was three or four courts-martial, battalion level courts-martial, when I was in Vietnam, that I'm aware of, and they all had to do with a black soldier. In each one, I had to participate in some function in the court-martial. Now, in those days, you could be assigned to be a defense counsel for someone or the trial counsel. We're not lawyers, but you have these schemes to work out in the book. You can go to the legal guys that tell you how to do certain things, but some of the arguments that a lawyer would make, you just couldn't do all that, because you were not trained in that area, but we're tagged with that responsibility. So, I was, like, an assistant defense, assistant trial counsel, in some courts-martial. So, I felt kind of bad being the only black officer and, every time they had a court-martial, the black guy was there somehow. I just think that I

was being used. I never said anything, because there was nothing I could do about it. The one time, where two black guys were being court-martialed, one was in the morning, one was in the afternoon, for the same offenses. The guy in the morning got convicted of all of them (violations). I don't recall what punishment they gave him. The guy in the afternoon, who we were defending, we went in and we basically said, "Look, these three charges can only have been committed by one person. Here's a transcript from the morning's trial. You've already convicted the person. So, you have to throw these charges out against our guy, all right, and you have to get rid of the board, because whatever we present on the next charge, the last charge, you've already heard evidence in the morning trial, you're biased to it. So, you can't be fair and impartial." Reluctantly, and they were pretty pissed at us, but they had to dissolve the board, but what they did was tell us to wait. Within an hour, guys flew out, guys flew in, this and that, they reconvened a new board and I went in. I plead the guy guilty on the last charge. Then, I did everything we could. If we'd have had tears from his mom, we'd have presented it, whatever, that, "He was basically a good guy, he made a mistake. Let's not really hurt him. Let's make it as positive of an experience as it could be." So, they gave him confinement at "LBJ," who was the President, but it's also the Long Binh Jail in Vietnam. [laughter] They gave him three months in jail, forfeiture of two-thirds of his pay for three months, all of it suspended, which meant, "Don't get in trouble for three months, all this goes away," okay. He called me a black MF in the courtroom, in front of these people, because I couldn't get him off on everything. I thought I did a great job. So, I reported that to the battalion commander. That was another charge, being disrespectful to a commissioned officer, after he was convicted. So, he signed the top line, following what the court-martial board had said, then, he dropped down a line and he vacated it all. They put handcuffs on him and drug his backside over to the jail. I was a very happy camper about that--called me something in front of my colleagues. [laughter] That was just the courts-martial. They're there for a reason. You have to have discipline. I just think that when you look at, at that time, the population of military jails, it was running about, like, twenty percent black and you're only twelve percent of the general population. There's an imbalance there. I've seen cases where I've seen punishments that were lighter for whites than they were for blacks committing the same offenses. So, you know there's an imbalance and a bias there. One of my later assignments, before I got off active duty, one I fought not to have was, I was the race relations/Equal Opportunity officer at a command for the Military Traffic Management Command, Eastern Area. So, we used a lot of those experiences to talk to people, so that they could view their actions in a more open and bias-free way.

SI: Are there any other questions?

AS: I can't think of any.

RS: Be like the guy in the boxing match, "That's all you got?" [laughter]

SI: I think we are out of questions for today, but I want to have you back and talk about the rest of your military career and your time at Rutgers-Newark. For today, thank you very much.

RS: Okay.

SI: We really appreciate you coming in and sharing your story.

RS: Okay.

SI: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Jesse Braddell 9/30/2015

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/22/2016

Reviewed by Maura ElMegeed 11/1/2016