

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RAYMOND TAYLOR

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second interview session with Raymond Taylor on August 5, 2013, in Iselin, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me back. We left off in the middle of your combat tour in Vietnam. You said that on your first patrol, there was a problem with one of your fellow patrol mates having a mental issue. Can you tell me a little more about that on the record?

Raymond Taylor: Yes, it wasn't our first patrol.

SI: Okay.

RT: It was this fellow's first patrol.

SI: Okay.

RT: About twenty minutes into the patrol, he started babbling to himself that, "They're all around me." So, we reported it to the patrol leader, who subsequently made arrangements to medevac him out. I don't know what happened to him after that. He wasn't there when we got back.

SI: How long had you been doing patrols before that incident?

RT: Four or five months.

SI: Were there any other times when you ran into men who could not take what they were going through, that sort of thing?

RT: There was an incident; I want to say it might be. We were at Chu Lai when this one occurred and it occurred in the company area, while, in the evening, traditionally, we'd go to whatever movie's being shown on the big wooden board they used for a screen. When we got back to the tent, there was this fellow, and I don't recall his name, who was ranting and raving, very upset. At some point, there was a sergeant, his name was Stanley, and I was trying to talk [to] this guy, calm him down. With that, he picked up his M-14 and locked and loaded. So, things were really getting a little hairy. In addition to this, physically, this guy was a big, strong guy. We continued to negotiate, trying to get him to calm down, and, when I thought he was going to pull the trigger, I dove out the back flap of the tent. I was told, later on, that a tracer went right over my shoulder. They were able to subdue him and they took him down to Charlie Med, to the lock up, the mental ward there. I've come to find out that somebody had delivered a telegram to him. He had a brother who was in the Army, in the Delta, and had been killed, died from wounds inflicted by a crocodile. So, he just plain flipped out. I think they changed the policy of how they deliver information like that in the future, but those were the only two that I recall.

SI: We talked a little bit about the UNION I operation. You were not as directly involved in that one. You were more on the periphery.

RT: I was on the operation, but I don't really ...

SI: Recall it?

RT: Recall any specifics.

SI: Okay.

RT: It was UNION II, I was the blocking force on the north side of the valley. I was the westernmost team on the north side of the valley. We plotted the floor, took us two days, and then, as the infantry pushed the NVA west, we tried to prevent them from escaping. We were fairly successful, to the point where an NVA officer and his aide appeared on the next finger and I had a team down in the ravine between the two fingers getting water. I found out, later on, that while they were getting water, they could hear the enemy getting water. In addition to being probed on three sides, we opened up with the machine-gun on that finger. At about five or six hundred yards, the machine-gun is not that accurate and it sprays bullets all over the place, but it forced them to leave the hill. Subsequently, we moved out also. We never did gain another spot where I could set up business and continue what I was doing, but we'd done it for several days and I guess we were successful enough.

SI: Do you remember approximately when you started doing that?

RT: April, May of '67. I'm not sure what the exact dates of the two operations were. In-between the two, there was something called BEAVER CAGE. That didn't involve us. I think it was an infantry operation. Pretty sure UNION II was in May of '67, somewhere around there. [Editor's Note: Operation UNION I began on April 21, 1967 and ended May 16, 1967. Operation BEAVER CAGE began on August 23, 1966 to September 5, 1966. Operation UNION II began on May 26, 1967 and ended on June 5, 1967.]

SI: How long were you deployed in this blocking position?

RT: I'd say we were there five days before we decided to leave the hill. I had to find another place that we could get out of, an LZ [landing zone] that we could get out of in a hurry, if necessary. I don't recall the exact [time], how many days or how much longer after we left that part of the operation to escape and evade. So, I'm sorry, I'm a little vague on that.

SI: No, that is fine. In these engagements, how close would you be to the enemy? You said you could see them at some points. Would you be able to see the enemy when you would fire on them?

RT: Oh, absolutely. The trick was to try and see them before they tried to escape across these open rice paddies, because [from] the time you call the mission to the time that the rounds explode, they quite frequently are able to get all the way through. On that particular patrol, I started firing into the trees, which produced a couple of secondary explosions, might've been a small ammo dump or a vehicle that they had in there, but the trees were so thick, you couldn't see into them, nor do we know the results.

SI: Being out in the field under these conditions, how did the environment impact your work, being in the jungle, the heat, the humidity?

RT: That's a good question. I think the jungle itself is so alien to our bodies or our bodies are so alien to the jungle. I was there only a couple of months and I got an infection in my leg which is ongoing to this day. I had cellulitis, infected leech bites, what I'll refer to as jungle rot as a cover-all for everything else, but it wouldn't heal. I was actually out of the bush for six weeks. At one point, they wanted to send me to Japan, because it just wouldn't heal in Vietnam. Because of the humidity and what all, it just wouldn't heal. Finally, it did. So, I didn't really want to go to Japan. I had the feeling that if I got there, I might not come back to my original outfit. So, I was fortunate in that respect, that it finally decided to come around, but I think the doctors were trying to treat things that they didn't know what you had. In some ways, the corpsmen played a big role in that, in checking people out on a daily basis, making sure people took their salt tablets and, obviously, you try to be as covered up as you can, especially if you're moving through elephant grass. It'll cut you like a razor. So, almost all of us wore leather gloves with the fingertips cut out and long-sleeved shirts and just tried to be as careful as possible, because you get cut on something over there, there's no guarantee that it's going to heal right away. When we were at Chu Lai, in the beginning, when we came in off patrol, the standard treatment was to go and sit in the surf. The moving saltwater was a great healer. We didn't have that at Da Nang. We were miles from the ocean. You'd actually have to go by vehicle to get to China Beach to sit in the surf. So, that usually didn't happen, but I think there's a difference. When we were working in Chu Lai, the valley seemed a little bit more wild, if you want to put it that way, as opposed to the valleys that we worked out of out of Da Nang, which were a little bit more cultivated and many more rice paddies and what-have-you. So, maybe the need for the ocean wasn't as great. A lot of the jungle up there had trails, which was good in some ways and bad in others, because while you're trying to maneuver, the enemy may well be up there trying to maneuver also. Everybody used the trails, because they're all trying to maneuver through the jungle, not very practical.

SI: Would you find booby-traps on the trails?

RT: Sometimes, yes, and at least that told us that there was some activity there. Usually, the birds and the monkeys were pretty good indicators of activity, whether they were reacting to us being there or reacting to somebody else. If they started acting up or if they went silent, we'd often move off the trail and set up in an ambush and see if we could catch somebody.

SI: When you came back from Operation UNION II, what was your next move after you left the hill?

RT: I don't really remember.

SI: Okay.

RT: I continued just running patrols, wherever they sent me, until July 6th. The morning when I came in on July 6th, that was my last patrol. Somewhere in-between, building this new platoon,

we didn't make any patrols for three weeks, while all the guys were in the RIP [Recon Indoctrination Program] program.

SI: When was the coal mine battle?

RT: It began the night of 3rd of July '67.

SI: You were in the process of building this new platoon. Was it the new platoon that was involved in that battle?

RT: Yes. No, actually, across the river, I guess we're about a mile-and-a-half from the coal mine. We were on Hill 452, which, for recon, was a permanent observation post. The views were almost 360 degrees. You'd often draw ten to twelve days on top of the hill. There wasn't any additional water, so, if you had the wherewithal to bring some cans of water, in addition to your canteens, that was all you had to live on. The night that the battle began--the day there was rather uneventful--I guess it was around eight-thirty at night and I couldn't sleep. So, I went over, relieved whoever was on the radio watch, and, shortly thereafter, my number two, Tony (Velez?), came over. He couldn't sleep. So, we were just sitting there talking, what it was going to be like [to go home], because [I] figured I didn't have a flight date yet, but it was a couple weeks away, just making small talk. There's nobody up there. The hill itself is very difficult to attack and I don't think it ever was attacked. I think Mother Nature did more damage than anything else. At one point, they built an ammo bunker up there. Lightning hit it and several guys got thrown off of the [hill]. The drop-offs are, like, 150 feet on three sides. It took days to retrieve the bodies. That, I think, occurred after I left and I found out about it many years later at one of the reunions, but they also did some smart things. They built a wooden landing platform, because all there was at the top of the hill were several, maybe a dozen, big boulders, huge pieces of granite, that if you ever were attacked, you just had to lay down between them, [laughter] because it has a natural defense. In the early [days], when we first started working that hill, off the back, the south end of the hill, there's a finger down below, about halfway up, that we used to land the helicopter on it and stay right in that spot. At least one additional time, they booby-trapped the area, but their grenades were of such poor quality, they didn't go off. I don't know how we came about it, but, just in the course of discussion was, if the enemy ever got up on the real top of the hill, we were at a severe disadvantage. So, eventually, we just used the finger as a landing zone, then, we'd hump up, a pretty steep angle, up the side of this to the top of the hill. It was virtually no shade and, at some point in the past, there was an open area to the north that was mined. So, it had some defenses and I wouldn't have wanted to try and attack that hill if I was the enemy. So, as far as I know, it never happened. The night of the coal mine, we were just sitting there and a fire erupts on the hill, which we didn't think too much about it, until it grew in intensity, and then, we just had binoculars out. There wasn't any ambient light that night. It was dark and we really couldn't see a whole lot of what was going on. Eventually, I don't recall what time it was, we got a call from division with a frequency to go to and hook up with--we didn't know who we were hooking up with--and it turned out to be the operations center at An Hoa Combat Base, which was eight-and-a-half miles away. So, we're talking to them. They wanted to know if we could adjust for these mortars and I said, "You'd have to light it up, because I can't see a thing out here. It's pitch black." So, there was a fairly steady stream of flares over the top of the hill, but, by the time we were ready to go with the four deuces, the

battery was knocked out. There was an Army, four-man Army searchlight team, also as part of the defenses on this hill and they got knocked out also. So, the combat base gave me another frequency, which I went to, and it turned out to be a fellow who was a sniper attached to this unit. He had one of the few working radios. So, I got some idea of what was going on on the ground from him and it was finally decided that we'd try and put some eight-inch on top of the hill. They had to pull them out of their dug-in positions and resettle them, because it's a self-propelled eight-inch, which meant that all of the prior--what's the word I want to use? registrations--prior registrations would be off. So, between that, the combat base knowing that position, and I gave him an azimuth from the top of the hill to what I perceived to be the center of the hill at the coal mine, then, we called the mission. They fired four rounds of eight-inch and they landed right on the top of the hill. It was enough to drive the NVA off the hill. They made an exit to the southwest and I was told, afterwards, that had we not fired the artillery, nobody would've survived. I think they had sixty-six men on the hill and sixteen were killed, thirty-four were wounded. Even though the enemy came with women to drag the dead and wounded away, the enemy left 110 bodies on the hill. So, I mean, that's information I found out years later from this fellow, Colonel Dick Esau, who was a major at the time and was the operations officer. I didn't know him at the time, he didn't know who I was, but, years later, we came to find out we'd both played on the same softball team for Third Battalion, Second Marines, before the war. I haven't seen him now in about six years. So, every now and then, I get a message that he just wanted to know how I was doing.

SI: At the end of the battle, you were pulled off and you started prepping to go back home.

RT: No, it just kind of ended when they didn't want us to pursue the enemy. I was ready to adjust the artillery to pursue the enemy, but I think they were more afraid of killing some more of their own people. That's a risky shot when you do what we did, but we were successful and I just didn't think about it again. I guess, for a while, I wondered if I ended up--I guess there was an initial shock when they asked me to do [it]--could I fire an artillery mission on to the top of the hill? That's not something that you want to hear. I mean, you take a chance on killing your fellow Marines, but, by the same token, if you don't do it, they were going to get killed anyway. So, I came back in. I don't recall there being any dialogue, other than the debriefing from the time we spent out there. I basically turned the platoon over to Tony (Velez?) and I went to work at division every day. So, that was kind of the end of it, until somewhere in the '90s, when this fellow, Dick Esau, became National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. We hooked up and had some, just conversations at various times after that.

SI: You were slated to leave Vietnam by the end of July.

RT: Yes, I actually left on the 19th of July.

SI: In general, how do you think the tour system--thirteen months in-country, and then, you leave--affected the effectiveness of your unit? Do you think it had a negative or positive effect?

RT: I don't know how effective [it was], although we went out with somewhere between thirteen and eighteen guys, if they were available. It only took three or four guys to do the actual job. The rest went along as security--they're extra guns. So, as long as there weren't too many

changes at the top, I would've preferred, probably, to see the whole unit rotate, but, then, you don't give your unit much [time to learn]. With the rotation process, people who had experience were moved up into leadership positions. So, in that respect, it was a better system than rotating a whole unit out and getting a whole green unit in again. I can tell you this much, that I was running a platoon, I was twenty-one years old and, in the beginning, I said, "What did I get myself into?" [laughter] It's an immense amount of responsibility.

SI: Did you ever have any issues with your men, discipline problems?

RT: No. Sometimes, you've got to discipline somebody for not doing what he was ordered to do, but it wasn't being insubordinate. It was just being [absent-minded], "You didn't do what I told you to do," and it wasn't personally directed at me. It was more of the mental outlook of the person involved. I'll give you an example. I told this one fellow who was to be trained on the machine-gun to take it to the armory and get a new sear put in it. The sear was worn. He never did. On a subsequent patrol, climbing up the side of it, one side, north slope of Antenna Valley, the gun went off. The sear slipped and it cranked off about fifteen or twenty rounds before he could break the belt. Of course, you've compromised your position at that point. Needless to say, he never did that again, but those were few and far between. [Editor's Note: A sear is a part of the machine-gun that controls its firing.] We had a guy that was a constant joker. He couldn't walk by you without saying something. One day, the Lieutenant had given him something to do or something happened--I don't recall the incident--but the punishment was to dig a six-foot hole, six-by-six-by-six. So, he hired a couple of the local gooks to dig the hole, went out and found the Lieutenant to come down and inspect the hole. In the meantime, somebody had kicked an empty soda can into the hole. So, the Lieutenant looked in there, saw the empty can, he says, "Good, now, bury the can." So, it cost him ten bucks for the guys to dig the hole and ten bucks for them to put all the dirt back in it, [laughter] stupid stuff like that. I don't recall any really bad discipline problems. We were nothing like what was portrayed in [1986 film] *Platoon*. That was, like, light years away. That's about it.

SI: In the pre-Tet period, do you remember any issues at all with drugs or anything like that? Were you aware of that?

RT: There was some marijuana around. Alcohol was a bigger problem, but our company commander had a basic rule--you'd better be straight on the LZ when you're going out. It got left that way. We didn't have the drug issues that supposedly existed. I just didn't see them.

SI: Last time, you said that when you first got there, you would have three to four days between patrols, but it went down to about two days between patrols.

RT: Yes.

SI: Did that pace keep up for the rest of your tour?

RT: Yes, pretty much.

SI: How did that affect you, in terms of your morale or endurance? Did it start wearing on you and your men after a while?

RT: I think the guys, on the whole, were so physically fit, so, that part of it wasn't an issue. I don't think there was any griping. I think we all understood that we were working with half the amount of people we had before, because the other half was in support of the Americal Division. We knew the reason why, so, we just did what we had to do.

SI: Would you say that, in general, you were well supplied, that you had what you needed in terms of food or ammunition?

RT: We always had that. We had a guy, a supply NCO, who was very good at his job and, if he didn't have something, he knew where to get it. No, we were never lacking for food, except towards the end of some of the patrols, when you're running low on food and you've still got a couple of days to go or you're running low on water and there's no source of water around you. No, food and supplies were not an issue then. We had plenty of [both]. I've talked to guys who went into Hue City. They didn't have everything that they needed. They didn't even have [proper uniforms], had torn up clothes. Quite often, if we needed a new shirt or a new pair of trousers, we'd have them in short order. I think they kept us supplied, because how could you send somebody out in the field with not enough food? The probability of finding food is so remote, it wouldn't be practical.

SI: It sounds like you had to make-do with not very good food, mostly K or C rations.

RT: Yes, we had a mess hall there in the battalion area. I don't think I even went there, not frequently. If we were in and weapons and everything were cleaned and everybody was physically clean, shaved and clean clothes on, then, we all went to the PX. Across from the PX was a movie theater. So, that was probably good for a whole afternoon, especially the snack bar next to the PX. You'd get a hamburger, French fries, something from home. Usually, that didn't last, that didn't last long. Usually, by the time we got back from the PX, there would be a patrol warning order out. So, you go for the briefing and make sure we got all the equipment and supplies that we needed and just business as usual.

SI: Did they have some kind of enlisted men's club in the battalion area?

RT: Yes, there was. There was a club. I guess we had the good fortune of--we were in a place called Camp Reasoner, named after a Third Recon lieutenant who was killed. I think he was awarded the Medal of Honor, but I'm not sure. They had built the area up in the time that they were there. So, we didn't move into something that we had to build ourselves. We put up some eaves, front eaves, and a porch at the end of one of the tents, but that was about it. In Da Nang, you were in the dirt and, in the monsoon season, that meant you were in the mud. So, the pathways were made from wooden pallets. If we managed to stay on that, you might not get full of mud and that mud was horrible. [Editor's Note: First Lieutenant Frank Reasoner, killed in action on July 12, 1965, served in the Third Reconnaissance Battalion and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.]

SI: Did the monsoon season affect your patrol schedule?

RT: Oh, yes. A lot of times, you couldn't get out. The helicopters would be socked in. There was a hill, [Hill] 1495, it's over a mile, about a mile high. On top of it--it's at the north slope of Happy Valley--we tried three times before we could get up there to get the helicopters to lift that high. I'm not sure about it being a monsoon, but the humidity was a problem at the time. So, it's quite possible it could've been somewhere around there, but, on top of the mountain, it was an old French hotel called Ba Na. That was the name of the mountain, had a few outbuildings, a post office, a general store, some other stuff. Basically, we went up there to assess it, to see if it was feasible, if they bulldozed all of the buildings, to put an artillery base, firebase, on top of the mountain. Many years later, I ran into a captain from Seventh Marines who, in the course of a discussion, said that he was up there with his company and the hotel had been demolished, but, at the time before he left, he was providing security, another company came and they were just starting to get the guns, I guess. I was long gone by then, so, I don't know, really, what the timeframe was, but to fire a cannon off a mountain a mile high vastly increased the range, a pretty good concept, if you could make it work.

SI: What was your mindset at the end of your tour in July? Was this also the end of your four-year enlistment or was that coming up?

RT: Coming up. Yes, I was due to get out on October 22nd.

SI: At that time, were you looking forward to the end of your enlistment or were you considering reenlisting? What were you thinking?

RT: I had pretty well had enough at the end of my tour. There were some things happening that made no sense to me. For instance, in Elephant Valley, north of Da Nang, just below the Hai Van Pass, a team was out there and reported lights on the river, the Ca De Song River that ran through Elephant Valley. So, two nights later, they bombed the area. Well, the lights weren't there anymore. Then, they sent me in the following day with a division photographer, a radio operator and one other guy, a rifleman. We assessed the dead, the bombing run. I did find some letters, torn up, thrown in the bushes, from an infantry unit that must've walked up through the valley at some point. So, I collected all that up. The General was furious that they did something as stupid as that, because all you have to do is put the pieces back together and you'd find a home address and the unit that the guy was with, that it was like [a mistake], but these guys were green, right out of the States. The part that bothered me was, "If the team reported lights on the river, meant that boats were coming down the river, why didn't you divert what you had in the air?" and they didn't. They waited two whole days before they bombed. I mean, it was stupid. Then, you hear figures, like, I was listening to NPR radio and there was a fellow--I didn't agree with him, he researches massacres and things of that ilk--part of the statistics he was throwing out was that during Vietnam, the US military lost thirty-six thousand helicopters and that for every one confirmed enemy soldier, they expended thirty-nine thousand rounds of ammunition. Those figures are just mind-boggling. I mean, put that on top of, if Kennedy hadn't been assassinated, we probably wouldn't have been there. His opinion was, "It was a civil war, leave it at that."

SI: At the end of your tour, did you have any thoughts on the goals of the war, if the war was winnable, that sort of thing?

RT: I thought that we were winning. We certainly had enough problems getting the enemy to fight us, isolated attacks, like the coal mine. The UNION operations were probably some of the biggest, in terms of effectiveness and reducing the enemy in the area, but I look at more toward the end of the whole thing, from, like, '71 to '75--I figured the North Vietnamese lost so many people that they had to grow an army. Without the American presence there, had they had, still, a standing army, they would've been able to roll south with no problem, but they didn't, because they didn't have the people. That's just my own take on the whole situation. We certainly had a lot of equipment. If you look at, like, Colonel Ripley's Stand, when he was a captain, he blew the bridge at Dong Ha and prevented two hundred enemy tanks from crossing the river. I think that was 1972. He was, like, an advisor to the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] troops. [Editor's Note: On Easter Sunday 1972, Colonel John Ripley defended and blew up a bridge in Dong Ha to prevent a North Vietnamese force of twenty thousand from advancing. He was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions.] I guess, in the end, I really had the impression that the people in the South just wanted to live their life without having somebody fighting over their land. There were some stupid things that occurred. One was when I first got there and I went out and I really didn't know what was going on. We were on a hill overlooking some rice paddies and there were a whole herd of water buffalo. There were, like, twenty-one water buffalo there. Well, that's a very wealthy farmer who has twenty-one water buffalo, an extremely wealthy farmer. So, the patrol leader we had, somebody yelled, "Gooks in the buffalo." The next thing you know is, all the buffalo are getting shot at and there wasn't anybody there, but seven of them got killed. At three hundred dollars a head, the Colonel flipped out, have to pay out twenty-one hundred dollars, when the average family income in Vietnam, at the time, yearly, was three hundred dollars. One buffalo was worth what the average family earned in a whole year. I said, "This is nuts." I mean, that was something that didn't have to get done, but some dumb stuff like that. There was--I'm guessing, I think it's Operation COLORADO, but I'm not sure--we were out at the combat base at An Hoa while the infantry was out doing whatever they were doing. We were just providing perimeter security. There was a small hamlet about a click or a click-and-a-half from the combat base that was a constant source of irritation. For political reasons, they couldn't relocate the people and demolish it and it kept being infiltrated by the VC. So, on the radio, we hear that a Skyhawk was coming around. He was going down. I'm watching him through the binoculars and he aimed that plane right for that hamlet and bailed out. The plane took out the hamlet. So, there's more than one way to cook somebody's goose, but that just pointed out something that was totally unnecessary to have to have done. The plane was going to crash anyway--the fact that he took out the hamlet, nobody could question him about it. I mean, the plane's now out of control. It's going to crash. Many years later, there was a program put together by, I believe, Columbia University and Arthur Miller of Harvard Law School was the moderator. All of the services were represented by generals and admirals, except for the Marines. There was a colonel and I don't know who he was. Miller's question was, "An infantry squad is moving up on a hamlet and you get just about to the hamlet and a woman comes running up, running toward the point man. Well, she was a suicide bomber. She blows herself up, kills a couple of the Marines. The Marines level the rest of what was left and, eventually, go back to their base." So, he said, "That's one scenario. The other scenario is, same situation, the squad's moving up on a hamlet and a little kid comes

running toward the point man and the point man blows the kid away. A firefight breaks out and a lot of people are killed, but there's a photojournalism team along with this patrol and they film the whole thing." You get into the whole thing about the perception and the moral compass and having had this second unit be aware of what happened to the first unit. I thought that that should be shown more frequently on television, but I guess, at the end of my tour, I was just tired of it all. I had pretty well made up my mind I was going to go back and see if I could get into college, which I was successful at. So, I will admit that I was home about a couple of months and I was probably, actually, wondering where I was and what was I doing, because everything was so alien to me, after being away for four years. If it hadn't been for the fact that there was a growing veterans' fraternity at Union College, where I got into, at Cranford, and I started to mix with the other vets that were there, I probably would have [rejoined the Marine Corps]. I might've gone back, because you had six months to retain your original rank and, as screwed up as Vietnam was, I thought this country was more screwed up at the time. That's my opinion.

SI: In Vietnam, were you aware of anything happening in the States, like antiwar activity or just changes in the culture in general? Did you get any news about that?

RT: I don't really recall that. I guess we really didn't see it until we got back. We didn't have television. We had radio, [like in] *Good Morning, Vietnam*. We had the military newspaper to read, but I don't think there was anything about the protests in it. I'm sure that some of the people back home writing letters were telling people what was going on, but I don't recall it being of any interest to me.

SI: Looking back over your tour, what would you say is the most vivid moment for you?

RT: Vivid moment--I don't know, there's a whole bunch of things.

SI: It could be more than one, something we have not discussed.

RT: There were some. If you want to say the worst night of my life was getting hit by our own artillery, killed one man in my fire team, screwed up the other guy.

SI: That was done by the lieutenant they got rid of later.

RT: Yes. Well, they promoted him and put him in charge of H&S [headquarters and service] Company, but he wasn't going to the bush anymore. I think he came back for a second tour, later on, and worked with some ARVN units. I'm not quite sure where we were, because I don't recall, but moving along a ridgeline, we came across an area, like, big enough for one "bird" [helicopter] and the brush was cut about two feet high. So, I thought to myself, "Looks like somebody got out of here in a hurry." So, we're looking around, we're looking around, we don't see anything. One guy says, "I've got three prongs by my boot." Well, it turned out there were five "tomato cans" [antipersonnel mines] in the LZ. So, I had a medic--a medic, a corpsman--by the name of Johnson, Doc Johnson. This guy had a rather extensive resume of what he'd done in Vietnam. Between he and I, we blew all five of the tomato cans with C-4. That, I've got to say, was pretty harrowing.

SI: Had the guy actually stepped on the prong or did he just see it?

RT: It was right next to his boot--a half an inch and he'd have blown himself up. What I did was, I froze everybody and I had the last guy in step back in his boot prints until he was out, and then, the next guy and the next guy--that's how we got out of there. Then, we went back and we had to find, locate, the five, turned out to be five, and we blew them up. You asked me before [about] incidents that may have influenced my thinking. On July 15th of '67, the airstrip at Da Nang came under attack. They blew up, rocketed, blew up, the bomb dumps, planes. One fighter was taxiing to take off and he just got obliterated. I said, "I bet when they find out where these launch pads are, they came out of Happy Valley." I was inserted into the wrong valley and I wondered, at the time, if it wasn't a test, to see what my reaction was, because I didn't have any radio contact whatsoever. Finally, after hours, a [Cessna O-1] Bird Dog came looking. I mirrored the pilot. He flew low; he could see it was us. Then, shortly thereafter, the helicopters came and we got out, but Happy Valley was so named because the Marines that went in there early on were happy to get the hell out of there. It's primarily a lot of trees. From what I could see of it, it didn't look like it was cultivated, open valley floor with rice paddies and what-have-you, but I always thought, [by] its proximity, where it's at, that somebody should've been watching that valley, because it's a perfect infiltration route. That's one of the things that you start putting all these things together and begins not to make a whole lot of sense to you after a while, yes.

SI: Did you always have a corpsman with you when you went on patrols?

RT: Always. Yes, the one we had for the longest time was Arnie (Swarensen?). He rotated out and he's the fellow that, unfortunately, was run off the road down in Georgia somewhere by some rednecks and put through one of those big billboard signs, killed him. He was reporting into a ship in Florida, Mayport, Florida, Jacksonville. I had a couple of fill-ins for a few patrols. Then, we got a guy in, Bruce (Rock?), we had him for a long time. Bruce owns a bar outside of Carbondale, Pennsylvania. He comes to the reunions regularly. The corpsmen were one of us. The Marine Corps recognized that, because they could wear, if they had a dress uniform, a Marine Corps uniform with naval insignia on it. The Marine Corps League really irritated me for a long time. I wouldn't join it because they wouldn't recognize them for the value and who they were. I mean, there were a couple of times when we were short team leaders and a corpsman'd take a team and nobody said a word. I mean, most of them were E-5s, so, they had the rank to begin with. They all carried automatic rifles, like the rest of us did. I mean, you couldn't tell them apart [laughter] and, to us, they were invaluable. So, I hope that answers your question.

SI: Sure. I do not think we went over the time you were wounded.

RT: Yes, it was the 10th of December, 1966. It was an eighteen-man raid on a sapper [combat engineer] unit. They were looking for the headquarters of this sapper unit and we ran into a convoy of porters carrying medical supplies. We killed one. We were, like, in these ancient steps, where the steps were often tree trunks. There wasn't a whole lot of room to maneuver and these guys were pretty well spaced out, with space between them, that we could only get the one at the time. I think it was either the 401st or 402nd Sapper Battalions, could've been both; they

both operated kind of in close proximity. We didn't find it. What we did, well, we went in about eight o'clock in the morning, we had to be out by three o'clock--came twenty after three, the birds still weren't there. What we had left, were going to leave behind, was a radio pack with a sending device in it, a homing device that the B-52s could home in on and saturate the area with bombs. Even though we didn't find the headquarters, we had a very strong sense of enemy presence in the area. Finally, they showed up. They waved off the B-52s and they went on to secondary targets. Two days later, we had to go back in and get the pack. They didn't go for it. My gut feeling was, somebody must've been there, but the pack was smeared with cow's blood. When they slaughter a cow over there, they drink the blood, because they want the strength from the animal. So, my suspicion was that they could tell the difference between cow blood and human blood and they didn't go for it. They just left it there. Yes, that was that. I got hit in the cheekbone. In fact, when I get sunburned, there's still a little "V" there. One place in my record book shows it was a gunshot and another one says it was shrapnel, but I think it was a ricochet or a spent round. We were shooting into the trees at the time. So, it could've been one of ours that came back. I mean, I have no idea. There was so much noise when you're shooting. Anyway, the Doc cleaned me up, patched me up and I got up and walked away.

SI: Did you have to go to the hospital for it?

RT: Yes, I was out for [a while]--I missed the next patrol. I had a headache, banging headache, black eye, the whole side of my face was swollen. I was out ten days, and then, I went back again.

SI: Tell me about the process of coming back from Vietnam. You said you were out on July 19th--was that the day you started moving or the day you actually left the country?

RT: Yes, that was the day I left the country. Originally, I thought it was the 18th, but my record book says it was the 19th, got on. There were two planes, two Pan Am planes. We flew out of Da Nang. The first pilot radioed back to the second pilot that he was taking rocket fire and I thought to myself, "Just tell them I'm leaving. I'm not coming back. I'm going. I'm done," [laughter] but we got out of there and flew to Okinawa, spent three days on Okinawa getting my gear back and getting new orders. I think it was there; I'm not quite sure, now. I either got them there or when I got stateside. I think we came into El Toro. It was at night. We had the obligatory sea bag search. Being a sergeant, he just opened it up, saw a carton of cigarettes, closed it back up again. In the bottom of my pack was five knives, bayonets, that I had accumulated along the way, my K-bar. Somehow, the time, 3:20 in the morning, sticks in my mind, but, by eight o'clock, we were on a flight at LA. There were five of us. I didn't know the other guys, but we all kind of stayed together. The air-conditioning was on in the plane and we were freezing. We had to have the stewardess give us blankets. So, all of the other passengers, as they came on the plane, were probably wondering why we were under these blankets, because you couldn't see anything else, until, one by one, we had to use the facilities or a meal came, something. We left LA, flew into Newark and I had orders to go to Quantico. So, eventually, I reported in there. They assigned me to the cross-country chaser section. I didn't make my bunk, I didn't have to do anything. I literally had nothing to do.

SI: Did you have to go to Quantico right away or did you have leave?

RT: No, I had some travel time, something else called proceed and I think a little vacation time. So, by the time [of my discharge], I don't think I was at Quantico more than three-and-a-half weeks and I got out. Initially, I had applied to Rutgers and they turned me down, because I didn't have the language requirement. So, somebody suggested I go to Union College in Cranford and I did so and the Dean of Admissions there was a Korean War Marine. So, after a quick chat, I was accepted. It's the old saying, "Marines take care of their own," and things worked out after that.

SI: You came back to Newark in July of 1967. I forget the exact days, but it was either right after the riots or during the riots. Were you aware of that? Could you see changes in your part of the city?

RT: Well, I wasn't living in Newark at the time. My mother had purchased a house in Belleville. [Editor's Note: The Newark riots lasted from July 12 to July 17, 1967. They began after the police arrested an African-American cab driver and rumors spread that he had been killed in custody. The riots resulted in over two dozen deaths, over seven hundred injuries, fifteen hundred arrests and property damage exceeding ten million dollars.]

SI: Okay.

RT: So, I was aware of the race riots. They had actually started in my senior year in high school. My recollection is, it started with a fistfight between a black girl by the name of Diane (Gunn?) and an Italian girl by the name of (Rosalin Carino?) and it just escalated after that, just started taking sides. I didn't have a problem with race. Growing up as a kid, we had a bunch of kids that we would get together and play baseball. Well, one of them was a kid by the name of John. I don't recall his last name. He was black. He was the only black kid around, but he was one of us. We never thought twice about it. He never wanted to let me go to his house, which was on lower Chester Avenue, below Broadway. One day, I just said, "John, give it up. So, what's the big deal? You can come to my house; I can go to your house." Well, he finally gave in. His grandmother was there and his grandmother saw me, and then, I overheard a comment of, "What's he doing here?" Somewhere in-between coming back from Cuba and going to the Mediterranean, somewhere in-between, I think it's like Spring of '65, James Meredith was supposed to integrate the University of [Mississippi], was the first black to go to the University of Mississippi. The Governor of Mississippi said, "I'm going to call out the National Guard," and Johnson said, "I'll send in the Marines," which I think was illegal, but we trained for a week with chromed bayonets and chromed helmet liners. They had the plane standing by and the transportation from the base up to Cherry Point was in place and we never went. It died. He walked through and that was the end of that. [Editor's Note: In September 1962, riots broke out at the University of Mississippi after James Meredith, an African American, was admitted to the school.]

SI: In Vietnam, was there any tension between white Marines and black Marines?

RT: We didn't have that many black Marines, a couple, really. We got in a black sergeant by the name of Cook. He was more of a stateside Marine, spit-and-polish, pressed uniforms--that's not

what we were all about. In fact, if your boots were totally devoid of black polish, that was considered to be very cool. They left us alone, as far as the upper echelon--if we left the battalion area, we had to be squared away, but, if we didn't, look at the picture in there, do these guys look like spit-and-polish? [laughter] No, they're not, but they left us alone, because that just increased our effectiveness, cohesiveness. We were all in it together and there was no chickenshit, but Cook kept insisting on this and on that and on the next thing. Finally, we had enough of Cook, so, we made the request to send him someplace else, because he was causing more problems than he was worth.

SI: I have heard from other Vietnam veterans that they could have a little trouble adjusting to the people that worked stateside, with different attitudes and practices. Did you find that at Quantico in that brief time?

RT: Yes, I have a vague recollection of thinking, "I'm going to have a problem." I understood why you need spit-and-polish and pressed uniforms, but my head wasn't in that. So, I just went along. I got my pressed uniform and, if I didn't have to go somewhere or do something, I put on civilian clothes. I had a buddy who was over in Vietnam, but his wife lived in Washington, and so, I would leave her phone number. This was in the day before cellphones, so, they said, "Leave a number where you can be reached." Well, I wasn't going to her house, but they would've never been able to get a hold of me anyway. The only problem we had, one day, was, they wanted us to snap in with forty-fives. So, four of us went out to the pistol range, fired the gun, showed the empty gun to the range officer. They had this platoon of officer recruits and he goes on to say how, "That is not the way to fire the model 1909," something, "forty-five-caliber automatic pistol." "What do we care? We just got back. We didn't need to snap in. I carried a forty-five the whole time I was over there," stupid stuff like that, but, fortunately, things worked out. Even the day that I left, the First Sergeant says, "Here's my last offer." He offered me immediate promotion to E-6 [staff sergeant], so [that] they'd probably twist your arm to take a commission, and fifty-six hundred dollars, bonus. For fifty-six hundred dollars, I could've bought a brand-new Corvette, but I wouldn't have been around long enough to drive the thing. They'd only guarantee your choice of duty station for six months. So, I said, "Sorry, Top, I'm going." Then, I reported into Port Newark, to a motor transport Reserve unit. So, the Sergeant Major there says to me, "You want to be active or inactive?" I said, "Inactive." "Okay, see you." That was that.

SI: How long were you in the Reserves?

RT: Two more years.

SI: In the Inactive Reserve, did you have to go to meetings or check in ever?

RT: No.

SI: Tell me about Union County College. It sounds like it was a good transition.

RT: Yes, it was a small school. I think, at the time, it was rated the number two junior college in the country. To me, it hardly looked to be much more than a few buildings, but it was good and I was able to bond with some of the other vets.

SI: Would you say there was a large veteran population there?

RT: I think, by the time a year went by, we had, like, seventy guys in the fraternity and they're all veterans. There were only a few Marines, a fellow that lives in Metuchen, who was at the coal mine that night, he, myself and Pat Kennedy, who eventually became a police officer in Scotch Plains, but a lot of Army, Navy, a few Air Force. We all got along.

SI: Did you have an actual house?

RT: Yes, actually, in March of '68, we rented a house from a doctor on Broad Street in Westfield. The doctor had, I guess, purchased this house. He wanted to tear it down and put up a medical building. The township was giving him a lot of grief over what the new building had to look like. So, we had this [house]. We leased it for six months and renewable if nothing was going on on his end. As far as I know, I got married in November of 1970 and there were still guys living in the house. It was huge, a big, old mansion-type house with a barn in the backyard. We'd have parties there that would be a couple of hundred people at the party. So, we weren't as bad as the *Animal House* on television, but it was pretty crazy.

SI: Did you live in the house?

RT: Yes. In fact, one of the original guys was a medical technician in the Air Force. He worked part-time at Muhlenberg Hospital, but it had gotten to the point where it was so crazy at times that we rented an apartment in Plainfield. I don't know what happened; I think George got married. Yes, so, he was going to go live with his wife and I moved back to the house in Westfield. Yes, I think it began to change when the two years went by. We started getting a little wilder crowd coming to the parties and a couple of them took open rooms that we had in the house, but nothing that was really notable.

SI: Were there nonveterans in the fraternity?

RT: All veterans.

SI: All veterans. You were there from 1967 to 1969.

RT: '69.

SI: Those were significant years on college campuses. There were a lot of changes in the way people dressed and appeared.

RT: Oh, yes.

SI: Political activism. Could you see that on the UCC campus?

RT: Yes, actually, I saw it on the Rutgers campus.

SI: Okay.

RT: We had a fraternity advisor who was a retired Army colonel. He must've taught at Rutgers at one point, because the minorities had been able to oust the admissions staff at Rutgers-Newark and he was called in to help process the applications. So, needless to say, I got a phone call. I gave him the names of all the guys that wanted to transfer to Newark and he took care of that. We did have problems with people trying to scar--I don't know if it was granite or marble--bases of buildings and what-have-you in Newark. There was only a couple of buildings at the time, across the street was the Law School, was the Graduate School of Business, up in North Newark was the School of Pharmacy. So, we came to [campus], every day, with baseball bats and, eventually, the morons got the idea that that's not a thing they want to do. So, there was a lot of people with long hair and psychedelic T-shirts and what-have-you, but it wasn't for me.

SI: Do you happen to remember the name of the colonel?

RT: (Dowd?).

SI: Okay.

RT: Yes.

SI: During your years at UCC, did you decide on a course that you wanted to take or something that you were interested in studying?

RT: I wanted to go get a course, a major, that somehow related to business. I thought accounting was pretty boring. Unfortunately, Newark did not really have a marketing program. I don't know if they do now, but they didn't back then. So, I ended up taking economics. I don't know how economics relates to what I wanted to do, but at least it shows I had enough brains to figure out the math end of it, anyway.

SI: Did you work while you were at school?

RT: Yes.

SI: What did you do?

RT: I worked at the snack bar at Union, which was cool, because I got free food, too. Then, I worked a couple evenings at the Quality Court on Springfield Avenue in Springfield on Route 22. Eventually, I got into UPS. They had a program for people going to college who could work four hours in the evening unloading package cars. So, I did that for a couple of years. I weathered a six-month strike. Two summers, I spent at [Alcoa]--my wife-to-be, her father was a die setter at Alcoa in Edison. They kept threatening the workforce that, "If you don't come to work," the conditions were hot, to say the least, it was a foundry, "we're going to go somewhere

else. We've got to get this work out. We have plenty of work." I almost stayed there, that's how good the money was, but it's just as well, because they did move. My father-in-law was out of a job.

SI: Did you meet your wife after you came back from Vietnam or did you know her before?

RT: Oh, yes, she was in the nursing program at Elizabeth General and I met her because part of the program was taking courses at Union College. So, one day, I was in need of a navigator. I was doing some road racing, rally racing, and I asked a girl--I don't even recall her name--if she was interested. She said no, that she was engaged, but her friend, Susan, was available. So, I asked Susan and she was going out with somebody else at the time and, actually, I was also, but the someone I was going out with lived on Long Island. So, we got together, we got talking, we went out a couple of times. She dumped her boyfriend and I dumped the girl I was going with on Long Island. This November, we'll be married forty-three years.

SI: That is great, congratulations.

RT: Hasn't been a smooth road the whole way, but we're still together.

SI: You did road racing. How long did you do that for?

RT: As long as they held rally races.

SI: Okay.

RT: A couple years, anyway.

SI: A rally race, that is a long, cross-country race.

RT: Yes, actually, it was kind of restricted to a couple of counties. To stay within the law, you had times between check-in points and stuff, so, either if you got there too fast, you lost points, and, if you got there too slow, you lost points, but it was a lot of fun. Of course, there'd be the inevitable couple of kegs of beer and a party afterwards.

SI: Did you get involved in any other activities like that?

RT: We had an intramural football team, which I played on, and we had an intramural softball team. I loved softball, so, I played on that. I don't think there was anything else.

SI: In general, how well do you think you adjusted to civilian life after having been in the Marine Corps for four years?

RT: I had some problems. I drank a lot. After we were married and out of college and I had a job, my wife would say, in retrospect, that the weekends were hell, because I was angry at everything. That issue did not resolve itself until the first of the reunions was in the offing. There was a guy, the guy who was my assistant in Vietnam, Tony (Valez?), lived down in

Bayville, but he was in touch with--he had been in all three platoons in Bravo Company. Wherever there was something going on, he'd try and weasel his way in there. There was a guy up in the Boston area who was in the First Platoon, who was an NSO [National Service Officer] for the DAV [Disabled American Veterans]. So, Tony--Tony, of all people, this guy had severe PTSD--gets a hold of this book put out by, I guess, the DAV and the Veterans Administration. There were, like, ten line items that said, if you have [so many of these symptoms], I forget how many you had to have to be considered to have PTSD, but I had seven out of ten. Eventually, I went to the counseling center, the vet center in Newark, was on Halsey Street. There was a VA psychologist there. I started with the counseling. Eventually, I went up to Lyons. It was a Swedish psychologist, a very nice lady, Dr. (Pheterson?). She was a big help. I make a joke now about it and I say, "Well, now I'm cured," and, inevitable, the rest of the family will go, "Oh, really? Did anybody tell us?" [laughter] It doesn't go away. Vietnam runs like a motion picture in my head. If I'm not preoccupied with something else, it's intrusive, it just comes.

SI: What year did you go for the treatment?

RT: Oh, well, from '86 to, actually, at the first reunion, which was in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and the First and Second Platoons were going to be there. The First had had a prior reunion in Las Vegas three years before. I met this guy, (Speta?), I vaguely remembered him, but he was kind of instrumental in getting me into the program. I probably went a good five years. I think Dr. (Pheterson?) was getting ready to retire, because she started to do--I don't know if there's a correlation here--but, like, a group therapy thing, instead of individual. I'm sure she's still seeing some people on an individual basis. So, she put me into the group thing and it wasn't for me. It was guys whining and moaning, "The world has treated me wrong," and I didn't have that problem. If anything, I was treating the people that I loved wrong. So, I guess the anger subsided. I really don't have that issue much anymore. I think, if I have it, it's for something that one person might normally get upset about. That's it. I had problems sleeping, so, I recall talking to Dr. (Frofaza?), who was head of the mental health, outpatient mental health, up at Lyons. He retired, also. Then, when he retired, I just never went back. So, that was that.

SI: Did you have any other lasting effects from your time in the service?

RT: I don't think so. After college, the booze issue kind of subsided. I even quit smoking in 1986, at the behest of my children. I don't know if there's anything that I can really identify and say that it was caused by being in the military. I mean, everybody's got their own problems with the jobs they have.

SI: Many veterans were affected by Agent Orange-related health issues. Did you ever have problems with that?

RT: Yes, that, I have.

SI: Yes.

RT: I never came down with the cancers, but I did come down with the diabetes, coronary artery disease and Parkinson's, but, by the time they [emerged], I had a bunch of other issues also, like,

the circulation in my leg is pretty poor. I had tinnitus in my hearing. Eventually, I came down with psoriatic arthritis, which I started having problems with my shoulders by the time I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine. I put in claims for some things with the VA. The VA actually fought me the longest over my leg, because they said that cellulitis and jungle rot and infected leech bites couldn't have caused the problems that I had. Well, the private sector says otherwise. The private sector said infection caused the damage to the valves in my leg. They finally had to accept that. The Board of Veterans Appeals, when I went there, sent it back in six weeks, agreeing with me, almost unheard of at that time. It's like express service and the idiots at the regional office in Newark still didn't know what they were looking at. It took the supervisor from the DAV to take the manual downstairs and show it to them, that this is what I had and this is what we're talking about. So, eventually, they gave me--I had had thirty percent since, like, 1986. I had ten percent from the beginning. I had a broken nose in Cuba, didn't set right. Eventually, it went up to, like, thirty percent. Then, the new fifty percent boosted me up to eighty percent disabled and, after I had quadruple bypass surgery, I applied for compensation, secondary to diabetes. Actually, they didn't give me anything additional for the heart condition, but the arthritis condition, which I had almost all along, it ankylosed. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that term, but it's a loss of range of motion in my fingers and my toes, my wrists and my ankles. They gave me the whole new hundred percent on just that alone. So, I have, like, 280 percent in disabilities. I've been totally disabled since July of '05. Then, since that time, the coronary artery disease became a presumptive, as did Parkinson's. So, I was already at hundred percent, but I applied anyway and at least they gave me the money from the difference in the time between when I had the surgery and when I became totally disabled, which was, like, three months in '05. I've been given a disability rating of thirty percent for the Parkinson's and thirty percent for the coronary, but it's meaningless at this point.

SI: At Rutgers-Newark, do any of your professors or classes stand out in your memory?

RT: There were some good ones. I thought this fellow, one of the fellows who taught--I don't recall his name--taught "Money and Banking," he'd been on Eisenhower's Monetary Commission. Dr. Chen once taught an elective on Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam and the relationship to China. I thought that was an extremely interesting course. There was a lady who taught "Theory of Economic Thought," but I don't recall her name. She made things interesting. Some professors, I was just sitting there. I mean, they weren't inspiring me to do anything. [Editor's Note: Dr. King C. Chen, a Professor of Political Science who specialized in Asian politics, taught at Rutgers for twenty-four years.]

SI: In general, were they helpful in getting you to your goals?

RT: I think that at least the admissions office was so screwed up in those days. They finally acceded to allowing any graduate of a Newark high school to come to Newark-Rutgers. Well, all of a sudden, you have this influx of minorities who flunk out after the first semester because they're so ill-prepared to be there, and then, all you had was manifesto after manifesto after manifesto about why they failed, because the system failed them. It's their own culture that failed them, in my opinion, not the system, because everybody else was able to use the system to do what they had to do.

SI: You had been very involved in this fraternity and enjoyed some student life at UCC. Did you have any kind of student life activity at Rutgers-Newark?

RT: Yes, we had a different chapter, but the same fraternity.

SI: What was the name of the fraternity?

RT: Alpha Sigma Mu.

SI: Would you say that there was a large veteran population at Rutgers-Newark?

RT: Pretty good size. I don't know how many. Even though Union was a commuter school, Newark was more of a--we didn't hang around in Newark. I mean, maybe once or twice in a month, we might go to a bar down there, but we would drive back to Westfield and to wherever else and hang out someplace else back there. I want to say that Newark was more businesslike, not your typical college experience. In other words, you're there to get an education in this and that's just about it.

SI: Did they have any kind of athletic offerings or intramurals?

RT: They had a first-year football team, Division III. So, I went to a couple of practices. It was across the river--the practice field was in Kearny, on the side of a hill. I thought, "This is really not where I want to be. If I get injured doing this, I'm screwing myself," wasn't any money in it. There was nothing in it. It was just to play football. So, I quit.

SI: You graduated in 1971.

RT: [Yes].

SI: Was the UPS job before or after you graduated?

RT: Both.

SI: You were working at UPS at the time.

RT: Yes, after I graduated, I put in for the management program. So, I was accepted into that. So, with that, I had to drive the truck, or a truck, for three months. I kept drawing Elizabeth and, in those days, in a severe rainstorm, Elizabeth would flood severely. So, this one day, I go out and I've got this little, tiny part for a piano company and where I had to get to to deliver this was through a whole bunch of water. So, I called in and said, "Listen, I really can't access this particular place." "Back the truck up." By the time I backed the truck, I called in--in those days, they must've had such pressure to produce that people made decisions that were the wrong decisions. The product, all these different products in these boxes inside the truck should've been preserved; instead, they all ended up getting ruined. Water came in the truck, I lost the brakes on the truck. I called them once from--I was able to get up a raised driveway. It was a doctor's office or something, on North Avenue, I think it was, went and found a phone, called in,

said, "Look, I have no brakes. I can't drive the truck. What do you want me to do?" By the time I got to that place to deliver the little, tiny piano part, the guy had to refuse it, he said, "Because it's wet. It might be warped and I won't be able to use it, but I don't know that," because the rules are, if you opened the package, you own it. I mean, that's stupid--not on the part of the guy, but on the part of the management that's telling me to keep going, keep going, keep going. I said, "I'm not going to live with this." So, I quit. This was absolutely ridiculous. Then, I got a job selling life insurance for Metropolitan Life. I made a few bucks; I didn't do very well there. I was living in Elizabeth and my next-door neighbor had a brother-in-law who had just closed a trucking and warehousing company, but was starting another one. So, I said, "Well, I'll give that a whirl." I worked there for five years, learned how to drive a tractor trailer, forklift and all the related equipment inside the warehouse and kept moving around. I went to what used to be called Royal Dairy, worked there for six months, but that was too cold. I really didn't care for that; then, a place called Filigree Foods. They got bought out by Food Fair. Then, Food Fair just started siphoning off product from the warehouse until the bank stepped in and closed us up, because Food Fair owed the bank seven million dollars. So, at that time, my wife was pregnant with my third child, my daughter, Victoria. I had applied to both Pathmark and to ShopRite. ShopRite responded first. I ended up working there twelve years, became a shift manager. After that, in fact, right after I responded to ShopRite, Pathmark made me an offer, but, by then, it was too late, because ShopRite had agreed to cover my wife's pregnancy with health insurance. So, I stayed there.

SI: It was in trucking and delivery.

RT: No, I was a supervisor in the warehouse.

SI: Okay.

RT: I've been in management almost the whole time. Eventually, I went to Key Food in Brooklyn, spent another ten years there, at that place. There, I got into inventory management and I did the backhaul trucking program for the trucks, made all the appointment schedules for the different parts of the warehouse--dairy, deli, meats, frozen and grocery. Eventually, they induced a trucker to take over the business and they turned around and they screwed him, took about forty-five million dollars' worth of volume from the outside business. So, he did what they didn't want, was he sold the service contracts to C&S, out of Vermont. Things just kind of collapsed after that. Ethically, I couldn't stand C&S. I thought they were a horrible company to want to work for--yet, there's people that work there that think it's the greatest thing since sliced bread. You're working sixty-five hours a week, so, you tell me. [laughter] If I don't have any incentive to get it done in forty hours or less, shame on me, I'll work on my own time, but I always got it done, except in places where it was built-in, like ShopRite. Overtime was just built into their system. Eventually, I went to work for Pathmark, in the non-foods warehouse over in Edison. They, eventually, were bought out by A&P. A&P had, a couple years down the road, a massive twenty-five-percent layoff. So, I got picked and, at the time, it was the greatest thing they could've done for me. So, although I had no choice in the matter, I came out very well in the deal. So, I retired. I'm still retired. [laughter]

SI: Being in the business for so long, with different companies, what were the biggest changes that you saw in the business over time?

RT: The biggest change was C&S. They just came, like a giant machine, they just came gobbling up service contracts for different companies and some went out of business, like Food Fair. Two brothers inherited the business from their father and they just kept buying a series of--not making, but buying--losing companies, whereas the father was far more astute. If he had a losing company, he got rid of it and they just went bankrupt and closed up, but Pathmark was taken over and A&P, Stop & Shop, I think Royal Dairy, all became C&S serviced. When I entered the business, after college, there was a lot of moving around, just trying to get a better job, better job, better job, but you had so many people in the business. Now, you don't have that many people in the business. Around here, you have C&S and you have ShopRite, or Wakefern, which is the parent co-op. I can't think of any other ones that are around here that [are] on the scale of being a full service entity. The others are all gone.

SI: What were the biggest challenges you faced in warehousing?

RT: I think the biggest challenge was trying to get the job done without overtime. Over in Brooklyn, at Key Food, you had a lot of guys that would give you eight hours' worth of work during the course of the day, but, then, you had the guys that weren't worth anything. Trying to get something accomplished and dealing with the union at the same time, that was a problem, always, no matter where you went. It seemed like the Teamsters had all of the food houses tied up, different locals. For the life of me, I don't know how C&S became so big. I think they have, they might have, a relationship with (A-Whole?) from Europe, but I haven't seen any factual anything, any documentation to that effect, but I suspect there's a relationship there, because it had to be big money, big, big money, behind some of these moves. You've got a lot of immigrants. If you go into the different warehouses, you'll see that they're mostly Hispanics and they're not going to complain, because what they've got now is better than what they had.

SI: You said that working with the unions could be difficult--can you elaborate on that?

RT: Well, like, they'd have, "A fair day's work for a fair day's pay;" well, how ambiguous is that? So, when you put a piece count into it, for, say, a selector, and they did, unofficially, and it's been there for years, and then, all of a sudden, push comes to shove over a different issue and this issue comes up like an asp or a cobra and it's about to bite you. All of a sudden, "Oh, this is your fault, not ours," when it's the company's fault for not tackling it head-on to begin with. If you just define what it is, instead of accepting what it is, if only two can be the same, would've made life a whole lot easier. I really didn't have much to do [with them]. When I worked in Key Food in Brooklyn, I was in the warehouse every day, but I didn't have to put up with the unions. I mean, I was part of the staff upstairs. So, I'd get a call from the trucker every time somebody lost a pallet, because the driver's responsible for what he brings in. At least three, four times a month, I'd have to go down to the warehouse and find a missing pallet that somebody took off the receiving dock without a tag on it. They're, like, on remote--these guys are doing the same mindless stuff day after day after day. [laughter] It's crazy.

SI: Did the companies you worked for introduce a lot of new technology for inventory control over the course of your career?

RT: I think it was always ongoing. I know, at Key, they had a lady come in from Canada. What they were doing had nothing to do with the warehouse; they were doing the purchasing and inventory end. So, then, again, when I was with A&P, just before I left, they put in this C&S inventory system. I don't know how that works, but I'm not so sure whose benefit that was for. On the surface, you're going to say, "Well, it's to benefit A&P," blah, blah, blah, but C&S has to profit in this whole deal also. So, fortunately, I'm out of there.

SI: Do you think your time in the military helped you in your civilian career in any way?

RT: It's caused me some grief over the years, because I'm kind of black-and-white, although I see grey on occasion. It's either right or it's wrong, and God knows I'm no angel. My son has the same problem--he did not serve in the military, but he's a police officer. It's all about what's right and what's wrong. If you were raised to abuse the system, then, you're going to be on the wrong side most of your life; otherwise, do it right, do it right the first time and stand by your convictions.

SI: When you came back from the service, did you ever feel like you were subject to any discrimination as a veteran?

RT: Absolutely. Although I got help through the college process, not just myself, but other veterans, when I went out in the workplace to get a job, there were jobs that I was infinitely qualified for and, yet, I didn't get a response at all. So, after a very short period of time, I removed all vestige of my military service from my resume. All of a sudden, I started getting job offers. My son'll tell you--he made a statement not too long ago and, when he said it, I didn't realize it--he was twelve years old, which he's born in '74, so, that would've been, twelve years old would've been, '86, the first reunion, that he didn't know that I even served in the Marines. I had to talk him out of joining the Marines when he graduated high school. I said, "You're not going to die for George Bush's oil policies." So, he becomes a police officer, five years undercover, narcotics, [laughter] risky business.

SI: Yes, absolutely. You have three kids. Was your son the oldest?

RT: He's in the middle.

SI: When did you have your first daughter?

RT: '72. She went to Glassboro. The year she graduated was the year they switched over to become Rowan. So, she has a degree that says--she has two degrees--one from Rowan and one from Glassboro. She's the only year that they did that. I guess that would've been, like, '94, '95, she graduated. She went to, I think, Farleigh Dickenson and got a degree, a paralegal certificate. Then, she got a job with J. M. Huber, over here in Metropark. They are a family-owned business. They have, like, 480 stockholders in their whole family, a four-billion-dollar-a-year company. She started out in the legal department, and then, under the CEO prior to the one that's

there now, he brought her [on] as his personal assistant for shareholders and the Board of Directors. That is her focus and, now, the new CEO has moved to Atlanta. Well, with computers and telephones, it doesn't matter, you could be in the next room or you could be in California, it doesn't matter. So, they love her and she's done very well at that company. My son, part way through college--my son tried to drink his way through college--he dropped out. So, he made the mistake of asking me to find him a job. So, I went to the trucker--I was at Key Food--the owner, asked him if he had anything in, like, the bakery division over here in Edison and I explained the situation to him. So, he said, "Yes, sure, send him here, I'll give you the guy's name," blah, blah, blah. So, my son went there. He worked with loading the trucks with bread and pastries and what-have-you. Then, sometimes, he'd go out and help the guy deliver them. Apparently, the message got through, that this isn't what you want to do for the rest of your life. So, he went back to Ramapo and made the dean's list, [laughter] eventually, got into law enforcement, was a corrections officer for a couple years. He's been up [with the] Morris County Park Police for eleven or twelve years. He's a detective sergeant at this point. They function as the county police force. My youngest daughter is a psychologist. She's got a degree from--the one outside of Atlantic City?

SI: Stockton?

RT: Stockton, yes. She's got a BA from Stockton, a master's from Montclair State and another master's and a doctorate from--can't think, it's in Philadelphia, Catholic, I think it's LaSalle College.

SI: Villanova?

RT: No. [Editor's Note: St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia is a Jesuit school.]

SI: You can put it in the transcript later.

RT: Yes, I'll ask my wife.

SI: You started going to reunions for your unit in 1986.

RT: [Yes].

SI: Before then, had you been involved in any veterans' groups?

RT: No.

SI: Had you been in touch with any of those guys before the reunion?

RT: Only Tony (Velez?). He kept bugging me about the mosquito repellent we used, tablets that we took, antimalarial tablets. At that point in my life, I didn't want to be bothered with it, but, out of good faith, I stayed in touch with him. Then, the whole issue of this reunion came up, so, we're working together to try and find the guys. We only managed to get eight guys to the first reunion, along with my former company commander, came from South Carolina. It was a

good time. Unfortunately, it didn't end well. Some of the people from the First Platoon took exception to some of the things that were done and said, and they were all the people from their own platoon. It wasn't from us. So, we went about our merry way and we did our own reunions ever since and their complete thing has collapsed. I think they're still embarrassed by it, that a couple of the guys that I was in touch with, Jimmy Kelly and Spada--Spada still sends me a Christmas card every year. When we were in Newport, Rhode Island, he was invited. He was only, like, an hour-and-a-half drive; he didn't show up. Kelly said his daughter was having triplets, so, he probably wouldn't be there. So, I guess that occurred.

SI: What was the issue that they were having a problem with?

RT: Actually, somebody insulted somebody else's wife, for one of them.

SI: Oh.

RT: The other one was, I was part of, I brought all my slides and I just thought that everybody would be happy to see them, because not that many guys have slides. I guess they took exception to that, although I'm not sure that they ever stated it as such. I have pictures with guys from both platoons with their arms around each other. We all had relationships there--I mean, we weren't enemies. In fact, the kid, the guy, who was the instigator was Bobby (Saint Clair?) and he and I used to hang out together in Da Nang. So, I don't know what his problem was. One of the guys called me, years later, asking me to help him get started again. I said, "Listen, I won't help you get started. What I will do is, I'll invite you to our reunions, if you want to come," and I did a few times and nobody showed up. So, I didn't bother after that.

SI: When did you start getting involved in other veterans' groups, particularly the Military Order of the Purple Heart?

RT: Well, shortly thereafter. I joined the First Marine Division Association and the New Jersey Chapter was pretty good. I mean, it was one chapter for the whole state, but, at a meeting one Sunday afternoon a month, you could get forty, fifty guys. Today, I don't know where they're at. [laughter] I left them when I joined the Purple Heart. I thought the Purple Heart had less of a fraternal aspect to it and more of a mission to be done. A fellow by the name of Joe Hems took me under his wing, kind of mentored me in the whole organization and the process. He is like, in New Jersey, "Mr. Purple Heart." He's a Korean War vet and built up the infrastructure. We had twenty-one chapters at one time. I think we're down to about sixteen that are actually functioning--and barely. I mean, if you get ten or twelve guys at a meeting, you've got a couple hundred on the roster. I think a lot of these guys joined to get the license plates. So, can we shut this off for a second?

[TAPE PAUSED]

RT: Okay.

SI: You got involved with the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Is that the full name?

RT: Yes.

SI: This gentleman started mentoring you. When did you start getting interested in taking on a leadership role?

RT: I think I joined in, like, 1990, somewhere around there and I have been the chief financial officer for our chapter, 181, for longer than I can remember, which I think Joe wanted me to take that job, and it was good. It's not an overwhelming job. It's writing checks, taking care of the money, but I started going through the chairs at the state level in '98 or '99. In the year--our year runs from May 1st to April 30th, and, actually, that's the fiscal year, although at the state level, that's converted to the calendar year--but the role of commanders, junior commanders and all of that is from convention to convention. So, in the year 2002 to 2003, I was the state commander. I went to junior, vice, senior, whatever. Then, I've always been the finance officer for 181. Then, I became the state commander again, 2007 or 2008, for two more years. Actually, I was elected to a fourth time, but, then, I resigned after I realized that I had to deal with the Parkinson's on top of everything else, kind of figured I wouldn't be driving all that much. My wife does drive now. Even with the pills, the muscles are still fairly stiff. They don't react. I can drive my truck, because I'm comfortable with it. It's old and it's beat-up, but I have a little bit of trouble with the car, with this action right here. Even though it's the same action in the truck, I probably have more room in the truck. So, in the fourth term, I resigned a couple of months into it. It was time for this other fellow to stop being the senior vice and be the state commander. He's a retired cop from Totowa. They wanted me to be the state finance officer, but I didn't want to deal with that. So, I've basically stayed away from that at this point. I still go, on the chapter level; I go faithfully one Saturday morning a month.

SI: Tell me a little bit about what your agenda was and what you accomplished during your terms as state commander.

RT: Well, we tried to get people to come out to the meetings, to be consciously aware of recruiting new people. A lot of the younger guys coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq, they're not joiners, and neither was my generation. So, although they're on the rolls, they're busy, out raising families and getting on with their lives. I tried to make it my business to go around and visit all the chapters throughout the state. In that respect, Joe was a big help, because he loved to do the same thing, and so, we'd go off driving. I guess I participated somewhat in putting the state dinners together. I guess the advantage, the real advantage, that I had was that Joe was still really hands-on. He's in his late seventies at this point and it's harder for him to get around. He's not going, and I'm not going, either, to visit chapters. We used to go. We'd visit well over half to two-thirds of the chapters in the course of a year. Some of them are really, like, way down in South Jersey. Well, the ones that were up in this area, Paramus, I'm thinking of a few that are out on the fringe, Glen Gardner has one, Morris Plains, but anybody's welcome to come to our meeting on Saturday morning. We have it at the Elks Club in Woodbridge and they're very good to us. They make us breakfast, eggs and bacon and sausages and pancakes and coffee. They don't want a dime for it, but we make a donation. We do get people from other chapters.

SI: Is there anything else you want to add to the record?

RT: I don't think so.

SI: How long have you lived in Iselin?

RT: Thirty-five years.

SI: Did you settle here because it was close to where you were working?

RT: I was living in Fords at the time and we needed more room. So, this place became available. Basically, I turned this place into what it is now. This was unfinished down here, the attic was unfinished or not even started, it was an attic and I put two bedrooms and a bathroom up there. It might not be everybody's taste, but my girls were up there and they loved it. I didn't hear any complaints. To have their own room was enough, didn't matter what floor it was on. That's about it.

SI: Thank you very much for doing the interviews. I appreciate it. It is great information for our Vietnam Era collection.

RT: Cool.

SI: Thank you very much.

RT: You're welcome.

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Reviewed by Jesse Braddell 6/13/2014
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 11/1/2015
Reviewed by Raymond Taylor 5/19/2016
Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/26/2016