Interview with Randall Richardson

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Interviewer: Cassidy Williams

A Note to the Reader

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Richardson: My name is Randall W. Richardson. I'm 68 years old, soon to be 69. I live in Oreana, Illinois.

Williams: When and where did you serve in the military?

Richardson: I served through basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Advanced individual training: Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Officers Candidate School: Fort Benning, Georgia. I stayed at Fort Benning, Georgia as a TAC [Training, Advising, and Counseling] officer for about ten months. Then I served with the 101st Airborne Division in the Republic of South Vietnam.

Williams: What years were you serving?

Richardson: I entered the service in February of 1969 and was discharged from the service in October of 1971.

Williams: Let's start off a little before you went to war. Where did you go to college?

Richardson: Well, I grew up in Champaign, Illinois. I had intended to go the University of Illinois, but I didn't get in. I didn't apply soon enough. I ended up at Eastern Illinois University with the thought of transferring back to the University of Illinois, but I liked it too much at Eastern so I stayed there.

Williams: What were your feelings towards Vietnam while you were in college?

Richardson: Well of course, we would hear the 5 o'clock news report of casualties and so forth. We were young men, and we were definitely involved in campus life, so we didn't think too much about it. I was in a fraternity, and we did have some fraternity brothers who ended up in Vietnam while we were still in college. In fact, I knew one fellow who was older than I was who graduated and went into the U.S. Marine Corps as a pilot and was killed in Vietnam while we were still in college.

Williams: How did that change your outlook as a college student?

Richardson: Well, I think the people that I associated with at the university were of the patriotic sort. We all felt really terrible of course about our brother who had died in Vietnam. It was probably beginning to dawn on us there were

returning veterans that hadn't gone to college but were now going to college after getting out of the service. There were a number of Vietnam veterans that we would intermingle with. I can remember one fellow who was always nervous and anxious. Of course I would run into him in the bars, and he would most often be under the influence, but it's like a loud noise and he would think we were getting bombarded or something. We were getting a taste of what had happened to people who had gone to Vietnam. I guess we weren't thinking too far into the future. Otherwise, we probably would have been worried about ourselves having to serve which a lot of us did then after that.

Williams: Did your feelings towards the war change once you were actually in the war?

Richardson: No, my feelings didn't. I allowed myself to serve my country, and I thought in my mind that what we were doing was the right thing to do. The South Vietnamese were not invading the North. The North were invading the South. The South Vietnamese was not exactly a democratic country, but they had more freedoms and were more prone towards capitalism than the North.

Williams: Did you witness any protests while you were in college?

Richardson: Only on tv. I don't think we had any protests at Eastern.

Williams: Tell me a little bit about how you were drafted, when you learned you were drafted.

Richardson: Well, I had a student deferment all through college, so I graduated from high school in '64, graduated from college in '68. As soon as I graduated, at the

ceremonies there at the university my mother handed me the letter that said I had to report for a physical. That got the ball rolling. I debated. I had the option at that point in time to enlist if I wanted to. I could have enlisted in the Navy, the Air Force, or the Marines. I looked into all of those and decided there was a program where you could volunteer for the draft which gave you the opportunity to go to Officers Candidate School. In my mind, I thought "You know if I'm going to be in Vietnam, be in the jungle, I'd like to have some sense of control. I'd like to be an officer. I'd rather lead men than have some dummy lead me into a catastrophe." So, I chose that route, so instead of a two-year commitment I had basically a three-year commitment. That's two full years after I graduated from OCS.

Williams: What was going through your mind when you got that letter the day of your graduation?

Richardson: Holy cow, what's going to happen now? It was inevitable that it was going to happen. I just had to go with the flow.

Williams: What were your feelings about the draft then?

Richardson: Well, I thought it was a natural thing. I guess I had not ever experienced life when there wasn't a draft. There was a draft even during peace time. So, I didn't think too much about it. It was something men my age were going to have to deal with.

Williams: Now 40 years later, have your opinions about the draft changed?

Richardson: I think having an all-volunteer Army is fine. We seem to be able to find enough smart young men that are willing to serve their country, and they will volunteer, men and women. In some respects, I think the draft would be good to bring back. I feel that young people should do something to serve their country, whether it be the military or whether it be Peace Corps or some other form of service. So, they would have a buy in to what this country's all about.

Williams: Do you have any family that have also been veterans then?

Richardson: I had numerous cousins, two of them my age. One served, well both of them served in the Navy. I had some older cousins who were of the Korean War age. One served in the Marine Corps, and one served in the Army. The one that served in the Army was a Green Beret, and he had three tours in Vietnam.

Williams: You said that kids these days should serve their country in some way. What did you get out of serving your country that you think kids that don't end up serving don't get? What do you have that they don't?

Richardson: Well, I have a sense of having served. That there was a purpose. I did something for the country. I think people who don't serve don't understand that everything in this world is not free. Everybody should serve their country and give back something. Of course, there are other ways you could do that besides serving in the military or Peace Corps. I guess you could dedicate yourself to your church or to your community and give back that way.

Williams: How does knowing you served and having that pride, how has that affected the way you live your life post war?

Richardson: I gained a lot from being the military: discipline, dedication, reaching for your goals and trying to accomplish the mission. Things that may have been already a part of my character, but it was certainly emphasized while I was in the military.

Williams: Let's get back to the military. What was your official role? Can you explain that to someone who isn't in the military.

Richardson: Well, it goes back to the organization of the Army which we talked about previously. If you've never been in the military, it probably doesn't make a lot of sense. While I was in Vietnam, I was an infantry platoon leader which meant that I was in charge of my platoon which was approximately anywhere from 17 to 25 men. I had a Platoon Sergeant who would have been an enlisted man who was an E-6. Then I would have two squad leaders that would be the leadership component of a platoon. I would take orders from the company commander, who was normally a captain. On a daily basis, we would huddle up, and we would be given our marching orders. What generally happened was we were given a grid coordinate that we were to pass through the jungle to that point and search and destroy while on that march. It was my job to lead the men and try to keep them out of harms way, to enforce discipline and just basically guide them.

Williams: What was it like going on those marches?

Richardson: We operated west of Huế which was a mountainous area. For fear of running into booby traps, we didn't travel on trails or roads or waterways. What we basically did, we would have our point man carry a machete. We would basically break brush as we were heading towards our grid coordinates that we were given, so it was a lot of single file marching, spread out 5 to 10 yards apart. So if we were ambushed, they wouldn't be able to get all of us. We would travel almost always in daytime, and at night we would just before dawn find a position that would be a place that we could defend. Just after dark we would move into what we would call a night defensive perimeter. Then we would set up our perimeter, dig fox holes. Then as platoon leader I would get on the radio and contact our nearest fire base that would support us with artillery fire. I would give them our coordinates of where we were located and ask them to fire artillery rounds near our position. We would call those night defensive targets. The object was if you were hit at night and you needed artillery support, you would already have these night defensive targets registered with the guns. We could call in and say we need artillery on defensive target two or five or whatever number we would give it. That was a routine and a ritual that I did every night. We would set up in the field.

Williams: Describe for me what did it smell like? What did it feel like? What was going through your mind? Just kind of walk me through that.

Richardson: Well, as I mentioned before, Vietnam was, not to lessen the idea that it was very dangerous, but it was a lot of hard work. You're carrying everything you need for your nourishment: water, C-rations, an extra pair of socks, maybe a

light jacket or something, some bed roll, extra ammunition not only for your own weapon but a lot of times people would have to carry machine gun ammo, or extra batteries for the radio. Our load bearing was anywhere from 70 to 90 pounds. So you got a steel pot on. You got 70, 80, 90 pounds on your back. You got your weapon, and you're following the guy in front of you. I always had a radio telephone operator right by me in case we needed to communicate with our other platoons or the company commander. We're trying to be stealthy, but you're not really stealthy because you got your point man up there who is chopping weed, chopping bamboo, trying to make a way through the jungle. You have vines that would catch on your rucksack, so you're kind of struggling through there. All the time you're keeping your eyes peeled trying to protect yourself.

Williams: On these walks did you ever encounter the Vietcong?

Richardson: We did. Backing up a little bit for the story, there's three platoons to a company. The company commander would say first platoon you take this and go a thousand meters that way. Second platoon you take this to those grid coordinates and you go that way, and third platoon. So we were covering a fairly wide area, and we would just sweep through an area. This particular day our third platoon came up on a stream, and there were women and children, maybe 15-18, and old men swimming in a stream bed. Turned out that they were Montagnards. They were unarmed. They were friendly to the Americans. Here they are though, we encounter them in a free fire zone meaning if you're not wearing an American uniform you're free game. Luckily, the platoon

leader realized they were unarmed, but they were in this free fire zone. They basically helicoptered the Montagnards out, and I don't know where they took them, but we heard about this over the radio. As we were getting ready to set up our night defensive position by a stream that very same day and night, our security people close to the stream saw four black pajama-clad Vietnamese with sacks on their backs. I was alerted and came up there, and we saw them walking away from us. I didn't see any weapons, and I had a whole squad of men with me. We all had our weapons pointed at the Vietnamese. So I said, "Chu Hoi! Chu Hoi!" which in Vietnamese means surrender, surrender. They kind of looked back and took off running, and when they did that then I said open fire. We shot at them, and we must not have been very good shots because none of them fell. It was very possible that we could have wounded them. It was starting to get dark, so we swept along both banks of the stream and down the middle of the stream for about 200 yards and didn't see anything. We came back and got in our night defensive perimeter. The next day I took a reinforce squad which basically added two men to our regular squad. That gave us two machine guns. We walked where we had last seen the Vietnamese down that stream. As we were walking down that stream, the point man runs into Vietnamese, pajama-clad, armed. He was able to kill them before they were able to get a shot off. Turned out we thought maybe they were a medical team perhaps because one of them was a woman. She was armed, so I mean she was a legal combatant. The other guy had a grenade in

his hand which he never got a chance to throw because our point man killed him too quick. That was one of the times.

Williams: Making that call to open fire, what was it like having to make a call like that?

Richardson: It was easy. It was no problem, mentally or anything. You got to realize we're trained killers. That's what they trained us for, to kill people. That's what you do in war. I gave them fair warning. They could have put their hands up, stopped right then and there. I wouldn't have shot them. As an anecdote to that story, after we got back the battalion XO [executive officer] and the company commander said don't ever do that. Shoot first, ask questions later. He was chewing me out because I didn't shoot first. That's the way the hierarchy thought about things.

Williams: When you were talking about going through the jungle you mentioned booby traps. Did you ever come across booby traps?

Richardson: We did. We were patrolling an area where we had found some old bunkers that were unoccupied. It was an area where there had been a lot of enemy activity. While we were patrolling, our Kit Carson Scout, who was a North Vietnamese who was captured and then pledged his loyalty to the South, they would put a Kit Carson Scout with each platoon if they had enough of them. Because they would know, if you could believe in them and trust them, they would know what to look for in terms of booby traps and/or signs of enemy activity. They could be a valuable resource. Well on this particular patrol, instead of staying in line and following the man next to him, he cut across.

We're not on a trail, but he cuts across. There is an old trail there, and he trips a 60mm mortar round that's been set up as a booby trap. It hit him and three other of my men. Of course we had to call in medevacs, and medevac them out.

Williams: What were the extent of those injuries?

Richardson: My three men had some shrapnel metal wounds. None of them were real serious I don't think, but the Kit Carson Scout he was in pretty bad shape. It was a belly wound and his intestines were out. I don't know to this day whether he made it or not. I know he was alive when we got him on the chopper and got him out of there.

Williams: After having that experience with the booby trap, how did that affect your mindset going on these marches in the days following?

Richardson: Well, looking for booby traps and avoiding booby traps was one of the major things that we did. That's one of the major emphasis that I put with my people. That's why we never walked trails. If you're walking trails, you're just asking for it. You might get lucky. There might not be any booby traps, but that's a chance you just don't want to take. Our whole thing was you don't walk trails. You break jungle. That's the way we operate. It didn't affect me at all really because we always tried to avoid that. We wrote that experience off to the Kit Carson Scout not staying in line and following the man in front of him.

Williams: Was it a constant fear of these booby traps then or was it just kind of part of your…

Richardson: Part of your training, and that's it. Our protocol, that's just what you did.

Williams: We talked a little bit about this before. Can you just briefly for someone who doesn't know, describe fragging for me?

Richardson: In Vietnam, it meant that somebody was throwing a hand grenade at a friendly, at another American soldier. For whatever reason enlisted men sometimes did that to officers they didn't like. Sometimes there were racial tensions back on the main fire bases. Like where our division was located there were a lot of racial tensions. People, malingers and people on sick call hanging around in the back area. There were a lot of drugs. There was a lot of racial tension. There were several fragging incidents while I was there that I heard about.

Williams: Did you have any direct experience with fragging, seeing it other than just hearing it?

Richardson: Within the first month that I was with my platoon, I was out in the field. We had been pulled back onto a fire base. We were providing perimeter defense, so we had bunkers, three or four men to a bunker. I had a dopp [toiletry] kit. One morning I woke up, got my dopp kit. I was going to find some water and shave and found a grenade in my dopp kit. I'm thinking, "Holy crap. What the hell is going on here?" I went outside and threw the grenade over into the

jungle and got down, and it didn't go off. It was a dud. I went back to my dopp kit, and somebody had written a little not that said, "Next time mother-, it will be live." There was a threat on my life right there, a warning. We had a CID investigation, but they never did determine who put it in there. I didn't have any other problems after that.

Williams: Do you have any idea why someone would have put that in your dopp kit?

Richardson: There's a natural division, an imposed division, between officers and enlisted men. It's kept that way. You don't want to be too buddy-buddy with your men because you have to give orders and make your men perform and help accomplish your mission. There are times when you got to give some tough orders, so there's always this division between the enlisted men and the officers. That could have been a part of it. That just natural resentment of an officer or the fact that I was a newbie in country. I don't know, trying to scare me to do something. I don't know what.

Williams: Did it scare you?

Richardson: Well yeah, it scared me. I got the enemy that I've got to contend with. Now I've got to worry about somebody on my own side that's possibly going to do me harm, so yeah it did for awhile. I wish I had eyes in the back of my head.

Williams: Why do you think fragging in general was an issue in the Vietnam War?

Richardson: Well, as the war wore on and there were more protests in the United States, you're talking about draftees, people who didn't want to be there. People

developed an attitude that we shouldn't be there. Why do I have to go? Look at all the people back in the states that are protesting. I think it would be these draftees who didn't want to be there who would basically describe themselves as peaceniks. They would be the ones who would draw the peace sign on their helmet cover or wear beads or whatever. So if they ran into let's say a West Point officer, who are notoriously gung-ho. They are out to earn a reputation. They are making the military a career. They want to distinguish themselves. If a draftee who had a bad attitude about being there and you had one of those gung-ho West Pointers, it wouldn't have to be West Pointer but as an example, that would create a little environment where some private would build up his courage to try and do something to intimidate the officer, so that maybe he would go easier on the men or something. Really I don't know what their purpose would be, but that's a possible explanation.

Williams: What did you think of those men who described themselves as peaceniks?

Richardson: It depended on the individual. If he did his job, I thought that was fine. I mean he could pretend he's a peacenik if he wants too. As long as he did his job and obeyed orders and didn't malinger, I had no problem with that.

Williams: Before you had mentioned the racial tension. Did you experience any of that firsthand or witness any?

Richardson: Not in the field. I had a black platoon sergeant. He was on his second tour. He was very knowledgeable, very experienced. I relied on him a lot. We only had maybe three or four black soldiers in my unit in the field. There wasn't really

any racial tension out in the field. It's in the rear where there was trouble. There were drugs, so part of it was drugs. Part of it was just the black-white issue. Probably wouldn't have been any different than if you take a group of people in the United States and put them together at that time.

Williams: Is there any experience with that racial tension or the drugs that sticks out to you or any problems?

Richardson: Well, cocaine was fairly prevalent and marijuana. The reason I know cocaine is because you would see vials that the cocaine would come in small doses. You would see vials laying around on the ground in some places. No I didn't see any people taking cocaine. I didn't run into anybody who I thought was on cocaine. I did hear about a near race riot where the S-1 who was a captain had to pull his .45 and shoot it in the air to stop some potential fights going on.

Williams: What did you believe you were fighting for in Vietnam?

Richardson: Well, the stated purpose of what the military said we were there for. That's what I believed. I believed that's what we were there for to protect the South Vietnamese from the North Vietnamese.

Williams: Has that opinion changed at all?

Richardson: No.

Williams: Why do you think others felt differently than you and the stated goal?

Richardson: Well, just a difference of opinion I guess. Of course I've heard the argument that Ho Chi Minh was just trying to reunite his country because it had been divided at the end of World War II. He just wanted to reunite his country. To me it wasn't any different than the North Koreans wanting to reunite their country with the South Koreans. To me that was the same issue. One was supported by communism and other communist countries, and same thing in Vietnam: Russia, Cuban advisors, the Chinese. They were all supplying the North.

Williams: What was your opinion of how the war ended?

Richardson: Terrible. Terrible. You know, the North Vietnamese agreed to the terms of the truce which was negotiated over however many years on how many secret trips by Henry Kissinger, et cetera. Had Congress not withheld funding for the South Vietnamese after we were all pulled out, I don't if the South Vietnamese still would have been able to prevail and prevent the North from conquering them, but they would have had a heck of a lot better chance. The fact that we didn't fund them for repair parts for the helicopters and tanks, vehicles. All that funding was cut off, so what are you going to do? If you lose your ally and your funding source for your weaponry, you don't stand much of a chance when the other side is being fully funded by the Chinese and the Russians.

Williams: What would you have liked to have seen done differently?

Richardson: That. I wish we would have still funded them and that we would have kept some skeletal force there which we did have I think because I remember all the Americans scrambling off the roof of the embassy at the last minute. I don't know how many people we had out in the field supporting the South Vietnamese, but that would have been a good thing if we could have afforded to do that.

Williams: Was that your opinion while the war was going on as well?

Richardson: I actually liked Nixon's idea of Vietnamization: train them up, give them the weapons, teach them how to fight, and let them do the fighting. We'll be their reserves. We'll watch their back. I like that whole concept. That was a good way I thought of winding down America's involvement. I think if we could have just continued to support them, let them do the fighting, the South probably would have prevailed. We would have had a demarcation there just like we do in Korea.

Williams: Has this opinion developed at all over the years or was that your opinion then and it pretty much stayed?

Richardson: It has pretty much stayed the same. I've heard all the arguments about it was just a revolution amongst their own people. But how can you say that when you got Chinese and the Russians supporting the North? I don't know how you can say it was a revolution just trying to reunite the country. To me it was the spread of communism. Look at the countries where we did prevent the communists from taking over: South Korea. How's that compared to how

Vietnam is now? South Korea is like an economic wonder, free society, an capitalistic system economically. They're doing great. Taiwan, same thing.

Williams: What was your impression of the Vietnamese before the war, if you had any?

Richardson: I didn't have any. I couldn't have told you where Vietnam was before the war.

Williams: What was your impression of them while you were there?

Richardson: I did not have a lot of interaction with the Vietnamese. You'd run into them if you got to the PX [post exchange]. I didn't go to Saigon. I didn't get into any villages. Come across what we would call 'Coke kids' whenever we would get resupplied close by a village. I guess I really didn't have much of an opinion about the Vietnamese. I wasn't around them that much.

Williams: Who were the Coke kids?

Richardson: I have a picture I can show you later on. They're like little ragamuffins who just follow American units around and try to beg for things, candy or sell Cokes to them. That's why they got the name Coke kids. They would try to sell Cokes to the troops if the ever ran into them.

Williams: Do you know any Vietnamese today in America?

Richardson: Yeah, I've met some but not very many.

Williams: How is being in the Vietnam War changed that interaction?

Richardson: Would I talk to them? Would I befriend them? Yeah, I wouldn't have a problem with that. I think over the years you get over some things.

Williams: What were those things you had to get over?

Richardson: Well, if you generically say Vietnamese, well that could have been a North Vietnamese. So, getting over who your enemy was. Just like Americans had to get over what they thought about the Japanese, what they thought about the Germans. You know over time they're your enemy, but now they're not your enemy, so you get over it.

Williams: Did you much interaction with the scout kids?

Richardson: The Kit Carson Scouts? Well yeah. You couldn't communicate very well with them unless they knew some English or you knew some Vietnamese which I didn't. The slang words were about all I knew. Sometimes they could communicate with you, but a lot of times you had to do it with hand signals or maybe they understood some English but couldn't speak it. They were ok.

Williams: During your time in Vietnam is there one story or one day that just sticks out in your memory?

Richardson: Yeah, leaving Cam Ranh Bay to get on the airplane to go home. That sticks out. No one particular day, they all kind of run together. I look at pictures, and it reminds me of what we were doing then, reminds me of the people I was serving with. Since we've been having these gatherings of the Alpha company, I've gone to four of them now. I've re-established relationships

with about 8 or 9 men that I served with in Vietnam which is a real cool thing. Getting together, and it's been over 40 years, and to sit around and somebody will bring up, "Well do you remember this Lt? We were looking for these helicopters that were down." Somebody else would chime in, "Yeah, I remember that. Do you remember that one guy?" Nobody can remember his name. Everybody tells a different version of the story. We're old men now. We can't remember this crap back then. It's still fun to get together with the troops that you served with.

Williams: Can you describe for me what it felt like to get on that plane to go home? Just kind of walk me through that.

Richardson: Well, you're like a herd of cattle. The Army is like that. They herd you around. You go get in this line to get this paperwork done. You go over there to get that paperwork done. Chow time, getting in line to go through chow. You had to go all through these procedures to get your paperwork straight. Then they made you give a urine specimen to make sure you weren't on marijuana or some other drug. If you had marijuana in your urine, you didn't get on the bird to go home. You had to wait until you could give a urine specimen that did not include drugs. So you've got a duffel bag of all your earthly belongings that you're taking home with you. It has to be inspected, so they put it up on kind of an assembly line and tear it apart and look for whatever. Drugs, mainly. Once they've inspected that, you go on through and walk out on the tarmac, climb the stars and get on the airplane. Big old smile on your face, thinking I made it. I made it. You really didn't say that until the

plane was off the ground and about 20,000 feet in the air. Then everybody hoots and hollers, saying 'We made it. We made it'.

Williams: Describe the atmosphere on that plane.

Richardson: Well believe it or not you could still smoke on the airplane at that time. People were smoking and drinking and joking. Some people were just sleeping. It's about a 17-hour flight all total, but just everybody maybe daydreaming their own daydreams about what it'll be like to get home. What will they be doing with their future? Thinking about things like that. Maybe reminiscing about some buddies they've left behind but mostly very happy.

Williams: What was it like when that plane landed? What was going through your mind?

Richardson: Same thing. When I got back, I was out of the Army. All I had to do was process out. A lot of enlisted men still had to serve an extra six months. Their two years total wasn't up, so they'd have to go to a post which I think was a very bad thing for a lot of Vietnam veterans being put back in a peacetime situation. I got out because they had a big reduction in force. They didn't need as many officers that they had, so that's why my tour was shortened. When I got back to the states, I got out. I was at Fort Lewis, Washington. You land on the airport. There's no bands playing. None of your relatives are there. You're at an out-processing military installation. I had a debriefing. I had a medical examination basically to determine if I had any wounds or disabilities that I was going to claim. I didn't. It was a one-day process. The next day you got tickets to wherever your home location was. Mine was to fly back to O'Hare.

When I got off the plane there, that's where my family was. That was a great feeling.

Williams: Who was waiting for you in O'Hare?

Richardson: My wife, my two-year old daughter, my mother and father, my in-laws, and my brothers and sisters. The whole clan was there.

Williams: What was it like when you landed? Describe for me the event.

Richardson: Well, it would be like if you hadn't seen a relative for a long long time, and you got off the airport and they met you at the airport. It'd be like that.

Williams: What were you most excited to go home for?

Richardson: My wife and my child.

Williams: When did you two meet and get married?

Richardson: We met in college right at the end when I was graduating. She was a year or two younger. We had dated but not for very long, but somehow the relationship continued after I graduated. She was still in school. Then I went to the Army, and the relationship continued on. We decided to get married. We got married right before I started OCS.

Williams: What was it like leaving a wife behind going to war? How do you think it was different than some of the other soldiers who didn't have their own family back home?

Richardson: The difference obviously would be as a single, enlisted man or a single officer even, you're more care-free. You're not deluged with thoughts of loved ones or anything. You're just watching out for number one. Of course you might be thinking about your parents, but if you're not married you're obviously not thinking about a wife. It's just a more care-free, I'll take care of myself, let's just get through this attitude. Whereas I think somebody who was married would be a little more cautious, would be somewhat distracted at times by thoughts of loved ones at home, but not a big difference probably.

Williams: Did you get to communicate with your wife at all?

Richardson: Letters. One time I was able to get to what they called a MARS [Military Affiliate Radio System] phone. I forget what that stands for, but basically it was like a telephone that was relayed through ham operators. So you would tell them who you wanted to talk to, what the phone number was. Somebody closest to your home would be a relay from them to another ham operator somewhere else in the world. Anyway you would talk and say what you had to say, and you'd say 'over'. Then that would be relayed through these ham operators, and then if I was talking to my wife, my wife could say what she wanted to say. Then she'd have to say 'over' to know that her side of the conversation was over. That's how that went back and forth. That was the only time that I got to talk to anybody was that one time.

Williams: Were you able to write letters or anything?

Richardson: Yeah, we wrote letters. That was the main communication.

Williams: What was it like getting those letters in the field?

Richardson: Oh, it was great. Just hearing from home, getting caught up with what they're doing, and just hearing from them was great.

Williams: How did you being away almost immediately after you got married, do you think it had any effect on your relationship?

Richardson: Well, we didn't really know each other that well. Then you get married, and you're separated. You don't find out what it's really like to be married to someone until you've spent some time with them. When I graduated from OCS, then I had almost a year with my wife before I had to go to Vietnam. It was a maturing and growing experience. One thing that was real sad for me was when I stepped off that plane in O'Hare, my wife has my daughter in her arms and she says, "There's daddy! There's daddy!" She didn't know me. She wouldn't come to me. That kind of broke my heart.

Williams: How old was your daughter when you left?

Richardson: She was just over a year, over a year old.

Williams: Besides just having a wife over there, also having a child, how do you think that was different? Did it change your mindset while in Vietnam?

Richardson: Only that you just hope and pray that you make it through and that you'd be able to get back to them.

Williams: We were talking about your daughter. How old is she now?

Richardson: 45. I figured that out.

Williams: Again, how old is she now?

Richardson: My daughter is 45.

Williams: Do you have any other kids?

Richardson: I have a son who is 43.

Williams: Any grandkids or anything?

Richardson: I have three grandchildren with one more on the way. My daughter has two sons. One is 17, and one is soon to be 13. My son didn't get married right away. He has a small child that is 2-years old and another child that is due in July.

Williams: Do you think being a veteran affected you as a father at all?

Richardson: I think my military training; I somehow sort of passed that on to my kids in a way. At least they experienced having a father who had been a military officer. I think they would tell you that. Security was always something I preached to my children. They like to laugh at an incident that happened. We were in Chicago watching the Chicago Bears. We bought programs, and I think some types of souvenirs. We found our seats, and they wanted to go get some refreshments. So, they left them there and went. When they came back, they were gone. Somebody had stolen them, so I got really raving mad over

that incident. They remember that as just an example of I really lectured them about you never leave your stuff unguarded. You always have to think about security.

Williams: What was it about security in the war that transcended? Why was that so important to you?

Richardson: If you weren't security conscious, that left you open to getting killed. I mean you're not in war zone unaware of your circumstances. You're always on guard, not walking out in the open, always wearing your steel pot in case you get shot. You want to have your steel pot. You just had to be security conscious. That's the whole thing about keeping yourself alive, keeping your men alive when you're in a combat zone.

Williams: Do you think you do anything different than non-veterans security wise now?

Richardson: I've kind of gotten over that a little bit. In the early days when I got back from Vietnam, say the first twenty years I was back, I was very security conscious. Always worried about burglars or somebody breaking into your car, so I would always make sure the car was locked, make sure the front and back doors were locked, windows were secure. I was very conscious about that, and I know I passed that on to my son. I last visited my son in Phoenix. That's where he lives. He has dead bolts on all of his doors and regular locks. Staying all night at his house, you get up in the morning. You can't get out of his house unless you have a key to undo the dead bolts. He lives in a good part

of town, but he's very security conscious. I think that's probably something he got from me.

Williams: Is there anything else because you laughed when you said they would both say that they were definitely raised by a military officer dad. Why would they say that?

Richardson: I was a pretty stiff disciplinarian. I would often use military slang in a non-confrontational way just to carry over from my experiences. Just little things that they would pick up that let them know that their father had been in the military.

Williams: You talked about coming home and making sure your doors were always locked. What was it like transitioning from being in the jungle to coming back to Illinois?

Richardson: I went on R&R. Let's see I got there in January. I went on R&R in August, went to Hawaii. I met my wife in Hawaii. Coming out of the jungle and going to Hawaii was a gargantuan cultural shock. Being in a war zone, being always on guard out in the jungle, dirty, and then being in paradise for five or six days. You realized a lot of Americans don't even know there's a war going on. They're living their lives, enjoying life, the finer things. Here we are drinking water out of a canteen and walking in the mud in the jungle, the fear of running into the enemy, et cetera. It's just two different worlds. What I experienced in Hawaii kind of lessened the shock or the change that you experience going back to the United States, but it was the same sort of thing.

Williams: What is R&R?

Richardson: I think it stood for rest and recuperation. When you served in Vietnam, you were given one out of country R&R. Some people actually came back to the United States. A lot of married men went to Hawaii. A lot of single men went to Sydney, Australia or Hong Kong or Thailand.

Williams: What do you think was the hardest part about coming back and getting used to regular American life?

Richardson: The hardest part was finding a job. If you had a job waiting for you, that was fine. If you didn't, you had to find one. Being married with a child, I needed to find one right away. I answered an ad in the paper, went in for the interview, and got the job making less than I was when I was in the Army with combat pay and everything. Making less than what a teacher was making. Once you had a job, we had some money saved from my combat pay in Vietnam. We couldn't afford to rent a house or an apartment in Champaign. Ended up renting a duplex unit in St. Joe which is a little town east of here. We had enough money saved that we were able to buy some furniture. We got by. It was a struggle until you got yourself established.

Williams: Do you think being a veteran made it harder to find a job?

Richardson: No, I don't think so. I think it was a matter of what you were qualified for, a matter of where you lived. There were jobs, but you had to find them. There were some recruiting companies out of Atlanta, Georgia who put out feelers I

guess all over the country. They said, "Come to Atlanta. We'll find you a job if you were an officer in the service." They were looking for people like me. They only problem was they wouldn't pay you to come down there. They wouldn't pay your expenses to come down there. They wouldn't pay for your hotel room once you're there or your meals. You were just there to be in an environment where there were probably a lot of employment opportunities for veteran officers. I didn't go. I couldn't afford it. I was sitting at a bar one time with my dad telling him I might go to Atlanta. He says, "Oh, your mother really wouldn't like that." That actually played a part in my decision in not to do that.

Williams: Why didn't your mom want you to go to Atlanta?

Richardson: She wants her family all around her.

Williams: Did you have any siblings?

Richardson: I had two sisters and a brother, still do.

Williams: Did your brother serve in Vietnam?

Richardson: No, he was too young.

Williams: We didn't really get into your training. Can you talk a little bit about your training and also how it was different than the average solider?

Richardson: I think we trained our soldiers really good. If they paid any attention at all going through basic training or advanced individual training, they were well

trained. It would be a matter of attitude and self-survival or whatever to pay attention and acquire all of the skills they're teaching you. In addition to doing basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, I did advanced individual training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I went to OCS at Fort Benning, Georgia, learned all the things over again that I learned in basic training and advanced individual training. It was totally reinforced and other stuff added on to that: tactics, leadership, the basics of artillery, calling in artillery, map reading, and the air-mobile concept which was a new thing in Vietnam. That's where they moved troops around by helicopter, and the logistics of moving companies or moving battalions by air mobile. It was a whole new concept, so you had to sort of learn how to do that, how to organize that and coordinate that.

Williams: What is OCS?

Richardson: Officers Candidate School.

Williams: How long was that? How was that different than basic training?

Richardson: Well, the whole purpose of Officer Candidate School was to train people to be officers, so you come out of the enlisted ranks while you're going through basic training and the other AIT. You're basically learning how to familiarization with all the weapons you're going to be using, the hand grenades, getting used to the uniform. Officer Candidate School was you're there to become an officer and everything that that entails.

Williams: How do you think you were more prepared compared to somebody who didn't have OCS?

Richardson: Well I was better trained because I had six more months of training. A lot of people who went through basic training and did their advanced individual training, mostly at Fort Polk or Fort Ord, California. Those were the two main infantry advanced individual training centers. A person right out of high school that got drafted, 18-years old, 19-years old, got drafted, went to basic training, went to advanced individual training, most likely got orders for Vietnam right after that. So he basically had 16 weeks of training. He's on the bird to Vietnam.

Williams: Do you think that was enough training?

Richardson: If you paid attention it was. Yeah, if you took your training seriously it was enough.

Williams: Earlier you had talked about how everyone should serve. Have any of your children served?

Richardson: No. My daughter is an accountant, and my son is in occupational health and safety.

Williams: Coming back, you always hear a lot of stories about resentment or anything. Did you personally encounter anyone?

Richardson: No, no one spit on me at the airport or disrespected my uniform. No.

Williams: Do you think that happened or do you think that was just kind of where the area where you or it was just talk? What's your opinion on that?

Richardson: I think it happened. Oh yeah, I think it happened plenty of times. It didn't happen to me. Well, I guess it could have happened when I was getting on the airplane to fly from Fort Lewis, Washington to O'Hare, but I don't recall anybody paying any attention to me at all. Maybe I just wasn't looking. Then of course when I get to O'Hare, my whole family is there. Nobody is going to do anything to me when my whole family is around. I think it happened.

Williams: Did you tell people you were a veteran when you came home?

Richardson: My prospective employer I told. Like who?

Williams: I was just wondering did you not really tell people? Were you open? What was your feeling about your veteran status when you came home?

Richardson: I was proud of my veteran status. I would have told anybody who asked. I did not necessarily blast it out.

Williams: We talked about how your view on the Vietnam War hasn't really changed. Your view on just war in general, how has that changed over the years? How do you think the Vietnam War affected that?

Richardson: I think sometimes war is necessary, but I think the government who gets us into wars needs to fight a war to win. The massive power that we had in Vietnam could have wiped out the North very easily. We did some bombing

in North Vietnam but not enough. We could have kept on bombing them until they surrendered. If we would have been able to go into Cambodia and Laos where the resupply lines for the North Vietnamese were running. We weren't allowed to go in there. We did finally get to go into Cambodia, but that was just an excursion in and out. If we would have been able to bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail or actually go into Cambodia and Laos that would have been an easy war to win. We were not allowed to win it. So if there's any future wars I hope there aren't restrictions on our forces like that. The rules of engagement, when you're trying to fight an enemy that has integrated itself into the civilian population and they're not wearing uniforms, in order to avoid innocent and civilian casualties the rules of engagement are much to the detriment of our troops. Even in Afghanistan where you'll be up in the mountains, you'll still run into villagers who might not be sympathetic to U.S. forces, but they might not be openly hostile either. But they might be hiding Taliban and Al Qaeda, anybody that's our enemy that we're searching for. It's hard to separate friendly from foe, and that is a difficult environment to fight in. The rules of engagement should give our troops the benefit of the doubt. They shouldn't be criminalized by accidents that happen.

Williams: In your opinion, why weren't we allowed to win the war?

Richardson: You're talking about the Vietnam War? Why weren't we? Well, there was a big fear of escalation of the war. If we were bombing North Vietnam, the big fear was there would be a Russian or a Chinese ship, and we would accidently hit one of their ships. Then they might escalate and retaliate in some way.

There was a fear of widening the war beyond just North and South Vietnam. I guess we didn't bomb or allow troops into Laos or Cambodia because those were countries who wouldn't allow us to. Maybe that was it. Maybe their governments said don't you be bringing troops in here. Don't you be bombing our country. Maybe they were sort of friendly to the Vietnamese for fear that the Vietnamese would then take over their countries.

Williams: You also mentioned civilian casualties. Did you have a personal experience with that?

Richardson: With innocents or civilians? No.

Williams: You talk a lot about winning. What would you have defined as winning the war?

Richardson: We pretty much had tamed and civilized the Vietcong. Most people don't realize that the Tet offensive of '68 that the Vietcong most of their troops and a lot of their structural forces were decimated. If it weren't for the NVA regular troops, the country would have been pretty well pacified. So if you didn't have NVA troops and the countryside is fairly well pacified with having decimated the Vietcong, I think you could have called that victory.

Williams: All these opinions that you have about the war, where do you think you got them from? Was it just physically being in the war? Was it the men above you? What led you to develop these opinions?

Richardson: Well from the political questions of why were there and was it the right thing to do, that was just having been a college graduate. I was a political science major, so I had a lot of reading and lectures on international affairs. I had a good understanding or at least I thought I did of how we got there and why we were there. I was the leading edge of the baby boomers. I was born in 1946. World War II was just over. There were lots and lots of American veterans around. There were lots and lots of war movies at the theater. You would run into veterans. You would see movies about World War II. I definitely looked up to our American veterans who fought in World War II.

Williams: You talked about that first job that you got in the newspaper. I'm not sure we ever got what specifically that job was.

Richardson: It was financial services. It was a consumer finance company, small loan company. They put me into a management training program. In nine months I was given my own office, moved from Champaign to Danville, run my own office over there. Associates Financial Services was the name of the company. Then they transferred me to Decatur. Then I met somebody at Millikin Bank. They hired me to come over and do consumer loans at Millikin Bank.

Williams: We talked about how what you learned in the military affected how you were as a dad. How did what you learned at the military affected how you performed at your job?

Richardson: Having served in the military and having served in a combat zone, coming back to being a civilian I had a lot of confidence in my abilities to do whatever

I set out to do. Having survived that, having been in a leadership role, I didn't think there was any challenge too big that I couldn't conquer. I just had a lot of confidence having come through and experienced all that.

Williams: Is there anything that we haven't covered or a story that sticks out to you that you want to share?

Richardson: I had one fellow who was already there when I got to my platoon. I heard a story about him. Every night we had set up a night defensive perimeter, you would identify likely avenues of approach if you thought you were going to get hit. Mainly it would be easy terrain where they might walk into your night defensive perimeter. We would identify those approaches, and we'd put out mechanical ambushes which was a claymore with a trip wire across the trail hooked to a battery. If they tripped the wire, the battery would connect, and the claymore would go off. We wouldn't have to sit there and detonate the claymore by hand. It would go off automatically. We set those out probably two of them each night. One of my troopers I was told would set out his claymore mechanical ambush, and then in the morning first thing, daylight, you go out to disassemble it and take it apart. I was told that he walked through and tripped his own mechanical ambush, not once but twice and it didn't go off. Two things about that. One, to be so stupid not to remember where you set up your own mechanical ambush, and you walk through it. That's bad. But the second thing, the fact that it didn't go off meaning it was worthless was the second bad thing. That was an incident that I remember.

Williams: Knowing that some of these security precautions didn't always work, what was it like going to sleep at night in that kind of environment?

Richardson: Edgy, edgy, edgy. After awhile, you could get to sleep, but it was always edgy. It was always uncomfortable. You're on the ground. There's going to be a rock or a root or something that you're laying on, so you're not going to be able to get totally comfortable. You always have your weapon close at hand. A lot of times you'd have to cover up your head just to get away from the mosquitoes. Then you'd have to pull guard duty. Everybody had to do a spell of guard duty. You didn't sleep the whole night through. If you had guard duty at first, ok so you lost two hours or three hours there. Then you got to sleep the rest of the night. Or you got woken up in the middle of the night and pulled three hours of guard duty during the middle of the night. That was one thing about Vietnam, you didn't get much sleep especially when you're in the field. I probably got five hours on average of sleep a night.

Williams: What was it like? It almost sounds like you were exhausted. Is that accurate?

Richardson: Yes, very accurate.

Williams: What was that like going through something already so stressful and needing to be so focused while also getting minimal sleep? Describe that for someone.

Richardson: As I mentioned earlier, Vietnam was hard work in a difficult terrain. You're basically on the equator, so you know how hot it is and how hot it can be. Humid, I mean you could break a sweat walking ten feet. Carrying the loads

that we carried and the fear of encountering the enemy, it all added up to a very stressful time, a very hard time. Occasionally you'd take a break. You'd see guys who weren't on guard duty sleeping. You catch sleep whenever you can.

Williams: Can you tell me a little about some of the friendships you made over there and what that was like?

Richardson: It was different for me as an officer. I probably was closest to one squad leader and was closest to two guys who were my radio telephone operators, RTO. When we left Vietnam, we didn't stay in touch. About four years ago we started getting together, and there was like forty years we weren't in touch. I wouldn't say that we had friendships. Now we do. They're friendships now, but immediately after the war there weren't. Just because of the division I described between officers and enlisted men, you really couldn't be their friend. I would say I did not have friends in Vietnam. I have friends now with the people that I served with, but it's only now.

Williams: What are those friendships like now? What does it mean to you to be friends with other Vietnam vets today?

Richardson: It's a reassurance. It's a reliving of the past. It's a proud feeling to know that we served. Not everybody did; we did. We made it back; not everybody did. So to be able to relive and retell stories with people who went through the same thing you did, it's just a special feeling.