Richard Lavigne
Veteran

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Interviewer

New York State Military Museum
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JA: As part of the Greater Capital District Teacher Center grant entitled "It's Time has Come" supplementary materials for teaching the Vietnam War. We have the honor today to interview Dr. Richard Lavigne, a well known Albany physician. He has a very busy schedule and we are glad that he took a couple minutes to talk to us, so thank you very much.
RL: You are very welcome.

JA: For the sake of genealogy, we always like to start off with little background prior to Vietnam, where you went to school, that type of thing.
RL: I was actually born and raised in Albany, New York. Went away to college and came back to Albany to go to medical school. I was in my second year of post graduate training at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City when I found out I was getting orders to go to Vietnam. Part of the background that might interest people has to do with how physicians were drafted into the service in those days. All doctors up until after the Vietnam War were eligible for the draft in the military. The military had a plan called the Berry Program, named after a physician, I believe, who initiated this program in the service. Every physician registered with the draft when they came out of medical school. They were all allowed to do one year of internship and then became eligible for the draft. The Berry Program allowed you to apply for a deferment until you finished your residency. And the way this worked, if you were interested in surgery and you were doing a four-year residency in surgery, then at the end of your internship year, you applied for the Berry Program in surgery. The military calculated four years down the line how many surgeons they would need. At that point in time, they took all the applications for surgery deferments and chose randomly, essentially out of a hat, the number of people they thought they would need in surgery four years down the line. If you were chosen, you

were deferred for your three or four-year surgery training and then it was assumed you would go in the service at the end at that time. Of course, you would go in as a surgeon as opposed to a general medical officer. In my case, I applied for the Berry Program in internal medicine and found out sometime later that I was not chosen. You then had an option of either going in at the end of your internship year, or you took one year of residency, but then you automatically had to go in at the end of that second year. Needless to say that during the Vietnam War, most people who were not chosen for their specialty in the Berry Program chose to take one more year, hoping the war would end before they had to go in the service. In my case, I elected to take that second year, and it was actually probably in the springtime of that year before you got your orders on where you were to be assigned in the service. It was an interesting time because some of us were planning to get married and we were just waiting for our orders to find out if we were going overseas or whether we were going to be assigned somewhere in the continental United States. In my case, I remember waiting and waiting and trying to make plans to get married. Finally called Washington, D.C. and had a secretary tell me that I was lucky enough to be going to Vietnam. So that was how I ended up going to Vietnam. I had one year of internship, one year of residency at St. Vincent's in New York, and then I reported to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. We had five weeks training and then you were shipped off from the West Coast to Vietnam.

JA: Could you put some dates on things for me?
RL: Yeah. I graduated from medical school in June of 1967. I started my internship in St. Vincent's Hospital in New York July 1st, 1967. I stayed there until June of 1969. In August of 1969, I went to Fort Sam Houston. And September of 1969, I shipped out for Vietnam.

JA: What kind of training did physicians get? You said you were in Fort Houston for five weeks. It wasn't military, was it?
RL: Oh, yes.

JA: Oh, it was military.
RL: Actually, at any given time, there were probably five thousand doctors down at Fort Sam Houston. Fort Sam is a huge Army base that deals with all the medical corps in the Army. That includes physicians, medical service corps, and all the medics in the Army. Of course, Fort Sam Houston is where Brooke Army Hospital is, which is the big burn center in the Army. We received training in, believe it or not, marching, classroom work, map reading, treating snakebites, traumatic injuries, how to do an emergency tracheostomy. Of course, we had to learn all about the military chain of command and the

various ranks in the service, etc., and a little bit about how the whole military administration worked. But they also took us out in the field. Their field was Camp Bullis, which is outside of San Antonio. We went out on the map reading course. We actually crawled underneath the barbed wire with machine gun bullets flying overhead, both during the daylight and at night, which was kind of interesting with all the tracer bullets going over your head. Many physicians were not used to this type of thing. We all bumped into each other on that map reading course, and they sent a helicopter out just in case someone got lost. I will say that we didn't have to stay out overnight. We rode back and forth from Camp Bullis in air-conditioned buses. We lived in motels while we were down there. It was not the most difficult thing in the world. It would have actually been quite nice if you weren't going to Vietnam. We actually enjoyed the five weeks there and of course the military provided everything that you needed, including money. If I had not been going to Vietnam, I would have enjoyed my five weeks at Fort [unclear] 11.22.

JA: I've learned something. I never knew that they prepared doctors for that. It makes common sense that they would have. By the dates you're talking about had taken place, had you formed any conceptions of Vietnam prior?
RL: I basically only knew what I read in the newspaper. Are you asking did I form any opinions about the validity of the war before I went, or just opinions about what it was going to be like before I arrived over there?

JA: Either one. Specifically the war?
RL: I have to say that probably the physicians that went to Vietnam were a little bit older than the foot soldiers and the college students who were doing a lot of protesting. In some respects, we probably came a little bit before and had gone through our education before the true protests of war occurred. Probably physicians tended to be a little more conservative and were willing to accept what the government had thought was the right thing to do. Our generation had not gotten into a lot of protesting because the war was probably in its infancy when we were in college. And then we had four years of medical school after that. I really think a lot of the protesting probably started around the time I left the military.

JA: That's a good point. That's something. It would appear [?] 13.24 that the doctors were older than you.
RL: Well, I mean, you had four years of college, four years of med school, at least two years of training, too.

JA: So, you were what, middle twenties, twenty five, twenty six, something like that?

RL: I was probably older than that. I was about twenty eight. It was interesting in the sense that I had a younger brother who was in college at the time. He and his wife were active protesters at Georgetown, which is my alma mater. They were on Key Bridge. It was interesting stopping traffic, this and the other thing. It was interesting to get letters from him and he got letters from me. And obviously he had his viewpoint. I didn't realize while I was over there how much was taking place back here. You couldn't fathom or get a good sense of how much protest activity was taking place back here. Although, with my brother involved, I probably did realize something was going on.

JA: When did you arrive in Vietnam?
RL: I believe it was September 10th, 1969.

JA: Do you recall your first impression?
RL: Oh yeah. It was— if I had one word to describe my time in Vietnam from the time that I left the States including my first impression until the time I left to come home was depression. We flew out of Travis Air Force Base at eleven o'clock in the evening. [gets up to answer the phone] [returns] I forget what I was talking about.

JA: This is the wonders of modern science.
RL: On arriving in Vietnam, we left Travis Air Force Base at eleven o'clock at night. And flying in that direction, you crossed the International Date Line. So with a stop in Hawaii and another stop in Guam, the flight took eighteen hours. Sixteen out of the eighteen hours you flew in the dark. The plane was loaded to the hilt with guys in combat fatigues and guys in uniforms. Then people like myself were there with civilian luggage, etc. On leaving Guam, there were obviously planes heading back toward the States with men that were finishing their one year tour, and there were guys like myself who were leaving, heading toward Vietnam to start their tour. When they announced your flight was boarding to arrive in Saigon, the ones coming home sort of gave a cheer and wished you well. They were obviously happy as a lark that they were going in the opposite direction. When you were in the area of Vietnam, you absolutely did not know what to expect. You assumed there was probably combat and bombings and explosions going on. You looked out the plane and wondered what this year will bring. On arrival at Ben Hoa Air Base down near Saigon, they basically boarded you on buses. The bus ride [went] from there to Long Binh, which was the transportation center or the relocation center for all incoming Army people in Vietnam. You immediately had a first impression of the country that it was quite dirty. Your gear was much different than the type you were used to in the United States. You saw natives washing their laundry in the river. You saw kids excreting in the streets and in the river. You saw huts that were made out of everything

from thatched roofs to aluminum. Beer can aluminum that somehow made its way to Nam. There was very little in the way of paved roads.

You realized that you had three hundred sixty five days ahead of you of somewhat less civilized and possibly dangerous times ahead. Obviously this brought on a lot of anxiety and you couldn't help but be somewhat depressed. I spent three to four days at Long Binh waiting to find out where I was going to be assigned. There were helicopters scurrying overhead. South Vietnamese national people, military people and Army trucks scurried about. All of a sudden you realized it was going to be a long, drawn-out year. In typical Army fashion, you slept on a cot in a room with a lot of other people. At three o'clock in the morning one night, they finally came in, roused you out of bed and told you you were due over in the airport and to hurry up and get dressed. And of course, when you got to the airport, it was a matter of sitting and waiting until ten o'clock in the morning when you finally boarded a plane to head upcountry, which is where I was headed. They just told you you were going upcountry. You really didn't know where that was or what that meant. But with me, after two or three stops along the way, we landed in Cam Ranh Bay. At each stop, you were still in the dark. You assumed there was a courier to pick you up, but usually it was a long wait.

Ultimately, I was driven from Cam Ranh across a bridge to another town, the name of which I can't remember. That was where I realized I was assigned to an engineer brigade. There was a former OB-GYN man from Puerto Rico who was in charge of deciding where I was going to be assigned from that point. I'll never forget, his major job at the base where he was, was to build an officer's club for the officers that were there. There were three doctors that arrived at the same time and I'll never forget, he said, "One of you is going to go up to the DMZ [demilitarized zone]. The other two, we don't know where you're going." So you assumed you were either going to be lucky or unlucky. On your first night upcountry, you were introduced to outgoing artillery shells, which at first glance you assumed were incoming. But you got used to those noises, and obviously the more you learned, the less anxious you were. I was lucky enough to be assigned to an engineer battalion whose headquarters was at a place called Phan Rang, which is forty miles south of Cam Ranh Bay, right along the coast. It was a fairly good-sized city.There was an Air Force base there where our battalion headquarters were located.

For my full year there I was a battalion surgeon for an engineer battalion which built roads in Vietnam. This was one aspect of the war that people don't realize. We rebuilt all the roads that the French had originally built in Vietnam. My battalion built an area on Highway 1 , which was the highway that went along the coast. Our area of operations

was from about twenty miles below Cam Ranh Bay directly south along the coastline to about forty miles below Phan Rang. And then, of course, there were other battalions that built on either side of this area. We also built Highway 13, which went from Phan Rang directly west to the Central Highlands. Up on top of the mountains at the end of our battalion area of operations was a city in Vietnam called Dalat, which was a very famous city where the Vietnamese Military Academy was located. And supposedly was at one time a vacation land for one of the Roosevelts who used to go to hunt lions and tigers in that part of the world.

The engineering part of the war is very interesting. I don't think a lot of people realize how much manpower and how much equipment we had over there for construction. Not only did we have a whole engineer command over there, which obviously had to build the airfields, the highways, any of the major buildings and the large bases. We had combat engineers that were responsible for building in areas where there might be combat. Our battalion had the capability of making their own base course and making their own asphalt for these roads. And everything was portable. When they completed a section of road, they scouted out another rock quarry. When they found the appropriate place, they moved their whole rock crushing operation down the road to this new rock quarry set up and they blasted rock. They crushed rock and formed a base course. We had a platoon that had nothing but dump trucks. There were thirty five dump trucks in this platoon. These GIs, for six days a week, did nothing but drive dump trucks. They loaded it with one thing or another, drove out to the job site, emptied it, and drove back. Of course, this also meant they pulled maintenance on their vehicles morning and night, six days a week. They had an asphalt plant where they made their own asphalt. So these were actual paved roads. It was interesting because first of all, the Viet Cong used these roads at night. No one went out on the roads at night unless you were in a convoy. And there used to be a common joke that if we spent days putting in a culvert and if the VC didn't like the way it was put in, they blew it up and we had to start over the next day until we got it right. One of the roads up into the Central Highlands, I'll never forget, we called it Goodview Pass. This was a very windy road. With a lot of heavy equipment, we had earth-moving equipment, bulldozers and road levelers. We had people that went up there and surveyed. These were all military people. We actually had serious industrial accidents. We actually lost people in some of these accidents. But we built this road up through the mountains. It was some of the most interesting, beautiful country you ever saw. The mountain people lived in huts in trees up in the mountains and there was beautiful foliage and it was a gorgeous view. And interestingly enough, right where this road was being built, there was a hydroelectric power plant which had been built by the Japanese. When the Japanese built this power plant, they moved in and built a small

village of semi-modern houses, and a swimming pool. Of course, these were all abandoned. The pipes that brought water down from the reservoir on top of the mountain down into this power plant were blown up in the course of the war. But there were still people assigned there to keep maintenance on the machinery. I've always wondered what happened to that power plant since we left. So, I was with the engineers and had the responsibility of handling the healthcare for my battalion. We had three or four companies out in the field, plus our battalion headquarters back in Phan Rang. I had tremendous medics who were very well trained. We had an aid station in each company area, plus a large aid station back in the battalion headquarters. There was a sick call every day at the battalion headquarters. But many days I went and spent the night in the company areas with my medics out there. Many times for nothing else but to have some diversion and also to give some moral support to the medics that were out in the field a good part of the time.

Simply by chance, because the physician that I replaced in this battalion happened to be the group surgeon, they automatically made me the group surgeon. What that simply meant was that we all had to write a monthly summary of the medical activities of our battalion for that month. And this obviously included very important statistics, which were the incidences of malaria and venereal diseases in your battalion for that month. This was very important to the commanders because this was a command indicator. If your malaria rate was high or VD rate was high, it was a negative mark on the command of the unit. It meant either the men weren't taking their malaria pills, which they were supposed to be taking. Or they were not educated or not interested enough to try to avoid getting VD. As the group sergeant, I took reports from the other battalions in our group, correlated them and made a group report every month. It was interesting. In typical Army fashion, on one occasion this one company that was up near the border with Cambodia, who happened to be in our group, was having a lot of malaria. It was just an inordinate number of cases of malaria. To show you how the Army worked, the immediate knee-jerk reaction was to get the group surgeon up there to find out what's going on. Of course, this made me laugh because there was a physician up there who had the exact same training that I had. They didn't care. They wanted somebody up there. They even sent an airplane to pick me up and get me up there. It basically gave you an opportunity to go up and meet another physician and his medics, walk around and talk with him about the cause of the malaria in this one company, which was way out in the middle of nowhere. Then went back and made a report, which really wasn't any different than what this physician wrote. They didn't send a plane to pick you up to bring you back. You were on your own to get back. But they got you up there and they got the report, which was what the military wanted. They didn't care. It seemed like they didn't really care too much what

it said. They wouldn't listen to the fact that there was somebody up there already who was capable. They just wanted somebody up there. So basically, that was my year in Vietnam. You did have an opportunity as a physician after six months in the field as a battalion surgeon to apply to go to one of the hospitals, which might have been safer and a little more relaxing. In my case, I felt I was in a fairly safe area and I had made so many friends. I wasn't too concerned about combat where I was, so I decided to stay on. I had no feeling of fear.

JA: Can I ask you a couple questions about the Vietnam experience?
RL: Sure.

JA: Any new medical practices come out of the war that you are aware of? I always think of the Spanish-American War and the prevention of malaria.
RL: Well, you are thinking of the Second World War when Winthrop Sterling over here in Rensselaer came up with DDT to get rid of the mosquitoes and the carriers for yellow fever. As far as I know, other than a tremendous amount of experience in treating trauma, I'm sure surgeons could give you a lot more information on surgical techniques, treating burns, and battlefield surgery. I'm sure many innovative ideas on types of clothing to wear in a hot, humid part of the world, which would be the most healthy for an individual, probably came out of this war. I'm sure there were a lot of snakebites and probably a lot of parasitology that might have come out of Vietnam. But other than surgery for major trauma, and combat surgery, I don't know of any other, any significant innovations that came out of this war like any other war. I'm sure people would probably say that the medical treatment during Vietnam was probably much more sophisticated than any other war. The main reason was helicopters. We had medevac helicopters that could get just about anywhere and get someone to a field hospital very quickly. Whereas in other wars, I presume you were much more isolated and that was much more difficult. We had a tremendous medical evacuation service. They had the capability to fly people to Japan from a field hospital. Even the huge flying hospital planes got somebody back to the burn center in San Antonio, Texas within twenty four hours, if need be. So transportation and evacuation were probably much better in this war than any other war.

JA: Did you have any contact with the people of South Vietnam themselves?
RL: Yes.

JA: What was their reaction to you as an American?
RL: Every Army base had South Vietnamese civilians working on their Army base. They were very friendly. They liked the Americans. I'm not one hundred percent sure if they

liked the Americans because they were helping them or whether they liked the Americans because they helped their economy, the black market and everything else. But they were very friendly toward the Americans. I came in contact with a lot of public health people in South Vietnam. Their system of healthcare was really primitive. Each province had a provincial hospital. We traveled into towns and met with the local public health people. They were actually quite intelligent. And surprisingly, a number of them had trained in either Western Europe or the United States. But their hospitals were primitive. What I mean is that they were quite dirty. Many times two patients were assigned to a bed, and the bed really did not have a mattress. It was more of a board-like bed, and the family usually stayed right there with the patient. The food given to these patients was cooked in a kitchen that had basically a big pot of something or other cooking over a charcoal burning fire. I'll never forget, we were down there and there were skinny chickens running around on the floor. I swear they used to grab one of these chickens, behead it and dump it in the pot. I'm exaggerating. But in general, they had charcoal fires and used those as stoves to cook their food. Obviously, nutrition was a problem. I'm not sure how much [they had] in the way of medications, antibiotics and intravenous fluids. Of course, we're talking about twenty years ago. The level of sophistication here was not as good as it is today. And back there [in Vietnam] twenty years ago, it was really poor.

All our companies in the field became more familiar with the local townspeople than you would in a large city. When I went to Vietnam, one of the things that was being promoted by the Army was what they called MEDCAP activities. These were trips you took with your medics, a trailer with medications and an interpreter. We went into a village. The theory was you were going to win the hearts and minds of the people. And they promoted this. When I first arrived there, I was very gung-ho and wanted to do this. It was interesting to see the people line up and we examined them to the best of our ability. Initially, I couldn't understand why my medics weren't quite as enthusiastic about this as I was. There were some towns we went into where my medics wore flak jackets. They brought their M16s into the town and basically covered us from a military standpoint. They knew that as friendly as these towns were, at one time during their tour of duty a rocket had come into our compound from one of these towns. They didn't trust anyone, and probably for good reason. It was interesting because the town always seemed to have a village chief who usually looked ninety years old. Many of these people had black teeth because they chewed beetle nuts. Their teeth were totally black. Many of these chiefs wore red turbans on their heads. It didn't take too many of these affairs before you realized that the people were trading blue pills for green pills after you left. And on occasion we found out that the village chief charged a small amount of money from each of these villagers who saw us. Obviously corruption. You saw a lot of skin rashes that

were infected, a lot of impetigo and things like that in kids. A lot of insect insect bites and scabs that were infected. There were people who I'm sure had tuberculosis. It supposedly was rampant in the population. Of course, we did not have an X-ray machine or whatever to determine this. There were kids who had congenital anomalies. And although we were not directly involved, there were many occasions where the military or the Army took kids with congenital anomalies, brought them to a military hospital, operated on them and took them back. For at least the first six months that I was there, we went out on these MEDCAP activities. Toward the end of my tour there, you sort of got the feeling that you were not really winning too many hearts and minds and that it was probably nonproductive. And of course, the closer you got to the time you were leaving, you didn't want to expose yourself too much to any kind of enemy activities.

JA: Was it a volunteer situation?
RL: Oh, yeah. They recommended it and we used to do it. But again, I think it was more idealistic than anything else, on the military's part.

JA: One of the things I've been trying to do is take a look at some of the stereotypes that evolved out of Vietnam. Would you care to talk about the stereotype of the drug-laden GI Vietnam veteran going home? How accurate, from your perspective, is that stereotype?
RL: I can only speak from my own personal experience. First of all, in my experience in Vietnam, there were many different types of GIs. I would say the majority were very, very hardworking young people. I was not in a combat situation. But as for kids who were nineteen years of age, away from home, many of them for the first time, in a relatively unpleasant situation, and who were given a job to do. The majority of the ones that I knew worked very, very hard and they were very pleasant. They accepted their role and they counted the days to the time they were leaving. But they worked hard. They played hard. They were extremely innovative. One thing that struck me while I was over there was how innovative these young people were in how to spend time. You'd be amazed at the hobbies kids had. There were many, many young people who built model airplanes. They were able to get the radio-controlled airplanes, which were relatively new and fairly cheap at the time, through the Pacific Exchange Catalog [PACEX]. They were all into stereos and hi-fis, which they could get cheap. It was amazing how they could have sound systems set up in their own little barrack area. But in general, most of them worked very hard. On the other hand, there were a lot of GIs over in Vietnam who were very heavily into marijuana. I don't remember a lot of hard drugs at the time. I really think pot was the drug of choice at the time. That was probably the beginning of the drug scene. These young people probably had a negative influence on the whole situation in Vietnam. I don't want to say war effort because I'm not so sure that the war effort was

right. But as far as getting any productivity, I'm speaking more in terms of the construction and the engineering aspects of it. Because I really wasn't involved. But it frightened me to think that they were also involved in combat. There was a fairly large number who basically were interested in smoking pot, finding out ways to avoid work, always looking to go on sick call, angry and resentful and really did not want to be disciplined at all. The other end of the spectrum was alcohol. You had the very young, angry pot smokers. You had the older noncommissioned officers, the master sergeants, many of whom had spent two or three tours in Vietnam. They actually liked it over there, those who were heavy, heavy drinkers. And the military promoted drinking, as far as I'm concerned, because there were PXs where cigarettes and alcohol were bought very, very cheaply. Some of the veterans and noncommissioned officers were heavy drinkers. One of the problems that we had was with alcoholics in some of the companies that were out in the field. I shouldn't use the term alcoholics, the heavy drinkers and the pot smokers were at war with each other. And it was not uncommon to have fistfights or all kinds of trauma that occurred because some people were drinking too much, some people were smoking pot too much. And they all were on the courier to sick call the next day.

The pot smokers had a way of banding together. I'm not exactly sure how. It was like there was a culture or a way they dressed or a way they acted that they spotted each other very easily and hung around together. There was absolutely no problem, from what I understand, obtaining pot if you wanted it. Our battalion was apparently upgraded from one class to another class, which meant that we added three hundred new soldiers to our battalion. Exactly what you would think would happen, happened. All the surrounding battalions unloaded all their undesirables on our battalion. At the time we were putting a new company out in the field farther down the road, farther away from the base camp and they all ended up in that company together. Word spread. They knew how to recognize each other and they hung around together. When you think about it, every one of these companies had a peripheral defense system. They were all required to take guard duty to protect their other company members. I am sure that they were smoking pot on the guard tower at night, which would make me nervous if I was out in the middle of nowhere depending on them. But no doubt there was a group who were heavy pot smokers. They were angry about being there. There was the other group who drank too much. And then you had the majority who were extremely hardworking, nice people.

I've always thought to myself, I'm just rambling on here. You heard about so many coming back with a drug problem. So many people had flashbacks. Whenever someone had a problem after returning from Vietnam, the stock answer was, "Well, he was in Vietnam." I never one hundred percent understood that myself. Now, I was not in a heavy

combat area. We certainly had rocket attacks and everybody was under pressure and what have you, but I wasn't heavily into the combat area. But it seems to me that there were an awful lot of people who spent their year in Vietnam that never had a problem. The people that smoked a lot of pot in Vietnam may have come back with some sort of a drug problem, but I can't help but think that they didn't go over there with a personality that would make them prone to it. Just by their nature, to come back with a problem and then blame the military for everything that ever happened to them from that point on. I'm sure this was true in many, many cases, but I can't help but think that there are more people whose bad experiences in Vietnam were brought on by themselves as much as it was by the war. They had a bad attitude to start with. I'm sure the war was not a good experience for anyone, but I just find it hard. I have a feeling that everyone assumed that everybody who set foot in that country came back much different than when they went over there, when in reality it's probably not true. I'm sure some people had extremely bad experiences over there, especially those involved in combat, seeing friends die and maimed and what have you. But it's my understanding that only ten percent of the people over there were actually doing combat. Ninety percent of the people were doing support services. And so you have to think that ninety [percent] were relatively safe. Although I was bored and somewhat depressed for the whole year over there, and certainly, I would have tried anything to get out of it. Not necessarily because I was against the war, but because I just didn't want to go there for a year. In some respects, there were some positive aspects to it. It made you stick it out for a year. It made you figure out ways to spend time, to occupy yourself when you had a lot of time on your hands. You depended on your friends and the people you met over there for support, just like they depended on you. You either worked at it and made it work for the year or you didn't. Obviously, some people got very depressed and had psychiatric problems, and we had psychiatrists that got people shipped out of country fairly frequently. But, once you finished, you at least felt some sense of accomplishment. Not necessarily that you did anything to help the war effort, but you personally had to live under adversity for a year. You did it and came out of it relatively sane. You learned a lot about yourself and learned to get along with others under dire circumstances. I'm sure a lot of people look at it from that standpoint, and that was what got them through the year.

JA: Doctors stayed one year, just like the regular guys?
RL: I was there a year to the day.

JA: Do you recall the date you left?
RL: Oh, yeah. It was actually funny. I was near Cam Ranh Bay. It's interesting. The year you were there, you saw nothing but combat aircraft, etc. Every once in a while we went

up to Cam Ranh Bay because we sent a lot of people to the hospital up there. We went up to visit them and to give you [unclear] 56.11 on occasion. You saw civilian aircraft and it really made your heart churn to get out of there. When my time was getting close, I was planning on getting married when I came back. I knew if I left Cam Ranh Bay, you landed on the west coast of the United States. If I was willing to go back to Long Binh, they had some flights that flew into McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. So, I decided to fly to McGuire Air Force Base. You were allowed to report to the debarkation center three days prior to the day you had orders to leave. I heard that people at Cam Ranh were getting on planes right away. Getting out a couple of days early. I went down to Long Binh and checked in. It hadn't changed a bit in the whole year that I'd been over there. They gave me a bed to sleep on. I couldn't get manifested on a plane until the exact day that my year was up. It was obviously an exciting feeling. There was always a little fear that something would happen at the last minute, that prevented you from going home or you theoretically got injured. All you heard the whole year you were over there was the word short. Everybody kept saying short. They counted the days. Of course, when you just arrived in country, that didn't interest you too much. You heard somebody else was short, but actually before you knew it, your time was short. We got on the bus in Long Binh and were driven to Ben Hoa Air Base. I have to say that I'm probably the only one that spent a year in Vietnam and never set foot in Saigon. I still have never been to Saigon. I went to some medical meetings outside of Saigon near that area, but I never actually saw the city. In any event, you turned in a lot of the gear that they gave you and you put a real uniform on for the first time in a year. You went over and they gave you the piece of paper with your manifest and you sat with all the other people. When the plane landed, unfortunately two hundred guys got off the plane who were starting their year. You waved to them and smiled, walked out and took your seat on the airplane. When that plane actually took off, got airborne and the landing gear pulled up, you actually breathed a sigh of relief. It was like you were actually going home. We went home a little bit different route. I don't know if we stopped in Hawaii, but this time we went through Anchorage, Alaska.

JA: There were some strange routes, the guys told me.
RL: When I was in Anchorage, Alaska, I called the Bronx and talked to my future mother-in-law and explained when the plane was going to land in New Jersey. I remember flying at nighttime out of Alaska. When they announced we were over New York State, it actually made your heart flutter almost to think that you were just about home. We got down over McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey and it was raining. I knew my fiancée was waiting down there. The pilot announced that because the runway was wet, they couldn't land this plane at McGuire and that he was going on to Kennedy

Airport. So we flew over and circled Kennedy for quite some time. We finally landed and it was actually comical. The plane landed and of course they always brought a military police officer on the planes and inspected before they let you off. Half the people on the plane were in combat fatigues and were filthy dirty. Other people were in regular uniforms. We descended on Kennedy Airport. Nobody went through customs or anything. We just walked through with our bags, got a cab and went home. It was obviously a good feeling to finally get back in the States, see civilization again, have real flush toilets and running water. It was a difficult year for everyone that went there. You were not only on the other side of the world, but you were a long ways away from civilization. Mail meant an awful lot to the people that were there. My father used to get up in the morning, cut something out of the newspaper, jot three lines on it, stuff it in an envelope and mail it to me. These were all personal things. When I arrived home, I wanted to sleep because it had been twenty hours on a plane. I hadn't slept. My fiancée, who's my present wife, insisted that we drive to Albany. I said, oh my God, I don't want to drive to Albany. She insisted. I think we got up to Albany about midnight. It turned out the people on Park Avenue had a sign across the street, my father was there and the neighbors were there when I pulled in the driveway. It was really exciting.

JA: They all had signs?
RL: Oh, yes. They had "Welcome home, Dick.". It was really nice.

JA: I was going to ask you, what was your reaction to the people?
RL: I got married nine days after I came home.

JA: They were glad. That's nice. I'm glad to hear that. Because a lot of guys didn't meet [unclear] 1.02.23 I am so glad you said that.
RL: I got out of there in September of 1970. And once again, I never had the feeling of being looked down upon. But again, I was not a combat soldier. I didn't come back to another military. Although I was reassigned and spent ten months at my next assignment in Atlanta, Georgia. I can't say that I was ever totally aware of a lot of negativism toward Vietnam Veterans. But on the other hand, I have a feeling a lot of it came in the ensuing years. From 1970 to 1973 or 1974. After the war ended, I think there was so much more negative feeling toward the people.

JA: You were right in that transition period.
RL: I think that is what happened.

JA: After spending a year, did you form any opinions about the war? You had alluded at one point that you weren't quite sure about the war.
RL: There were a number of opinions that I formed. One opinion was that I couldn't believe was all the military hardware we had over in that country. Being on an Air Force base, there were F-100s taking off around the clock. You knew there were B-52 sorties. I couldn't believe that with all the equipment, all the personnel and all the men we had over there, that we could not win that war. And if the Viet Cong were as primitive as I think they were, it was amazing to me with all our technology and firepower that we could not be successful. It only pointed out the fact that they were fighting in a jungle that was familiar to them and that our leaders had totally miscalculated what it would take to win any kind of a war in that part of the country. It was pretty obvious to me that they could have sent another million men over there and they wouldn't have been successful. It made me think that the enemy had to have tremendous ingenuity. This Ho Chi Minh Trail must have been the greatest. Much better than any engineering feat that we had because it was, one, undiscoverable and two, it had to be destroyed many, many times. From what I understand, within twenty four hours it was rebuilt to the point where they moved convoys. But it became fairly obvious that there would not be a military solution to this. Secondly, you really came away thinking that somebody in their own culture should have been running that land rather than any outside influence. I couldn't help but think Ho Chi Minh had to be better with their country unified, than being at war with each other and some Western country trying to tell them how to run their affairs. I couldn't conceive of what it would be like if we ever did try to organize a population that was really not very well educated or very sophisticated. It would be like starting from scratch. I guess maybe I did have the feeling at that point that we were not wanted over there and that we were not being supported or asked to support the South. But obviously in retrospect, you can't help but think that there were tremendous miscalculations.The thing that always amazed me were all those body counts. If you really think back to the war, all the reports of the different battles were actually reporting numbers of U.S. or friendly forces that were killed versus the enemy. And if you think back on it, there were always two or three times as many [deaths reported] of the enemy. If that was the case, the population should have been annihilated three times over. So obviously, one feeling you can't help but come away with was that the U.S. military had a way of interpreting things that…or either to the point of being brainwashed. That if things were going their way, that there was always something positive, even though it may well be negative. I think that was just part of the trend. No one really came to grips with the fact that, one, we couldn't win, two, we weren't winning. And three, it wouldn't solve anything by sending more men or planes. Their system of reporting victories, they were talking about conventional war, in the

sense of World War II. When in reality I don't know that anyone really knew what was happening over there. That would be my opinion.

You also learned, not having spent more than five weeks in the military, that there were a lot of gung-ho commanders in the military whose careers were really being formed at that stage of their lives. If they didn't show something positive, they wouldn't move up the ladder. I'm not just saying this in a negative sense. We had commanders who insisted on flying over dangerous combat areas to get out to the troops and to find out what was going on, almost to the point of stupidity. One story I had that I never forgot was there was a new general in charge who came in and took over for a fellow who went back home. As part of his indoctrination or whatever, he had had at least one tour over there before, but they brought him around to the different engineer battalions. And obviously, like any situation like this, they put out a red carpet. I guess they served the main meal at lunchtime. In some of these mess halls, they had something special. I'll never forget the time this general came. Of course, he had colonels and lieutenant colonels and captains and everybody else with him in his entourage. He was coming to our battalion. Of course, your commanding officers are all spit and polish that day. This fellow sat next to me at lunch. He was a very nice guy. He seemed a little tired and he seemed more interested in talking to me, a physician, than to any of the other people about what was going on from a construction standpoint. We had a nice talk. When I went up to Cam Ranh to leave for R&R, it came on the news that this helicopter had been shot down. This general who'd only been over there a couple of months, had been shot down and killed along with a number of other officers. So there were always those kinds of stories. Even though the military man was trained in his own way, they were still human beings and many of them were very, very nice people. They were just oriented toward military and career and success and victory and other people were oriented in other ways, but they were still very, very nice human beings. The generals and the higher-ranking officers, I would have to say, were very, very bright people who would make it anywhere in the civilian industry. Some of the lower officers may not have been that impressive, but the ones that made it that high were quite impressive people. I don't know what else to say.

You know, in retrospect, reading and seeing what happened, I think now you can look back and see how you got led down a garden path. Although the protesters were kind of an irritant at the time, I think most people would agree that they were right. I don't see how you can deny that fact. In retrospect, you really wonder what we would accomplish. I think the theory was that if Vietnam fell, then Southeast Asia fell, and you had the whole domino theory. When in reality, I think today, over the last twenty years, we've grown to realize that this theory doesn't hold. That we're probably strong enough to be

more isolated and we don't have to worry about countries like this that are not industrialized. I'm sure that Russia and the other communist countries aren't as interested in moving into a lot of these territories when they can't even handle their own problems at home. And it's the same for the United States. We can't solve everyone else's problems and try to fight a war halfway around the world. Unfortunately, at the time, it was not realized as an impossibility.

JA: It is today, isn't it?
RL: Oh yeah, it sure is.

JA: Can we now can we wrap it. When we met before we started, you mentioned the fact that most of the kids in high school are seventeen. They haven't experienced this, and us old-timers kind of assume that they have. It's the anniversary of Woodstock. One last question. Based on your experience in Vietnam and the things that have happened, are there any final words for those kids who will be seeing this tape?
RL: Well, I think that you should try to learn as much as you can about the Vietnam War. I think you should try to understand the thinking at the beginning of the war. There's a lot to be learned. There were a lot of misconceptions that hopefully will not be made in the future, like a few more foot soldiers would solve the problem, then we needed more and more. The misconception that conventional forces could ever win a war in a heavily jungle-like country against people that live there. But I think you have to look at history prior to Vietnam and realize that it may not have been so easy to anticipate what was going to happen. At the time, the general population all had this feeling that communism was taking over the world. And somehow, until the war was half over or three-quarters over, people started to realize that maybe this wasn't worth losing lives. It's hard to believe that it took so long to realize this. But I think that it was a difficult experience that I don't know how many million men had to go through. It was a part of the world that was not the most pleasant place to be. There were some people who felt they were doing service to their country. There were others who were there because they had no choice. And there were others who realized that maybe this wasn't the best service to their country. I think there's a lot to be learned from this. Historical, sociological, from many, many different perspectives. I would try to learn as much as you can about it and put yourself in the shoes of some of these eighteen, nineteen-year-old kids that were told they had no choice, and had to go to a godforsaken part of the world, be separated from their families, and do something that they really didn't understand the reasons for. I guess maybe most wars are like this. People don't understand the reasons. But this was the first war where people eventually followed their own way of thinking. I think most people realized that probably it was a lost cause from the start. I feel sorry for any family that

lost a family member in this war. You can't help but think that. Although they were doing their duty. In retrospect it was such a waste. But in reality, all wars are a waste. I mean, if you really think about it, here we are. At the time of the Vietnam War, China was our bitter enemy. China was on the border of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had occupied the country. They're now making overtures to be friendly with the United States. China, up until recently, all of a sudden has become our ally. Japan was our bitter enemy in the Second World War. Now they're industrialized and our ally. When you really think about it, anyone dying in war is really ludicrous because the way history evolves, twenty years later they may be our best friend. It's almost ridiculous to think that anyone has to go to war and die. Maybe the Woodstock people were right. We just got to make love and not war, right? I really haven't given you much of a historical perspective. It sounds to me like more of personal feelings about what took place and how it affected me and this, that, and the other thing. You don't talk about it too much anymore. Every once in a while you run into somebody who spent a year there and you like to find out where they were in relation to you. I always think of it in terms of anybody that was there before me had it worse than I did because there were fewer of us there and probably less organization. Many of them were just military advisors working with the Vietnamese military that hadn't been taught to do anything. In the local villages, like the natives…it had to be very difficult.

JA: I met a guy who wasn't given any bullets for the first— he was over in Da Nang. He had to have been there as soon as it started, like in May, when the first Marines went in. They couldn't have any bullets inside the perimeter. Once they went out, they could.
RL: They were there with the security forces, Police forces or something like that?

JA: Yeah. It was right after Pleiku. He went in like in May. He was one of the very first that went over. They were security forces. And, you know, they just kept going and going and going. Dr. Lavigne, thank you very, very much. It was a pleasure. Okay, John. It was a pleasure.
RL: Ok, Joe. I hope it helped.. Thank you very much.

JA: Oh, are you kidding. You were great.