

**Richard Kenneth Olson,
Veteran**

**Mike Russert, Wayne Clark
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on 6 May 2008
Buffalo, NY**

Q: Interviewers

RKO: Veteran Richard Kenneth Olson

Q: We're rolling. All right, this an interview at Lyon's Hall, Canisius College, Buffalo New York. It is the 6th of May, 2008, approximately 9am. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clark.

Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth please?

RKO: Richard Olson. Richard Kenneth Olson. January the 15th, 1948. I was born here in Buffalo NY.

Q: Okay. What was your educational background prior to going into service?

RKO: Prior into going into the service I attended grammar school and Mckinley Vocational High School where I took horticulture.

Q: Okay. Did you draft? Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

RKO: I received my draft notice and I decided I wasn't in favor of the war. I decided if I had to go I wanted to try to help. And so I joined so I could become a medic.

Q: Okay. So you did enlist.

RKO: I did enlist

Q: Where did you go? When did you enlist?

RKO: At the end of 1967 I went into basic training, I think January the 3rd, 1968, at Ford Dix New Jersey.

Q: Alright. What was your basic training like and how long were you there?

RKO: Well, basic training lasts for eight (8) weeks. It was the middle of the winter. It was freezing. All day long you'd be on bleachers and outside in the snow. You did 10 minute break every hour. And you'd get to run down the bleacher steps yelling "Kill, Kill, Kill". It was not something I was crazy about doing. And when you received your lunch

you had your metal mess kit. And it was about zero degrees at Fort Dix and the food froze almost as fast as it hit the mess kit.

Q: Was this the first time you were, you'd been away from home for an extended time?

RKO: The first time I'd been away from home and I was very lonely. And my birthday was about two weeks after I went into the service. And I received a telegram, and they gave it to me early in the morning---the message (that) I had a telegram. But they didn't tell me what it was. And all day long I was worried that somebody was hurt at home, or something awful happened. It was to wish me Happy Birthday. (Kenneth smiles and laughs)

I; Did you keep in contact with those at home while you were away at Fort Dix?

RKO: Yeah, for sure (nodding his head). In fact, I have a good hundred some letters, maybe 200, from the time I was in the service, from friends and relatives and family. And reading them over now it brings back the voices of, you know, many relatives long gone.

Q: Now these are letters from them to you?

RKO: Yes

Q: Do you have any from you?

RKO: Yes, I do have a few letters that I wrote. , but not a lot.

Q: Okay, um, where did you go after (Fort) Dix?

RKO: After (Fort) Dix I went to Fort Sam Houston in Texas, and it was where you took medical training. It was a 10-week course, and it was nice and warm down there at Fort Dix—or Fort Sam Houston, and I enjoyed it quite a bit. In fact we had a weekend pass and we went to Mexico and saw the Mexican sites.

Q: Okay, how intensive was your medical training?

RKO: It was fairly intensive. And after that I went to Fort Riley, Kansas where I worked at Irwin Army Hospital for six months on an orthopedic and surgical ward of our fellows who were returning from Vietnam.

And on Sunday mornings, they would roll us out of bed if we were sleeping in the barracks, and we'd get an ambulance and we'd head down to the airfield and we'd unload a load of guys coming back from Japan that had been wounded. Can I tell those stories?

Q: Sure, yeah.

RKO: This one particular day I'm pushing this fellow into the admission part of the hospital, and he has a full body cast on, and he's covered up with a sheet. And I pull back the sheet to see his wound, and his wound is this great big side wound (Kenneth turns to his right side and indicates the side of the ribcage),and on the wound is covered with

maggots crawling. So I quick put up the sheet and went over to the nurse, and said “You know, this fella has maggots crawling all over him”. And she says “Don’t worry. The doctors in Japan put them there to eat the dead flesh.” And that’s something, apparently, they still do.

Now these were not maggots out of the garbage can.

Q: mm hmm (agreeing)

RKO: These were homegrown maggots to do, to do a job, and just illustrates how much is involved in a war. It’s not just people. Everything is involved.

Q: Did you find that this additional medical training that you went through at the hospital, did that better prepare you for what you would encounter at Vietnam?

RKO: I’d say it definitely better prepared me, but there’s not a whole lot of preparation to seeing somebody blown up, when you come down to it. In a hospital you generally, you’re dealing with people recovering or they don’t make it. But out in the field it’s a lot different.

They’re fresh wounds, and they can be horrific.

Q: Okay, after you left (Fort) Riley, where did you go?

RKO: In November of 1968 I got my notice for Vietnam, I was going in January, and I went home for a month on leave. My buddy was getting out of the army and we hitch-hiked from Fort Riley to Chicago, where he lived. And we wore our uniforms so we would be more likely to get rides by truck drivers. And all the way I had my portable tape player, and the Beatles White Album had just come out, and we played that all the way across the country. And that was an enjoyable experience. I caught the plane home, and was home for a month. And then I went to Vietnam.

Q: Okay so January?

RKO: January the 3rd, 1969 I went to Vietnam. Of course I’m from Buffalo, and to Vietnam the temperature alone was a shocker. First though, before I went to Vietnam they sent me to Fort Lewis in Washington, the State of Washington, for like a week’s training. And I was a medic, so I had only shot a rifle at basic training. I’d never shot a rifle afterwards, and had never shot one before, and didn’t really want to shoot any and I didn’t even think I’d carry a rifle when I got to Vietnam because I was a medic and I didn’t see that as my job.

And we’re at Fort Lewis, and we’re going through this training, and a little make-believe Vietnamese village, and I’m running and I trip over a wire, which means the whole place would have exploded (chuckles). But the rifle I had went through my glasses and my eye, (points to the right lense of his eyeglasses) and it did not do a lot of damage. But it did cut me right below the eye. So I had to quick run over to the medics (covering one eye

with his hand), and I'm going "My eye. My eye" (chuckling), as if –you know—I'd lost my eye in battle, and here I wasn't even in Vietnam. But I was okay. It was just a little flesh wound—but bled a lot.

Q: Now how did you get to Vietnam? Did you fly over?

RKO: We flew over on a commercial jet. And of course that was the last time I would see American girls for a while. And it was a very long ride. We stopped in Alaska and then we stopped in Japan, and I was able to send a couple of postcards home from those places. And then we landed in Vietnam.

Q: What were your reactions as soon as you got off the plane? You know, the smells?

RKO: The smells, and how hot it was. The beauty of the jungle.

Q: Now where did you land?

RKO: You know, I'm not 100% sure, but I believe Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base is probably where we landed. And then we went to Da Nang, where I was there for a day or two. And they originally sent me to Saigon to work in a hospital. For 2 days I was in Saigon in a hospital with flush toilets, air-conditioning, all the wonderful things of life, and I thought: "Well this isn't to bad."

The next day the Sergeant come up to me and said "They made a mistake in your orders" and I found myself headed to the Ninth Infantry Division in Dong Tam, and that's where I would stay for the remainder of my tour.

Q: Now whereabouts is Dong Tam?

RKO: Dong Tam is in the Mekong Delta, down south. And I was only in Dong Tam itself. And it was an army base with about 25,000 guys I was there for maybe 2 days. And it was the only time I ever filled any sand bags too (chuckles) while I was there. And then I went to an infantry company, **the 3rd** of the 39th, and I soon found myself out in the jungle doing night patrols for the next five months. And we would go out at night and sleep in the

Q: So you weren't used as a medic or you...?

RKO: Oh yeah. I was the medic. I was the medic within the infantry platoon.

Q: Okay. Now did you carry a weapon?

RKO: I did carry a weapon. And the medic who was leaving—his name was Lebasser (sp?), I forget. Wayne Lebasser I think—he gave me his 45. I was a horrible shot—which was ok. So I did end up carrying a weapon. And after a while I came to the conclusion, that if you're going to try to protect your fellow soldier it doesn't just mean putting a bandage on them now and then, it means being part (of.) So I became –you know—a participant. And I can't really think of any other alternative for me.

Q: Did you wear any designation at all that you were a medic?

RKO: Oh yeah. Well eventually I got my combat medic's badge, so that was my designation. I didn't have a cross or anything on my helmet. I don't think we even had that. That (cross) wasn't really an option.

You don't want to be identified, because you're out in the jungle with the infantry

Q: When was the first time you were in combat?

RKO: I'm not sure the exact first time, but I can say that every night we would go out at dusk & set up in the jungle. And after maybe 2 weeks, or a week and a half, we received some fire. So there was a little combat there. But it was mainly hit and run. They would shoot at us for a while and then we'd shoot back, and then they'd disappear. And as time went on, there came to be more and more combat, and different sorts of combat.

For five months I went out and did night patrols and slept in the jungle. And then we'd come back in the day and it was fairly safe. We were on this highway number 4. And every mile and a half there was a little post and there'd be one platoon from our company at each of the 3 posts. Every week we would rotate & go from Duke, Danger & Diablo, were the names of these little outposts. And I have a picture of it. Just a mud bunker, and another tinier mud bunker. And most the guys slept under poncho liners outside.

And the tape I have with the recording was in February, so that's maybe 6 weeks after I got to Vietnam. And there's quite a bit of shooting going on. And there was some (does Air Quotes) "Gooks" out in the rice paddy, and they were shooting at us and we were shooting at them. Part of our platoon was out for the night on night patrol. Usually I went out every night, but on that particular night I stayed back—there was maybe 5 or 6 of us. That's all there was at this little compound. (13:00)

Q: Now during the first 5 months were there any casualties that you had to take care of?

RKO: Oh yeah, there were casualties. One day two guys —one of the few days when I stayed back—two guys, they were in an ambush—the guys that were out there—and two guys were wounded. One, his name was David Black, and he lives in California. I found his name on the internet, so we've been corresponding for the last year. But he lost his eye there. And the other guy's name was Callahan, and he received a number of flesh wounds but I don't think they were terribly serious.

One of the problems when people got wounded, they'd be medevac'd and you would not know their status usually because, you know, we weren't near the hospital. So they'd be medevac'd. If they were bad they'd be sent to Japan and then to America. And we would never find out what happened.

And you know you spend, I spent years trying to find out what happened to one of my best friends that had been wounded.

Q: Did you ever find out?

V; Well, yes and no. His name was William Roberts and here's what happened. We were out on patrol, this was maybe April or May of 1969, and we're walking on a rice (paddy) dyke, and I was maybe the 3rd or 4th guy in the line and he was right behind me. And as we're walking people are pointing out the grenades, the booby-traps on the ground, and all of a sudden my buddy-- William Roberts behind me-- says "Doc, we better trade places. You're to far up." So we trade places and a 100 feet down the road he steps on a grenade, and he gets blown up—just a lot of fragments in his body. So I call in a "Dust Off" & they take him away and he was in pretty bad shape.

Q: What do you mean by a "dust off"?"

RKO: A dust off is a medical evacuation helicopter which would come & take the wounded. And they have some medical equipment and a nurse there, or whatever, to help stabilize them till they got back to the field hospital. So they took him away, and I know he was in very bad shape, but I didn't know if he lived or died.

Then MANY years later I went to "The Wall" in Washington DC and they had people there that would look up names for you. So I asked them if his name was on the wall, William Roberts. There were four (4) William Roberts on the wall, so I didn't know if one of them could have been him or not. And I had no idea where he lived in America. I also asked if my name. There are four Richard Olsons on there. So that just kind of ironic to a point.

So another I come home and I'm still trying to figure our how can I ever get ahold of him. And there were three of us that hung out together. The other was Steve Foster and he lives in California too and we've kept in contact over the years. In fact in November I got to see him. I went, my brother lives an hour away from him, and he came and we visited for a few hours. But every time we'd communicate we'd always ask: Did you hear anything about Roberts? That was our big question.

So my brother who works, sells cars, one day I was telling him about it, and he says "Well, did you ever do a credit check?" (Laughs out loud). I know! I don't do credit checks, you know, on people. He (brother) said "Well let's try doing a credit check" So we found a William Roberts that we think was him. I forget what state he lived in. So I wrote him a letter and—I don't know—I said something like you know "You may not want to talk". You know, I have no idea 30 years later. And I never did hear a response from him.

So I thinks it's him, but I just felt I could not try to get in touch with him. Maybe he lost his legs, maybe he doesn't want to talk about it, who knows. So I never pursued it. But hopefully..... And he had decent credit (Chuckles). So hopefully he's alive and doing as well as possible.

Q: Okay, what was daily life like?

RKO: Well daily life, while we were at this little base would be, at dusk we would go out

on patrol. And during patrol at night, there'd be—we're talking about 14 guys maybe at most, we would be out in the jungle and we'd set up. And we would often set up on a grave site, which was like raised ground and it was just all stone, and supposedly the Vietnamese buried their ashes there, or scattered them there. And there were rice paddies all around, and then jungle, nipple palm and that. So you had very good view of anybody that might be coming.

We had a star scope that would pick up the rays and so we would be able to look and see in there was anybody coming, or anyone out there.

And you didn't want to set up at the same place too often because eventually people find out your location. But we went there quite a bit. And there were geckos in the trees. They would be swearing at us all night long. You'd be on guard for an hour and a half, twice a night, so your sleep would be pretty broken.

Then in the morning, first, as soon as we woke up, we'd get together and we'd come back to our little base camp where we could do whatever we wanted for the rest of the day. Sleep or whatever. And everyday the medical sergeant came out in a jeep from Dong Tam, and he would bring our mail and he would bring us some food—which was just unbelievably bad. And there was the only hot meal. We would have were powdered scrambled eggs, and you know bacon that somebody had cooked for hours before. Otherwise, ate C-rations. Or we ate with the Vietnamese a lot.

Q: I was going to ask you, did you have much contact with the local people?

RKO: Oh, tremendous amount of contact, because we're out there in the jungle. So we'd have a lot of contact with the people.

But during the day there, and I'll tell you more about that in a minute, but during the day you'd write letters, and you'd have to be on guard even at our little base there and it's right by the road. And there were no shower facilities or bathroom facilities. And we had no electricity—no anything.

But there was, we had one of these—you'd see them in old movies—a shower stall with a big 55 gallon drum. And you could fill it with water and take a shower. Right there by the side of the road as people are going by, and people would be going by. But we didn't bother using that because you'd have to haul water from the little river down the road. So we'd just go down there---set up a machine gun—and just bathe in the water with the kids, the village kids or the buffalo, the water buffalo going by there, or whatever. And you'd come out, and it'd be pretty bad, but at least you felt a little refreshed. And you'd mainly write letters home, And after a while we did get a little tape player, and we'd have a little Rock n Roll music and stuff. And then we found the Army station that played music so we'd had that too.

Q: Did you ever have, like, any USO Bands? or anything like that

RKO: They did in Dong Tam, but I was out in the jungle so I never got to see any bands. And I came in January, so the Bob Hope thing had gone through in December. But for

five months I never even went back to Dong Tam, I was just really in the jungle for that time.

Then we started a new cycle of missions after that. Where it was an 8 day cycle where we'd spend 2 days in Dong Tam, which was the big Army base, and we would see—they had a swimming pool. And my best friend Steve, his buddy was the lifeguard at the Dong Tam swimming pool. And they had this great bunker and he had fans, and he had electricity and he had Rock 'n Roll music and of course we would go there and party when we were in Dong Tam.

And sometimes they would show movies on the side of the building. There'd be 2 story flat board buildings where the barracks were. And I remember this one time they are showing Dr Zhivago in Vietnam, where it's probably 120 degrees and it's snowing on this building.

And all of sudden Dong Tam gets attacked by incoming rounds. There were always incoming rounds from the VC. They would constantly be popping rounds into there. So you had to run into the bunker until the shelling stopped. And by the time the shelling stopped we just said "To Hell With It" you know. It's a great movie, but it just was not right in Vietnam to see that.

I remember waking up at night and we were getting snowed and I just didn't get out of my bunk. I was tired, you know. I just didn't care. And after a while you just kind of don't really care. If your numbers up, your numbers up they say. They say if your getting showed, the show says "To whom it may concern". If your getting shot at it's, you know..HaHaHa. So that was it in Dong Tam. But that was part of the eight-day cycle. We'd do that for two days, then we'd take a helicopter.

And I did 65 helicopter missions after that. They would drop us out in the plain of reeds, I think sometimes, several times, we were probably in Cambodia. There were secret missions, but they wouldn't tell us where we were going, but that's what we decided. So we'd spend two days in the jungle basically doing a sweep. Somebody would be a few miles away and we were supposed to be sweeping the VC towards them. Sometimes we would find VC, sometimes we wouldn't.

One time we found a very large cache of all sorts, from helmets to clothing to weapons, and that—certainly there were a lot people over there for that. Then the next part of the eight day cycle we went to Firebase Moore (FSB Moore Fire Support Base Moore) which was an artillery base. And when you're out in the jungle and somethings going on you'd call an artillery (base) and it would come from this firebase, usually, because that was in our region. All around the firebase they would have great big bunkers and we'd spend two days on. It was a rest period for us, and we got hot food and they had showers and so it was pretty decent. And they would have a little music there. I don't remember if we saw, maybe, a USO band, but we might have. I know they had Donut Dollies, the girls who would pass out coffee and pop or doughnuts, or whatever. Occasionally there would be some there.

Q: Were these Vietnamese women?

RKO: I think a few times there were some American women. Usually they came out of Korea, the bands, is okay.

So while we were there you'd be in these bunkers and you'd be on guard at night on top of the bunker, and sometimes you get incoming rounds. But on my tape you can hear the monsoons are coming down by that time, so you can actually hear in the background the sound of the monsoons. And it would be soaking wet in there and there'd be, maybe, eight or ten of us in the bunker. A couple of guys on top, we'd have our radios, and that's what's going on the second part of my tape here. We'd just be partying and passing around food and peanut butter and M&Ms and whatever we had. And telling stories, you know. It'd be dark and just try to, as if the war wasn't enough, would be caring each other now (smiles & laughs)

Q: You said in your unit there was some use of marijuana?

RKO: There was, sure. There was a lot of use of marijuana in our platoon. We had our code. We never got high out in the field, you could only get high when you were back on base and it was relatively safe. So one time I was the medic, so I had an aid bag and I had morphine in there. One fellow with us during the night stole my morphine and shot him, you know, shot himself up with it and we found him the next morning crawling around. We got him on a Dust Off. We didn't want him and he was a fairly new guy, so we told them we didn't want him back, and he never came back to our platoon. The goal was to stay alive and to look out for each other. Pirating was secondary, and that's pretty much it.

Q: Were there any racial tensions with the unit?

RKO: We had in our platoon, we had one black guy and can't think of his name now. (looks off in the distance, thinking) But anyways, we had one black guy and there was no racial tension really.

In fact we had couple other black guys. These guys, our platoon, had the Puerto Rican contingent, so there was maybe five or six guys in our platoon that were from Puerto Rico. And one guy's name was Castro, this is the only name I can remember now. And he could speak good English and Spanish. The other fellows could not speak English so that's why they put them all together. But they were great in the jungle, you know, because they came from that sort of area. And they were very-uh-had good vision, and they could shimmy up the coconut trees. So you know we needed each other. There was really no racial tension with us. Back at Dong Tam there was lot of racial tension going on, because you have thousands of guys and a lot of drugs, and a lot of hard drugs going on. Were we just mainly smoke pot, that was basically it, and we didn't have hard drugs out there. The interesting thing about the pot, you would not buy a little bag of pot. Somebody would take a carton of Kools (cigarettes), open them up, empty all the tobacco out and fill it with marijuana. And they'd sell us a pack of 20 rolled joints and

filters for a dollar. It's very inexpensive, and there weren't a lot of rolling papers around. So that's how they got around that. So you buy a whole carton for five bucks of marijuana cigarettes.

Q: Was there much illness within the unit, especially when you were out in the forward camps? Dengue fevers, malaria, illnesses from the water, foot problems, dysentery?

RKO: There was a lot of illness from the water, more foot problems were the big thing with us. Foot immersion, it was called, because we were in the water once monsoons came. At first when I got to Vietnam the rice patties were dried and cracked. Then by April the monsoons started and they (rice patty fields) filled up with water, and it was much safer to walk in the rice paddy, because in the dark would be booby traps, so we would walk in the water a lot. And of course you'd be walking in the water, the monsoons would be coming down, you'd be soaking wet all day long. And sometimes we'd be out, we'd be out 18 hours, then we'd sleep outside. If we could find a hooch, and inside of every hooch was a bunker—usually. And the Vietnamese people would go down in the bunker, underground. They took their pigs or chickens with them because that's all they had, you know. And we would kind of take over the house for the night, and set up patrol.

But you would be soaking wet and you'd stop to take a break, and you'd sit down and you'd light up a cigarette and relax. I think you had a few minutes. I used to use a bit of C4 and a can and I'd make a cup of instant coffee. And I did a lot of writing, I'm a poet, so I was writing a lot of poems in Vietnam. And I might write something and all of a sudden you'd realize there's something on your leg. And you pull your pant leg up and there'd be a leech there, or a couple leeches. And sometimes they'd be like this---holds his hands approximately 10" apart. And sometimes they'd be like that---holds his hands 24" apart. And they'd just be sucking the blood out of you, as if the war wasn't enough you had to contend with the leeches.

Q: What about skin diseases, like jungle rot? Was there a problem with that?

RKO: There was, there was, but let me get back to the leech for one second. The only way to get rid of the leeches was to use your mosquito repellent. You could squirt them, or burn them with your cigarette (everyone laughs). And I didn't like to use my cigarette because afterwards you'd take a drag and it would be like bleach guts.

So there wasn't a tremendous amount of jungle rot. There must have been a little but there wasn't a lot.

And one thing we would do, especially at the end, I was in Vietnam for about nine months. So Nixon had promised that he'd start pulling out troops. The Ninth Division was the first unit pulled out and that was us. So maybe for the last six weeks in Vietnam we tried to do a lot of goodwill missions, and our whole company would go out and we'd go to a village and we'd set up a little medic station. And anybody from the village could come and we would try to patch them up and give them some aspirin, or do whatever we

could. And we gave the kids candy. In that, I mean Americans are pretty generous. And I'm sure they are today in Iraq, you know, doing the same thing. That's not to say they don't fight the war, but there's another side to the. So that was a good thing that we di.

Q: What were a lot of the health issues with the people that you were with?

RKO: Some of them were horrible, you know. But I mean, I had an aid bag with aspirin and some minor things and cuts and bruises I could patch up. But Health issues, you just did whatever you could and hoped that somehow an aspirin would at least psychologically help somebody that had a bigger problem. If somebody had a major problem...One night we were out on night patrol and early in the morning they wake me and they're bringing in a woman with a little girl. The woman had her foot blown off. She stepped on a booby trap. A Vietnamese woman. So we stopped the bleeding and called a medevac and they took her, you know. I'm sure the American doctors did whatever they could for her.

Q: Now, did you have any direct contact with the doctors at all?

RKO: Oh no. I mean I was in the jungle, they were in the hospital. I had no contact with anybody really. I mean we'd be out in the jungle for two days on those missions and a helicopter would bring us our water and food and letters and drop it off. So we didn't have any contact. And the brass, the Majors and the Generals they're all up in the air, they're flying around in the helicopter watching you, telling you "Do this. Do that". And sometimes we would do it, and sometimes we diplomatically figure how to get out of it. Because, you know, they want you to charge a wood line or do something that's disastrous for you, but fine for them, you know. So those are some of the things you have to contend with. And there were times when we were out in the jungle, we were beat, you'd be walking for 18 hours, 16 hours in the monsoons, and we just would set up and say we spotted some VC. And we'd call in some artillery so we could get a break, you know. And you sometimes you have to do that. Well unfortunately it cost the good taxpayers of America a thousand bucks or two but even soldiers deserve a little rest now and then.

Q: Did you get any sort of R&R at all? (Rest and Recuperation)

RKO: I never got an R&R. But my two buddies, the one show stepped on the grenade, William Roberts, and Steve Foster, were there months before me. And one of the bad things about Vietnam is you'd go as an individual. Where during World War II a whole unit would go, so they had a lot of cohesion, is what I'm thinking.. But everybody came and went at different times. So my two buddies went on R&R and I have a picture of them, I was ready to take one—I knew we'd be leaving for Hawaii in a month or two. So I just figured that would be my R&R, and I won't have to spend any other money.

Q: When did you leave Vietnam?

RKO: August. August of...maybe middle of August of '69. I forgot. I went to Hawaii where I stayed for the next 14 months, and I was a medical records clerk in Schofield Barracks (Oahu, Hawaii), and it was a great job. On the weekends we would go down to the beach and we would party all weekend long. And if we were out on a convoy, an Army Convoy, doing something we'd pull over our ambulance to the Dole pineapple fields and grab a couple of pineapples and throw them in the ambulance, and away we'd go. (Smiles and laughs). I'm sure Dole wouldn't mind.

Q: Are there any other stories you wanted to tell us?

RKO: Well one story I well tell you is, one of those nights when were out on night patrol, and it's funny. I wrote a poem years later. Well, maybe I'll tell you this. Speaking of years later, when I came home, I put everything away that I had about the Vietnam war. I never talked about it for 20 years. Or people would be in the room talking about it, and I would never say I was a veteran. Not that I was ashamed of it. I just didn't want to talk about it. And I started talking about it when the Gulf War started, because I decided if you don't talk about it people will never know. So that's what prompted me to talk, and start talking about it.

But this one story, and I think of these guys, is the Mud Men of Vietnam, and they were out on night patrol, and it's early in the morning. We had just woken up and we hear a loud explosion. So we start running and we get to this---they called them Shit Moats because they didn't have a toilet so there'd be this moat in the ground. And there'd be fish—carp, that's swimming around, and there would be sticks across there and you jest went to the john there. But anyways we heard this loud explosion. When we get to this moat there's four American soldiers blown out of this moat. I don't know if they were alive when they went in there or if they were not, but they were dead when we got there. Although they were not blown up in pieces. I mean their bodies were really intact. They were covered from mud. And I took my shirt off (Stops talking, crosses his hands-tears in his eyes, closes his eyes and clears his throat)—to try to clean them up. (pauses). But the hard thing is after all these years you still wonder who they were. What their parents thought. I suppose they never found out how they died. I don't know. But that wasn't the only horrible occurrence, but that was, that was a big one, you know.

Q: Now when you were discharged, or when you went back to the states, did you wear your uniform? Did you encounter any protesters?

RKO: Oh yeah, yeah. I encountered protesters afterwards too. When I came back I went to ECC (Erie Community College), and then I went to UB (University of Buffalo) for a while, I, my Army jacket. In facit I have my one Army jacket at home from Vietnam. I don't wear it. It's falling apart. It's just there. But I wore my boots, my jungle boots, for a couple years. I must had a couple pairs and they were very comfortable. And you know,

people would notice them, or say something, and I'd say Yeah I was in the service, but I didn't really talk about it.

But when I went to college, in several classes people knew I was a veteran. And there were other veterans too. So a lot of people would have a lot of animosity towards veterans and call you Baby Killers and that, and whatever. Well you know "That's life".

Q: Did most of the veterans stay together on campus?

RKO: I don't know. I hung around with two other veterans a lot, so maybe they did. You know I was working and going to school, so I didn't spend a lot of time in the social aspect of school, unfortunately, because I had to work and everything else. But, yeah, I'd say veterans, to a point, certainly hung around together. The black veterans especially. Well they were, you know, there was a lot, the black movement was really strong in the early 70's and they stuck together. And I'm sure the white people did to a point too. But it was the black movement that was far more vocal and powerful in its way.

Q: Did you ever use, did you use the GI Bill to go college?

RKO: Yeah I did, I did. In fact it was great. I went to ECC, which was on Main Street here. Down in Timing, or something there for a while. In fact, one of those Catholics, it had been a Catholic school. In fact my one Army buddy had the statue of Christ, that had to be from there, in his apartment. I don't know how he ended up with it, but. Whether he walked off with it or not, but it was a great statue. He's long gone. And my other Army buddy, his name was John Richliano. You know, long black hair and he looked like Jesus. And I had long hair at the time too. But John had contracted some sort of lung disease in Vietnam and he ended up killing himself a few years later because.... He wanted me, he had two little kids, but he wanted to have control of his life. So memories are good and they're bad and they're difficult, but sometimes you need to talk about them, I guess.

Q: Did you join any Veterans organizations at all?

RKO: No I never did join any Veterans organizations, but I know some people in them and I'm not at all opposed to the. It's just that my life has just been really busy and I work afternoons. So a lot of things take place in the evening like that, so I really didn't. My schedule didn't allow for it more than anything.

What I do is work in a high school, I'm a janitor in high school. Williamsville High School. I've been there for 20, uh 28 years or so, and in English they do a unit on Vietnam. So I go in there every year to classes and read my poetry and tell them about the war, and play my tape and show them pictures, and stuff.

Q: Do you ever watch any movies at all?

RKO: For years I could not want to tell them. But when I did this (pauses) When I decided to start talking about the war, then I started reading a lot about it and I started

watching some moves. Full Metal Jacket is a heck of good movie. In fact, the guy who co-wrote it wrote my favorite book about Vietnam. His name is Mike O'Hara. He wrote a book called Dispatches which is phenomenal. But the other thing, the book the kids in school read is The Things They Carry, which is a beautiful book you know.

Q: I like that short story.

RKO: That's a great story. Very poetic, very poetic book by Tim O'Brien who's actually been in Buffalo too, although I didn't get to see him that day. So I've read a lot of literature, a lot of oral histories, books about blacks, and Chicken Hawk, and a number of other books. And I've written a lot about the war. In fact last year I wrote a play about it and takes place in America and Vietnam. So that's kind of been my life with the war.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed, or had an effect on our life?

RKO: Oh, it had a massive effect. Although at the time I wouldn't say it did. I did not like the Army. I didn't like being in the Army, but I loved the part where you got to meet people and do a lot of the things you do. I didn't like the war part, you know. I came right out of the Flower Power, the Beatles, Love. That was my, you know, Summer of Love. That's what I was living for and then I got my draft notice. (Laughs)

So what do you do? How do you reconcile that you know War and Peace? To be at war. To be at peace. To be empty. To be full. We are all empty vessels longing to be filled.

And then we were in Vietnam, a guy cut off the ear of a VC you know, and it just, a machine gun, and it just ticked me off so much you know. But I wrote a poem about it years later, you know.

To be at war, it ends

To be at war.

To be at peace.

To be empty

To be full.

We all are empty vessels longing to be filled

Dead men do not need ears.

I think they have heard enough about war

It is the living who need to listen.

It is the living who need to hear that a poem about war should say Peace.

And that's what I think, you know. All good war writing says at the end of it. It says peace, you know, because otherwise it's madness, you know. And the part that ticks me off the most is the women and children being involved. Bad enough when men want to destroy each other, but you know senseless killing.

One time we're on helicopters flying in for a landing, and in the rice field is water buffalo, dead. And this little guy, maybe 12, 14 year old that had been on top of him and his head is just like blown off, and his brains are in the rice thing, you know. It's just sad. And here's another little story too. This is not my original high school ring. (holds up his right hand to the camera showing the high school ring on his ring finger.) I graduated in 1966 from McKinley but I lost my high school ring in Vietnam. We were coming in to a hot LZ, landing zone, and we're getting shot at and we jump out of the helicopter. It's hovering over the rice field, jump down and started running through the rice paddy for cover. And I slipped on something. And when I pulled my hand out my high school ring goes flying off my fingers. Like one of those moments in life you never forget, you know. Well I didn't have time to stick around and for my ring in the muck. So I just kept running.

But I lost a lot more than my high school ring you know. And not everything everybody tells you is true. Politicians don't always give you the real story.

But years later, in fact ten years ago working at North High School, after going in there (smiling & chuckles) telling them the story about my high school ring, teachers bought me a new high school ring. (Huge smiles and joy spread across Kenneth's face). So I've been wearing it pretty much ever since. It's just a nice gesture. (still smiling) McKinley Bulldogs.

Q: (Interviewer passes a photo to Kenneth) Could you hold this up and tell us where and when that was taken?

RKO: (Holds up a B&W photo of himself that appears to be taken in the barracks. Wearing dress uniform with his hands in his pants pocket, jacket unbuttoned, a long tie, full head of bushy hair with a side part, and wearing glasses) November 1970, in Schofield Barracks. It's a picture of me the day I was leaving Hawaii to be discharged from the Army. It was a happy day and a sad day because I had so many friends there and I did not relish the thought of leaving them. But it was time to come home and start a new life.

Q: Okay, now what about other things? You have some other things.

RKO: I have some other things. I have this picture, from, you know---Holds up a framed rice paper painting. See if you can get the whole picture. (Kenneth holds the framed picture up, it's rectangle and approximately 20"W x 30"L) It's on rice paper and it was from a destroyed Buddhist temple. And the temple was a real poor man's temple, this was the only thing in there. And it was just a little hooch really. And this was on the ground in a little frame with no glass. And I like to think it's a picture of Buddha waiting at heaven for the faithful to arrive with his guards. And there's a little dragon at the bottom of the picture. And you can see where it's all worn away. And you know the faithful for Buddha are headed up there. But over at one of the other entrances to

heaven sits Jesus Christ waiting for his faithful to arrive. But nobody comes. The faithful are all so busy fighting wars, they don't have time. I folded this up and carried it around in my pocket for a week or two before I finally got back where I could put it away, and it was up in my attic for 20 years. And then, when the Gulf War started, I got this down and had it framed.

Q: Any idea how old that might be?

RKO: It could be very old. You know, I really don't know. But I love the way it's frayed at the edges. And it's just rice paper. It's very, very delicate paper. Well, I've had it for almost 40 years and it was old then.

Q: Now you had some other photographs?

RKO: I had some other stuff.

Kenneth leans over to his right side and looks through items he brought to the interview, and then moves the box of items in front of him, continuing to look for something. He pulls out a green, 3-ring binder and places it in his lap and starts to turn the plastic sheet protector pages that have items inside them. Kenneth pulls out a piece of folded paper, approximately 5"x7". It is a 4-page pamphlet with printing on all 4 pages. He turns it towards himself and then turns it to the camera, so the camera can zoom in & focus on the writing.

RKO: Well this is a piece of propaganda that the VC would have for the people, about Johnson's administration.

Kenneth holds up the 4-page pamphlet to the camera, which zooms in and we're able to read the following on the upper part of the first page:

APPEAL BY THE SOUTH VIETNAM
PEOPLE COMMITTEE
TO
SERVICEMEN IN THE U.S.
EXPEDITIONARY ARMED
FORCES IN SOUTH VIET-
NAM AMERICAN G.I.S!

Johnson administration has been forced to end their bombing and drafting on the whole Democratic Republic of Vietnam Territory.

It is clear that the escalated polgot* of the HAWKS in the White house and pentagon is heavily defeated. At the same time it is the sign of the complete defeat of the U.S. Imperialists in their aggressive plots in south Vietnam. It means

clearly the glorious victory of the Vietnamese, both in North and South America, who are fighting to defend the independence and freedom for our fatherland.

*polgot: research shows this is likely a misspelling of the word “policy” or “plot And you’d find this laying around. (Kenneth puts the pamphlet down, and continues to page through the binders protective plastic sheet covers)

And I have this (pulls out a small booklet) book of Vietnamese poems, probably about Buddha, that we found on a dead soldier. (The booklet is approximately 5x7, with a picture of a seated Buddha with folded legs in the top half, and the words SAM GIANG . underneath. (The Sám Giảng (full title: Sám Giảng Thi Văn) are the sacred poetic instructions, prophecies, and doctrinal texts of Hòa Hảo Buddhism)

Kenneth places the book down, pulls out a piece of paper next and holds it up to the camera.

And I have this actual handwritten poem that a Vietnamese wrote. But on the back is a Chinese symbol, (Kenneth turns the piece of paper around and Kenneth points to the large Chinese symbol written in red ink on the bottom left corner), so it was a Chinese person who had the paper. Whether they wrote the poem and gave it to somebody I’m not sure. But in school one time a Chinese kid told me that what the Chinese means, but I forgot.

Q: Now you found that on a dead..?

RKO: (Kenneth nods) On a, on a dead Vietnamese. (Kenneth turns several more pages in the binder.) Should I pull this picture out? Kenneth then pulls out an 8x11 sheet with four B&W photos on it, and holds it up to camera.

These are several pictures. Right across from where we lived was this hooch with this fellow there with his water buffalo. (Picture is of a smiling Vietnamese man wearing a white short sleeve shirt, dark shorts, facing a small thatched roof bungalow. The water buffalo is to the Vietnamese man’s right, and the water buffalo’s head is turned and looking at the camera.)

And the week before we had left Vietnam, now the pictures on the bottom, and we were on quarantine on a big Navy vessel for a week to make sure nobody had any horrible diseases. (This photo is of many soldiers wearing short sleeved uniforms. Kenneth is wearing a glasses, a cap, looking directly at the camera with a broad smile. Another soldier is holding an 8mm style movie camera pointed out to sea.)

Q: Okay

RKO: (Kenneth looks through the binder again and pulls out and unfolds a long rectangular piece of paper with handwriting on it, and holds it up to the camera). This was propaganda that would be on the trees. “SAY NO TO TERROR AND MASSACRE AGAINST THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE PEOPLE!” And on the back it (Kenneth shows

the back of the paper) I wrote my mother a letter (smiles), and sent this home as a letter to my mother back in the day.

(Kenneth folds this paper and returns it to the plastic protective cover.)

And years later, I'm a writer and I sent stories out and the Story magazine had a great story by a Vietnamese guy who's living in exile in France. And I said, please tell him. So they sent me, he wrote a letter back in French and his translator translated it into English. smiles

See what else do I have here (Continues to page through the binder) Okay, I don't have to much more (Pulls out an item and holds it up to the camera) This is just a postcard that I sent my brothers of Buddha, and it says "Dear Kevin and Randy: Hi, it's hot here. The picture is a Buddha. He's on of my best friends. Be good Rocky the Kid.

My nickname was Rocky in Vietnam, and it was years before Rocky Balboa. Obviously not Rocky Balboa. But I wore a peace symbol, and then somebody thought it looked like a rocket ship. Its when peace symbols first came out, so they started calling me "Rocketship", then it got shortened to Rocky. But it was all over a little peace symbol that I wore.

And I was very interested in Buddhism. I wanted to go to Vietnam to see Buddhist temples and to see what life was like. I was disillusioned, you know how kids are. When you start growing up and see the hypocrisy around you. And it seemed like they weren't talking about stopping the war in church. Things just seemed wrong. And so you focus on other things, other cultures, because you can't see the blemishes that they have. So those are a few of my mementos there. (Kenneth closes the green binder and places it back in the box by his feet)

Q: All right. Well thank you very much for your interview.

RKO: You're welcome. And this tape is for you. Kenneth hands the interviewer a cassette tape.

Q: Thank you