

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ALAN M. RICHARDS  
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War  
2002

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**Richards, Alan.** Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

**Abstract:**

Al Richards, a Grafton (Wisconsin) resident, discusses his Vietnam War service as a Forward Observer with the 9th Infantry Division. Richards describes his duties as a Forward Observer including map reading, use of an SCR 300 radio, calling for artillery air strikes, and ordering mortar strikes at night. Operating in the Mekong Delta area, Richards talks about firefights with the Viet Cong, patrol missions, and searching for tunnels and passageways in areas the Viet Cong had held. He comments on booby traps, being wounded in combat, and the effects of his injury on his post-war life.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Al Richards was raised in Mequon (Wisconsin) and served as a Forward Observer in the Vietnam War. Richards attended one year of college before being drafted. In Vietnam, Richards was wounded twice before returning home to Wisconsin where he settled in Grafton.

Interviewed by Laurie Arendt, 2002

Tape gifted by Laurie Arendt, 2003

Transcribed by Matthew Sorensen, 2010

Corrections Typed in by Kelsey Burnham, 2012

## Interview Transcript

Arendt: 14th, 2002. It is Grafton, Wisconsin. I am interviewing Al Richards. My name is Laurie Arendt. We are the only two attending the interview. There is no affiliation or relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, except that this is for the Ozaukee Veterans Book Project. What branch of the service did you serve in?

Richards: The Army.

Arendt: In the Vietnam War, what was your rank when you left?

Richards: E-5, sergeant.

Arendt: And where in Vietnam did you serve?

Richards: Mostly in the Delta area.

Arendt: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

Richards: Drafted.

Arendt: Were you expecting it, was it just—

Richards: Yes.

Arendt: Okay. And when were you drafted? Do you remember what year?

Richards: '66.

Arendt: Were you in college? Were you working? What were you doing prior to—were you in high school?

Richards: I was going to college. I got a year of college in, and I couldn't afford to go to college anymore. I was working nights at the Clark [gas] station.

Arendt: Here?

Richards: Actually the one in Mequon.

Arendt: Oh, okay. So you were—

Richards: I'm from Mequon originally. And, uh—almost a year to the date from when I stopped going to school I got drafted.

Arendt: So when you were going to school, did you have a deferment, or was that still—

Richards: Yes.

Arendt: Okay. Alright. Did you do anything to prepare for being drafted, or was it just sort of an inevitable thing you just waited for?

Richards: No, just waited.

Arendt: Okay. And when you're drafted—most of the guys I've interviewed thus far have enlisted—did you have any choice in what—did you have to take a test or, you know, like an aptitude test?

Richards: Yes, we took tests. And I always found it humorous that the year of college that I attended I was taking electronics because it was my hobby, and I was doing very well in it. Again, the only reason I dropped out was the money, and I was getting so tired working all night and going to school all day. And when I took the aptitude for being anything with electrical schooling in the military, they said I didn't pass. [Laurie laughs] So, I think that was a little fixed. I was offered officers school—

Arendt: Was that because of college? Or they just saw something in you?

Richards: —either that or from tests or whatever.

Arendt: Okay.

Richards: And, uh, I figured I was drafted, I was in for two years, and every time they offered me something it was always with, "Well, you have to sign up for three more years," or something. So I kept saying, "No, I'll pass." I just wanted my two years, in and that was it.

Arendt: Okay, good. When you were drafted, did you presume that you would be going to Vietnam?

Richards: Yes.

Arendt: Or did you hope you were going to, you know, Europe?

Richards: No, I presumed if I was drafted that's where I'd go.

Arendt: Do you think that was a good way to prepare yourself? I mean there's not a whole lot you could do to prepare, but did it help with the right mindset—

Richards: Uh, I guess so. It just doesn't—it was just a matter of fact. You know, it was going to happen. And when I did get drafted I went down to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, and I was there for just a short period of time. I'm not even sure it was even two weeks. And I got sent over to Fort Riley, Kansas because they were reactivating the 9th Division because they needed more divisions. And it was known from the outset that it was getting reactivated because it was going to be sent to Vietnam. And all our training was tailored toward—even the specific area that we were going into.

Arendt: So, like what? What types of specifics did they train you for?

Richards: For the rice paddies, the jungles.

Arendt: So how do they train you in Kansas for rice paddies? Or was it more interior—

Richards: Well, as you saw there was the dry season over there. It gets very dry. Kansas was the same way. There was a standing joke there. It's the only place in the world where you can be in mud up to your neck and still have dust blowing in your face. The ground would actually get like baby powder. The heat and the conditions did match it.

Arendt: So did you finish training in Kansas and then get shipped over to Vietnam or did you—

Richards: Yes, and we got shipped over as a unit which, at times, made it harder. There was good with it because you knew the people you were with. You trained with them. You knew how they would react. You could count on them. But then again, you had been with them for such a long period of time, from almost the beginning, that when you lost them it took awhile till you got hardened to that fact.

Arendt: Now, I don't know if this would apply because I don't know what the military conditions were like in Vietnam, but when Doug [Arendt; Laurie Arendt's husband] went through basic training and AIT [Advanced Individual Training] —he was a military policeman—and it was the same thing, all the same guys. And he said that once we got to South Korea, he said we're all vying to move up. Was that the same way in Vietnam, or was making rank really a priority or a big deal?

Richards: Because they reactivated a whole division they didn't have enough sergeants, corporals, whatever to go around. Uh, so they made some of us like—I was actually a forward observer for the mortars. I'd go out with the other squads for ambushes and stuff. And then I would call in, and

once I got to Vietnam I would actually call in artillery and everything. Because you fit a certain rank, a certain position would call for a certain rank. And because of that a lot of us made sergeant—like I made E-5 sergeant in the minimum amount of time you can make it. Even before that, they would let us wear the stripes but they just didn't pay us for it. Because technically we weren't sergeants, and they couldn't pay us for it, but they needed sergeants for leaders. So some of us apparently showed some leadership ability because I was actually squad sergeant of the headquarters section which had all the forward observers.

Arendt: So you were like the head forward observer?

Richards: Yeah, I was the head of all that group.

Arendt: Did you find that job particularly challenging or interesting or—

Richards: In training it was kind of fun because they would actually—in Kansas they would set you out on your own, and you had to go out, use a map, and in those days you didn't have all the electronic locating equipment like you do now. But we had a map and a compass, and that was it. And you had to go out and pick an area on the range, and then call in the mortars or the artillery. So that was kind of fun. It wasn't fun lugging the radio around. I think in the picture you can see a radio on my back.

Arendt: Yeah.

Richards: But it's, you know, something you just get used to.

Arendt: Did you find it difficult to do? Were you good at it?

Richards: I was good at it. From being a hunter in Wisconsin and being able to find my way around with a compass—I was good at that. And, uh, I was always good with mathematics in high school. So that part of it, figuring out where you were as far as directions and azimuths and stuff like that—I mean it just—

Arendt: Okay. So once you got to Vietnam—

Richards: Everything changed.

Arendt: Everything changed. How did it change?

Richards: Uh, we weren't trained to be a rifle platoon. The platoon, our platoon, the mortar platoon was set up of three squads that actually carried the mortars or handled the mortars, actually fired the mortars. We had three mortars so we had three squads. And then the fourth squad was the

headquarters section, the forward observers, and then—three forward observers for the three squads—and then we also had at least three what they called FDC [Fire Direction Center]. I wish I could remember what that stands for. But it was the guys who took the numbers that we phoned in and translated them back down onto a map and then told the gunners where to shoot. So we weren't trained as a rifle platoon, but once we got over to Vietnam we didn't carry the mortars with us during the day so they turned us into a rifle platoon during the day.

Arendt: But you didn't have any weapons in camp?

Richards: Not in camp, no. They would give us our rifles when we were going out. And we would go out during the day along with the rest of the company as a normal rifle platoon. And then when we would set up camp at night, not always but often, the helicopters would fly, find where we were, drop off a couple of mortars, and then the rifle squads—usually one a night—would go out on an ambush duty. And then if it was your squad, as a forward observer, you went out with them. So at night we were a mortar platoon, but during the day we were a rifle—

Arendt: You multitasked.

Richards: Yes. And it was kind of hard because we weren't really trained as a rifle squad to start out with, because that was a different training, but we learned.

Arendt: Was there a quick learning curve for you?

Richards: Yes. [Laughs]

Arendt: Okay. Good. So when you went out—tell me a little bit about your experience with the Viet Cong, because it seemed very flat. So were you shooting at long distances? Were they tunneling? How did that happen? Tell me—like ambushes. What were you ambushing?

Richards: We would go out, and it was awfully hard to find where we were in Vietnam because everything was flat. So even on the maps there weren't any elevation or any hills. Ah, and to say that you were by a stream or a river down in the Mekong Delta area—that was every place you went. You were either wet from rice paddies or walking through a river or a crick or getting rained on unless, like I said, it was in the dry season. Then it got awfully hot. But what we would do—what I would do is I would call in—and even at a couple times if we were close enough I would call a ship and have them fire illumination rounds in the air. And they would fire that at a quoted coordinate and then when I would see that I knew where I was. And of course you never fired it close to you because you

didn't want anybody to know where you were. So you'd have it fired somewhere away from you but that you could still see it.

Arendt: So how close did you get to the Viet Cong? I mean were you yards, feet, half mile?

Richards: Yes. When we went out on ambushes at night we were ambushing, trying to find supply lines, et cetera, or activity. In the Delta it was a little bit different than further north. It was kind of a hit and miss thing with us. The general engagement, when it happened, would be that when we were out there in the day walking through on a search—and usually the Viet Cong would open fire first. They would spring a trap. They'd wait until we walked into some cross-fire, and then they would start shooting. And that's how the battles per se would start.

Arendt: God, that had to be nerve wracking.

Richards: Yes, you were tense. And then when you first got there you walked around tense all the time. And I remember one of the first missions we were walking out, and as we were approaching camp my lieutenant looked at me and told me I could relax because I must have looked tense to him. I must have had—but after awhile you had to guard against complacency also because for every ten or twenty missions that you went out on you wouldn't see anybody.

Arendt: Oh, really? But did that mean there was nothing out there, or that you just didn't see it? Or did that vary?

Richards: Either. Like I said, usually the enemy didn't engage us unless it was a pre-designed trap.

Arendt: I'm kind of contrasting your experience with Ralph Beck's. He was at Khe Sanh, and he said it wasn't a matter of if we were going to get shelled, it was—it happened every day. We just didn't know when.

Richards: Yeah, when we were back at base camp, when I was showing you the base camp area, during the dry season we got shelled several times while we were in camp.

Arendt: But it wasn't a daily—

Richards: No, it wasn't a daily thing. It was just maybe once a week. Again, the vast majority of the time I was over there I was not in a base camp. We were either out, or like I said during the monsoon season we were on those troop ships in the Delta for awhile.



Arendt: Now, geographically, like he was further north. You were south. Was there less conflict in, the area you were in, or did that vary as it progressed?

Richards: I would think Ralph probably faced larger numbers. He was probably facing more of Chinese or North Korean regular army type thing. Where the area we were in were more the true Viet Cong. They were kind of hit and miss. It would be the same thing. They would spring their trap, and then we would—the first thing we would do is, you know, hit the ground, but then after that we would generally call—I would call in, or whoever would call in, artillery and or helicopters. Gunships would come in, and then we would go in and try to mop up afterwards. So there wasn't a lot—two times there was actual, where you saw somebody running and we were shooting back and forth.

Arendt: Oh, really?

Richards: Yeah, but most of the time it was wait to get shot at, call in artillery and helicopters, and then go in and try to find out where they were and find their tunnels or their bunkers, or whatever they are, and blow them up. That kind of situation.

Arendt: So were you around their tunnels and their bunkers?

Richards: Ah, yes.

Arendt: Did anything strike you about them, or the way they were built?

Richards: Again, the area where we were was probably a little more primitive than probably further north would have the big tunnels and the whole cities underground and that. We never—I never ran into any of that. We did run into some tunnel systems, but generally we were just from one bunker to another or to a different area. Yeah, I didn't go far into those anyway.

Arendt: You mean a tunnel rat? [Alan coughs] 'Cause he—one of the stories—I hope he keeps it in. He had like a—somebody come through with a stethoscope. What the hell were they doin'? Well, they saw one of the target [inaudible] started to go like this when they tunneling under the base. So he was listening at the walls of the bunkers, and sure enough they were tunneling underneath.

Richards: Yeah. Can I get you a soda or something?

Arendt: No, I'm fine.

Richards: A Diet Pepsi or something?

Arendt: I'm fine.

Richards: Would you mind if we took a short break?

Arendt: Sure.

**[Recording stops, then abruptly begins during ongoing interview]**

Richards: Matter of fact, he somehow knew that when I came back that I was at Great Lakes Naval Hospital. And somehow he—somehow we kept in contact with him because I knew he was from Peoria. We were both in Illinois. But he's the one that actually tripped the booby trap, and we saw some kids in an area. It was actually an orchard, and we thought, well, they're just out there playing. And we walked over there, and he saw that it was an apple orchard. So he went to pick an apple, and the kids had booby trapped—these were probably less than sixteen. Kids had booby trapped that area. And he picked it; it was a grenade. That was one of the few times—because it was called "Booby Trap Island", so they made us wear flak vests. So, he had picked the apple and turned around and walked away, and it got him in the back of the legs and the back of the arms. I was kneeled down on a little dike, and it came through, and the only—I don't know why it didn't hit me in the arm because I was sideways to it, but the only place it caught me was in the neck right here. They cut this because these tendons all were cut. So they had to cut this, come down and pull these back up. And I was walking around like this for a long time until I could stretch them back out. And then years later because my neck still bothers me—I go to a chiropractor—and he took an X-ray, and he said, "Did you know you still have shrapnel in there?"

Arendt: Really?

Richards: And I said, "No." And he says, "Yeah, I can always tell your X-rays" because there are two or three pieces of shrapnel in my neck there.

Arendt: Do you—I have degenerative disc disease. I was walking to Polish Fest and sneezed, and I swear to God, I thought a lightening bolt came out of the sky and hit me in the back, but I blew out two discs. But like when weather changes I can tell with my back. Do you have that with your neck?

Richards: Well, that's on the left side. When I was real young I had an injury to my left foot. Then, during one of these battles that we were in where they would shoot at us first—there was an old standing joke about how sergeants and lieutenants didn't last long, you know, all that stuff. And they always looked for the guys who were ordering the other men

around. And we were walking across a rice paddy up to a V-tree line [a type of ambush shaped like a "V"], and we were about the second squad back, and I had just told my men—and the old saying was, "Spread out. One round would get you all." Because if you're clumped up too much and somebody throws a grenade that means you all. So, I was just turned around, and just got done yelling at them to spread out, and I was one of the first guys hit. They opened fire, and we all hit—we were in rice paddies so we were in the water, and I could see the bullets skipping in the water around me. And then it felt like somebody came up and kicked me in the shoulder. And it flipped me over on my back, and this radio thing that we carried, it had quick disconnects in the front, and I always wondered about that. And the first thing that came to my mind was, "Oh, I get to use these," you know—

Arendt: Okay. So you were calm.

Richards: I was fairly calm. It just felt like somebody kicked me real hard in the shoulder. And then when I popped that and I went to roll back over, the bullet came in and went and stopped right next to my spine. Then I felt pain in my back. And then it was very hard to move. But then I must have gone into shock because I was aware, you know, still aware of everything. I just had to lay there. Excuse me; and it wasn't much of a dike. And then one of those guys in the picture there—one of my, one of the smaller men in our group—came over by me to see if I was all right. And I said, "Yeah," I said, "I'm fine." I said, "I think my arm's broke." And he kept sticking up his head, and I kept telling him, "Gann, get your head down." And then he got shot. It came in right through the top of his shoulder—just missed his heart, went through his lungs. And so then we were both laying there, and then I called for the medic. And when things settled down a little bit it seemed like—and even when I look back at it now, it seemed like a very short period of time. But we had just eaten lunch shortly before we took off and started marching through the rice paddies again. And by the time we got out of there it was dark. So a longer period of time than what I thought. But the medic came over, and because I could still move around a little bit, he asked if I could help—we put—his name was Gann—we put Gann on a poncho, plastic poncho type thing, and tried to pull him. But when I put pressure on my back I couldn't do it. So then the medic took me back. We got back about a hundred yards, and we probably had about another hundred yards to go. And I told him I can't crawl anymore. It was too painful. And he said, "Can you get up?" And I said I'd try. And it actually didn't hurt to stand. I was taking a chance at getting shot again, but we started to run. Then my arm—this whole bone here was shattered in the ball joint—so I started to run, and even though I was hanging on here, it was flopping all over so then we had to stop. Then he tied my shirt around me, and then I ran back to the tree line. And then he went back and got somebody to help him

drag Gann out. When I got into the hospital I asked the doctor to put us together so I would know how he was. And he was—last time I saw him he was fine.

Arendt: Good. Wow! So now, did your neck happen first, or did—

Richards: Yes.

Arendt: And was that taken care of there, or you—

Richards: Yes.

Arendt: Medevaced out or—

Richards: Well, I, uh, matter of fact I was taken care of at our base camp. I believe it's called Dong Camp. I don't know. That's a while ago, and I don't remember the names quite right—we had a hospital there. It was one of these half circular—

Arendt: Like Quonset huts?

Richards: Quonset huts but they were filled with air. They were kept up by air. And so they were actually kind of air conditioned inside.

Arendt: Because of the air circulating?

Richards: Yeah, and after the surgery and I came out, they had IV or something hooked up with who knows what was in there. But once I was able to get up and even go outside to the latrine somebody would have to carry my bottle for me or something. So, when we did that, we'd go outside or sometimes we'd just—the nurse would take us outside for some fresh air. You know, all the other guys start yelling at the nurse saying what an ugly dog you got [Laurie laughs] because it looked like she was leading me around by a leash.

Arendt: So, were you like ticked that you were shot? Were you angry? Where you—'cause I would be mighty—

Richards: Well, the first one was a grenade. And I had a feeling before I went over that I was going to get wounded, but that I was going to be okay. And my first thought when I was wounded was I didn't expect it this soon. Because it happened--I went over right at the beginning of the year, right in January, right after Christmas.

Arendt: You know I can't tell you the guys that have went over like in January or left on Christmas Eve—

Richards: Yeah, it was like they let you come home for Christmas, and then you could go over there. We took a troop ship over so it took us awhile to get there. But, uh, this was in, I think like, must have been May, around that time. And it was just one of—my first thought was I didn't expect it this soon. And then my next thought was—because my ear hurt so bad from the concussion on that side—and I reached up and I could feel the blood coming down my neck. The next vision I had in my mind was—years ago there used to be a youth center in Thiensville [Wisconsin], and used to help run that. And there used to be a young guy who came in that didn't have an ear. And it was—I don't know if it was burned off or what—but it was not attractive. And when the medic came over he said, "How are you?" I said, "I'm okay, is my ear still there?" Because that's all I could picture that I was going to look like this kid now. And the medic kind of laughed. He said, "Yeah, there's really not much of a hole there at all, you know." [Laurie laughs] I said— well, you know, it's just the strange—

Arendt: Isn't it funny the things you think about? [Laughs]

Richards: Yeah, you know, like you're hurt, and the blood's running, and my mind [Laurie laughs] went, bam, went back to that poor kid I knew when I was young. That I didn't have an ear, and once he said my ear was there then I thought, "Oh yeah, I'm fine. Just put a bandage over it for awhile."

Arendt: Okay, good. So when you were shot where were you taken?

Richards: Okay, when I was shot I was probably in the hospital for actually not very long, two weeks. And then I was allowed to go back on ship but not go out because if I got it wet they were afraid the stitches would all open up again. So I spent about another two weeks on ship but not going out on missions. So—

Arendt: Did they remove the bullet?

Richards: Yeah. Matter of fact they had given it to me, and I lost it. But, uh, that was in like October when I got shot. So I was taken back to the same hospital, and the bullet was taken out there, and because they soaked the bullet in feces and stuff. Part of my shoulder blade was also taken out because it was infected. And then they left me back open to drain. And that was done there. And then I was sent to Long Binh which was—most of the guys over there knew Long Binh. There was a big hospital there. Then I spent a couple weeks there with this draining, **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** then they sewed me up. And that was probably the most painful time of the whole thing. After this had been open, to pull it all back closed, and there were metal stitches in my back. Probably about six

inches long, six to eight inches long. They were opened up. So that was the only time I remember asking for morphine. I woke up from that, and it was really painful. But then I was wrapped [Approximately five second pause in recording] then I was wrapped from my waist up to my neck with my right arm sticking out and just my left hand. So it was like this. Diane yells at me to this day every once in awhile to put my arm down because it's a habit for me to stand here like this. Because it's comfortable for me to stand like that. This whole bone was shattered, and that's as high as I broke my arm, because this whole ball joint was shattered here. So if you don't know [inaudible] you don't see me swim. It's the scars. Most people don't notice or realize.

Arendt: No, I would have never known that.

Richards: And that's kind of why—I was working at a machine shop when I got drafted. And that's kind of how I got into this field. And I went back there even though I had visions of going back to school and finishing my education with the GI Bill. But because of the handicap I wanted to go back to someplace where I knew they had to take me back because of the law. So then I just worked—I learned to work around it.

Arendt: So you worked there in addition to the Clark [gas] station?

Richards: No, the Clark station was when I was going to school before I got drafted. This was after I came back. I wanted to make sure I had a job. So I went back to where I left, where I was drafted from and learned to use my arm the best I could.

Arendt: Has it been a problem for you, or is it just been something—like when you wear glasses or—

Richards: Ah, the older I get—I used to be able to play on two different softball leagues. Matter of fact, the team that I played on wrote me when I was in Vietnam that they took like first place in state the year I was in Vietnam. So when I came back I would try to play softball. When you can't reach much higher than your shoulder it's kind of hard to catch fly balls. And I used to actually play awhile, but when you were semi-good—

Arendt: It kind of sucks to [laughs]—

Richards: Yeah, you know. To try to do some things that you used to do or to—I was raised along the Milwaukee River in Mequon, and I cannot remember not knowing how to swim as the rest of my family. And I can't—I have trouble swimming now because I can't bring the arm around and stroke. I mean I can stay afloat and everything. It's not a problem, but—

Arendt: So if the ball joint was shattered, did they put a metal bar in, or did they just—

Richards: No, they just put back—tried to put it back together what was left. And then this bone here, because it was kind of shattered they actually had to turn it a little bit to have it heal back together. And like you can take your arm and go like that, I can't do that. That doesn't go that far. And again, most people that know me probably don't even know that.

Arendt: Unh unh, no.

Richards: But I think we got started on this because of the chiropractor. [Laurie laughs] But anyways, this all happened to the left side so I favor my left side. And my back got out joint a little here so that's why I go to a chiropractor, to straighten it.

Arendt: Were you right-handed or left-handed?

Richards: Luckily I was right-handed. You goin' so soon?

Unidentified  
Man: Yeah.

Richards: It come out all right?

Unidentified  
Man: Yeah, it's happened [brief crackling on tape] [inaudible].

Richards: He was going to a tech school, and when he graduated the economy slowed down so he just stayed for me full time. But now he got a place that will give him an apprenticeship. So, unfortunately I lost him, but he still comes back and works once in a while at night for me.

Arendt: Oh, that's good.

Richards: Yeah. Okay.

Arendt: So, you said you were a hunter. Did this affect your hunting?

Richards: Uh, a little bit. You learn--you learn to comb your hair with one hand. Things like that. Matter of fact, I shoot trap. I'm on a trap shooting team.

Arendt: Do you really? Good. Can you tell me a little bit more—you talked a little about booby traps. Did they train you for those, or was that something you kind of picked up as time went on?

Richards: No, that was one of the things that we trained for when we were down at Fort Riley.

Arendt: What kind of things did they tell you to watch out for?

Richards: They would tell you, you know, watch for the lines. Or some were--some were made out of natural elements like bamboo shoots and stuff like that. When we were in Fort Riley, Kansas they actually had a village, a mock village, set up that some of the guys who were in Vietnam and came back set it up and kind of trained us to look for things. But sometimes you just don't see everything, you know.

Arendt: 'Cause I remember we learned about—it sounds so dumb—in college we learned about—is it "pugle" sticks?

Richards: Punji?

Arendt: Punji, that's it! Punji sticks. We had it—it was on an exam [Alan laughs]. Doesn't that sound strange to you?

Richards: Something you'll always use the rest of your life [laughs].

Arendt: Don't remember how to pronounce it, but—did they stick to the same basic things, or did they get creative?

Richards: Oh, there were all kinds, yeah.

Arendt: How would you say morale was? Were you always on alert? Did you have time to do—did you keep a sense of humor?

Richards: Oh, you had to. Yeah, that was the only way you could survive was to keep your sense of humor. And there were times—because it was a type of war where you—even when we were in a boat or the same thing would be when we were in base camp—you'd go out for two or three days, and then you'd come back in. Unless you engaged the enemy, then you'd maybe be out for four or five days. Then you'd come back in. It was never a long two week, you know, three week thing. It was always go out, spend a couple days out, come back in. So you did get some time back where you could relax and—

Arendt: Did you have a lot of down time? Or what did you do? Did you play cards?

Richards: Ah, it was mostly generally relaxing when we were back in the main base camp. Like I said they had like a mini outdoor theater. Well, you have to



realize that most of the time you were in very warm, you know, weather. Like you see, we were without shirts or in short sleeve shirts almost all the time.

Unidentified

Man: I'll see you tomorrow then.

Richards: Okay. When we were on ship, that was basically, we'd come in—we'd usually get in late at night, it would be dark. We'd come in, time to take a shower; you're tired. You'd sleep. You'd sleep half the morning away. You'd get up, relax, do whatever, sleep that night. And then the following morning you're taking off again.

Arendt: So the only time you were in the military was during Vietnam. You didn't enlist again. Was it—was structure more relaxed when you weren't out on a mission? 'Cause Doug and I were kind of—not arguing about this because I have a picture from Chuck Ellmauer in Port [Port Washington, Wisconsin], for the book, and he's got his sleeves torn off, and he had facial hair and—

Richards: No, we didn't get—in that form we didn't get that relaxed.

Arendt: Was that more rebellion or a coping mechanism? Do you know what I'm—

Richards: Yeah, I understand what you're saying. I'm saying we weren't allowed to get that relaxed.

Arendt: 'Cause, see, that's what Doug said. He said it depended on who the commanding officer was. He said it—no, you'd still have to—

Richards: I mean—you saw—I showed you some slides of us walking around without our shirts on relaxed and the pants rolled up was because we were supposed to do that to dry our feet. We actually sent home for shower shoes so we could walk around in little tongs, you know, shower shoes. And that was to dry our feet out. But besides that, if we went anywhere—when we were in base camp, if we went over—after about six months they had a little USO building that they had where it was actually you could go buy a hamburger. It was probably water buffalo, but it was a hamburger, you know. There you had to have your normal uniform on, which was the green OD [olive drab] type thing. But you had to be dressed properly, with your helmet and stuff. So, and then if we went anywhere else, like when I went on R&R, you had to go to Saigon, and fly out of Saigon. Then you had to be in proper uniform. My sister married a traveling [laughs] salesman who had the Midwest account, and then he did very well. So then he had the western United States account, and they lived in

Salt Lake City for awhile. And then he had the European account which he lived in Tokyo. So I hadn't seen my sister for about five or six years. I was the second youngest of nine. And so I picked Tokyo, and I went to Tokyo to see my sister. Which is strange because the idea developed when I was shot, and from Long Binh we flew up to a hospital in Tokyo. So I made a return trip. Not that I wanted to, but I ended up staying in a Tokyo hospital for two weeks.

Arendt: So, let's finish out when you were in the hospitals. You went to Tokyo for two weeks. Then where did you go?

Richards: Till—I stayed there until they thought it was healed up enough that they could take these metal stitches out, which they did in Tokyo. And I had a cast on, and they took the cast off, and they took the stitches out. And then they just wrapped me, and then they tried to get you as close to home as possible, which here would have been in Milwaukee. But Woods [Wood Veterans Home] was filled up, so the next closest area was Great Lakes Naval Hospital. And they asked me if that was all right, and I said, "Sure. That's close." You know, "I'll go there." And so they put us on an Army transport, and we came across and got to the Alaska area, and the plane had trouble. So we had to land, but after being in the tropics—and this is the beginning of November, because it was right in the beginning of October, end of September when I got wounded—so by the time I got to—

Arendt: What year?

Richards: '67, '60—yeah, '67.

Arendt: Okay.

Richards: It was snowing. And for a Wisconsin boy—in the pictures, I'm sorry, in the pictures you see of guys getting out and kissing the ground; that happens.

Arendt: Really?

Richards: Absolutely. There were guys that were on crutches and whatever on this because there were all wounded guys on this plane, got out and kissed the ground. Boy, we were back in the real world again.

Arendt: [Laughs] So—how did they decide—was it if you were wounded severely enough you went home?

Richards: Yes, generally it was if you broke bones.

Arendt: If you broke bones. Okay.

Richards: If you—I might be wrong, but if I remember this right—if you were wounded once, and you could—it wasn't, uh, it was something that you could heal from easily enough they kept you there as was my first wound. And was my buddy's with the shrapnel in the back of his legs. Now, when I got wounded my buddy who I kept in contact with—because I wasn't in shape to call in the artillery—he actually called it in, and he was in front of me. And he ended up getting, I believe, the Bronze Star for calling in the artillery on himself. And he actually—it's hard to say whether it was from the artillery flying or from—but he got a minor wound at the end. So, the second time they would take you out of that field, so to speak. You'd be still over there, but you didn't—supposedly didn't have to go out on missions and face—unless it was something drastic. Which he didn't. And if you were wounded a third time then that was like a three strikes and you're out, you know.

Arendt: Your luck was running out on you.

Richards: Yeah, or if you broke a bone the second time then, so, like I did. Obviously for me I wasn't—I never did get back to active duty, so.

Arendt: Were you glad to come home?

Richards: It was a heckuva way.

Arendt: I mean, yeah, glad to be out of there, but glad that it was over with?

Richards: The worst two men to be around when you're in Vietnam were people who just got over there because they were so nervous and people who were short-timers--only had a month to go or something--because then they got overly cautious and too nervous. Matter of fact, a lot of times they didn't even send them out. If you got back—because if you had twelve months and you got, you know, your tour, and you got to go home. So, if you had like eleven in they kind of take it easy on you—wouldn't send you out because those guys were basket cases to take along anyway. What happened was—and you asked me about staying in contact with some of them—after we were there for about six months it finally dawned on somebody, hey, we brought like 8,000 guys all over together, they were all going to be up at the same time, then the whole division is going to leave again. So then they started transferring guys. So some of my buddies that I had been with all the time got transferred to other units. Like the one I showed you that I said we tried to get in contact, he got transferred out to a different unit, and that unit transferred somebody in who had a different amount of time in than we did. So not everybody would pick up and leave at the same time.

Arendt: Good. Was it a worthwhile experience? Are you, I mean obviously you're glad you came home, but are you glad you did it?

Richards: When I was going we were trained for, you know--I knew I was going, you were trained for it, yadda yadda, all this and that, you were in a mind frame. I was ready to go, okay, and when I got over there—and like I said mostly all you saw was children. You never saw teenager or young adults, or even, adults. And I saw some of the things that went on there and some of the treatments that the Viet Cong did to people. Then I kind of felt like we were here for a purpose. But there were times. We were on a French rubber plantation, and we were going out on missions from there. We had set up the base camp on this hill—the plantation was in ruins, but we set up around it. And we went out once, and we were picking up sniper fire from an area. And generally what we would do is back off and call in mortars or artillery to clean the area out. Better than sending somebody in there. We called in a request, and they refused our request because if we damaged the rubber trees the U.S. government had to pay for them. So they wouldn't fire into the rubber trees.

Arendt: Oh, God.

Richards: Which sounded funny if there ever was rounds because they actually felt the vum-vum-vum-vum. [both laugh] They actually think do that. It's funny. [both laugh] But times like that it was frustrating. I lost—most of the guys that I said that didn't make it—I lost them in one major battle. That was where we were going up cricks and rivers in a fourteen-foot rowboat, basically, with a motor on the back. So you were sitting ducks. And that was—when I think back it's one of the things that first come to my mind. Because it was probably the hardest time of my life, and I've given a speech on this. I was still—I told you I was able to come back to the ship for awhile but not go out on missions because of my first wound, but one of the other sergeants took my squad out in this boat. It was one of the boats where they sprung the booby trap, not a booby trap but an ambush from both sides.

Arendt: They couldn't go anywhere.

Richards: Yeah, they were sitting ducks. Shortly after that they stopped using that. But originally it was supposedly a good idea because you could have an outboard motor and go zipping 30 miles an hour down these cricks and move men around quickly. But it never dawned on them what sitting ducks they were out there. And because I was back on ship, uh, just out of the hospital, and I knew these guys, they took me to the morgue which was actually part of a—it was just off of the hospital, and it was like an old truck garage or something that just had a—because it had big garage doors on it. But it had just a dirt floor, and we walked in there, and it was

just rows of black bags. Actually it was hard for me to watch the stuff in New York—

Arendt: Yeah, because it reminded you—

Richards: Because—oh yeah. That brought those memories back like instantly. Seeing all those body bags getting taken out and that. And, uh, that was a rough thing to go through.

Arendt: So if you hadn't been hurt you would've been on that boat.

Richards: Yeah, I would've been on that boat.

Arendt: Wow.

Richards: Yeah. A good friend of mine, another sergeant, took my squad out and almost all of them—they're gone—and then to go to the morgue and have to identify them besides. That was probably the hardest thing I had to do when I was over there. But after awhile you get—and when I went to Tokyo to visit my sister, and we were kind of looking through pictures because I took my one buddy from Peoria along. He went with me, okay, and we were kind of looking through pictures that we had developed while we were there. And we were showing pictures, and my sister looks at it, “Oh, that's a nice looking young guy.” And we'd go, “Oh yeah, he didn't make it.” And she'd say, “How can you be so hard about that?” You know, because we were kind of, “Yeah, he didn't make it.” And I, you know, I told her, I said. “Well you kind of have to harden yourself to that.” You can't—you have to just move on and keep your sense of humor the best you can.

Arendt: Wow. We went to New York in August, almost a month before the terrorist attack, and the only reason we were by the World Trade Center was because we got off on the wrong subway exit—'cause we didn't want to look like tourists and get a map. So we came up the one that was closed down, and Doug had never been to Ellis Island so we were on the ferry, and for some reason I turned around, and I snapped a picture of the World Trade Center, which is not like me because I don't really do the touristy thing. And I didn't realize it until like September 12<sup>th</sup> when I went, “Hey! I wonder if I took any pic—” Sure enough, it's right there in this picture which—it was hard.

Richards: Yeah, Diane and I went there for our tenth anniversary.

Arendt: That's what we did. It was our tenth anniversary.

Richards: Which was—and we were married on December 7<sup>th</sup>. You know, this all has a military tie-in. Pearl Harbor Day.

Arendt: Pearl Harbor Day [laughs].

Richards: Yeah, a day that will go down in infamy. Thought they were talking about my wedding. But she said, “Did we ever go there?” I said, “Don’t you remember? We were supposed to go to it.” They had a restaurant up in one of—

Arendt: Windows of [on] the World, yeah.

Richards: And I said, “We were supposed to go there, and we were tired that night, and we canceled out of it.” You know, and I was just—so never did go there. We were supposed to, but we didn’t.

Arendt: I had e-mailed the hotel, and I said, “It’s your tenth anniversary. I’d like to go out to dinner someplace nice.” Well, they like suggested all these tourist—I said, “No, no, no. I want a nice, you know, someplace that you would go.” Well, then they suggested a couple others, and we ended up just eating at this rinky-dink Japanese place. But they said, “Go to Windows on the World.” And it was very odd. I felt very ill at ease in New York, and it wasn’t I’d been there. We were there from Thursday to Sunday, and by Saturday I just—I couldn’t stand it anymore. I packed out clothes, and I wonder what the world I was pickin’ up on, you know? But I had to get out of there, and I was feakin’ out about ridin’ on the airplane and—who knows?

Richards: Yeah, we enjoyed it when we were there. It was—because it was—we went in December obviously everything was decorated for Christmas, and the hotel we had just happened to be a nice spot. It was close to Rockefeller Center, and Fifth Avenue. We walked probably all to the main stuff. So—and we like Broadway shows so we saw [brief crackling sound] One of our first missions—and they had, we had trained with the M-14 and just a week before we went over there they gave, okay, here’s this new Mattie Mattel plastic gun, the M-16 and gave it to us a week before we went over there, “Okay, here go shoot it once. Okay, now you’re qualified.” So when we went to Vietnam they had trouble with them hanging up. They wouldn’t fire. So after we learned, and they did some modifications to the gun, then it was fine. We learned how to keep it clean. Well, there was certain areas that you had to keep clean. The rest you could drop it in mud, but there was some areas that you had to keep clean. But, uh, we had surrounded a village where there were Viet Cong, and they had called in an air strike. So we were supposedly around back when the Viet Cong would come out of the village that we could capture them or whatever. And we were along a large ditch, muddy stream and it

had a little ditch or stream coming in perpendicular to it. And I was kind of sitting right in the corner, and we were so focused on looking forward, and it was a muddy everything, that all of a sudden I could hear something behind me. And I look, and here comes a Viet Cong running into the village, towards the village running down the stream. And I turn around and look, and he sees me, and I wheeled around like John Wayne and dropped to my knees, and I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. And he kind of stood there and looked at me, and I kind of looked at him and by then my buddies next to me, dawned on them that something is going on. So they turned around, and he—when he saw them then he took off running back the other way. They didn't get him. They started shooting at him, but that was kind of humorous.

Arendt: So he's probably sitting over in Vietnam right now tellin' stories.

Richards: Yeah, that crazy American [both laugh]. But the big whirl around, drop to your knees, and pull the trigger and go click. And then you go, "Oh shit." [both laugh]

Arendt: Oh, that's a good one. I've gotta put that one in. I won't put the "Oh, shit!" in, though.

Richards: Well, that's what I thought.

Arendt: Maybe I should. Just to get back at the schools. Okay. Good. I won't be listening to the tape. I write from notes. It's what I do for a living.

Richards: Well, I mean there were goofy things that happened, you know. You'd walked through—they had red ants these red ants over there that were terrible. And once we learned about them then we'd avoid them. But they bite, you know, and we'd walk a column through a tree or something and everybody would be—[Laurie laughs]. There were goofy things.

Arendt: So have you ever talked extensively about this before?

Richards: Not a lot.

Arendt: Just bits and pieces?

Richards: Yeah. Once in awhile some guys—somebody will ask me about some of the things, and, uh, I talk about them.

Arendt: You were talking about your wife. You have one child, two child?

Richards: Two daughters. So, I don't think I've really ever talked with them about it much. It would be hard for them to understand. I more talk about, uh, to

somebody else who's been in the service. Maybe I'd talk about it. And then mostly I would talk about the funny stuff. You know, that flooded area where I was standing, as soaked as I was showing you in the pictures, we were guarding that one night. And there was a village down a little ways where I'm told there were prostitutes. I wouldn't know, but I was told.

Arendt: Oh, okay [laughs].

Richards: And we were being checked on. It just so happens that the lieutenant came around and stopped by us to check to see how we were doing. And as he was checking on us out in the distance we could hear something, and we saw some movement. And here it ended up being some Army guys, G.I.'s, sneaking—

Arendt: Using the services of the—

Richards: Yes, being tourists [Laurie laughs] and trying to sneak back into camp. You know, they were trying to sneak back through—I don't know if they had a buddy that was on the line somewhere down further, and they lost where they were, and they were trying to come back where we were. And I yelled, "Halt!" And the lieutenant says, "Sergeant Richards, you got a hand flare?" And it was one of these like you see in emergency cars. You know, you pop one end out, put in on the bottom, and then you pop it like that, and a big aerial illumination would come out. And I said, "Yes." So I took the thing out, and I went like that. And I hit it, and I projected it perfectly right into the window of a grass hut in the village. And I burned the hut down [both laugh]. But nobody ever knew where that came from. The lieutenant advised me not to shoot any more off.

Arendt: Okay [laughs].

Richards: But so there were things like that would happen, you know.

Arendt: Yeah, that's good. Well, next time you see Doug you'll have to ask him about his only scar [Alan laughs]. Did he ever tell you about that? It's on his chin right—

**[End of Interview]**