

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RANDY RICHGELS
562nd Artillery Division, Army, Vietnam War
2002

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Richgels, Randy. (b. 1946). Oral History Interview, 1999.

Master Copy: 1 video recording (ca. 30 min.); ½ inch, color.

User Copy: 1 audio cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Randy Richgels, a Madison (Wisconsin) native, discusses his service with the Army stationed in Alaska and Vietnam operating missiles and radar. He talks about working at Nike Hercules Missile Battery in Alaska with the 526th Artillery including tracking Russian aircraft and operating the "radar scope." Volunteering for duty in Vietnam, he mentions advising the 21st Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), operating in the delta region, and living in "hooches" with Vietnamese women to do their laundry. Richgels touches upon using mines for self-defense, problems caused by the monsoon season, rest and relaxation in Japan, and discharge from the service.

Biographical Sketch:

Randy Richgels was born in Madison (Wisconsin) in 1946 and served in the Army during the Vietnam War. Richgels first served at Nike Hercules Missile Battery in Alaska with the 526th Artillery performing scope operations. He then volunteered for service in Vietnam and performed night search light maneuvers, which he trained the Vietnamese army in. After leaving service, Richgels used the G.I. Bill at MATC and UW-Madison where he was trained in offset printing and lithography. He went on to work in the printing shop at American Family Insurance.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002

Transcribed by Jeff Slauson, 2012

Reviewed and corrected by Beverly Phillips, 2012

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: I'm talking to Randy Richgels, and the date is 29 May '02. Where were you born Randy?

Richgels: Madison, Wisconsin.

McIntosh: When was that?

Richgels: 1946.

McIntosh: When did you enter military service?

Richgels: 1965.

McIntosh: Army?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: Where was your basic?

Richgels: Fort Polk, Louisiana.

McIntosh: Just like the old 32nd Division went down there.

Richgels: Yeah.

McIntosh: Back in 1940. Okay, that looks good, and what was your MOS [Military Occupation Specialty]?

Richgels: I had several MOS's. I was a 23G20 Fire Distribution Operator from Fort Worth, Texas. I had a 17 Echo [17E], which was Night Searchlight Operator. And that's what I ended up with the 17 Hotel [17H].

McIntosh: What was that first one?

Richgels: 23G20.

McIntosh: Yeah, what's the job?

Richgels: It's a missile, Nike Hercules Missile outfit.

McIntosh: Oh, yeah. This is new; I haven't had one of these.

Richgels: Yeah, I was attached to the 744th AC&W Squadron north of Fairbanks, north of Murphy Dome, Alaska.

McIntosh: That was your first assignment after basic?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: How long did your basic last? I don't want to get too far ahead here.

Richgels: With zero week, ten weeks altogether.

McIntosh: Ten weeks?

Richgels: Mhmm.

McIntosh: It was just standard infantry training?

Richgels: Right, we had Tiger Land post afterwards for AIT [Advanced Infantry Training], but we didn't go there.

McIntosh: Oh, okay.

Richgels: There was an outpost that was a hamlet, so—

McIntosh: So tell me about your training for your specialty. I don't understand yet.

Richgels: I volunteered for Vietnam after I came back stateside from Alaska.

McIntosh: Well wait a minute, we haven't gotten to Alaska yet; don't get too far ahead there. What was your first assignment and what was it you did with the Nike missile?

Richgels: We worked with the Air Force and with five missile batteries outside of Alaska. And we were the scope; we did scope operations for all the aircraft.

McIntosh: Were these in silos?

Richgels: It was called a Dyess silo type thing.

McIntosh: A what?

Richgels: You worked on a Dyess. It was small, enclosed, and you had a plotting chart.

McIntosh: Okay.

Richgels: It was all confidential, you had codes.

McIntosh: Oh my goodness.

Richgels: You had yellow teams, red teams.

McIntosh: And it alternated depending on what time of the day it was?

Richgels: Right, we had three different shifts so we were always— We were a remote isolation duty, and the closest town was Fairbanks, which was twenty miles away.

McIntosh: So it was eight hours on and sixteen off?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: That's a pretty good duty.

Richgels: It was. It was isolated, remote, but you worked with an Army Air Defense Command Post. I think the main headquarters were in Cheyenne Mountain, Wyoming, which had equipment, and it's like NORAD.

McIntosh: What was your specific job?

Richgels: I was scope operator for the tracking—

McIntosh: What does the scope—

Richgels: Tracking different aircraft and putting track designators on them.

McIntosh: In the area? That came into your—

Richgels: That came into our airspace.

McIntosh: —airspace.

Richgels: Let's say a Russian plane would come over.

McIntosh: Sure, and you would just keep your hammer trained on him?

Richgels: Right, and then if we thought it was—

McIntosh: Did you record as you trained or—

Richgels: We did a lot of simulated missions.

McIntosh: Oh. You mean American Air Force pretend missions.

Richgels: Right, we'd do those every so often.

McIntosh: So that you could practice tracking?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: Okay, I apologize for my stupidity, but is tracking something that's hard to do, or is that easy, or take some experience?

Richgels: Well, no it's not that much. It's pretty easy; I mean it was basic stuff that we learned.

McIntosh: I mean you're actually just controlling a long distance camera that keeps an eye on this airplane, is that correct?

Richgels: Right, all of our Target Tracking Radar and TRR, Target Range Radars, inside the—

McIntosh: Well once its locked on radar, then you don't have to do anything do you? Doesn't the radar take over?

Richgels: That takes over automatically.

McIntosh: What's left for you then?

Richgels: Well, we just sit back and watch, then the Colonel gives the orders to fire on, or simulation fire.

McIntosh: Sure.

Richgels: Which was kinda unique, 'cause you work with about twenty-five people in a Dyess.

McIntosh: Was the Air force airplane that you say you're tracking— Was it their job to try to avoid you? I mean was it a game we're playing here?

Richgels: Right, and if we thought, once in a while a Russian Bear or Bison would come over in our airspace to take pictures of our— And then we'd scramble from Eielson Air Force Base a couple of jets on.

McIntosh: How far away were they from you?

Richgels: Eielson is only like fifteen, twenty miles.

McIntosh: Oh, so they can be up there in five minutes.

Richgels: Oh sure.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Richgels: Plus we had the missile batteries that were on alert if we had to go up to DEFCON defense operation.

McIntosh: Right, up to what, DEFCON three?

Richgels: Usually two or three.

McIntosh: I'll bet.

Richgels: Look up the squib lines, but then you had to—

McIntosh: Did they try to jam your radar?

Richgels: Well somewhat, like we'd jam theirs; we had shaft.

McIntosh: Sure. It went both ways, the game that's being played here.

Richgels: Oh yeah. [laughs] Yeah it was a game alright.

McIntosh: Well of course, of course everybody's practicing.

Richgels: Right, they didn't want any UFO's flying around up there.

McIntosh: No, I understand.

Richgels: That was in 1967 I was there, to '68.

McIntosh: So how often would it have to be done, every day?

Richgels: No, it varied. It might be an operation would come up once a month maybe.

McIntosh: Oh. And no one knew or nothing was announced?

Richgels: No, it was just on a—

McIntosh: Could have been any time, day or night?

Richgels: Right, we get called up and we have to run up to the Dyess and get on our scopes, and then the operation began. Call up the Colonel and he'd come up. It could happen any time. Keep you going—

McIntosh: How long was an operation like that before it was over?

Richgels: Anywhere between a half an hour and an hour.

McIntosh: I was going to say, it was going to take that long for the plane to fly out of your airspace, too.

Richgels: Right, and then they'd just say "Terminate," and it would be shut down.

McIntosh: Was that the most excitement you had when you were doing this?

Richgels: Just about; it was all there was to do except work with the electronics techs. You know, working on the equipment.

McIntosh: Was it your job to maintain any of that equipment or not?

Richgels: No, we had special—

McIntosh: You had specialists to do that.

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: And how long were you in Alaska?

Richgels: It's a one year tour, and if you worked on the missile battery itself it was eighteen months. For the five different batteries that we had.

McIntosh: I don't understand what the difference is, other than six months?

Richgels: 'Cause we were more remote than they were, and we didn't have access to go into town like they did.

McIntosh: Right, so they cut your tour down to one year. And after one year then where'd you go?

Richgels: I was re-stationed in Oakdale, Pennsylvania for another Army AADCP [ArmyAir-Defense Command Post] Defense Post, working with—

McIntosh: Similar?

Richgels: It was similar, but I really didn't do my job there because they were overstaffed. So therefore I volunteered to go to Vietnam, because I had ten months left.

McIntosh: So where did they send you in Vietnam?

Richgels: I was unassigned, so I got over there and spent three days in Bien Hoa, and then Tan Son Nhut, where we came into. I was stationed first of all in Can Tho where our base camp was, and then I moved on to Soc Trang, then Bac Lieu, and then the Ca Mau Peninsula, then back to Bac Lieu. Then Tho Chau and Ha Tien, Cambodian border.

McIntosh: When you were in Alaska, what was the name of your outfit?

Richgels: I worked with the 562nd Artillery Division.

McIntosh: 562nd

Richgels: And they were stationed in Fairbanks, the base camp was. Fort Wainright.

McIntosh: And you were classified as a— Tell me again.

Richgels: It was a 23G20.

McIntosh: No but that's, it was a spotter did you say?

Richgels: Scope operator.

McIntosh: Scope operator. Okay, that'll do. So that was in 1965; so in '67 in Vietnam?

Richgels: It was '68 I went over to Vietnam. Well I got over there, but—

McIntosh: Oh, we have some space here then. So you went in '65, and you were in Alaska a year, that makes it—

Richgels: Well, '65 I entered the Army, and then I had a three month waiting period, so I wasn't active until '66.

McIntosh: Ah, so it was '66 to '67, and then you were in Vietnam in '67?

Richgels: '67-'68.

McIntosh: And with what outfit?

Richgels: Well that was quite a few different outfits, because I was with the Mobile Advisory Team 51.

McIntosh: Okay, Mobile Advisory?

Richgels: MAT Team they called it, and I worked with the 21st Armor and Infantry Division.

McIntosh: That's who you were with most of the time?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: With the 21st ARVN?

Richgels: Right. And they were stationed in Bac Lieu on the Mekong Delta.

McIntosh: Bac Lieu is B-a-k—

Richgels: B-a-c L-i-e-u.

McIntosh: Okay, now you went from a pretty chilly place to a place that's distinctly opposite.

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: How did you deal with that?

Richgels: I lost a lot of weight, about forty pounds because of the heat.

McIntosh: Just didn't eat enough or drink enough?

Richgels: Well it was so hot, and plus you didn't get the right kind of food, and you sweat a lot.

McIntosh: Was this a large base at Bac Lieu?

Richgels: I think there was only like twenty-five of us.

McIntosh: Oh my.

Richgels: And the rest were all Vietnamese, maybe 200. ARVN, Army of Vietnam.

McIntosh: Yes, how'd you get along with them?

Richgels: Pretty decent; I mean we all got along pretty good.

McIntosh: How about food?

Richgels: We ate what they ate sometimes if we were out on an operation out in the boonies somewhere. We'd go to their village or hamlet and eat with them, and the rest of it was C-rations. Or we—

McIntosh: No wonder you lost weight.

Richgels: Yeah a little bit. [laughs] I got a picture of me—

McIntosh: Did you get malaria?

Richgels: No, a couple buddies of mine did though, and they medevacked 'em out.

McIntosh: You took your pills like a good boy?

Richgels: Oh yeah, once a week. And leeches were always on the chest; if we had to cross a canal we had to wade across it, because the bridges were all mined.

McIntosh: Right.

Richgels: So we—

McIntosh: Took leeches off each other?

Richgels: Right, and burn them out with a Zippo.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Richgels: And then you had to have a tetanus shot. A lot of snakes, lot of— I just remember rice paddy foot; if you spent too much time in the water your feet would shrivel up.

McIntosh: Oh just like the jungle rot that people get.

Richgels: Right they get that. The country itself, they didn't have any sanitation, so everybody threw their garbage out in the streets, and then the rats came in at night and ate it. And they got rid of their waste in the canals.

McIntosh: Wasn't an appropriate place to live—

Richgels: Right, I mean the stench was so bad that you could tell which way the wind was blowing because of the smell.

McIntosh: You live in a hooch?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: How many men, sixteen?

Richgels: We only had, let's see, six in ours.

McIntosh: Six.

Richgels: Yeah, and our lieutenant had his own hooch.

McIntosh: Yeah, and then you had a native boy that took care of things?

Richgels: We had a mama san and—

McIntosh: A mama san? She did the laundry?

Richgels: Right, did all our laundry and shined our boots.

McIntosh: Did you give her money?

Richgels: Right, it was like 500 piastres a week, which is about five dollars.

McIntosh: She seemed reliable?

Richgels: Oh yeah, did a good job. They washed the clothes, and once in a while you'd get a case of ringworm, if something didn't wash out right. 'Cause they wash them in the canal, and most of the time they use canal water.

McIntosh: Wonderful.

Richgels: So you'd get ringworm all over you, and that's that not too enjoyable, but along with the jungle rot— [laughs]

McIntosh: Well the jungle rot was not having your feet dry.

Richgels: Right, yeah.

McIntosh: We talked about the food; what was your specific duty there?

Richgels: I worked with a searchlight division, which was a million candlepower searchlight mounted on the back of a jeep, which had infrared capabilities up to 100,000 yards. So you could—

McIntosh: Regular and infrared?

Richgels: Right, so you had a white light and infrared that was run off of a generator and four twelve volt batteries from the back of the jeep.

McIntosh: Off batteries?

Richgels: Mmm. So you had to start the motor and then pull the throttle out to get the generator going, and it powered the white light. Also the night light which you looked through—

McIntosh: What kind of an experience did you have doing that?

Richgels: It was different 'cause you work at night and you worked the canals.

McIntosh: What was your job? To look for infiltrators?

Richgels: Right. Infiltration, set up Claymores for perimeter guard for the Bac Lieu airport, make sure that there wasn't anything floating down the river that the PBR [Patrol Boat, River] boats missed.

McIntosh: Any dogs? Did you have guard dogs?

Richgels: We didn't use dogs.

McIntosh: Oh, I've interviewed one guy who had a patrol with guard dogs.

Richgels: There were some I'd heard of, the German Shepherds.

McIntosh: Yes.

Richgels: Yeah, and there was Kit Carson Scouts, but they were up north more. They would go into the hole and look for ammunition caches.

McIntosh: Yeah that's a different type of deal, different dog too.

Richgels: Yeah, I'm not sure what they used up there.

McIntosh: Small ones. [laughs]

Richgels: That go down in the hole.

McIntosh: Yeah, you'd never get a big dog to go down in a hole.

Richgels: No, but that was a different outfit up north. Down in the delta it was kinda different cause you're kinda out in the open.

McIntosh: Plus them rivers all around you.

Richgels: It was, plus the monsoons came—

McIntosh: And you didn't know where there's a river. [laughs]

Richgels: That's when you had a lot of time off, because nobody could dig in. The enemy couldn't do nothing either, it was all mud.

McIntosh: I mean it paralyzed everyone, right?

Richgels: Right, for months, the whole month of, I think it was October.

McIntosh: You mean it rained constantly?

Richgels: Every day it rained.

McIntosh: No letup?

Richgels: Well, you just about expect it every afternoon, and it'd rain in sheets.

McIntosh: I suppose it really came down, too?

Richgels: Oh yeah, flooded everything, there was mud and—

McIntosh: How about your hooch? Did it get flooded?

Richgels: That was pretty well—

McIntosh: You kept it pretty dry?

Richgels: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: So it filled up where? About six inches, or a foot, or more?

Richgels: It was pretty much above land away from the canal, way in. Maybe like a half a mile from the canal, so we were pretty good there. I mean it was wet and damp, but just mud. But we had our bunker sitting next by us, so if we got mortared once in a while, we'd run to the bunker and sit in there.

McIntosh: How did they ever get close to you? Did they sneak past your guards?

Richgels: Yeah, you never knew—

McIntosh: How did they infiltrate your unit?

Richgels: You never knew what they were gonna do, because you never really knew your enemy. I mean you could see them downtown, they were sympathizers one day and at night they'd be out—

McIntosh: Yeah, but you were an ARVN unit, so you had some friendly Vietnamese. They're supposed to know who's who aren't they?

Richgels: Yeah, but I think somebody was getting paid off.

McIntosh: Ahh.

Richgels: You know, sympathizers.

McIntosh: Sure, let them get through.

Richgels: Right, and I'm sure that was going on, because I couldn't figure it out. I knew they were tricky, but it was the element of surprise, and I didn't figure out how they could get by our security.

McIntosh: They probably couldn't; they put out the money.

Richgels: Right, so I think a lot of that was going on in collusion.

McIntosh: What was your rank by this time?

Richgels: I made Sergeant E5 as soon as I got over there.

McIntosh: Oh, very good.

Richgels: E5 Sergeant. And, which I didn't expect right away, but they wanted me in charge of this one squad, so that's what happened there.

McIntosh: All Vietnamese?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: How did you communicate with them?

Richgels: I picked up their language a little bit, learned their language. I had a pocket book, but I—

McIntosh: Did you give them a pocket book of English?

Richgels: A lot of them knew it, but they knew more French, and they could talk French but not—

McIntosh: Well that's their other, their second language—

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: —after so many years.

Richgels: And a lot of them picked it up from the Americans that were over there earlier in '63 or '62. And a lot of them knew the language pretty good.

McIntosh: Were the men under you pretty reliable? Were you pleased with them or not?

Richgels: Some were, some weren't. I had various ones that would go to sleep on you; a lot of them didn't care. They had the kind of a didn't care attitude. And I thought that something wrong there somewhere, but when the Sergeant found out what they were doing they'd slap them around physically. I seen a lot of that, where they stand 'em in formation and physically hit 'em.

McIntosh: If they slept on duty?

Richgels: Oh yeah, or late for formation, or got caught goofing off.

McIntosh: Why didn't they just kick them out of the unit?

Richgels: Well, they had a different type of discipline. I mean they stood them up in front of you and set an example in front of everybody else.

McIntosh: Did that work?

Richgels: Uhh, I didn't like it too much. [laughs]

McIntosh: Well they weren't slapping you.

Richgels: Well yeah, they didn't slap me; I mean we were pretty strapped. Kept our stuff together so— I mean I worked with two or three other Americans, so it wasn't that bad. But they were— I didn't understand why they would do that, but I guess it worked for them.

McIntosh: Yeah, that's not our style.

Richgels: No, I didn't like seeing that. You see some things you don't like to see. That's the way they go about it.

McIntosh: They didn't shoot any of them did they?

Richgels: No, no, there once—

McIntosh: At least that you could see—

Richgels: When I was in Ca Mau they took a guy—they were interrogation—a fellow out back. And all I heard was commotion, and I heard a bang. That was it, but I didn't see anybody. I'm sure— I heard that they assassinated.

McIntosh: Did the mama san steal?

Richgels: I never had that problem.

McIntosh: I know other guys have said that they had to worry about that.

Richgels: The only thing they stole was my handkerchiefs, and I don't know why. I had my embroidered handkerchiefs—

McIntosh: I'm sure it wasn't to be a handkerchief, I'm sure they had other uses than that.

Richgels: [Laughs] Yeah I'm sure it was. I can imagine what it was, but I'm not gonna say.

McIntosh: Well they get three or four of them together and they've probably got something else.

Richgels: Right. I don't know, but it was kind of weird my handkerchiefs disappeared.

McIntosh: Did the other guys have the same problems?

Richgels: Yeah, I guess they never had one; they never brought any with them. [Laughs] It was not military issue.

McIntosh: No kidding.

Richgels: But they had some trouble with their socks missing, but we had a place we could get socks and things like that.

McIntosh: And tell me about entertainment now.

Richgels: We didn't have much for entertainment. We had a little NCO club where you could drink beer and play cards.

McIntosh: But no USO troupe?

Richgels: There was some up north in Dong Tam, which I never went—

McIntosh: You weren't a large enough base to attract any kind of organized entertainment like that.

Richgels: No, we never saw any of that. I did do an in-country R&R up in Cam Ranh Bay, where you could go swimming and—

McIntosh: Did you take a helicopter up there or truck drive?

Richgels: It was an Aussie [inaudible] that came in with a C-130 and took us up there.

McIntosh: Was it a weekend?

Richgels: Three days I think it was.

McIntosh: Three days. Did you get to the Philippines on leave?

Richgels: I put in for Japan, because my sister was stationed there with her— Her husband was a Colonel over there in the Air Force at Tachikawa [inaudible] Air Force Base. So I got a chance to visit her over there for a week for my out of the country R&R. So I took advantage of that and saw her in Japan.

McIntosh: Well that was nice, where in Japan?

Richgels: Tokyo in the Ginza area.

McIntosh: Yeah, that's where all the servicemen are.

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: Shopping at the BX [Base Exchange], biggest BX I ever saw.

Richgels: Oh yeah, I sent some big speakers and stereo equipment from there.

McIntosh: We all did that when I was in Korea.

Richgels: Oh yeah, it was nice over there, I enjoyed it. They showed me all over the place. I enjoyed the week.

McIntosh: Japan's very nice.

Richgels: Expensive, but—

McIntosh: Everything's expensive.

Richgels: On post it's not bad, but downtown it's pretty—

McIntosh: That's the one thing it wasn't when I was there, it was not expensive. It was cheap.

Richgels: Yeah, there was a lot of places I'd like to see. I wanted to go to different places, but I didn't have the time. Rode the bullet trains. But I took in all the Tokyo tower, and that was good.

McIntosh: Did you go anywhere else besides Tokyo?

Richgels: No, that was it.

McIntosh: Didn't go up north?

Richgels: No. I wanted too, but I just didn't have enough time.

McIntosh: You didn't have a chance to go to Nikko? That's a great place.

Richgels: No, I wanted to go to Osaka and Kobe. But I didn't make it to either one of those.

McIntosh: And how long were you in Nam, another year? And rotated home?

Richgels: I ETS'd [Expiration, Term of Service] from Vietnam. My tour was up, and then I came back home and got out in Fort Dix, New Jersey.

McIntosh: Did you use your GI Bill?

Richgels: I attended school over here at MATC, and went to school there for four semesters. I had two summer classes at the University of Wisconsin, so I got a chance to use something there.

McIntosh: Sure, now what did you—

Richgels: I'm into the printing field, offset printing.

McIntosh: Offset printing, that's what you learned to become?

Richgels: Right, I went through the printing project where they had a good program in lithography.

McIntosh: And where did you work then?

Richgels: I worked for Sycom Incorporated. It was on the west beltline near—Defunct, now; they were bought out by NEBS [New England Business Services Inc.] and sold out to NEBS. And then I worked there, and then I went from there to American Family Insurance.

McIntosh: You work for American Family? My son does too.

Richgels: I work at the print shop there at nights. So I found a home there.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Richgels: So I always stayed with the printing outfits.

McIntosh: Well that should be a place to stay until you retire. That's a good job.

Richgels: I hope so, if my health permits. So far—

McIntosh: Well you look healthy enough now.

Richgels: Yeah, I get my physical so—

McIntosh: You didn't come down with any disease when you were in Nam?

Richgels: No I didn't. I had a bunch of rashes and stuff over there, but nothing really, it was nothing. No malaria, nothing like some of the troops got that, but I lucked out.

McIntosh: Well you took your pills. You didn't luck out. You didn't do anything stupid like not take your pills. That's why you didn't—

Richgels: I didn't have no problem with that. They didn't bother me like some guys it bothered them.

McIntosh: What, the pills?

Richgels: Yeah, with dysentery and stuff.

McIntosh: I don't think it caused dysentery. They got dysentery for other reasons.

Richgels: Maybe they ate downtown someplace.

McIntosh: Right.

Richgels: It was not monkey or dog or—

McIntosh: Yeah, the pills wouldn't cause that. But tell me this. What about keeping track with your fellow comrades?

Richgels: I looked a few up on the internet, and there is a magazine called the *Duster Searchlight* that I get sent to every once in a while from a guy from

Michigan. But I haven't really made contact with these people. There's one in California and —

McIntosh: There's no reunions or anything to go to?

Richgels: No. There's one other guy—he lives in Marshall I found out from the American Legion—that was in my outfit, and I want to get a hold of him one of these days.

McIntosh: Sure. He's close, right.

Richgels: Right, and find out what he did after I left, because he got there after I was getting out.

McIntosh: Do you think the Army trained you well for the job they asked you to do, or were you disappointed?

Richgels: No, they trained me real good. I thought they trained me, told me all about what I had to do and what—

McIntosh: So your experience was about what you expected?

Richgels: Right. I enjoyed the experience; I mean I wouldn't trade that for anything. I was taught real well. I was just put in one operation, because a change in MOS I was kind of reluctant, but I didn't even know what a searchlight was until I got there. And they showed me all about it, trained me, and I in turn had to train the Vietnamese—

McIntosh: Right.

Richgels: —or the Army of Vietnam. And I guess that was the whole thing, we wanted them to take over our equipment and run their own war.

McIntosh: Was it hard to teach them how to do that? 'Cause they had very little education, and that's sort of a technical thing. I would think that'd be hard to do.

Richgels: Right, it was very frustrating. Yeah, it got very frustrating. Some days you just could not tell them nothing. It's just like they do the opposite. But it finally got through their head that we could work with them, and once we got to know their way of living and the culture shock. After about two or three months I guess I got a little bit used to it, so I didn't mind it so much.

McIntosh: I think they called it going Asiatic.

Richgels: Yeah. It took time to figure that one out, but after you kind of learn what their ideals were, and you're dealing with Buddhists and Shinto and things like that. But it was interesting to see how they reacted to their own kind and seeing their own people.

McIntosh: It was really a cultural shock for you, the whole deal though wasn't it?

Richgels: Right. Especially when you're twenty years old.

McIntosh: It's so much different from Madison, Wisconsin that's hard to believe it's on the same planet.

Richgels: Right, I guess it was mostly just being there and smelling everything, and the country was just the smell and the being there.

McIntosh: Was it always bad?

Richgels: Mostly yeah, it was. And all the different kind of diseases people had, and they had no medical care much. A lot of the people didn't live to be beyond fifty. I couldn't believe it.

McIntosh: Really? Too many worms.

Richgels: Oh yeah, they were just intestinal worms and—

McIntosh: They all had them.

Richgels: I didn't know if they didn't care or if they just didn't have the medical facilities to take care.

McIntosh: Well I don't think they considered an alternative.

Richgels: Right. Seeing the people that were in the army over there, that was main from Indo-China, the kids and that. And the men, their arms and legs were missing, and amputees, and begging for money and—

McIntosh: Oh, that's the other thing I was going to ask about. People begging on the streets of Saigon, beggars all over?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: Constant?

Richgels: Most of them were from the war that lost limbs. Selling flowers or something, or give them money, even if it was a dime or fifteen cents.

McIntosh: So they'd just beg for whatever that you'd give them?

Richgels: Right. A lot of people that could live on a bowl of rice a day, and I don't know how they made it. I guess they were so poor that they were used to it. There was a lot of motorbikes and bicycles, and the people have a different way of living over there. The car breaks down in the street, and they just tear it apart right there and fix it.

McIntosh: Right there?

Richgels: Oh yeah. They just tear it apart. [laughs] It's amazing what they can do with just wire and a few nuts and bolts. Yeah, that and the landmines, our L-5 Bird Dogs—

McIntosh: Oh that's right. Did any of your boys step on those?

Richgels: One guy in our outfit got it, but I didn't know him that well. Their jeep hit a mine and he had his legs dangling over the side of the jeep. Lost his legs, then I guess he bled to death, but I didn't know him that well.

McIntosh: Oh, that's too bad.

Richgels: Yeah, but in the morning before we came in from the canal, after a tour out there at night, we would have the Air Force L5 Bird Dogs clear the— They could tell where a mine was probably laid the night before, because the gravel in the road would have a spot in it that was dug up.

McIntosh: Oh, what kind of aircraft?

Richgels: It's called an L5-Bird Dog, a Kiwi. The Australians had Kiwis.

McIntosh: Oh yeah, they flew low and they could see that.

Richgels: They could see where maybe something was planted in the road, so they had to clear the road for us before we could come in.

McIntosh: Who would clear it?

Richgels: The Air Force.

McIntosh: How?

Richgels: They would call in Attack Operations Command and say, "Don't take this route until we get somebody out there."

McIntosh: They'd drop something on it to explode it you mean?

Richgels: They would send out a mine detector.

McIntosh: A team?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: On the ground?

Richgels: Right.

McIntosh: Yeah, okay.

Richgels: And then a patrol would go out and check it out and dig it up.

McIntosh: Sure, find it and blow it up.

Richgels: And then we also had three fire zones where you just didn't fire at anything you wanted to, we had to call in and get permission to fire in a lot of those places.

McIntosh: Why?

Richgels: Because Attack Operations Command had different civilians living in different areas, so we had to call in quadrants. Like if we thought there was enemy activity going on in a certain quadrant, we had to call Attack Operations to come in and get permission to free fire zone, which they call permission to fire in that area.

McIntosh: Well you wouldn't be doing any of that, just the people that you're associated with would be.

Richgels: Yeah, they'd get on the radio and call in, see if that was anything going on there that was expected to be friendly or foe.

McIntosh: Sure.

Richgels: So in other words, if we thought there was something there, we'd call in an air strike with a chopper or what they call "Puff the Magic Dragon," a C-130 Gunship with a mini-gun, and they'd spray the field.

[End of Interview]