

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM ROLKE

Radio Operator, U.S Marine Corps, Vietnam War

2015

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2022

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2022

Rolke, William., (b.1949). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 2 hours 25 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, William Rolke, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native discusses his service during the Vietnam War as a radio operator. Rolke was signed up for the Marine Corps while in high school and went to basic training in San Diego in the summer of 1968. He describes the type of training he underwent before flying to Vietnam via Okinawa. Rolke talks arriving in Vietnam and the living conditions he experienced in the Da Nang region. He discusses the missions his unit were involved in which included daily patrols, preventing North Vietnamese Army attacks on the city of Da Nang, and providing medical assistance to local Vietnamese. Rolke talks in detail about the casualties sustained to his unit during his tour and how this impacted him and his relationships with his fellow soldiers. He reads a letter sent to his sister and comments on the packages received from home. Rolke describes being shot in the hand – an injury for which he was presented with a Purple Heart and resulted in him being sent home to Wisconsin after three months recuperating in Okinawa. Discussing life after service Rolke mentions a trip back to Vietnam decades later and experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Lastly, Rolke talks about rations, attending a USO show, and reflects on his time in service.

Biographical Sketch:

William Rolke (b. 1949) served with the United States Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. He worked as a letter-carrier for the Post Office for twenty-one years, and is the leader of the New Berlin outpost of Point Man International Ministries.

Interviewed by Helen Gibb, 2015.

Transcribed by Helen Gibb, 2015.

Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract written by Helen Gibb, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[File 1]

Gibb: Today is Monday, November 16, 2015. This is an interview with William Rolke who served with the United States Marine Corps from June 1968 to November 1969. This interview is being conducted at Bill's home in New Berlin, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Helen Gibb and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. Okay. Alright, so we usually just start the interviews with—you want to tell us where you were born, where you grew up and just a little bit about your background.

Rolke: I was born in Milwaukee. My mother was a teacher, my father was an electrical engineer at Allen-Bradley, a big factory in Milwaukee. My father died in 1962 just shortly before John F. Kennedy did. My mother raised me the rest of my time. I worked the last two years of high school. After high school I was—they were building a Holiday Inn in Milwaukee. I applied for a job at the place before it was finished. I got accepted there. I had signed up for the military while I was going to school. I went to work at the Holiday Inn, and just before summer came I gave my boss—his name was Jerry—two weeks' notice to say I'm going into the Marine Corps in two weeks. He left the room to do things, when he came back later he said "Finish today, here is a check for your next two weeks." I will never forget that. I left Milwaukee to go to San Diego, to Marine boot camp. Boot camp was a completely different life experience for me, teaching mostly discipline. Discipline and physical aspects of building your body up to the stresses and things of combat and what the Marine Corps were about. I had one benefit going for me at the time and that was that in high school I was on the tennis team, the football team and the wrestling team so I was in a lot better shape than some of the guys were, which made it easier for me. Still, it's a point with the Marine Corps everybody gets picked on to learn to know that it's not one individual, it's a team. After that I of course went through some of the basic trainings with the Marine Corps. I had 50 caliber machine gun school. I went on to have other courses and classes in the Marine Corps and then I was shipped over to Vietnam.

Gibb: Okay. Just to back up a little bit, um, so did you—your family have connections with the military?

Rolke: No. I am the only member of my family that has been in the military. My father was too young for World War One, too old for World War Two. My brother was in high school when Korea was going on, got married after his high school graduation, that would have been 1958. So I am the only one—aunts, uncles, grandparents—that have ever served in the military in my family.

Gibb: Mm-hm. So you signed up while you were still in high school?

Rolke: I enlisted when I was in high school. I don't know if I believed the PR of the Marine Corps but I was pretty much of a snotty little rat and spoiled and I figured if anybody could do anything for me it would be the Marine Corps and I learned very quickly that—what—horrors I had thought were true. I did learn and I'm here now to prove it, so.

Gibb: So did you have conversations with—it was just your mother at the time?

Rolke: It was my mother and I—I told her and her reaction was one of quiet. She didn't say very much, I—I guess I didn't expect she would say very much, there wasn't very much she could do. She took me to the airport when I left and of course, kept in contact with me, and wrote letters to me probably more than everybody else did while I was away and—like I was just telling you—everything that I sent home, be it little souvenirs or letters or packages or something, she kept everything 'til I got home. So, I think my biggest thought after, it had been years since I had been home, it had never crossed my mind 'til one day I was just talking with my brother and I could only imagine what it must have been like for my mother when, eleven o'clock at night, the phone would ring, somebody would be calling her to see how she was. Or at any time at all that phone would ring, just the horrors and thoughts that would go through her head and I guess I'm glad I didn't think about that at the time. Kinda sorry I didn't either but she was quite a lady.

Gibb: So going to your basic training, do you have particular stories about that?

Rolke: Basic training, the first thing we did—I flew from Milwaukee to Los Angeles and got on another plane, flew from Los Angeles to San Diego. I got off the plane in San Diego and a Marine in dress blues was waiting for men that were being sent to Marine Corps recruit depot, San Diego. And pointed to a bus outside, it was a gray navy bus and I got on the bus, there were other people on the bus. We probably sat on the bus four, five, six hours waiting for everybody to come. Each time the bus door would close the yelling would start. Something that the civilians outside wouldn't hear. When the drill instructor finally got on it was bloody murder. Screaming and hollering and shouting at us and the first attempt to take away our personalities. We got to boot camp and we were told to line up on yellow footprints—Marines will always remember yellow footprints. From there we had our hair cut, then we had our clothes taken off—well, we took them off—and packaged them up and shipped them home. In fact one of the letters my mother sent me, one of the first ones was "I see they cut your hair" because all of my clothes had all my hair in the box. We waited, sitting at attention on a cold concrete floor 'til five in the morning when our drill instructors came walking in. They addressed themselves, "My name is Staff Sergeant Hollafeld [sp??], I am your senior drill instructor." "My name is Staff Sergeant Mills, I am your drill instructor" and Sergeant Mills who was the senior of all the drill instructors started talking to us about, "This is the Marine Corps handbook, and it says I cannot do this, it says I cannot do that, this is what I cannot do. This is what I think of what I'm telling you." And he threw the book behind him, it bounced off the

wall, bounced off a wall and landed in a garbage can. I will never forget that image. I don't know if he practiced that or if it was just a lucky type of thing but that was my first real eye-opener.

We were given canvas tents to stay in the first couple of nights. We were issued all of our clothes, all of our boots, our socks, razors, things like that. Each day we'd start at about four, five o'clock in the morning, we'd get up, we'd go onto the head—the bathroom—and we'd do the things we had to do, shower, shave and get back out, get dressed, make sure that our racks were made perfectly, the way they wanted them. And training would go on from there. First it was going into the mess hall and on the mess hall there were two signs. One sign said, "Take all you eat, but eat all you take." And below it was another one that said, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war." These were in Marine Corps red and gold print. You had five minutes to get into the mess hall, you stood at attention, your drill instructor would say "Ready. Seats." And you sat down as one. If you heard two noises, he'd get you back up and make you do it over again. And they were pretty much messing with you. The first couple of days we didn't get to eat much at all and when you did it was throw it all in as fast as you can. When it was time he'd say "Get up. Get out." and you grabbed your tray and took it out and there were garbage cans with heaters underneath with boiling water and you rinsed each of your trays in one to the other and you stacked it up and then you ran out the parade ground and you got in attention and waited for the drill instructor to come out.

From there we went on to learning how to do drill with a rifle—face right, face forward, march, about face, those kinds of things—and to do parade things that normal Marines will do when they march. We went on to learn how to shoot the rifle at the rifle range, the ways to take the rifle apart, the ways to put it together, the difference in weapons. From there we went on to certain survival skills that we had to learn—karate and hand holds on people. How to fight somebody with your rifle, using pugil sticks, a stick with padding at each end. So you'd learn how to spear a man or beat him with the back of your rifle. I watched everybody do it and I thought I had it pretty well set so the first time somebody came at me with their pugil stick pointed at me I just side stepped and slapped them across the back of the head and knocked them down. And I felt pretty good about it. The drill instructor said, "In war you don't just knock the man down, you kill him. Don't stop." So I had to beat on this guy 'til the drill instructor told me to stop. That went fine, the next time, I was up, I was up against somebody that was a little bigger and I thought it went pretty good so I sidestepped again but he was waiting for me and put me down and I got the beating that time. It was pretty much of a team work thing, we never really hated each other, we did what we had to do.

We learned how to carry somebody from a battlefield that was injured, how to treat battlefield injuries. They had plastic rubber bodies and they had what looked like real injuries and you had to bandage it up, fix it or do whatever was right with it. Learned how

to read maps, learned how to read a compass, learned how to give directions, learned how to call an artillery. Learned how to move troops on a mission when you're walking in the jungle or in the open field. From there I went on through more training and then the 50 caliber school which is what, Twentynine Palms, California where we learned how to shoot, clean, fix, and build a 50 caliber machine gun. Which I only go to use two or three times when I was overseas. The last time I got to use it was after I'd gotten shot and I was evacuated up in a helicopter. I went on to the 50 because the jungle had just erupted in fire and the helicopter was taking hits. There was two guns, there was one that wasn't being used so I just went over on the used one and started laying down a field of fire. So I—it helped me I guess.

Gibb: Mm-hm. How long was your training?

Rolke: I had thirteen weeks in boot camp and from boot camp I went to ITR, Intensive Training Regiment. This was the really more physical aspect of it. It's in the areas at Camp Pendleton where there's a lot of—they're not mountains but they're big hills and you quite literally walk up the hills, you walk down the hills, you didn't get bus rides where you were going. You went where they told you to go and you got there. Quite exhausting. You'd take your meals with you and you'd find out the day before, "We're going to be going over here someplace" "Oh my gosh, that's twenty miles away." You'd walk the twenty miles, you'd get there and then you'd go up the hills and you'd play war, you'd learn how to escape from a POW camp, you'd learn how to assault another unit, you'd practice ambushes on people, the different types of ambushes that they had. The different types of weapons that were good for an ambush for—for killing. And how to set an ambush up and what to do when an ambush was ready to happen. Troops would come into an ambush zone that you had, you knew which people were going to be firing, which people weren't and you'd count the number of people going in and count the number of people that left to know if anybody was left. After that it was just a station battalion where it was let's get everybody from this group, this group, this group, that had trained—people I didn't know. You kind of refreshed on what you'd learned and waited 'til the billet was full to go overseas. While I was waiting, saw an opportunity as—on one of the postings for 50 cal school, that's when I signed up for that.

When I came back after that I was taken to Orange County, California to El Toro Air Force base—Marine Corps Air Force Base which—Marine Corps base, excuse me, which flew me over to Hawaii. I got a glass of orange juice, pineapple juice. I never got the lei and the kiss on the cheek but I got the free flight. From there we flew on to Okinawa where—when we got off at Okinawa we were treated a little bit more like Marines. "Here you are going to be 'til we muster enough troops to send you over to a unit. You will probably be here three to four weeks." The first day I was there, I managed to go into the EM [Enlisted Men's] clubs and I noticed there were slot machines, I never seen them before in my life and they're called slot machines. The drinks were very, very

cheap and just being twenty years old I hadn't had a lot of alcohol and I'd had a little more than I should have. One of the things I had to do when I came back was rake the dirt. Marines are very notorious for raking dirt. You make it look neat. I remember doing that when I was pretty well under the influence.

Two days after I had been there it was about four o'clock in the morning and one of the sergeants or somebody in charge came in, turned on the lights and said "Saddle up, you leave in a half an hour." I had expected it was going to be another two or three weeks at least but that's just how it was. Saddle up is saddle up. I mean, I had everything ready. I had packed it all up, we took trucks to the airport, I got in a C-130 and flew from Okinawa to Da Nang. In Da Nang I got off the plane with a bunch of everybody else. The first thing I noticed was when they opened the door was the incredible heat. I mean, I'd had heat in California but you—it was just like a blast of an oven. The smell of ammonia from urine, just—and feces and everything. The Vietnamese, that's how they fertilize, they go in their fields. We walked into an old, wooden barracks and there were two tables and as we stood in a line, there was a man counting off "One, two three, you go to this table. One, two, three, you go to that table." It was men being assigned to either the 1st Marine Division or the 3rd Marine Division. 3rd Marine Division was further north; the 1st Marine Division was south. Da Nang is south. I was assigned to the 1st Marine Division and Kilo Company.

I was transported to Hill 55 which was the 7th Marines regimental hill at that time. That was 1/7, 2/7 and 3/7 which was A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K companies. Kilo Company had its own hill, Hill 41. After my paperwork was turned in on Hill 50, I got on a truck with three or four other guys and we drove to Kilo Company, where I met my troops. I was there for roughly one day, then sent to Hill 10 which was a company hill—excuse me, a battalion hill. I was there for three days in an acclimation situation where it was getting used to the heat. Not only getting used to the heat—this is our area, this is what to expect here, this is what to expect here, the people here fight this way, the people here fight this way, this area is swamp, this area is mountainous, this area is rice paddy. These are the type of weapons that are used, etcetera, etcetera. I was issued my M-16 at the time, my 782 gear which is all of your canvas gear, your field jack, your flak jacket, your helmet. My helmet in fact had a bullet hole in it that was hammered flat. I'll never forget that. I covered it with helmet cover and I put the helmet liner in it and never paid a second thought to it. We went to one of the bunkers and had target practice to sight in our rifles. I stayed on Hill 10 for about four days, during that time Tet [Offensive] of 1969 was going on. It was a more peaceful than Tet of '68. The people in the villages nearby were shooting rockets to, you know, like fireworks to celebrate their Chinese New Year. It was pretty—pretty to see.

I still hadn't seen any real issues of war or combat or anything so I felt like, you know, "This isn't going to be too bad." But one of the last nights I was there, right next to the

barracks I was in was a battery of 105s—Howitzers. They had to fire off a fire mission to somebody in support of combat and it rattled and shook us and it sounded like bombs going off right next to us. Well we all ran to the first bunker we could get. Now being new I was barefoot, I took my shoes—my boots and socks off and ran to the bunker, ran over barbed wire that was laying there and everything. Learned from then on you don't take your boots and socks off. After that I went to Hill 41. I was there for a couple of weeks. My squad, my company, would send out two units for patrols during the day and one unit for an ambush at night. That's three squads—three platoons, two squads would do one, one squad would do another. Somebody got a hold of Hill 10 and said "We need to fill a radio operator's slot on battalion radio school." So I went back to Hill 10 and for a week I took classes for the PRC-25 radio—PRC, portable radio communications. Learned how to use the radio and came back to Hill 41 and over time, on occasion, when need be, I would carry the radio and it would be more along the lines of carrying it for my squad leader. When the radio message came in for him, I would hand him the radio, he would do the talking. Otherwise I would just monitor the radio as to what would happen. From there on it changed after two and half months. We ended up spending three and a half months in the jungle on search and destroy missions, which later on they changed the name of it but it was still search and destroy. We'd go out, find things and blow them up—bunkers, things of that nature.

Gibb: So how much did you—taking you back again, but how much did you know about the conflict going on there, how much were you aware of it?

Rolke: When I joined the Marine Corps I could not have told you for a million dollars where Vietnam was. I had no clue of where it was and I guess I really—I guess I really didn't care, if I really would have cared I would have looked. I knew that something was going on, I knew that it was really big in my country, things were happening and I felt that's something I had to do. So I did. It was pretty much plain and simple.

Gibb: So you didn't have any expectations of what Vietnam would be like or—?

Rolke: I had a car and I had a motorcycle, before I left to go overseas. Before I left I sold the car and I sold the motorcycle because I didn't expect to return. I guess I was pretty fatalistic and I kick myself now because I miss my motorcycle. But I knew—at that time the broadcasts were coming over TV and this was the first war where it was body count, body count, body count. I didn't want to leave the motorcycle sit there and have it be a burden for my mother, the same thing for the car and so I sold them both. Plain and simple.

Gibb: So when you go to Vietnam, were you with anybody that you'd been in basic training with or the advanced training?

Rolke: No, I am in contact now with some of the guys I go—I went through boot camp with. I've met a couple of them, one of them is a pastor in Des Moines, Iowa. The other one is a friend—I missed seeing him last year at Christmastime in Oklahoma because of a snow storm. But because after ITR and through staging I went on to radio—I went on to 50 caliber machine gun school, these guys went off their way. Some would be in one area, some would be in another area and each guy was being called for a different unit. Some of the guys would go to the 3rd Marine Division, some of them would go to the 1st and some would go to different battalions and divisions, regions, so, no. I didn't see anybody I knew when I was over there. Everybody was new. And because I was new I was frowned upon because I was the new guy. New guys always get somebody killed. And a week and a half after I was there the quote, "curse", happened—we lost a guy on Valentine's Day. But you had to prove your worth. I mean people don't want to be friendly with you because they don't know—they don't want to get to like somebody, they also don't want to trust somebody that hasn't been proven and until I got my feet dirty, it was something that I was—I was there, I was talked to, but I was not a true, true friend and it didn't take long. It was about a week and half after I was with my unit that I'd proven myself. So.

Gibb: What were the living conditions like?

Rolke: Home is where you dig it. Pretty much so. When we were on the hill, you had a canvas tent and there were canvas cots inside but you were out on the daytime patrol, you came back in, you went on nighttime ambush. The only time you slept on that cot was when you came in after the patrol, or when you came in after the ambush. Most of the times when you came back in the first thing you did was clean your weapons, then you went to eat. Then after it's time to sleep, write letters, do things like that. You'd do that. There was never a time when I could sit in one of those tents and have a whole night's sleep. That was the living conditions. And then on an ambush, you would walk through a muddy rice paddy, you would walk across rice paddy dykes that were slippery, in the dark, you'd try to keep a distance of ten feet between people but you could—in the dark you'd just, you'd keep up on the guy in front of you and everybody's always telling you "Back off, back off". Your feet would get full of muddy water, your whole body would get full of muddy water, it's ninety-five degrees, it's 95 percent humidity, you're dripping wet. When you dried in the sun, when the sun came out, your back would be white from the sweat that you'd have evaporated. Laying next to bushes, most of the times when were out on ambushes, we set our ambushes up in graveyards. The Vietnamese have a habit of burying their chief leader sitting up in his grave with his head above the ground level but what they'll do is put a mound of dirt over it so it looks like a great big round pile of dirt that you see but that's where papa-san is looking over his fields of rice. Those were the places that you would set your people up, three people in one spot, three people in another, three people in another in a rough triangle to cover the area you're in. It gave you some cover and it gave you some protection. That was really my living conditions.

Gibb: I'm not quite sure where we got to but you were at the hill and then you said you went out on the search and—

Rolke: We would go out for a morning patrol, we'd leave at six o'clock in the morning, we'd get to the front gate, lock and load our weapons and we would file out, go down a trail, go down to a village, we'd go through the village, we'd go through the fields, we'd go through the farmlands, just looking for trouble. Most of the times we didn't see anything because this was where it was Viet Cong protected and they tried not to fight you unless they had a big advantage. Out in the mountains it was quite different, it was the NVA and they didn't leave. They stood their ground. At night it was different, you'd go out after dark so that you wouldn't be seen. That's where it's the creepy part because you're walking around in the dark and you're the one moving and they're sitting still and every step you take you feel like it's gonna happen any second. Your hearing gets so intense you can hear your heartbeat. It gets so intense it's just—silence just sounded so loud. We would walk maybe six, seven clicks, maybe three miles in the dark, to where we had our positions set up. The company knew where we were going to be so if something happened they wouldn't send artillery out because it would be us. But they would send artillery around our area to protect us if something happened. When we'd get to an area, if it was a rice field, we would set a group of three men in one corner, a group of three men in another corner and a group of three men in another place, sometimes we had ten or twelve, we should have had fourteen men but we never had more than twelve. You set your fields of fire up which—"You can shoot here, you can shoot here, you can shoot here. Don't shoot in the other spots because that's where friendly people are." And we'd wait the whole night for something to walk past. When they did, we'd do our best to eliminate the problem.

Gibb: So what was the main purpose of these missions you were going out on?

Rolke: Okay. We were on Hill 10. North of Hill 10 was Hill 41. North of Hill 41 was Hill 22. Then south there were other hills, this was a ring of hills around Da Nang proper. It was called the TAOR, the Tactical Area of Responsibility, our job was to stop interdiction of Viet Cong and NVA from coming in with rockets to bomb and rocket the runway in Da Nang. And to stop interdiction of troops coming in to get into the city to do damage proper. So we were like the outside guard fence. We couldn't always be in the right spots, we'd have to go where we thought—where we'd heard movement had been the night or weeks before. We'd go into those areas and wait. It was mostly rice fields where we were. We were maybe two miles away from where the mountains started and they would come down from the mountains and come in. So it was our job to keep them from firing rockets into the city.

Gibb: How successful was your—?

Rolke: Not to brag. I honestly never saw—

Gibb: Please do.

Rolke: No, I honestly never saw a rocket fired from our area into Da Nang. They had the 122[mm] and I think it's [M]151 rockets. It's a long tube with a cylindrical slot cut in the tube. And the rocket was nothing more than a rocket shaped tube with a stud on it that corresponded with that slot and as the rocket fired it would spin around the tube giving it the spiral to keep it accurate. They didn't have fins on them. They had the most beautiful purple and orange flames that would shoot out of these things and they made a real loud roar. I'd seen the rockets but I'd never seen them fired towards Da Nang. I think maybe we did what we had to do. We at least tried to do it, we were out there every night.

Gibb: Did you get a break at all?

Rolke: Well, after the ambush you would come in at first sun, you'd radio the company, you'd come in to the hill and like I said, we'd clean our weapons, we'd go to chow, those that wanted to write or read letters would do that, others would crash out, get some sleep. Hop in the little shower we had and just wait 'til it was time to go back out for nighttime ambush.

Gibb: How—how long did you do this for?

Rolke: I got there the first week of February. I got to Vietnam on my birthday. Happy birthday. I got to Vietnam on the first week of February and like I said, I was with the company for a couple of days, then I went to radio school. Went to radio school and I went to the acclimation classes. About the third week of February was when I really started going out with my unit. It was—it was the same, it was patrol, come back, ambush, come back. It was every night like that. Once every ten or fifteen days that platoon, our platoon would stay on the hill, it would man the bunkers, while the other platoons in my company would go out. So the hill was always protected as well. But you're still sitting behind a bunker and truthfully I felt safer in an ambush than I did in a bunker 'cause a bunker is a known target. An ambush, they don't always know where you are.

Gibb: So did you feel unsafe?

Rolke: All the time [laughs]. Yeah, all the time. You--nobody was your friend. You didn't know who was who. You didn't know where anybody was. You'd walk into the villages and—when we'd do village sweeps we'd do MEDCAPS, medical units, where we'd go in and we'd bandage up the kids and the women, the people. You never saw Vietnamese men over the age of about fifteen. They were always, "Working in the city". They're not working in the city, they're Viet Cong. Mama-san did not ever smile at us because we had guns and we had access to their kids. Probably the worst weapon in the world is a

nineteen year old boy who is away from home, he's got a rifle and he's angry. So I can understand their fear. I went back to Vietnam in 1996 and the looks on the women's faces were completely different when they saw me, it was a joy to see them smile when I played with their children, so.

Gibb: So what was the purpose of going out into the villages to do the medical—?

Rolke: To let the Vietnamese people know we cared about them, we weren't just there to kill everybody that we saw for one. For two, to go into each of the huts and go through all of the—very impersonal—you can understand their point of view, how you'd feel if somebody came in and looked through all your things. And their things were very meager. They had dirt and stick walls and a hole buried so that when something happened they could get into it at night. You'd look through all of their things to make sure that there was nothing that was there the enemy could use—weaponry or things of that nature. You generally leave the village and—as peacefully as possible and go onto the rest of your patrol or come back to where you were stationed.

Gibb: How did you feel that your—that the training prepared you for what you did encounter while you were there?

Rolke: Physically, I think my training brought me to my peak. I don't think I could've gotten in any more physical shape than I was in. I got used to the heat quite well because I think of the fact that I'd been in physical shape. As for the rest of the training I've looked so many times at a certain day—it was February twenty-third—we had—February twenty-second we were out on an ambush. We were five clicks away from the Hill and I'll never forget my corpsman was with me Doc Hardigan—Larry Hardigan—and I had a cough and he was joking with me about you know, "Make it a little louder, you'll scare all the gooks away" I felt so bad about it but I mean I couldn't help the cough. Halfway through the night the radio buzzed and it was the hill saying "Saddle up all your gear, Amtracs are coming out to pick you up in about a half an hour. Mike Company is in contact and you are going to help them." Now, there are what's called react companies—reactionary forces and evidently that week Kilo Company was the reactionary force for the battalion—Lima, Mike, and India Company—if they got in trouble, we would go. Amtracs came and picked us up, drove us back to the hill. We were told, "You have enough time to get something in the chow hall, fill all your canteens, load up on all the ammunition you can carry and muster back by the Amtracs." Boom.

So we did, we saddled up, we got on the Amtracs, they drove us about eight, ten clicks away from where we were north and east of Hill 10. Dropped us off in some open rice paddies and we sloshed across rice paddies for about a click, and I stepped over one rice paddy, right on top of a dead NVA and that was my first vision of what was going on. Heard a lot of shooting where we were headed, and walked into an area that was all trees

and inside the trees there was an open, rectangular area of about fifty by seventy-five meters and it was a depression—the ground was lowered about four feet. In the depression were maybe fifteen or twenty Marine bodies, this was Mike Company, they had gotten in this open area and were surrounded and got quite literally wiped out by the North Vietnamese. We started trying to pull the bodies out and shooting stopped us from doing that. We got back out of that area and were sitting talking about what's going on and I was talking with a guy named Jesse Nunez. The irony here is Nunez had eighteen days to go before he went home and I'd been there for roughly eighteen days. I was asking the questions, like, "Is this what it's like?" What to expect and we talked a little bit and this is where something you can't train for, it's just inside. I heard the bullet, I heard the gun go off and the first thing I did was get behind this little rice paddy dyke I was at. Nunez body fell across my back. I moved to look at him and it was a head shot. He was killed. The rice paddy dyke must not have been more than a foot thick and about a foot high and I could feel the bullets impacting into the dirt, like a bunch of angry bees trying to get through to get to me. Doc Hardigan was on my right, Johnny Coleman was right next to me, Doc Hardigan was next—he would remember this. Doc Hardigan ran over to check on Nunez, turned him and said, he's gone and a bullet caught him in the head and he fell across my legs. I can't even raise my hands to shoot the rifle because I can't see and I'm being shot at.

The rest of my unit was twenty-five meters behind me in the trees. There was this little open area we were in and then the big open area. My squad and platoon were behind me shooting over our heads into the trees and somebody said, "They're in the trees." They started firing LAW [Light Anti-tank Weapon] rockets into the trees. Stuff was going off all over the place. I'm thinking, "Oh get me out. I don't belong here" Our squad leader was talking with our machine gunner—his name was Bob Sixay [sp??]. Bob Sixay [sp??] said "I'm going to lay down a long hundred round burst. After I lay down that hundred round burst, get back here in the trees with us." He dropped the hundred round burst and we got out of there and got back in the other trees and that was pretty much it for the shooting. We sat there for a couple of hours looking, seeing if there was anything we could do and as it started to get dark all we could do was pull ourselves back through an open area of rice paddies to another area of trees where we set up a nighttime defensive position. All night long we had artillery sending illumination over our heads and of course it's 100% watch, everybody is watching and we heard some noises, we heard some screams from where we were and—what do you do?

We went in the area the next morning. We had A-4 Skyhawks dropping bombs. I mean, these guys would come in and they'd come down just about the tree level, drop their bombs and pull out. We went in after the bombing was over and the North Vietnamese had slipped away in the night. Our bodies were all there and we started to take the bodies and move them. Amtracs had come, they were going to load up the bodies. During the

night the Viet Cong had booby trapped the bodies. They'd cut slices in the stomach, spread the stomach apart and put a grenade in or they'd split the back and put a grenade in and as you'd turn the body over, the grenade would come out and we lost a bunch of guys because of those booby traps. We started tying the guys up with ropes to pull them out, which is degrading but there's no other way to do it. I've got the lists. I don't know how many from Mike Company, I think it was twenty-one. We lost six that day. So we pulled out a bunch of guys, we had them loaded up and once they were loaded up, Amtracs took them away and I think we had our whole company with us then I'm not sure but we swept all of this area. It was called the Bo Bans—Bo Bans one, Bo Bans two, Bo Bans three and Bo Bans four—four little hamlets. We found nothing, no people, no wounded. Blood trails—we'd evidently wounded some but that was it. From there, we went back to Hill 41 and went back to the same process of patrols, ambushes, patrols, ambushes.

In March it was the same thing then in April—April Fool's Day—we left the Hill, walked to the mountains, we walked into the mountains and we walked west. This was on search and destroy, looking for base camps, looking for supply depots, anything. We found a POW camp where we are sure they had American prisoners because they were—bamboo—we call them tiger cages—bamboo cages. It wasn't just a training thing because there were three or four of them. We found a training area for sappers where they'd take in bamboo strips and rolled it into coils to make it look like our concertina barbed wire. It was a big training area there. Further on we found an armory where they had all sorts of parts of weapons and they were putting weapons together. They had dragged in American bombs that hadn't gone off and they were chipping the explosive out of them and putting them into homemade CHICOM's—grenades, Chinese communist grenades. And uh—using our own weaponry against us. So—

Gibb: Was that—that loss of life that you had, was that recurring thing or was that something that you just had at the beginning when you were there?

Rolke: No, it was recurring. We lost somewhere—we went out into the operation, it was called Operation Oklahoma Hills. We left on—[looking through papers] April first to go out on Oklahoma Hills. We lost a man on April twentieth, he got the Navy Cross. We lost a man on April twenty-one, another man on April twenty-one, another man on April twenty-one. We lost three men—two men on May tenth. We lost two men on May eighth, excuse me, one man on May tenth. Three men on May tenth. Man on May thirteenth, a man on May twenty-third. then we got back on the Hill. So we lost about eight men just on that operation we went out on into the mountains. But our unit also got caught in an area where they were in the middle of a rice paddy and the enemy lured them into the rice paddy further where the men dropped their packs to race after them. That's when the enemy opened up on them, when they dropped their packs because they'd left without all of their ammunition with them. We lost quite a bit of men on that one day.

Gibb: Just for the record this is a list of men—this is in your company?

Rolke: This is a list of the men that were killed that day alone. This is the roster of all the men that were lost in our unit from day one to the end.

Gibb: Wow. There's probably how many here? About twenty there, something like that and I don't know how many in total.

Rolke: Yeah, at least twenty. [Sound of papers]. It was a day-to-day thing. You never knew when things were going to happen.

Gibb: How do you—I mean—hmm—how do you deal with that, like, on an individual level, and as a unit as well?

Rolke: As a unit we would have a memorial ceremony for the individuals. At the time you couldn't dwell on what happened. A good example would be [sound of papers]—forgive me for going through this.

Gibb: No, that's fine.

Rolke: April twenty-one, we had a bomb go off on the top of a hill we were on. It killed a bunch of our men, there were twenty-six men killed and probably thirty or so injured. I was on the other side of the hill just protected because I was down from the explosion. They brought in helicopters with big nets. The helicopters couldn't land but the net would touch the ground and we'd fill the nets with the bodies to take away. We'd give the live ones to them first on a special extraction tool. Your—it's a job, you've gotta get this done. It's—there's nothing you can do, you can't cry about it now because who knows what's going to happen in five minutes. One of the men had his arm blown off. I'll never forget this. He was laying down on the top of the hill, laying next to another man who was screaming bloody murder. Now the guy who was screaming had a small injury, it was a small piece of shrapnel that had hit his arm and he was—I know it must have hurt, he was screaming bloody murder. The man who lost his arm was just laying there, and I'm sitting talking with him and I took his shoelace off—bootlace off and I tied off his arm so it wouldn't bleed and I gave him a cigarette and I sat and talked with him and he was calm. While I was talking with him the guy that was screaming died, from shock. He just, psychologically, died. The guy that had his arm blown off was talking about, "Looks like I'm going home, looks like it's all over for me." I don't know where his arm went. There were pieces of people in trees and all around. But he had the will to go on.

And after that, how do you deal with it? What was left then was the supplies to put on the nets when the helicopters came. You took the supplies. I mean, his meal is my meal. His ammunition is my ammunition. His boots are my boots. His rifle, his weapon, is mine. This is his personal stuff, that's his, that's going with him but anything that can keep this

company surviving and alive, you kept. It's a grisly thing for somebody who has never been in a case where their life depended on somebody else's but that was a survival mode at the time. It needed to be done and that's how it was done. Respect was given to the people and yet they—in their dying, saved us by giving us other things. I'd only had four keens—I had only had four canteens at the time and wanted to carry more and they told me "There's only one way you're gonna get more canteens." That's how I got my two extra canteens. That's how I got a cleaning kit for my rifle. That's how I got certain things that they didn't have to issue me at the time. Then of course they're gone and all you think about then is just the carnage of what happened. Do I remember crying for these guys? I don't know, I probably did. I remember that night after things had calmed down we heard noises all around the perimeter we were on and we had guys shooting out into the woods, we had grenades going out, we had all sorts of things going on. I believe what it was was, it was sticks and twigs from the monkeys in the trees jumping around. I don't believe there were any enemy down but at the time it seemed like there were. You have to survive, you just have to go on. It's—it's like the Packers, they lose a player, they put another player in his spot. They can do the job and we were all cross trained to do everything. I mean, I could fire the mortar if I had to. I could fire the machine gun if I had to. I knew how to read a map, I knew how to read a compass and I knew how to do first aid on somebody. It's just, everybody—you just banded a little tighter together.

Gibb: You were actually able to—were they friendships or were they a different kind of relationship that you had with people, you know, knowing that you might lose them?

Rolke: I didn't know the man whose arm I tied off but I knew that he needed that done. It's a Marine thing. He's a Marine. He'd do it for me. Was it—did I look at it, like, "Ugh, how can somebody do that?" No. I looked at it as "This has gotta be done." Never did it strike me as, "Ugh, this is just something I can't do." After that I'd gone out and I'd done worse. It's—you lose a brother. You don't know who he is but he's one of you. Your odds of safety go down with each one of your lost brothers. So, yeah.

Gibb: You mentioned Oklahoma Hills, this is the name—?

Rolke: That was the name of the operation we were on. There were others over the time. One of the first one the Marines did was Operation Starlight, then there was Meade River, Taylor Common. Different names for different groups that went out. So when it went back to headquarters, "Which group is this?" "It's Oklahoma Hills." "Oh, they're right here"

Gibb: Okay, okay. Did you get a break at all? I mean, apart from those evenings but did you get a break where you were away from your mission?

Rolke: No, we were in the jungle, there was no break. In fact one of the days near to that we were on the top of a hill, we'd been without water for two days, we'd been without food for about four or five. We couldn't call for resupply because right below us was an enemy

base camp. I mean it's not like we were afraid of letting them know we were there, we just didn't wanna let them know we were there because we were watching, in a sense. So we ate whatever crawled along the ground and we found a couple of small water drops, not even streams and we'd send guys with the canteens to go fill them. I went to fill the canteens at one time and the water was—it was a kind of a brownish-yellowish because of all the rotted vegetation. You put in your Halazone pills to purify it and you drank it, so we had water. But we ran out of food. The thing we did was we heated water and put in presweetened Kool-Aid so we had something warm and flavorful to drink. Pre-sweetened Kool-Aid was a big thing back then.

Gibb: Was th—did those come over issued or were they packages?

Rolke: No, mailed from home, mailed from home. Those and Vienna weenies were the big things. The people who had their packages packed right, mom and dad would insulate the package with popcorn, you had popcorn too.

Gibb: So did you—I think you mentioned you sent quite a lot home to you mom, was it letters or—?

Rolke: I would mail letters to my mom as often as I could mail letters. I never had a steady girlfriend. I lived with a girl when I was over in Vietn—when I was in the states but when I went over to Vietnam I made sure that it was just a friendship type of thing. I didn't want it looking as if—here's what's happening and you might lose me and so I didn't—I didn't stay. But out in the woods when you ran out of stuff—I wrote this letter on a C-ration box [sound of papers]. I took the cardboard and I split it so I had paper I could write on to my—this was to my sister. She saved it and it's—so it was written on separated pieces of cardboard. I mean just—you—the Marine corps always talks about adapt and improvise. So that's what I did.

Gibb: What kind of things did you tell them about—did you talk to them about?

Rolke: Well this one was written right after the bomb [sound of papers]. Sorry, I should have kept that out [pause].

Gibb: That's fine.

Rolke: "Dear Phyllis and family. Sorry about the paper but three or four days at a time without food, so you can see supplies are hard to get. We've got a good LZ—landing zone—now so supplies are going to be getting easier to get. They've extended the operation to June first because we found over two hundred weapons, hundreds of mortar rounds, rockets and eight to ten cases of bullets and that's just our company. There are thirty-five other companies out here. I should be up to lance corporal May first but since we won't be back on the Hill 'til June first I can't take the test. All is well as could be expected, we've had

only one wounded and that was in the shoulder but figuring we've killed fifty-two and had only contact from artillery, it is different time. I'd say we are doing pretty good. The only thing we don't get here is the beer and packages but time passes quickly so I guess I can't say I mind. Sorry about the paper but I just wanted to write to let you know I'm okay, guess that's all that counts."

So that's what you'd write just after you've lost a bunch of friends. I'd keep it—I mean, I look at the horror movies on TV where you as a person sitting back in your living room are watching and you see the mad creature in the basement as the wife starts walking down the basement steps in the dark. You are aware as the combat man what's going on around so it's okay. But the person back home doesn't know what's happening and I think—I look back and I think the war for my mother was probably very hard. [pause] Sorry.

Gibb: No, no. No need to apologize.

Rolke: I think I owe her more. So what, ask me anything you wanna know, I'm glad to talk to you.

Gibb: Well thank you for doing this, you know, it's—I'm glad we can take the time to talk with you. These are important stories, very important stories. So did you have any idea of what the atmosphere was like back in the U.S. regards the war 'cause these things did change over time?

Rolke: The—some people would get the local newspaper. I got military newspapers over there—*Stars and Stripes* and the Marine issue—Navy issue was called *Sea Tiger*. And it had stories and articles in it about what was going on and uh—it's someplace in there. I'd read those and those were mostly, "Here's what's happening this week, where you've been." You know, "Kilo Company went in and caught ten NVA" or, "Mike Company did this" so that's the information I got. Back home, I didn't hear too much. I had a friend of mine I went through school with. Friend, yes, but it was always a little abrasive. He had to be better than I did and I never cared. He was drafted into the Army. He went over to Germany and he got a letter of deferment for sole surviving son. Got out and started writing me letters about, "My attorney got me out, I can get you out" and that was the first I heard about people being either against the war or trying to stop it. I turned the letter over to my commanding officer and never heard a word again from my friend. I'm sure that that was passed to somebody in the states and they went over to his house, knocked on the door and said, "This was given to somebody" Boom, boom, boom, you know, "You'll cease and desist." That's what I would bet. It was troublesome because every time something would happen I'm thinking, "I don't wanna be here." When it did happen I was with my brothers. I couldn't let them down. Shooting would be someplace else, it would be your friends, and you'd run into the shooting to be with your friends.

That's just how it was. I didn't know much more than that and it wouldn't have mattered to me. I guess I missed the free love—that was all while I was gone. So, and I didn't miss too much of that either.

Gibb: How long were you over there in total?

Rolke: Nine months and twenty-eight days. I took some shrapnel in my leg which I still have. Never did anything about it. Then the last time I was hit, I got shot in the hand. That took me out because I couldn't use my hand. I was hospitalized for three months going through—I had three operations. One in Da Nang, then two in Japan. Then I went through physical therapy to work on my hand before I was released. Then I came home. I hit the states. I hit Elmendorf, Alaska, I hit Travis Air Force Base and then on to Twentynine Palms Naval Base which is in Los—San Francisco. The second I hit San Francisco I started to spike a fever, a real bad fever. I didn't say anything because I just got out of the hospital. I didn't want to say, "Hey I'm sick" because they're going to put me right back in. After three days I was discharged. I took a flight from San Francisco to Chicago because it left an hour earlier than the flight from San Francisco to Milwaukee and I figured I could catch the hop from Chicago to Milwaukee and be home. As it was, I got to Chicago and we were in a holding pattern and as we were circling the stewardess came up to me and she said, "Corporal, that plane right there is the last plane to Milwaukee, that's leaving right now." So I spent the night in the terminal at San Francisco—in Chicago. The next morning I took a flight to Milwaukee it was six when I landed in Milwaukee. I didn't call home, I hopped in a taxi and I came home. There of course was nobody waiting and I was home that day and the next day I was taken to the South Milwaukee hospital with a 106 fever.

They say malaria protects your brain from cooking and they covered me with a sheet. They covered the sheet with ice. They poured alcohol on the sheet and they put fans on me. And if you know anything about malaria, you're shivering and you're shivering because the blood cells are bursting because of the parasite. It was to bring my body temperature down. Well, my mom had been given some papers by one of the doctors and it was that I had recently travelled to an Asian country. Boom, they diagnosed me with malaria but they diagnosed me with the wrong type which—that's not a big thing. That's like diagnosing you with a cough when you've got a sneeze. The VA at the time had an ambulance and they came and picked me up, took me to the VA here in Milwaukee where they filled me full of chloroquine phosphate and primaquine phosphate—the treatment at the time. They laid me on an ice blanket which was tubes of ice cold water, put a sheet on top of that, covered the sheet with alcohol, covered me with the sheet, covered the sheet with ice, covered the ice and the sheet with alcohol and they had fans on me. It's like, "I've been here before." For three days, pretty nurses would come in and they'd press on my stomach because they wanted to make sure my spleen and pancreas didn't explode because the malaria parasite will do that. I knew a very, very beautiful girl

at the time, she was my buddy's cousin. She looked like Barbara Streisand, she was gorgeous. She came in to visit me and I wouldn't eat and she'd cut the food. I wouldn't eat. She'd—"You are going to eat or I'm going to leave." I think that probably saved me, was just eating. So, I was there. I was discharged on Thanksgiving Day. My mom and my aunt had driven out to Madison where their family is, thinking I was going to be in the hospital for another couple of days. So I got out of the hospital, I had no money to get home and I went down to travel and I said "Hey, look" and they realized this guy's just gotten out of 'Nam. Usually you have to be a certain distance away from a Veteran's Administration to get travel pay. "What do you need" I said, "Well, I'd like to get home-bus fare." Boom, they gave me bus fare. I took the bus from National Avenue down to Kinnickinnic. From Kinnickinnic into South Milwaukee and I walked out. Now, this is November twenty-seventh, November twenty-eighth, all I've got on is summer greens. I mean, it was cold. I'm carrying this C bag over my back. I get to the door and I knock and nobody's home. So I had to climb the back porch to the second story to where my bedroom window was, to break into my house. That was my Thanksgiving upon getting home, my welcome home.

Gibb: At least you were out of the hospital. [laughs]

Rolke: Yeah.

Gibb: Was malaria a big issue in Vietnam?

Rolke: Every Sunday the—I think—I understand the Army got pills every day. They got two different kinds, they got a colored one on Sunday and they got a white one every day. Now, we only got the Sunday pill. The corpsman would come past and give it to you and it always gave you diarrhea. You'd see a lot of guys take the pill and trash it. I'm thinking "The odds of what can be better, what can be worse?" I don't remember getting it every Sunday and maybe that's where I got malaria, I don't know. Why it didn't bother me from all of September when I got shot 'til the end of November, I don't know. Maybe it was the cold snap. But the same thing with dysentery, I got dysentery a couple of times when I was over there.

Gibb: Tell me a little bit more about how you ended up—you got shot in the hand, that was your homecoming?

Rolke: They had changed from search and destroy missions to just on, and on, and on search missions. It used to be when it got to be dark in the jungle you would find an area that was a great defensive position, normally a hill so you could protect—you know, the higher you are, the easier it is. With the new leadership it was, "When it got dark, pull yourself off to the side of the trail and just keep quiet." And we did that and we did that, and we did that. It got to where you—you didn't know where anybody was until the next morning. We walked, and we walked and all it was, was walking, jungle, walking, jungle.

We came to an open area and it got so god-awful hot. I'll never forget how hot it got. I'd never felt heat like that and we walked and we walked and we walked. The more we walked the more it dragged on me because I carried the grenade launcher at the time and I carried a ton of rounds for the grenade launcher. I was dragging it. It turned out we were on a seventeen mile walk to get to LZ Ross was actually where we were going. I didn't know that, I just knew we were walking. By the time we got where we were going I was the last man in the column. I had a—I don't want to call him fat, that's bad. He was overweight, he was a sergeant. He stuck with me just because Marines don't leave Marines alone. We walked together into the base. There, they gave us clean clothes and fed us and it was doughnuts and chocolate milk.

They put us on helicopters and said we're going into a hot LZ and uh, we went onto the hot LZ and it wasn't hot. The area on the ground was. This was an army—artillery base and the area below it was Hiep Duc area. The army had been told “Don't go down there you're taking took many casualties.” So they called the Marines. Go figure. We walked down the hill—we had men falling out from heat exhaustion, walking down a hill. When we hit the bottom it was so hot it was like opening an oven door. I'd never felt heat like that in my life. There were 12.75 anti-air craft positions that the Viet Cong had set up on the ground. That's why they would not send helicopters down there because they would be sitting targets. It's for the same reason they kept fast flyers out of the area from dropping bombs because they would just be targets. Our job was to take them out. That night we camped at the bottom of the hill and the next morning was August twenty-eighth. We walked through rice paddies and they were terraced—they'd go, they'd jump up about three feet, they'd go, they'd jump up about three feet and they'd go.

It was a misty, foggy morning and as it was burning up you could hear the—[thumps fist on table] of these guys pounding stones, pounding sticks into the ground to fortify positions. In front of where I was, as the mist cleared, I could see these guys building a 12.75 anti-air craft position. I started firing my M-79 at these guys and the squad that was with me started shooting at them. Well, a 12.75 position is a great big hole in the ground with a mound of dirt in the middle so these guys can go in a 360. And on top of this mound is a tripod so they can spin around in a 360 with the anti-aircraft gun. It's pretty good cover for them, all they've gotta do it keep their heads down. I used every high explosive round I had from my M-79 trying to take that position out. I had Bouncing Betty's which were rounds that would hit, they'd bounce up in the air and explode. I shot all of my white phosphorous, all of my illumination rounds at them and that's the only way I got them was burning them out with illumination rounds. When we went up there were three of them still moving up but very close to death in the bottom of this position and that was my platoon. Another platoon went another way, another platoon went another way. That was August twenty-eighth and we had—quite a few men we lost on that day [sound of papers]. We had—Johnny Bosser [sp??] was lost that day, he got the

Silver Star. Buchanan [sp??] was lost. We had Dean Davis [sp??] lost, he got a navy cross. We had José Jiménez, he got the Medal of Honor that day. Bob McCabe was killed that day. Clarence St. Claire was killed that day, he got the Navy Cross. Edward Cherade [sp??] was killed that day, he got the Silver Star. So, a lot of medals were given out that day for that operation and a lot of our leaders are still very, very angry with the Army because they sat up on top and did nothing. I don't know the orders, I just know the orders I was given. That was probably the baddest time for me. But that was leading up to what you asked.

Two weeks after that we were still walking from there through the mountains and we're in the jungle and I saw a Vietnamese with a rifle—I'm sure it was North Vietnamese Army and I saw him looking up at us as we're walking and I gave the signal and I said, "We've got enemy over here." I take my M-79 and I shoot and if you're familiar with a grenade launcher, it's a weapon that's got a high trajectory, it lobs. It's like a BB gun you can actually watch the round. I couldn't hit the guy. Every time I would shoot I would hit the same vine that was hanging in the air. I mean, if I put it lower I'd shoot past him, if I put it higher I'd shoot in front of him. I had to shoot at that spot and always hit that same vine. And shooting went on for ten, fifteen minutes, shooting stopped and one of the things with the way a Marine is, is he will not drink his water 'til he's got more water available. I had six canteens and there was a little stream right by where I was so I dumped all my six canteens of old water, fill the canteens and as I was taking a drink of water, I'm sure it was that man I was shooting at, took a shot at me. I'm sure he was aiming at my head, and he got my hand instead. It's the closest best guess I can say. Like it was on February twenty-third in the Bo Bans—[thumps table] you're instantly down. I mean, just—something's not normal—boom—you're kissing ground. That's how it was. I said "Hey, I've been hit."

Then I had to transfer my M-79 to somebody else, my .45. I got a rifle to take back with me which—the helicopter was three hundred feet up. It's solid trees all around. They dropped this cable down with a bar on it that folds down like this and you put your legs over the bar and you hang on. Now, here I got a hand that doesn't work and I'm holding on a rifle and this thing is swinging back and forth, bouncing into all the trees as the helicopter's trying to stay steady while everybody out there is shooting at him. They managed to get me up in the bottom of the helicopter. Halfway up I thought I was going to lose it, I dropped the rifle and I had, boom. When I got in the helicopter, I could hear the hits that it was taking. If you take a baseball bat and go up to an aluminum storm door and smack it with a baseball bat, that's just what it sounds like. My first thought is, "My god, I'm going to die in a helicopter wreck now." And I went over to the 50, I didn't even ask for permission. I mean, the man in the helicopter who's flying it, you've got the pilot, the co-pilot, there's a crew chief. The crew chief is on one side and what he's doing is he's supposed to be on the gun but he's bringing these guys up so I just got on the gun and I

just started laying fire down. Now, looking out the window as I'm laying fire down there were three or four Huey's that came out and they're dropping white phosphorous flares to smoke the whole area to hide the helicopter. The helicopter picked up three or four more injured and we took off to LZ Baldy, where it was an Army base we were taking over and battalion aid station there.

They gave me a Darvon for my pain, that's like a baby Tylenol. I can't say I hurt that bad. Waited for that helicopter to load with supplies and go right back where it was to drop—that's guts, these guys have been shot up and they're going to go right back there and drop off supplies, but the supplies were needed. Then the helicopter came back, picked me up and by then it was dark and this is the first time I really spent a lot of time flying in a helicopter in the dark. I'm seeing everything going on down below me as we get to Da Nang. I went NSA—Naval Support Activity—and they proceeded to cut my clothes off of me. Cut my boots off of me. I'm naked, "It's my arm, people!" They bandaged me up a little bit, asked me how I was. I said, "I'm okay." Put me into a rack in the hospital which right above me had a hole that had been patched where sometime before a mortar had come through. It's like, "Well this is—" But nothing of course happened but that's just something I remember. I got to talk with the guys there and one of the guys looked just like Robert Boone. I don't know if you've ever seen the TV show "Have Gun, Will Travel" but he looked exactly like him. He was a sergeant and we got to be close friends. Said "What happened to you?" He said, "I got my foot run over by a tank." And the first thing I did was laugh, I mean, you know how can you be so close to a tank and get your f—? He knew of course I wasn't laughing at him and—there's my Marine dog, he likes the high ground—but he understood.

And so when they took me in for surgery, they bandaged me up, I thought, you know, "It's cool, it's all taken care of." But the next day they had to take the bandages off and the bandages were all bloody. What I didn't realize is—and this is gruesome, I'm sorry—they didn't sew me shut. They left it open and because of that, my skin swelled so—the scar is from here down to here—

Gibb: Oh, I see it, yeah.

Rolke: So it opened up this far on this side, and this far around so there was this much raw meat. The nerves had healed to the gauze, so when they took this off I'd never felt such pain in my life, I hope I don't again. It was like they pulled the bones right out of my arm. I know I screamed. I mean, I know I screamed. I don't know if I said anything vulgar, dirty or not. Probably didn't, that's not how I was. But the sergeant across, "Payback, payback." and he's laughing and it's like, "Oh, you son-of-a-bitch." But it's—that's how you joked around with guys. They came up and they just re-bandaged me with new stuff and I'm thinking "They're going to do this again tomorrow" and they did do it the next day. She was not—I hadn't seen a round-eyed woman in nine months. Any round woman shouldn't

be pretty—she was not. She was a major—wait—lieutenant commander she would have been in the Navy because she had a brass oak leaf. She came up and she smiled at me and she's got a syringe and she said, "You'll be fine it just a few minutes." She hit me with Demerol and I'm thinking, she got me in the left arm—right arm, I think. Remember thinking "It's over here, why are you doing my right arm?" and in about five minutes I could have gone outside and played baseball. That's just how it was.

And each day they would come up—because it's such an infectious place, I would get penicillin. Now this is not procaine penicillin—penicillin that's got an anesthetic in with it so you don't feel it. This is the pure penicillin that goes in like concrete. It's these big things like this and I chose to take them standing up so I'd stand up at six in the morning, they'd hit me in the left cheek. I'd stand up at noon, they'd hit me in the right cheek. I'd stand up at six he'd hit me in the left cheek. I'd stand up at midnight and he'd hit me in the right cheek. You know, you joke around with the corpsman and stuff. They have these—it looks like a mosquito sprayer and they used those to fill up with certain medicines that they can put in on IV so they don't have to replace. Well he comes walking up to me one—must have been noon and I'm holding an IV bag in this hand, and an IV bag in this hand and he says, "I'm here to give you your shot." And I turn around, he's got one of these in his hand, and he's just joking around. I didn't know he was joking around and I took off like a shot. I hit the corner, I slid and I fell and both IV bottles hit a wall and broke. Now of course he's really in a panic because I could bleed out and I'm in a panic because he's trying to come at me faster. When they finally pulled me over it was just a hilarious, hilarious type of thing but you know, kids are kids. You make the best of it.

I was there for four days. When I got to the—I had to spend the last night in the Air Force hospital. That was when I was going to be shipped out from Vietnam. Doctors came up and said "We have to change your dressing." I said, "It was just changed about a half an hour ago." He says "Look, we are the Air Force, we're not the Navy. Just—" They hit the bandage with hydrogen peroxide. They let it sit for about a half an hour and they peeled it off. Just one, two, three. And it's just like, "Oh man." They sprayed it with some kind of oily antibiotic and there's this plastic mosquito screen that they have that has, like, grease on it so stuff won't stick and they put that over the wound and then they gauzed it up and it's like "Now I see why people talk about the Air Force." Then I went to the Air Force hospital in Japan, someplace, I don't remember where. I was there for a day and then I was in Okinawa for three months where they took and stitched me shut—that was actually in Japan they stitched me shut. Then I went to Okinawa and in Okinawa I was there for physical therapy. I couldn't do anything. My hand was—the tendons and the nerves and the ligaments were severed. My hand was like this. The most I could move my hand was up to here. I would put my hand down and one of the things I would do would be to raise my hand. And to pick something up, I couldn't, I just couldn't do it.

This was the hardest, was touching the thumb and the finger together. I got to a point where I would go against a wall and I'd put my hand on a doorway and I would stand up to stretch them out. When I got to where I could reach down and pick up a cigarette lighter, open it up and light it with one hand, everybody in the ward knew. It wasn't just, "Hey look what I can do." It was "Hey, look what Rolke can do." It was just—everybody was there for you. I was there for three months and then was sent home.

Gibb: You were back in the US for three months before?

Rolke: No, I was in Okinawa for three months.

Gibb: Oh, wow.

Rolke: When I left Okinawa I came back to the states. I flew to Guam, Midway [Atoll], Wake. Not necessarily in that order. Hawaii. Hawaii to Elmendorf, I spent a day in a hospital in Elmendorf then I flew down to Travis Air Force Base in California. We took navy buses from there to Treasure Island which is at the base of the Oakland Bay Bridge in San Francisco and I was there for four days. Thankfully because I was being discharged I didn't have to do anything. And I think I spent the whole time laying down because I was just so—so sick. Then I got home and like I said, my trip home, I didn't have anybody waiting for me. I made a few calls when I got home. I didn't see too many people, the next day I was in the hospital. Then I was moved to the VA for almost two weeks and then got out. But I think one of the big things that gave me some semblance of normalcy is that three months in Okinawa and the time in the VA gave me a chance to refresh my mind and to deprogram some of the things I had. I don't know what I would have been like otherwise. I know how I was when I got out and I still had a long way to go.

Gibb: Did your family—your family knew you were coming back, they knew you were in Okinawa and they knew that—?

Rolke: That's a whole other story. After the gunshot, I—after my last surgery there, I was ambulatory, I could move around. In fact I walked from ward to ward to ward to see if I found any of my friends that I'd served with because I wanted to say goodbye. There was a Red Cross office and I went in and she had popcorn and—that's my Purple Heart in this box that General Ormond Simmons [Simpson] gave me, "Can you wrap this up for me?" Brown paper bag she wrapped it up, she wrote the address on with the crayon, she mailed it home. I didn't think anything else of it. When I got to Japan, halfway through my physical therapy, I thought, "I'm going to give my mom a call. 'Hey, hi, I'm in Japan, I'm coming home. Good news, bad news. The bad news isn't as bad as the good news. I'm coming home, I was shot, I'm going to be okay. I was shot in the hand, everything will be okay.'" She's—"Oh yeah, I just got a package from you today. I haven't opened it yet." I went, "Oh, damn. She's going to open up a Purple Heart and not even hear from me." I'd forgotten completely to tell her what it was about and so I told her, "It's probably a Purple

Heart medal for my wound but—I don't know how long I'm going to be here but I'm safe now. I'm far, far, far away from war.” Of course, she told the whole family, it was just—yeah. I had a great mom.

Gibb: Maybe just to move on to your homecoming, you said you felt like been—you had time to deprogram—

Rolke: Because I'd had time to talk with guys in the hospital, there was one guy next to me he was in a bunker when an RPG went into it and blew up, his whole back was a checkerboard, His arms were in outrigger casts, his fingers were in outrigger casts. I mean, he quite literally couldn't scratch his nose. There were other guys who had worse injuries—amputees. We had one—the guy had a broken leg, it was from artillery. I'm in old wooden barracks in Yokosuka Naval Hospital, we're on the second floor, and we're having wheelchair races around the ward. I mean, I can push and we turned a corner and he was on the inside of the corner, as we turned the corner, and he hit the stairs and went down and broke his other leg in the wheelchair. I mean, it's just some of the crazy things that kids do. I'd forgotten about that. But I'd gotten to race slot cars at the enlisted men's club in Yokosuka. I'd gotten to go to the EM club, I'd gotten to go out on liberty and there were Japanese girls but I got to meet people and talk with people, people that were—forgive me, I don't mean this derogatorily—slant-eyed people that were your friend. Found out just—war was behind for me.

Gibb: What was your experience of Japan?

Rolke: I had R&R. I went to Japan for R&R and I saw the great Buddha in Japan. I saw Tokyo tower, I saw things in Japan that only the girl I was with could show me—just wonderful places and different foods and different things. The hotel I stayed at, the bartender taught me how to use chopsticks. I taught him how to swear in English. You remember that stuff. I found Japan very—I love Japan, I've been back to Japan three times since. I find the Japanese people and the culture just a wonderful thing. Hospitalized there in Yokosuka, the one thing I noticed on the edge of the base is Yokosuka Bay and the Japanese did not like when our nuclear weapon powered ships would come in. They'd protest. Along the bay there were holes still—caves, still in the sides of the hill from where Japan would have their artillery pieces on rails and bring them out when the war was going on. It was kind of like a history lesson for me as well.

Gibb: Interesting. So maybe moving on to post-conflict, after you got back, after the Thanksgiving, what happened then? What was your life like?

Rolke: I figured I owed myself a vacation. I was getting paid unemployment, I thought, “You know what, I'm sorry, I worked for it. I'm taking some time off.” So I took off December and in January applied at Allen-Bradley, a big local company in Milwaukee. They hired family and because my family worked there I got a job. I worked there for just about a

year. I was not treated like I was—I don't like the word baby killer. I was treated like I was just another person, not a warrior and got laid off because business was business. My boss liked me enough that he found me another job, knew it was coming and had it ready for me. I went to work at a steel factory in Milwaukee and worked there for eleven years. They in turn because of labor costs moved to Texas, and I was out of work. This was 1980. You weren't here in 1980 but in 1980 here finding jobs were impossible. With work I had been going to college and I'd spread my hours so that I could go to college at night and take day classes or I could go to college days and take night classes. Do the work in the meantime. I could not find a job. I would mail out resumes, I would knock on doors, I would ring bells, make phone calls. Eighteen months to the day, my wife's friend told her and she told me, "Carla's wife just told me that Chuck got hired" "Where?" "The post office" "I'd never thought of the post office."

So I went down to the post office and the next day and talked with the guard 'cause this was when you had an armed guard in the post office. "Where do you want to go?" "Employment" He says, "We're not hiring" "My buddy just got hired. I was told you were hiring disabled veterans" He says, "You're a disabled veteran? Room 279." Pushed the elevator button for me and that was it. Room 279. I went downstairs, her name was Shirley Parker, she was a red head. She was a very nice lady. I took the test that day and normally there were waiting periods for what was going on, I just—luck of the draw. I'd taken the test, there were more tests being given the next week, I took those tests. There were more tests the next week, I took those and they hired the week after. Because I was a veteran I got five points added to my test, because I was a wounded veteran I got five more. So I got ten points added. I scored third highest out of 1,200 applicants. I was working as a mail handler downtown, unloading trucks, putting parcels and magazines and this and that, wherever it went. After almost a year they asked me, "Would you like to be a letter carrier?" and I said, "Show me where." I went and became a letter carrier for let's see, 1985 to 2006, I was a letter carrier and then had to retire because I couldn't do it with my hand anymore. Just trying to hold things wouldn't work. So I retired.

Gibb: Sounds like your experience coming back as a Vietnam veteran was different to other people's.

Rolke: Yes and no. I got married in 1977 to what I thought was the most wonderful woman in the world and I made life hell for her. I had nightmares every night. I never had the nightmares where I'd beat up on her. I never had nightmares where she felt for her safety but I'd be screaming orders in my sleep. "John, Phil—" whatever, "go this way, do this, do this." I'd wake up in a pool of sweat. It was—what do you do? What medicine do you take for that? And in 1991, just after we bombed Baghdad, my wife said, "Let's look for a different church, one closer by." So I went into the phone book and picked what I thought was the closest church and it wasn't. It's just—this is where I'm supposed to go. Walked into the church and they had yellow ribbons on the walls of the church and I thought "I

belong here." Met the pastor and he said "Hey, thank you so much." And it's like, that's the first time anybody's ever said that to me.

I was outside in the back of the church laying sod one day and my pastor came out and—you can take this however you want okay. My wife would leave it up to me where we're going for vacation. She was afraid to fly so I would plan trips, six months in advance we knew where we were going. This year we didn't have an idea at all and everyday "Where are we going for a vacation? It's in two weeks Bill" and I had no plans. The pastor came out while I'm laying the sod, he said "Bill, just got this in the mail, it looks like it's something you might like, sadly it's in two weeks, you probably can't plan for it yet. Well, it's Vietnam veterans' conference at '[The] 700 Club', Pat Robertson." I don't know if you know his name. Big on the TV show, "[The] 700 Club". It's a Christian show, he has Regent University. That's where we went. It's all Christian veterans and—talked about our problems, talked about our issues, talked about what we're talking about right now. One of the men said, "What can I pray for you for?" I said, "I have nightmares" And they prayed for me and I've not had nightmares since.

I went back the following year and—totally healed of course, I mean, I'm perfect now—and we had a break in one of our conferences and there was another conference that he had going on at the same time. This man came out of this conference and I knew him. "He is my cousin"—much older, but he's my cousin. "I know him." I'm talking with one of the speakers who I'd become good friends with, this man came up and he stopped and as he stopped I realized he's not my cousin. I finished this talk with my friend and I looked over at this man and said, "We just had a few minutes between our break", he said "I wanted to just—I just felt in my heart I had to come up and tell you thank you." And he walked away and I turned to talk to my friend, to say "Roger," and I looked back and he wasn't there. I don't care what you want to say, call me what you want. Do I believe in angels? Yes. I needed that at the time. It was two years after that that I took my wife back to Vietnam. We smuggled Bibles into the country and my wife got to meet the people.

Gibb: What was the return like? What was the—going back to Vietnam, what was that like for you?

Rolke: [laughs] When the plane came in to land in Saigon, at the end of the runway are old rusty 12.75 anti-aircraft mounts. They leave 'em there. I saw a couple of the hooches Christmas tree lights. This was the first part of January when we landed. Unbelievably I left Vietnam on my birthday. Unbelievably, I got there on my birthday, one year and I left on my birthday. Actually, I shared my birthday twice because we had my birthday party with a guy I met, his day is the same as mine, in Kuala Lumpur. We crossed the International Date Line and we had our birthday all over again. But to get back to that, the revetments—jet enclosures—were all filled with MiG-29s. We pulled in, the airport was empty, it was well past midnight and we were told about customs and how gruff they

could be and we passed through customs and we went into the hotel. Everybody was extremely friendly. Spying on us? I'm sure the communists had spies, I'm very sure. We went places and people would come along and when we went into one area there were some young girl shopkeepers who were selling things and they'd come up to you and, "You're not Russian" "No" "Russians don't smile, you smile. Are you French?" "We're American" "Why are you here?" "Well I was here years ago and things weren't done right and I'd like to see things done right, now"

To them, if you say the word Vietnam War, they look at you with this quizzical look because to them that part of history ended in 1975. If you talk about the Vietnam War to them they'll say "Oh, before '75" That is always what they'll say. The kids would come up and they'd just hold you. They'd just—just great kids. Places you went—everywhere you went, things you did, everybody was just very friendly. We—like I say, we smuggled bibles into the country, we went on—places where we saw the kids making bricks and building pottery and eating all the things and enter the churches they were in. I talked with a woman in the post office when I was there. We went to the tunnels of Cu Chi. We went up to pay our respects to cemeteries of the fallen Vietnamese. On the beach, on China Beach with all the kids, the kids have all got smiles on their faces. Participated in three Vietnamese weddings, found American ordinance still laying on the ground because it's explosive, they won't pick it up. But everybody you talked to had a smile for you. It was great. Our group leader who I'm sure was Vietnamese, this guy was a Viet Cong soldier and we talked privately on a elevator because he was afraid he was being spied on. Went to Hue, downtown Hue where the Tet of '68 was the worst. We actually drove the boats. Even in Saigon—even in Saigon with the cyclos where you ride in the bike, we'd ride the bike and let the guy that was peddling sit in the front. So it was a pretty neat experience for us.

We went into a couple of villages up near Dong Ha, which is right near the DMZ and we stopped in Dong Ha at a pharmacy and paid thousands and thousands and thousands of dong for antibiotics. Five cents a tablet. Thousands and thousands of dong is pennies and pennies. Thirteen hundred dong is a dollar. Yeah. We'd take them into the villages. When we went in there, we went into one village where the chief's son had his leg partially blown off. He was digging and he hit a mortar round that hadn't gone off. You could smell the gangrene on his leg and we treated him as well we could. The next year the group went back—I couldn't go because of my wife—and his leg had healed. It hadn't gone back to normal but it had healed which was unexpected. The chief was just overjoyed and wanted to know more about us because of it. We went into North Vietnam, what used to be North—and as soon as you crossed the river, the atmosphere changed. People were still unfriendly but down south everyone was very wonderful. I had them kill my cobra. I ate my cobra dinner and had my cobra blood wine—got pictures of that. That was that.

Gibb: Were you—how did you feel about having the opportunity to go back?

Rolke: I couldn't wait to go back. The following year I had the opportunity to go back again and this was to help build a village within miles of where I was shot. It didn't turn out because at that time my wife didn't want me to go back. They go back each year and I would like to go back again. Vietnamese people are a wonderful people. All people are wonderful, it's the leaders, it's war that changes the things.

Gibb: You came back '69 did you say? So the war continued for several years after that, how did you—you were obviously hearing about it, reading about it?

Rolke: [sound of papers] Yeah, reading about it and reading about it. All the notes of what happened, the last couple of weeks in the war. Watching it end.

Gibb: You kept newspaper clippings and—

Rolke: Yeah. Going back and a lot of it was—I didn't see us winning that war but at the same time, I didn't fully grasp 'til we left, the sacrifice our guys put into that. It was like pouring water into the ocean. So many families—I mean you will go to Vietnam and there are graves all over to their troops. So many, they are empty graves because they can't find them. Here we've pretty well kept it that way. You go to Washington D.C. and you've got the wall with 58,000 names on it and you know each one and each one has a story behind it. People don't die in war just, "I'm dead." People in war die in some of the most horrific types of ways. All of those ways are things that went through my head when I heard Da Nang had fallen, when I heard Hue had fallen, when I had heard this and I'm thinking "All of these sacrifices." And it wasn't just Charles who lost his life it was Charles' wife, Charles' girlfriend, Charles' mother, father, aunts, uncles, grandparents. Hundreds and hundreds of families besides people were affected. The time of Paul the Apostle and the New Testament: when somebody killed somebody else, they would chain the person to the body, he'd have to carry the corpse wherever he went. That took a physical, a mental strain on the person generally causing them to eventually die. The metaphor is poor but I look at our guys coming back from every war, they have this chain on them the same way with a different burden. We have to do something to help them.

Gibb: Did you talk much about your experiences after you came back?

Rolke: The first couple of years, no. People would ask and sometimes I'd start to open up. Sometimes if I got liquored up I'd open up more. I don't drink much now. And my wife told me once, "You should write a book." and I didn't think much of that 'til I was working—I was going to school days and I was working a third shift factory job and all I had to do was listen to the machine. If it made a different sound, I knew something was wrong, boom. Otherwise if the sound stayed right, I could sit and read, do my homework and everything. Well I put all my memories together on sheets of paper, got them all

together. Then I put them in chronological order and I'd go through "Oh my goodness, there's another one." So I had a stack of notes and then I started writing and I started writing and I've got my memoirs written. It's about 450 pages. Typed. Single spaced. One of my friends said "You should show your war story to other people." And it's not a war story, it's a love story, which is probably why I don't show it to other people because I didn't change names, I used names and I wanted it more for my family to know just exactly what it was like. My brother thinks I'm a hero. I'm far from a hero. I just—I did what I had to do. They think that because—they have not, because they look not. I guess is the best way putting it. He had to call me on Veterans Day and on the Marine Corps birthday and it's like, I was there, I just had to be. So yeah, I've done my notes and over the years I've many other things.

I had a friend who on the fourth of July, lost his leg to a mortar, we lost three on third of July, my squad leader—somebody set off a booby trap, he was hit, the guy behind him was hit and my—one of my best friends was hit. They were all three shipped out on helicopter. We were told "Stay in that area, the enemy might come back after hearing the explosions" so we stayed there all night, the next day as we were coming in mortars came down, we were walking like this and a mortar hits here mortar hits here and it's clear, it's like you're in an open field, there's no place you can hide. All you can do is try and keep everything inside your helmet. The third mortar landed this far in front of my friend's leg, right in front of me and he had his leg blown off and his arm mangled and I carried him to the helicopter, he's the last friend I had over there. And when the helicopter left, I watched my life go. I mean, I knew these other guys but I was really close with these three. I'm alone now. I'm also the senior man. It wasn't 'til a few years ago I realized if he hadn't have been standing there, I'd've taken the brunt of the mortar round. I don't feel guilty about that, it's just the deal of the cards.

I managed to go to Silver Spring, Maryland in 2001. My wife had business there and I found his address and I said, "Hey, can we get together?" He said, "Hop on the metro, take the red line to the last exit, it's a Silver Spring exit, get out of the train. Come up, go out the door, turn left, walk to the corner, across the street that's my office." He is a counselor for the Silver Spring Maryland Veterans administration. We had a great talk, he didn't know what happened. He was told something different by the government. I said, "Do you want to know?" We talked for a long time and I left. I do the newsletter, the finances, the mail outs, the roster for our company so I keep adding his name, mailing him information for our reunions, I've seen him at our reunion. My other friend who was hit the day before, I saw him in Louisville at our reunion once, we talked for a while. I just got back from reunion that we had in Mobile, Alabama, less than a month ago. So I still see my guys.

Gibb: Do you talk about the experiences that you had over there and anything since?

Rolke: Yes and no. sometimes you will come up with—we had one guy his name was Bill, I'm not going to use his last name, just because I don't want him to ever see this. He was—calling him a doofus is bad—but he was just not all with it sometimes. You'd be walking out at night to go on an ambush, you wanna be quiet, you wanna be ten feet away from each other so a hand grenade won't get two or three of you. Walking along all at night, quiet and a splash, "Argh." It's him—he'd fallen off the rice paddy into the water. He'd get back up, we'd walk along ten or fifteen feet more and boom, splash. Do it all over again. That's the things you talk about. Yeah, we talk about the Bo Bans where we lost Nunez and where we lost Hardigan. We remember them as friends. We have a memorial service. All those names get read at a memorial service. Each one is remembered. [Pause] Sorry. [Pause] Each one is loved. But it's the joyous things you remember more. There—at first it's a hate. I think it's okay to hate war. I ended up coming home and hating the people. When you can change that hate into sadness, your body will survive more because hate is bitterness and bitterness is a failure to forgive. And bitterness will eat you from the inside out. We're here, remembering these guys is the best way we can honor them because we remember. And that's why we get together to share the times that we had good and to remember the times that weren't, so—what else can I do for you?

Gibb: [laughs] I'm just trying to think. One thing I am curious about, obviously you mentioned your faith, after Vietnam but I'm just wondering if you had sort of spirituality before you left and how that was—

Rolke: I think some people who are stronger going into something come out stronger. I think that's just pretty much standard. I went in—I had been a Sunday school teacher for some years, so I went in having a little knowledge. Enough knowledge so that one time outside of a village of An Hoa we were right across from the Arizona which was a bad area. A chaplain came in and gave us a Communion service and I don't know what your religious beliefs are but if you know Communion I was sitting on my helmet and I've got my .45 on my waist. Never paid attention to it, I went up and got Communion while I've got a weapon on. I don't think it's wrong, it just strikes me as I don't think I'd ever do that again. I talked with him afterwards. I said, "Hey, I gotta ask you a question, the Bible says 'Thou shalt not kill' that's the fifth commandment. I'm here killing people, what gets me off doing this?" "Well, where it comes to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's you're doing for your country, what your country says." I think that was a little cop out but he also said "In the original translation which was Greek—Hebrew, the word kill is translated *ratsach* which means 'murder'. Are you deliberately trying to murder these people?" "If I'm going out at night on an ambush, I'm not going there to pass out cookies and cake. I'm going out there to kill somebody, so yeah, that's murder." I told him that and he said "You're doing what you're ordered to do. If you weren't ordered to do this, would you do it?" "I really don't know." He told me, "You really seem like you are—" I'm paraphrasing of course—"troubled by this. Would you like a job in my office, on a

staff where you wouldn't have to do this?" I'd never thought of that. The only thing that popped into my mind was, "I'm not going to leave my guys." Boom, that's just the first thing. I said, "No." Now his answer to me about killing and murder helped but I still always didn't know.

Coming home I was back in the church and like I said, it was my pastor, a new pastor who got me to go to Virginia beach, it was their church who had the yellow ribbons on the walls of the church. It was the church who donated supplies to me when I went to Vietnam. I think, yes, some of the background I had and my Christian faith before I left helped me. I saw some brutal things done by people that—I don't want to call them war atrocities, just brutal, wrong things. Just things that I know I could never have done.

Gibb: Hm. I don't know if I have any more questions, I don't know if there's anything else that we haven't covered that you really wanted to talk about that you've thought about?

Rolke: Do I want to talk about? I start and I never stop and I can't say that I'd know what you'd want. That's why I brought all of this stuff, I didn't know if you wanted to look through it, prick your thoughts to anything?

Gibb: I mean it's really up to you 'cause I could have a look but I'm not sure I would know exactly what I was looking at.

Rolke: Start here if you want and I will just explain to you page by page.

Gibb: It's just a little bit difficult with the recording.

Rolke: Oh, I see what you're saying.

Gibb: Because you won't be able to see what we're talking about.

Rolke: Those are C-ration packages.

Gibb: Well yeah, maybe tell me about the food, what were the C-rations like?

Rolke: Canned. When I was going through training it was 1968, I was eating food that was canned in 1942. I was eating white bread that they canned from 1942. Realize that the American war in Europe had been going on and they were making food for the war. If I'm eating C-rations from 1942 and there was '43 and '44 and '45 in Europe and in the Pacific. '50, '51, '52 and '53 in Korea. How much of that stuff did they make that there was stuff left over for me in training? I don't know where it all came from.

Gibb: Could you perhaps describe what that tasted like given that it had been in cans for—?

Rolke: Everyone will talk about ham and lima beans. There was a name for those which anybody who's ever going to hear this knows what it was. It's not—

[End of File 1][Beginning of File 2]

Rolke: —in your boats. The food was okay. I liked beef with spice sauce, it came in a little can. Everybody else liked beans and weenies, it came big can and it was like spaghetti O's with big pieces of bean—of meat. Other than that—you got four cigarettes in a pack and you got a pack of matches, you got toilet paper, you got salt. You didn't get pepper, for whatever purpose that was. This had stuff inside of it. All of this was inside. Cigarettes and soups. Stuff you needed, little pack of Chiclets so you could chew gum.

Gibb: You said you got things in—things were sent over as well?

Rolke: I would ask for—wow, Vienna sausages in a can, beef jerky, we had a friend in Hawaii, his mother and dad would always send him shredded fruit from Hawaii. That's the first place I ever had shredded mango and other stuff. He looked Hawaiian, I almost killed him one night. He got in front of our lines to go the bathroom and he's crawling back up in the jungle in the dark, right in front of me looking as much Asian as anything. It wasn't 'til I heard him say a word to somebody else that I—just was ready to kill him. Bryan Amoto [sp??]. Yeah, I guess you're right, I guess there's not much I can show you.

Gibb: Well if you want to leaf through and perhaps you can describe some of the things that we're looking at.

Rolke: Pictures of us going through rice to find supplies, crossing the Song Vu Gai River, just doing things like that. What one of our weapons looked like, these are paper packages from the bullets that the enemy had that I took off one of the wrappers.

Gibb: Were you able to retrieve much, you know, sort of things—paraphernalia from the other side?

Rolke: Oh yes, quite a bit of stuff.

Gibb: What kinds of things?

Rolke: You mean to bring home or to bring back to the company?

Gibb: Both

Rolke: 12.75 anti-aircraft positions, rocket—mortar-weapons, rocket launchers, ammunition, grenades, explosives, packs. We went into one bunker in the middle of the jungle that had a couple hundred bras. These were for the North Vietnamese nurses. They were all moldy and smelling of mildew. Excuse me. Things like that. But yeah all those things and they all got burnt or exploded. The weapons we'd bring back because they're good for display, the captain likes, "Hey, look what I got, our guys got" Just all sorts of different things.

Gibb: Did you bring things back the US with you?

Rolke: I have an SKS rifle. I have—is that something you guys want? I have my poncho liner with shrapnel holes in it. I have my K-Bar and my boots, my original boots, that's it. [sound of papers]. This is more rations. These are longer range recon rations. Tooth pick that's cinnamon impregnated wood, you chew on the end, that gets fluffy, you can brush your teeth. That's communications wire, that's a flechette that comes out of an artillery round. That's part of a sandbag. That's a poem I wrote. These are pictures and things from there, the Purple Heart and the combat action ribbon, my ID cards. Letters—

Gibb: You received things after you got back?

Rolke: Medals you mean?

Gibb: Yeah, yeah. Was there any kind of ceremony for those?

Rolke: No they came in a cardboard box to the house. I even had to write for the certificate for my Purple Heart saying, "I understand there's a certificate that comes with this" and I got it a week later. Letters that I sent from over there with all sorts of different letter heads and things like that. Cigarette wrappers from the Vietnamese packages of cigarettes. Rice from the rice paddy. Can openers, a card I got on the plane going over to Vietnam. Grenade ring. Sandbag. My medevac tag from when I had dysentery. What some of the not so good looking people looked like. My certificate of appreciation from the state of Wisconsin. Xeroxed on a sheet of paper, mailed to me.

Gibb: What is that? What's a certificate of appreciation?

Rolke: You notice how very personal it is.

Gibb: Do you want to just describe what that was for?

Rolke: The state of Wisconsin, the governor ran off these on a copy machine and mailed them to each vet coming back and it was to say "Thank you for your time in service." And that was it. That is me with my right arm injured with my radio operator and two of the guys I was with. This is the time I was in the hospital over there and this is Major General Ormond Simpson giving me the Purple Heart at times of injury. Some of my medical scripts. The money from over there. The stiches they took out of me from my first surgery. The last letter from a girl I was dating. I got this from her when I got home. She said they'd sent it back to her, they tried to get her a couple hundred times. Packages and envelopes. More ID cards, all government. Then pictures from over there of burning down a village that our people—girls from a USO show that was there.

Gibb: Oh what was that one?

Rolke: It was three girls from Australia with a band that came onto our hill. They just sang and did a little show. It was nobody famous. Her name was Tanya Vail and we had an

enlisted men's club that they were on the stage of and I was in charge of the door so nobody could go in while they were changing. My dog tags. That's pretty much all of what I have.

Gibb: What was the show, just music?

Rolke: Just song and dance and nothing more important than that but it was the idea that we had somebody come to us. They were very, very nice to take their time. Australia was closer but it was just a case of it wasn't safe for them and they did make the time to come to be with us and I thought it was very nice.

Gibb: Mm-hm.

Rolke: I wish I could show you more and give you some idea of something. There's me drinking the blood of the cobra.

Gibb: Oh, wow.

Rolke: There he is right there. So.

Gibb: What else was I going to—I'm just wondering what—you know, it's been a few decades now and when you reflect back on it, what are the sort of things that spring to mind?

Rolke: I look at how many people were lost in World War One, how many were lost in World War Two, just with the genocide alone of Hitler, with Stalin. The loss of Polish lives, the loss of Jewish lives. How once—come here, come here. How once the war was over, what really had changed? Just land. Korea, the same thing, it was just loss of lives. And what's really changed? It's still going on now. I think with Vietnam, if anything, what I've learned was—I went back in '96 and I saw that the people are living better. Places now have electricity, there's more things for the people to do. There's more people doing things and would they have gotten it without us? I don't know. But I know there's a lot of losses of life and I look back at—I think mostly of the waste. I don't think any war is right, I think some wars are necessary. But I don't think any war is right and it's gotta be up to those dedicated people who want to make it right for you, to do it. I got a letter from somebody years and years ago—if they bother you, kick 'em—I don't know who she was and it was—"I wanna thank you, I cannot imagine what horrors must go on in your head, what you must have lived through, the sacrifices you gave so that we didn't have to. So please, let me say thank you." I think probably that is the best thing I've heard from anybody is that I stopped somebody else from seeing a horror that would otherwise be drastic. Can I live with it? Yeah, I have. I mean, I have my days. February twenty-third bothers me, fourth of July bothers me, August twenty-eighth bothers me. There's a few other days. I lost my best friend that I served with July this year. I always call him on the Marine Corps birthday. He's a memory from then and a memory from now. We all have

that but we lose family, we lose pets, but we have that hope—at least I have that hope—of one day it's going to be there again. It's not for me to ask why. I believe God answers all prayer. I just don't believe he answers it the way we want to know it. He wouldn't be God if he did. I have that hope.

Gibb: Okay. I don't know if there's anything else that you want to—I have no more questions. If there's anything else that you would like—

Rolke: No, I'm fine. I'm here for you. I'm sorry if I ramble, I just you know if I could give you—

Gibb: No, no rambling here. I'm just wondering if there's anything else you would want someone who was listening to this in the future to know, or your family to know about your service and—?

Rolke: It's time away. It's time of stress. It's time of physical drag down. Do I look back on it and think anything bad? No. I look back on boot camp and boy, if I had a nightmare I'd probably have it at boot camp. I look back on it with the greatest pride in the world and when I'm with my friends, it's something we share. We've all—it's like somebody that lived for weeks and weeks in a life boat and were finally rescued. You have this thing that you share. I don't see that in the Army, the Navy or the Air Force. When I'm in the—when I'm wearing my Marine coat someplace and I see a Marine "Hey, *semper fi*" and we talk like we're brothers because we are. I have walked up to eighty, ninety year old man who I've seen this little eagle, globe and anchor on, my brother is standing with me or I'm visiting him in Oklahoma so he knows I don't know the guy. "Hey, *semper fi*." and we start carrying on a conversation like we've known each other a hundred years. That is something my brother will never have. And that is something I will always have. And it's not a thing between my brother and I, it's not a thing between anybody, it's just, that's something that will never be lost. I'm so proud of that. So, that's me.

Gibb: Great, well thank you very much. Appreciate it.

Rolke: Thank you, I appreciate you coming here.

Gibb: Well we're really honored to have your life history in the archives, it's important. Really do.

Rolke: Now you take stuff for the archives, give me an example of what you take.

Gibb: Um, we can talk about that I just, are we done with that so we can just turn that off?

Rolke: I'm sorry.

Gibb: No, no. That's fine.

[End of File 2][Beginning of File 3]

Gibb: This is just to redo a little bit of the end that we didn't get on the recording. But just some reflections, general reflections on your time in the service and what you'd like people to know about that time.

Rolke: Well, people give their whole life in a certain period of time. Mine was given in a year and a half period of time. I was a kid and within a year and a half, I was an adult. Just the things that people do to survive or to keep their friends alive. First thing you did was you kept yourself alive, second thing you did was you kept your friend alive. I don't think anybody ever fights for their country. I think they fight for themselves and they fight for their friend. I told you before I don't think any war is right but I think some wars are necessary. I also told you before that just as in the time of the apostle Paul, people were chained to their victim, we as vets are going to be chained to some of the things we did.

I didn't bring it up before but the one thing that has chained me was an ambush I went out on and I was the last man in the ambush and I had men run up behind me as we were setting up our ambush and I didn't shoot at them. This is all within split seconds. It all takes time faster than I can say it in a sentence. I remember feeling super hot and sweat pouring all over me and my sound in my ears was just ringing loudly and how do I tell my friends we've got somebody behind me and they're close and just as I'm ready to fire I realize it's another squad of our Marines joining up with us. And I look back on the good point that I didn't kill my friends but I look back on the bad point that I didn't shoot when I should have. So what did I do that was right? We carry these things with us always. This will be with me as long as I live. I've lost friends and I've made friends and as much as I hurt with the friends I've lost, the camaraderie we have with the life keeps us together. I would say that the greatest thing I ever did in my life was come to know Jesus Christ, but the greatest action I ever did was to join the Marine Corps and actually did what I did to help save another life, try to save another country, survive and come home and at the same time by saying that, I can rest on the fact that of all the orders I gave, and I wasn't an order giver, but when I had to give orders, of all the orders I gave, no one was hurt or killed. That's probably the best thing I can fall back on is I didn't get anybody hurt and I think that's the way any football or baseball coach looks at his job too. Yes he'd like to win but a good coach should look at his men first.

I would do it all over again. I would do it all over again in a minute. Am I proud of what I've done? Yes. Have I done anything I shouldn't be proud of? I don't know. There might be fifty-fifty on one or two of those things but I think that's with everybody. I would just like anybody to realize that not just me but others go so that people can be able to say and feel and do the things they want to do that they couldn't if they weren't where we are. Germany with the Jews, Poland with the Jews. Russia, Stalin with the Jews—I mean, millions and millions of people were killed and it was just because of one or two people. Somebody has to put a stop to that. The Chinese said the longest march begins with the

first step, the biggest fight begins with one person. And you need people that are willing to stand and defend and do what's right. That's it.

Gibb: Okay. Before you did mention about the brotherhood that you have with—I found that interesting.

Rolke: Oh yeah, with the Marine Corps it's completely different you see anybody with an eagle, globe and anchor, it doesn't matter if they're twenty or forty or sixty or eighty. You go up and it's "*Semper fi*, hi" You are like family. My wife starts talking with his wife and the kids are all introduced and you all went through the same boot camp, you all were indoctrinated the same way, you're Marines. And first and foremost you're Marines. there's a real pride to that and that pride comes from inside and it's not of being a Marine it's the fact that "I" am the Marine, something is part of me. I became part of something. It's a way of being proud of you. Yeah, that's the greatest move I ever made. I told you my greatest acceptance was accepting Jesus Christ, but the greatest move I ever made was joining the Marine Corps. One of the greatest things was being able to come home afterwards too. So, yeah.

Gibb: Okay, I have no more questions. [laughs] Unless there's anything else you'd like to add.

Rolke: I don't know what I could add. I appreciate that I have this opportunity just—if somebody's listening, looking, questioning, I think that our military is probably one of the freest, one of the best and I think short of some leaderships, we have what we have because of this. I'm very proud. I can lose a lot of things in life but this is not something that will ever be taken away.

Gibb: Great. Okay.

[End of Interview]