

James Laughlin III '64
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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REED-WESTON: All right, this is Anne Reed-Weston. I'm sitting down with Jim Laughlin for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. It's May 11th, 2015.

So thanks again for agreeing to talk with us for this project. We'll just be recording the interview for you.

LAUGHLIN: It's a pleasure being here.

REED-WESTON: Great. So I guess just to kick things off, do you mind just telling me a bit about where you grew up?

LAUGHLIN: Yes. I grew up in Kearny, New Jersey, which is a town in Hudson County, directly across the river from New York City. I guess I'm a Dartmouth success story because I was the first person in my family to go to college. When my mother started grade school, she couldn't speak a word of English, and to her dying day, she couldn't pronounce Dartmouth the way it's supposed to be pronounced, but that was just something that she had to live with.

From Kearny, I went directly to—I lucked out and got into Dartmouth College, among several other schools, and matriculated here in 1960 and graduated in 1964. At the time I graduated, I was awarded a commission in the United States Army Reserve, and I elected to take a delay in active duty to go to law school because I had been accepted at the University of Michigan, into their law program, so I went there from 1964 to 1967.

In the summer of 1966 I married my wife, who was a Michigan senior at the time I met her in 1965, and she worked as a teacher in the Ann Arbor public school system, while I finished up my last year in law school. In 1967 I managed to take and pass the New Jersey bar exam, shortly after which I was ordered to active duty in the United States

Army, at the Officers Infantry School in Fort Benning, Georgia starting in July of 1967 to October of '67.

By then they changed all of our orders, and we were directed to proceed to Vietnam following a four-week crash course in intelligence at Fort Holabird in Baltimore. So I hit the ground in December of 1967 with very little training and no knowledge about the country was supposed to be serving in.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm, okay. So when you were growing up, did you know anything about the military? Did you have any military members in your family?

LAUGHLIN: No members in my immediate family, but my father's best friend from the time they were in high school was an officer in the United States Army. He was a World War II highly-decorated veteran, and I think I kind of looked up to him as a model figure or a role model during the time I knew him.

REED-WESTON: Did you know that you would eventually want to enter the military?

LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?

REED-WESTON: Did you know that you'd want to enter the military eventually?

LAUGHLIN: I don't think it was so much a question of wanting to enter the military as the fact that in 1960 we still had the universal draft, which was pre-lottery, so everyone, every male was exposed to doing at least two years of active service in one of the armed forces or another, and in a blue-collar town such as the one I grew up in, it was accepted that you would do that. And, in fact, if you tried to avoid doing it, you were kind of looked down upon.

REED-WESTON: So you didn't consider trying to avoid doing the draft?

LAUGHLIN: No.

REED-WESTON: No. So why did you choose to come to Dartmouth specifically?

LAUGHLIN: I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and I was accepted at several schools: a couple of the military schools, Cornell [University] and Dartmouth, and it just struck me that Dartmouth would be the fit for me. And so I took a chance and came up here, and, as with so many other students, I think I made the right choice.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So were your family supportive of you coming to Dartmouth?

LAUGHLIN: Pard' me?

REED-WESTON: Were they supportive of you coming to Dartmouth?

LAUGHLIN: Very much so. They love this place.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. What was their opinion on you entering the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corp] when you came to Dartmouth?

LAUGHLIN: I think both my mother and father just thought it was the thing I had to do, that they supported me in it, and so many of my classmates were in it, it was just a way of keeping yourself out of the clutches of the draft. There were very few exemptions, and if you didn't qualify strictly for them, you were subject to being taken out of school and put in the service.

REED-WESTON: So you decided when you were applying to Dartmouth—did you know that you were going to do ROTC then?

LAUGHLIN: Oh, I knew that before I even got here.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Did you have any thoughts about what you would do after college? Considering that you—

LAUGHLIN: No, when I started here. I really did not have any clear plan as to what I wanted to do, and I don't think it was until I was in my junior year that I thought about going to law school.

REED-WESTON: Can you just give me a sense of what your Dartmouth experience was like while you were here?

LAUGHLIN: Well, I think one of the great things this has is a camaraderie that I've not experienced at any other institution, and I've been on a large number of campuses in the United States. I think the academic program was terrific. It was kind of a Spartan existence because it was all male, and we didn't have the physical facilities that the students now have the advantage of using. The Hopkins Center [for the Arts], when I started school in 1960, was a hole in the ground. And Rauner [Special Collections] Library, in which we're now sitting, was Webster Hall, which was the only auditorium on campus.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Yeah. So what did you get involved with while you were here at Dartmouth?

LAUGHLIN: My first year, I rowed lightweight crew, and I wanted to continue that, but right before the race season in the spring of 1961, I developed pericarditis, which is an inflammation of the heart pericardium. It knocked me out of commission for six months,—

REED-WESTON: Oof!

LAUGHLIN: —took me out of the fall training season, and that was the end of my rowing career. I was active in the ROTC for all four years while I was in college, and then I did some skiing, and I was a member of the Judo Club.

REED-WESTON: How do you think that the ROTC experience impacted your Dartmouth experience?

LAUGHLIN: Well, I think ROTC was a valuable experience because it gave us exposure to what a military officer's life and responsibilities were like. I think it taught me certain values, such as organization, leadership, self-sufficiency and generally gave me a portion of my education that I wouldn't have received otherwise.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So do you think that the ROTC program at the time had a good place at Dartmouth?

LAUGHLIN: Yes.

REED-WESTON: It became a bit more controversial later in the 1960s. Do you think that it should have—that it should have continued throughout the Vietnam War?

LAUGHLIN: Well, most of the Ivy League schools and a number of other colleges and universities eliminated their ROTC programs as a result of the Vietnam War, and I think that was a mistake, but it was part and parcel of the time, so I'm not sure that we could have avoided that. I always felt that—and I feel to this day—that having liberal arts students from schools like Dartmouth or Cornell or NYU [New York University] adds a leavening experience to the military that you don't get from having your officer corps comprised solely of [U.S. Military Academy at] West Point graduates or Annapolis [U.S. Naval Academy] graduates and OCS graduates, Officer Candidate School graduates, who are already members of the service.

REED-WESTON: Do you think that a lot of the other ROTC students who you were with entered for the same reason that you did?

LAUGHLIN: Yeah, I think probably so.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So it was, again, to basically be able to fulfill military service without being in a general draft?

LAUGHLIN: I think we all felt that sooner or later we were going to be drafted, and my personal feeling, and I think a lot of my classmates shared this, was that we would be better off serving our country as officers than as enlisted men or draftees.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm, okay. Can you describe a bit about what the ROTC program on Dartmouth comprised?

LAUGHLIN: Well, it was the infamous Wednesday afternoon drill requirement,—

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: —where we walked around Chase Field with rifles and dress uniforms, learning how to do close-order drill. We also took military history courses, which were taught by the professor of military science, who was generally an Army officer. During our third summer, between our junior and senior

years, we went to a six-week boot camp at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and we were commissioned the day after we graduated in June of 1964.

REED-WESTON: So what type of specialized training did you get as part of the ROTC? Like, the summer programs and things like that.

LAUGHLIN: Well, the summer program was the most concentrated training we received. That was basically small-unit tactics, riflery, close-order drill and just generally trying to beat us into shape so that we would think and act as soldiers as opposed to civilians.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think they succeeded in their goal for that?

LAUGHLIN: I think they did, but we were a recalcitrant bunch.

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.] Yeah. How did you guys relate as members of the ROTC? Were you a tight group?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, I think so. Three of the fellows who are here with me today were members of my class in the ROTC: [Frances C.] Bud McGrath, Glen [R.] Kendall and [Furman K.] Neal Stanley [Jr.]. The first time I saw Neal, following our graduation, was in the mess hall in Can Tho in Phong Dinh Province in the middle of the Mekong Delta, and we were both packing heat, so it was quite a different change from our halcyon days on the Hanover Plain.

REED-WESTON: Did your opinion about the ROTC change in any way, shape or form throughout your time at Dartmouth?

LAUGHLIN: No, not really.

REED-WESTON: What was your understanding of what was happening outside of Dartmouth at the time in terms of U.S. foreign involvement?

LAUGHLIN: I'm not sure that I paid much attention to it because, although people seemed to think that we should have known about the Vietnam War when we were matriculated in 1960, in reality I don't think most Americans knew where the country was until long after we graduated in 1964. Even when I was in law school, I didn't pay that much attention to

what was going on in Vietnam, although what was happening was shaping a radical change in the fabric of our society and our government.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolutions [sic; Gulf of Tonkin Resolution] weren't adopted until August of 1964, I believe.

REED-WESTON: Sixty-four, yeah.

LAUGHLIN: And that was the first time that anything got out, because as a result of the resolutions, of Congress giving [President Lyndon B.] Johnson the authority to use us on foreign soil—was the first step in escalating that conflict to the levels it finally reached.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So when you entered Dartmouth, you knew that there was a draft. Did you have any idea of where your military service would eventually take place?

LAUGHLIN: I thought I'd end up in some cushy job in Germany because I spoke a little bit of German and I took two years—I jumped it out of one year and took two years studying here, but, as with any foreign language, unless you use it, you're going to lose it, so I didn't end up in Germany.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Yeah. So you were foreseeing eventually going to Germany for two years and then—

LAUGHLIN: Oh, yeah, I thought that would be a great break.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Yup. Do you think that that's a pretty common conception of people who entered Dartmouth with you, who then went on to military service?

LAUGHLIN: If I were to say—but I think that—I think that most of us did not know enough about Vietnam to make a judgment call as to what we should or shouldn't be doing.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So it was just kind of you knew you'd most likely wind up in some place like Germany, and that was a good place?

LAUGHLIN: I hoped so.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So when you ended your ROTC program here at Dartmouth, you were commissioned, correct?

LAUGHLIN: That's correct.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. And you were commissioned as what, exactly?

LAUGHLIN: A second lieutenant in the United States Army Reserve. I was ordered—I was offered a regular commission, which required a three-year to five-year minimum active duty obligation, because I was a distinguished military student and distinguished military graduate. But even though I had the aptitude for doing it, I did not intend to make the military a career.

REED-WESTON: At that point, were you intending on entering law school?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, because I was afraid that if I got out of school and went directly into the service and started getting paid a salary, that I wouldn't ever go back again, because my family basically had very little money when I was going to school, and all four years were a struggle for us financially.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Yeah. So you decided to enter the Army Reserve. Were your parents supportive of that?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, yes, they were.

REED-WESTON: Did they want you to eventually become a career military officer?

LAUGHLIN: No. No.

REED-WESTON: Were they neutral, or did they have a strong opinion?

LAUGHLIN: They were neutral. They didn't express much of an opinion one way or the other, although when I finally got sent to Vietnam in 1967, they were adamantly opposed to the war.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: As was I.

REED-WESTON: But they didn't have an opinion on it in '64?

LAUGHLIN: No.

REED-WESTON: No. So you entered the Army Reserve, and then at that point you knew you were going to go to law school, correct?

LAUGHLIN: That's correct.

REED-WESTON: So how did you wind up in Michigan law school?

LAUGHLIN: Again, it was the best law school to which I—I had been accepted to Northwestern Law School [sic; Northwestern University School of Law], Cornell Law School and [the University of] Michigan Law School, and I just knew that Michigan was the top among the three, and that's why I went there. We had a tremendous number of Ivy League graduates from all the Ivies at Michigan Law School.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So did any of your other classmates wind up at Michigan Law School?

LAUGHLIN: Sure.

REED-WESTON: Yeah?

LAUGHLIN: My roommate, [Edmund] Ed Frost was a Class of '64.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Was it a good experience, putting of military service to go to do law school?

LAUGHLIN: Well, that's a good question. [Chuckles.] I'm not sure I know the answer to that. It was one of those decisions I made that affected my life—you look back upon and say, *Well, I wonder what I would have done if I could have done this or should have done that.* You kind of can't ask yourself those questions because you'll drive yourself crazy. I did that, and I had to live with it.

REED-WESTON: Were you still envisioning the same type of two-year service after law school, so going to Germany?

LAUGHLIN: Yeah.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. By 1964, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution had—

[Recording interruption.]

REED-WESTON: All right. We had to pause for just a minute, but now we're back.

So we were talking about you going to Michigan, and by 1964 things had started to change a bit in terms of Vietnam. How aware of that were you, in terms of things like that Tonkin Gulf Resolution?

LAUGHLIN: Well, again, I think we were very naïve in that we didn't pay much attention to it. There was very little that was being reported back to the U.S. by the press. I think they were suppressed in what they could and could not send back. I remember distinctly when they started using [Grumman] A-6 Intruder aircraft for bombing Vietnam, and I thought, *Well, that's nice. That'll end that conflict real fast.* But I don't think I or any of my classmates paid much attention to it, but part of that was due to the fact that we were so focused in on our law school requirements and passing the bar exam that we kind of pushed that other stuff aside.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So did you think that—throughout your time in law school, did you think that you might wind up somewhere else in terms of performing in the military?

LAUGHLIN: I thought I had a shot of going to Europe.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So tell me a little bit about your law school, your time at law school.

LAUGHLIN: In terms of what?

REED-WESTON: Well, you're in Michigan, and then—you were mostly just studying—were you aware of anything else happening, really?

LAUGHLIN: Generally aware but not particularly acutely aware of the fact that there was starting to be a great controversy over what we should and shouldn't be doing in Southeast Asia. I, as I mentioned to you, was focused in on my studies. I went from a high school where I was not really particularly taught how to study to Dartmouth, where I had to learn how to study,

and I went through the same process again with another cut above the average, was a number of Ivy League students who were my classmates at Michigan.

One thing that radically changed my life was meeting my wife in the fall of 1965, and we decided to get married, and so we were married in August of '66, and we'll be celebrating our 60th—or, excuse me, our 50th anniversary next year,—

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: —after a lot of trials and tribulations. [Both chuckle.] But we somehow managed to make it through.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So did you have any particular specialty in law school? Did you know where you wanted to eventually practice law?

LAUGHLIN: No, not really. The first year and a half to two years, you're pretty much confined to mandatory courses, and I think that's still the way they run law schools, on the Socratic method. You got to take some optional courses your third year, but I'm not sure that they really contributed greatly to the legal education process. The thing I learned about practicing law is you don't really learn to do the practical stuff until you're out of law school.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So you graduated from Michigan in 1967, correct?

LAUGHLIN: Correct.

REED-WESTON: So by then, what were you thinking about in terms of your future?

LAUGHLIN: At what?

REED-WESTON: In terms of your future when you graduated from law school.

LAUGHLIN: Well, I knew I had to do at least two years of active military service, and my wife was well aware of that, herself, and our main focus was: Let's get out of law school, get your degree, see if you pass the bar exam (which I did), and we'll roll with the punches.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So you said earlier that by '67 you had started to become opposed to the Vietnam War. Can you tell me a bit about that?

LAUGHLIN: I can tell you about it because of the way I learned about it initially, in a forceful way. I never really thought about it until I was ordered to active duty at Fort Benning, Georgia. And from the day we got there, all that people talked about was Vietnam. I said to myself, *What are they so concerned about? It's just a tiny little conflict in a tiny little country in Indochina*, what used to be French Indochina. There were six other lawyers in my infantry company with me. we could have gotten commissions in the Judge Advocate General's Branch [sic; Corps], but they require a four-and-a-half-year to five-year active duty commitment, and they got sent to Vietnam anyway. So I and my other lawyer classmates decided we would just take the two-year commission, and we were assigned to the [Military] Intelligence Corps [of the U.S. Army], as opposed to the infantry. But for some reason, the Army thinks that if you're going to be a combat intelligence officer, you got to go through infantry platoon leader school, which we did.

REED-WESTON: You did that right after—you did that—

LAUGHLIN: Yeah, it was the first ten weeks of active duty, which was a thrill in Fort Benning, Georgia, in the middle of the summer.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: So to get back to what I was saying before, when I first went on active duty was when I first appreciated the magnitude of what was going on in Vietnam. And then the third week we were there, the officers assigned to military intelligence were called into a meeting room, and there were a couple of hundred of us, and the leader of the discuss named off a group of names and said, "You guys are going to military intelligence aerial reconnaissance school, and then you're going to Vietnam." And the next group, he said, "You guys are going to Vietnamese language school at the Presidio [of Monterey, Defense Foreign Language Program, which today is the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center], and then you're going to Vietnam."

When he got down to the last seven guys, which was me and six other lawyers, he said, "We know you guys aren't staying in the military, so you're all going to Vietnam after a four-week course at Fort Holabird." And that's what happened. We got sent for a four-week intelligence crash course at Fort Holabird, which was then located in Baltimore. And on December 7th, we hit the ground in Vietnam.

REED-WESTON: So when you had originally received your orders to be part of a military intelligence unit for two years, what would that have entailed?

LAUGHLIN: When I first went overseas?

REED-WESTON: Well, when you first went on active duty, you weren't originally going to be headed to Vietnam; you were going to part of military intelligence, you said.

LAUGHLIN: Yes.

REED-WESTON: What would that have been, instead of—

LAUGHLIN: Well, regardless of whether in Vietnam or in Germany, the military intelligence function is about the same. It's to locate, identify and target enemy units, and to do that, we had the use of airplanes for aerial reconnaissance and photo missions. We had a counterintelligence team. They used foreign agents, for example, in both Vietnam and in Europe. They had an order of battle section, which was to track enemy units and their composition and strength. So that's pretty much the function of a combat intelligence officer.

REED-WESTON: Were you happy with that assignment when you originally received it?

LAUGHLIN: I was happy to be in the Intelligence Corps. I wasn't happy to be sent to Vietnam.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Yeah. What was your reaction upon really hearing that you were going to be going to Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: Total shock.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

- LAUGHLIN: You could have heard a pin drop in that room.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: And neither my wife nor I could believe it, and the same went for our friends. I was particularly close to another lieutenant in the same boat as I was, who was a graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School, whose wife was with him at Fort Benning, as was I with mine. She was 19 years old at the time, and we had to smuggle her into the officers' club—
- REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]
- LAUGHLIN: —because she wasn't old enough to drink.
- REED-WESTON: [Laughs.]
- LAUGHLIN: But we became very fast and close friends, and we went through Fort Holabird together, went to Vietnam on the same airplane. Got split up and ended up three months later in the same unit. Came home together, and we're friends ever since. He just recently passed away within the last six months as result of a brain tumor.
- REED-WESTON: Oh. So it was a pretty universal reaction to the news?
- LAUGHLIN: Yeah. And when we got there, I think it didn't take long to figure out we were in a losing situation from the get-go.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. So you—what was your reaction when you first got on active duty and started really hearing about Vietnam? What was your reaction to that, hearing about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam?
- LAUGHLIN: Again, I think what was being filtered back to the American public in 1967, when I went on active duty, was a sanitized version of what was actually taking place and that these troop buildups that we were experiencing, which were supposed to be temporary, became permanent and more bloody as time went on. So I think it was not until I was on active duty that I really thought about what was going on, and probably not until I really got there did it really hit home

as to what this country had gotten itself involved in and what it meant for the individual soldier and for me and my friends in particular.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So did you think that the U.S. should have been involved in Vietnam Before you got to Vietnam, did you—

LAUGHLIN: That's a difficult question to answer because I've often thought—you know, there's a controversy as to whether or not the attacks on the [USS] Maddox ever took place. There's no question in my mind that Hồ Chí Minh and Lê Tuấn [sic; Lê Duc Duẩn] intended to take over South Vietnam because they were running people down on the Hồ Chí Minh trail and fomenting dissent before we got there.

The whole operational plan was flawed. I don't think that, given the constraints under which we were operating, that the war was winnable. I got the same adverse feeling about [the war in] Afghanistan.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: So I would say it didn't take long for those of us who were sent there to realize that we were pawns who really had little control over what we were supposed to be doing, and the name of the game was to survive and help your buddies survive and get home in one piece.

REED-WESTON: Was that a pretty universal feeling?

LAUGHLIN: I think so.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Including before you got to Vietnam, among the people who were going to be sent there? Was that the same feeling they had?

LAUGHLIN: I don't know of many former soldiers who had anything positive to say about Vietnam or their experiences in Vietnam.

REED-WESTON: No. Yeah, that seems pretty [chuckles]—pretty universal. So what kind of training did you receive before you went to Vietnam?

- LAUGHLIN: Just what I told you.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah.
- LAUGHLIN: Ten weeks in infantry school, four weeks of common intelligence, none in survival skills.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah.
- LAUGHLIN: And no troop time.
- REED-WESTON: Did you get any training in Vietnamese intell- —in Vietnamese language, I mean?
- LAUGHLIN: No.
- REED-WESTON: Do you think that the type of training that you did get was helpful at all?
- LAUGHLIN: No.
- REED-WESTON: No. Do you think that they could have improved on it at all?
- LAUGHLIN: They could have, but the military is very slow to change. In the early 1960s, we were geared up to fight a European land war, so the tactics that you use in fighting a European land war are totally different from the tactics you use in fighting a guerilla war in the jungles of Southeast Asia. You don't have tanks. You don't have heavy artillery. Airpower is useful but not controlling. And to take on an enemy with the tenacity of the Vietnamese, who were defending their own country in a war of national liberation, was in my mind a losing task.
- LAUGHLIN: What skills would have been beneficial for you to have? What type of training could they have provided that actually would have made a difference when you first got to Vietnam?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, there was no training on guerilla warfare, which would have been helpful, because it's a totally different type of fight. There was no really direction as to how the military should be going in Vietnam. We started off with the concept of almost fighting a European land war, where taking territory was paramount. Well, that didn't work. So then we went to

the search and destroy phase, where the name of the game was to kill as many North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as possible and keep up the body count.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: When that failed the government decided to phase out of our involvement in Vietnam, they turned to the Vietnamization of the war, where the entire program was to be taken over by the South Vietnamese military, who were totally unequipped and untrained, themselves, to defend themselves. So by that point in time, it was just a matter of time before we got out, they caved in, and the North Vietnamese took over.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So how aware were you of the U.S.'s, like, military position in Vietnam when you arrived?

LAUGHLIN: I wasn't aware of it when I arrived, but within the next month or two, I was certainly well aware of it. I knew where all of the American units. I knew what we were facing. We saw first hand what the results of the war were going to be. And I think the first time that I really sat up and said, *Whoa, there's something wrong here* was when we got hit with the Tet Offensive in 1968, the first time we were under heavy enemy attack. Although that offensive was a military disaster for the VC [Viet Cong] and the NVA [North Vietnamese Army], it was a giant propaganda victory, which for the first time impacted on the ordinary soldier and the small-unit leader and, more importantly, impacted on the people at home and helped coalesce the opposition to the war.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So when you were about to go to Vietnam, what was your family's reaction to that?

LAUGHLIN: Well, my wife burst into tears.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.] Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: My parents were upset. I only had one sister, who's younger than I, and I don't think she knew much about it.

REED-WESTON: How old was she at the time?

- LAUGHLIN: She was two years younger than I am, so I was 24; she would have been 22.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. So do you think that the public had learned anything more by the time you were about to be deployed, or was it still a pretty sanitized—
- LAUGHLIN: It was pretty much in its infancy. I think the four years from 1967 to 1971 were crucial. The year of the most intense fighting was 1968, and from then on, we'd soon be fighting a holding action, with no real clear objective as to where we were going with this thing.
- REED-WESTON: Okay. So what were your goals when you were originally going to go to Vietnam? What was your plan for doing your service there and then moving on to law—to—
- LAUGHLIN: To be a lawyer?
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Did you have any plans beyond Vietnam at that point?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, my overriding concern was to keep myself in one piece and to do my job, and I think that the American soldier, by and large, did a remarkable job of fighting under very adverse conditions in a very ferocious war. I don't think most people realize how difficult that war was. You know, people think of World War II as a major conflagration, but this was all consuming. We had close to a half a million men in Vietnam at the time—in mid-1968, at the height of the fighting, and we weren't going anywhere.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Yeah. So when did you originally arrive in Vietnam?
- LAUGHLIN: December 7th, 1967.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. What were your first impressions when you actually arrived to the country?
- LAUGHLIN: [Chuckles.] I looked up, and I said, *I wish on was on that silver bird flying home.*
- REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.] Yeah. Where did you land in Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: We landed at the Bien Hoa Air Base, which is about 20 miles northwest of Saigon, and I was assigned to a military intelligence detachment to the II [pronounced Second] Field Force, not too far from Bien Hoa, about two-thirds of the way from Saigon to Bien Hoa up Highway 1.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. What were your responsibilities in that?

LAUGHLIN: I was supposed to gather intelligence from wounded North Vietnamese and Viet Cong prisoners in the prison hospital there. I didn't speak Vietnamese. I didn't know what the Vietnamese interpreter was telling them or not telling them, and I got very little useful intelligence out of them, because by the time we got there, they knew they weren't going to be tortured or dealt with adversely, so they shut up.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. What were those hospitals like?

LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?

REED-WESTON: What were those hospitals like?

LAUGHLIN: I can't say they were much different than the U.S. hospitals. The doctors provided medical care to the wounded enemy as well as to wounded Americans.

REED-WESTON: How did the wounded enemy wind up there specifically?

LAUGHLIN: That's a good question, because by the time they got discharged from the hospital, they would be taken over by the South Vietnamese, and they didn't have the scruples that we had.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So your responsibility was to deal with them while they were in the hospital?

LAUGHLIN: Yes.

REED-WESTON: Did you have any other contact with them?

LAUGHLIN: No, and I wasn't there long enough to branch out into any other areas because right after the Tet Offensive I got assigned to the Military Assistance Command and shipped down to the Delta as an adviser.

- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So what did you know about the South Vietnamese government at the time when you arrived in Vietnam?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, by the time I arrived, it was a dictatorship.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: President [John F.] Kennedy and [Ambassador] Henry Cabot Lodge [Jr.] managed to depose and have assassinated Ngô Đình Diệm in the period before I arrived there.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. In '63, yeah.
- LAUGHLIN: And there was a succession of puppet dictators, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, who was a former Air Force pilot, and [Nguyễn Văn] Thiệu, and they didn't have the will to win that the North Vietnamese had. And they were corrupt.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think that the corruption was a pretty universal part of the government?
- LAUGHLIN: Absolutely.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think that by the time you got there, that they could have enacted reforms to help eventually win the war?
- LAUGHLIN: It's hard for me to postulate a scenario where the South Vietnamese would win the war, and what happened, happened. And I can tell you the reasons why I think it happened. But we never really trained them or equipped them to take over the fight by themselves. And when we pulled out, we pulled out a lot of the aid packages we were giving them. They couldn't afford to buy gasoline for their airplanes, so at that point I think what happened, in my mind, in the early '70s was inevitable.
- REED-WESTON: Okay. Do you think that the U.S. was really propping up the South Vietnamese government at the time when you got there, or do you think that it was an independent government on its own?
- LAUGHLIN: Oh, no, I don't think it was independent on its own.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Yeah. Did you think that the U.S. was really supporting it?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, because I believe that Johnson, for all of his flaws, felt that he was helping to avoid the domino fall of the countries in Southeast Asia and was stemming the tide of communism as best he could.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Okay. What did—

LAUGHLIN: Can we take a pause?

REED-WESTON: Oh, absolutely.

LAUGHLIN: I need a glass of water.

REED-WESTON: Absolutely.

[Recording interruption.]

REED-WESTON: All right, so we're back now. We were talking a bit about the situation in South Vietnam when you first got there. What was your opinion on what was happening to the North Vietnamese prisoners once they left the hospital? You said that they were—

LAUGHLIN: I really don't know. I don't know what happened to them. I assume they were taken to a POW [prisoner of war] camp, and that was outside the purview of our control, so I really have no knowledge whatsoever.

REED-WESTON: So that was under the South Vietnamese control?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, yes.

REED-WESTON: Did the U.S. have any involvement with that aspect of it?

LAUGHLIN: I don't think so. I don't know.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So when you first got there, who were you originally working with, when you first got to Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: The intelligence detachment I was assigned to was attached to the II Field Force, which was the core control for the third

of the country that went from the Mekong Delta to the north of Saigon. So I was answerable to the commanding officer of my military intelligence detachment, who in turn was responsible to the core officers to whom he reported.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So did you have any difficulty assuming leadership, in that you came in as a lieutenant?

LAUGHLIN: Did I have any problem? I never had a problem with any of my men. I seemed to have the facility to work with them and not have any problem with them because I didn't treat them as inferior human beings.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that a lot of officers did treat their men as—

LAUGHLIN: I think there were a lot of officers who were nothing more than tinhorns, who don't know how to deal with or manage people.

REED-WESTON: So what type of men were you usually leading? What were their general backgrounds?

LAUGHLIN: Well, if they were still on their first tour of duty in Vietnam and were alive, they were 18 or 19 years old, at the enlisted level. The NCOs, the sergeants—the non-commissioned officers were in their mid-20s, and the officers were the young guys like us in the field-grade positions of lieutenants and captains, and the older officers were the career officers. The rank of major or above were the ultimate responsibility, upon whom the management of the war fell, the field-grade officers.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. What was, like, the general mood, morale in the groups that you were working with when you first arrived?

LAUGHLIN: I think the general mood was the same as mine: Do your job, cover your ass and get home in one piece, and cover your buddies.

REED-WESTON: Do you think that people felt good about the U.S. presence in Vietnam at the time?

LAUGHLIN: The soldiers or the people at home?

REED-WESTON: The soldiers.

LAUGHLIN: No. We all wanted to go home.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Even the enlisted men, the people who had—

LAUGHLIN: They were the ones who were taking the brunt of it on the combat lines, so I would say they more than anyone.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: The heaviest casualties were the young men in the ages of 18 to 20, who were infantrymen, and the field-grade officers, the lieutenants and captains who led the small units, from platoon up to company size.

REED-WESTON: So aside from working in the hospitals, interrogating prisoners, did you have any other roles?

LAUGHLIN: Well, I had other jobs to do. I was the supply officer for our unit. Trying to keep track of supplies like rifles, cameras, other valuable items in a war setting is difficult at best.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.] Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: I can't say that I had much else to do besides that, because we were working 12-hour shifts, 12 hours on, 12 hours off, seven days a week. And it was just an all-consuming process.

REED-WESTON: Was it difficult not being able to speak Vietnamese?

LAUGHLIN: We didn't have that much contact with the Vietnamese. I think it would have been helpful, but I'm not sure it would have made much of a difference because I think that, in retrospect, it has become apparent to us that many of the Vietnamese who worked on the American compounds during the day were shooting at us at night. When we got hit in the Tet Offensive, we would have been overrun but for the fact that following their artillery barrage, they were supposed to hit us on the ground, and they were late, so by the time they launched their ground assault, it was daybreak and we had

helicopter gunship cover, you know, that just chewed them up.

We found maps, journals, propaganda leaflets instructing us how to behave when we were taken prisoner and taken to the VC concentration camps, but racially-oriented propaganda playing upon the separation of the white and black people in the United States, Puerto Ricans, anything they could seize upon to drive a wedge between us and the various components of the military.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Okay. So you said that you didn't have a whole lot of contact with normal Vietnamese people. Did you have any contact, really, with people outside of the military bases?

LAUGHLIN: When I moved to the Delta with an advisory team, it was a totally different experience because there were about 17 of us who lived in a building in Can Tho, and we had a couple of Vietnamese employees who took care of the cleaning of the building and our laundry and stuff like that, so we had some contact with them and some contact with members of the Vietnamese military, but nothing meaningful.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So you said it was a pretty broadly-held conception that the people who you were working with on the bases might have been Viet Cong.

LAUGHLIN: Yeah, no question about it.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think that that was pretty widespread in terms of the Vietnamese who were working with the U.S. military?

LAUGHLIN: One of the problems we had was identifying the enemy because they wore the same black pajamas and conical straw hats that the civilians wore.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that that caused issues for the U.S. military?

LAUGHLIN: I think it caused frustrations that led to such things as the Mỹ Lai Massacre, which I blame not only on Lt. [William] Calley [Jr.] but on his company commander, [Capt.] Ernest [L.] Medina [pronounced meh-DYE-nuh] and Medina's battalion commander. There was a complete lack of leadership and

role setting, and frustration on being picked off day in and day out, stepping on land mines and booby traps. They just broke.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that that was a pretty common reaction to the stresses of—

LAUGHLIN: I think that there were probably more atrocities committed than most people realize, but nothing out of the ordinary for a wartime situation, which is an atrocity in itself.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think it was a different kind of atrocities in Vietnam, as opposed to in earlier wars?

LAUGHLIN: No, because if you read the history of World War II, you have the same problems, people breaking—doing—particularly after the invasion of Normandy, the Germans assassinating American prisoners, Americans assassinating German prisoners. It just goes with the turf.

REED-WESTON: How often did you get out into the field?

LAUGHLIN: I never got into the field in terms of being an infantry officer. What happened to me was very peculiar. I was supposed to go out to a sector advisory team, which is a low-level town [sic] in one of the provinces, to run their intelligence operation. When I got to Can Tho, that was the headquarters of the IV [pronounced Fourth] Corps, which managed the war in what I'll call the Mekong Delta. I was a first lieutenant, and this captain grabbed me, and he said, "You're comin' with me. I need help in the reconnaissance section." I said, "Captain, I'm obviously your man. I'm near-sighted"—

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: —"astigmatic, partially colorblind, and I have absolutely no training."

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.]

LAUGHLIN: And he looked at me and he said, "Yeah, but you forgot you have one important qualification." And I asked him what that was, and he said, "You're here."

REED-WESTON: Ah.

LAUGHLIN: “And I need help, and you’re going on flight status because I can’t handle all the low-level aerial reconnaissance myself.” So he prevailed, and I was made an aero reconnaissance officer, put on flight status. We had a second lieutenant who was an assistant to us, the captain who was in charge, me and a private first class who had just graduated at the age of 18 from high school in Kankakee, Illinois. And we were responsible for planning and programming all of the aerial reconnaissance that was flown by both the Army and the Air Force over the IV Corps for the duration while we were there.

The second week I was there—he and I had been out on early-morning missions, and my plane had taken some ground fire, so I was not in a particularly happy mood when I got back. And I was just standing in the radio shack, and he was supposed to be on a flight along the Gulf of Thailand, and we got a call about a plane down up near Cambodia. And I didn’t link the two up at first. And somehow, while I was drinking coffee, it penetrated they were talking about my commanding officer’s plane.

REED-WESTON: Oh.

LAUGHLIN: So I was there when they brought—you know what a Dustoff is?

REED-WESTON: Nn-nn.

LAUGHLIN: It’s a medevac helicopter. You pick them up and dust them off and send them back.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: I was there when the Dustoff arrived, and they had his body wrapped up in a parachute, and instead of setting the helicopter down on the hard stand, the pilot was hovering, and the litter bearers tried to get the stretcher off, and one of them lost his footing and dumped the body out on the runway. And he rolled out of the chute, and he was just lying there, and he was all smashed up because he must have hit the ground going 200 miles an hour. And I had to identify him and get him in a body bag and take care of all those details,

notify our commanding officer. And then it suddenly dawned on me that *It's step up or step aside, Lieutenant. You're the next in line.*

So the terms of my combat experience were I flew on a total of 77 missions all over the Mekong Delta for about eight months while I was running aero recon operation in the IV Corps.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So you wound up doing aerial reconnaissance after the Tet Offensive had begun, correct?

LAUGHLIN: That's correct.

REED-WESTON: So you were still working on interrogating prisoners in—

LAUGHLIN: No.

REED-WESTON: But that was earlier, when you first arrived. And then when did you switch between the two? Because you—

LAUGHLIN: Well, the Tet Offensive was January 31st of 1968. Right after that, I got sent down to the Delta, which was when I made the transformation from a POW interrogator to, if you will, an aerial recon officer.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So as you got into January, were you aware of any of the built-up for the Tet Offensive?

LAUGHLIN: No, we didn't take them seriously. We had been hearing reports in late January about the fact that we might be subject to a major attack, and we said, "Get out! What are *they gonna do?*"

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.]

LAUGHLIN: Well, they proved what they were going to do because they really knocked the hell out of us for the first day or two. But the American firepower was such that they couldn't stand up to the aerial response and the automatic weapons fire or armored vehicles.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So it was pretty much business as normal up until the Tet Offensive actually broke?

LAUGHLIN: Yeah.

REED-WESTON: What was your experience with the Tet Offensive?

LAUGHLIN: Getting blown out of bed at about three o'clock in the morning by a Russian-made rocket.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.] When was that?

LAUGHLIN: The night of the Tet Offensive, January 31st of '68. I was asleep, and I heard this noise, and I said, *What in the hell is that?* And then there was this massive explosion, and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground. What had happened was the blast had knocked me against my steel wall locker, and it dazed me for a matter of seconds. So I got up and I said, "Are you guys goin' to the bunker?" There's dead silence. They're all gone. [Chuckles.]

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.] So you were the last person there?

LAUGHLIN: I was the last person to get out of that barracks.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. And so what happened for the rest of that night?

LAUGHLIN: We were taking sporadic automatic weapons fire until about seven o'clock in the morning, when all hell broke loose and we just came under a full-scale ground assault. And, as I said before, by then we had aerial cover-up, so we were able to repel them between the helicopter gunships and our own defensive fire.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So what were you doing up until the ground attack happened at around seven a.m.? It was just aerial?

LAUGHLIN: Well, we had a few people wounded in the rocket attack. We had to attend to them. Our normal workday started at seven o'clock anyway, so we didn't think—we thought this was an aberrational thing, and then they proved us wrong.

REED-WESTON: Had there ever been attacks like that on the air base?

LAUGHLIN: No. No, none whatsoever.

- REED-WESTON: Had you heard about them on other bases at all?
- LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?
- REED-WESTON: Had you heard about, like, random attacks like that on other bases?
- LAUGHLIN: Yeah, the whole country came under attack, and one of the problems was that William [C.] Westmoreland, who was the commanding general, had moved all of the American units up to seal off the Cambodian border because he anticipated that they would be coming down and attacking us. They were already behind that line, so they were already there.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah.
- LAUGHLIN: They overran the U.S. embassy.
- REED-WESTON: Okay. So what was the general opinion after the first Russian attack, the first Russian rocket attack, three a.m.?
- LAUGHLIN: The general experience for a short period of time was euphoric in that we survived this offense, and then it started all over again.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So what was the response when it started again?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, as I told you, we just drove them off. I was out on patrol and we counted over 200 enemy dead,—
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: —as a result of—mostly from the helicopter gunships.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: They were devastating weapons.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. So the ground attack started around seven a.m.?
- LAUGHLIN: About daybreak.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. What was your experience with that?

- LAUGHLIN: It was all part and parcel of the same experience.
- REED-WESTON: What did you see for it, really? Like, did you see any part of the ground attack specifically?
- LAUGHLIN: We were returning their fire, so I would say yes, we saw it. The helicopter gunships were mowing them down a few hundred yards in front of us.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. How long did that go on for?
- LAUGHLIN: Most of the morning, and then it tapered off during the following two days, but it would flare up at night again
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you know how many Viet Cong were eventually killed at your area?
- LAUGHLIN: No. No, I have no idea.
- REED-WESTON: Do you know roughly how many U.S. military members were—
- LAUGHLIN: No.
- REED-WESTON: —injured?
- LAUGHLIN: No.
- REED-WESTON: No. So do you think that it mostly died down after those two days?
- LAUGHLIN: Where we were.
- REED-WESTON: At your location specifically?
- LAUGHLIN: Yeah.
- REED-WESTON: What was the attitude at the end of it—like, the general attitude on the base?
- LAUGHLIN: I think it suddenly brought home to us that we were fighting a guerilla force that wasn't going to quit, that was very tenacious and resourceful and that no matter what we did or how well we fought, we were not going to prevent them from

prevailing over the long haul. They outlasted the French, they outlasted the Japanese, they outlasted the French again, and they were going to outlast us.

REED-WESTON: Do you think that was a big turning point for you guys specifically, for the people within—

LAUGHLIN: It was in terms of making us realize how futile our effort was from the get-go.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think that that was—you said that that had already kind of been the attitude before the Tet Offensive. Do you think that cemented it?

LAUGHLIN: Among the junior officers and the junior enlisted men, yes.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. What did you think about the response in the U.S.? You've mentioned it a little bit before.

LAUGHLIN: Well, we really didn't know much about what was going on until we got home. And this country was being ripped apart by that war. People hated it. The longer it went on, the more the people hated, the less approval Johnson had. He started withdrawing troops, which only weakened the South Vietnamese position up to the point where he turned the war over to them in about 1971.

We had the start of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and their march on the Capitol, where they all threw their medals on the Capitol steps. There's never been a mass demonstration by members of the military or former military before or since.

The civilian groups and the campus groups were radicalized and were physically confronting the police and security officers.

I started to tell you a little bit about my experience at Princeton [University]. I was hired as the assistant legal counsel after I graduated. I lucked into that position because I had already passed the New Jersey bar and I happened to run across a request from our placement office at the University of Michigan Law School that led me to the chief

counsel at Princeton and he hired me. And that was a great job, and I really liked him. We got along well together.

But by 1970, '71, Princeton was being subjected to violent protests as well. In around I'm going to say February of 1971, there was a peace rally on campus, which turned violent. It was led by a guy whose—I think his name was Steven Burlingham [sic; William J. Burlingham] who was not affiliated with the university but nevertheless succeeded in throwing a Molotov cocktail down the ventilation shaft at the Institute for Defense Analyses and then tried to burn down Nassau Hall. And Nassau Hall is the oldest academic building in the United States. In 1756, when it opened, it was the largest academic building in the United States, and it was for a time the seat of the Continental Congress. And this guy wants to burn it down!

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: And they threw some incendiary devices at the building, which were extinguished, but the following day, the president of the college, who was named Robert [F.] Goheen, called a joint faculty-staff meeting, and we attended as members of the professional staff of the university. And it was in Nassau Hall, and you could smell the acrid odor of smoke and burned wood, and he was going on and on about the fact that we had to respect the rights of these students to protest this violent war and this was an aspect of free speech and freedom of expression that we needed to honor or at least acquiesce to.

In the middle of the speech, my boss put up his hand, and he said, "Excuse me, Mr. President." He couldn't take it anymore. He said, "You know I'm an attorney, and I'm as dedicated to free speech and freedom of expression as anyone in this room, or this country, but," he said, "that doesn't give these students the right to go around throwing Molotov cocktails at buildings and, you know, 'Burn, baby, burn.'" Well, there was a dead silence in the room.

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.]

LAUGHLIN: And Goheen somehow finished his talk, and we walked outside, and he turned to me, and he said, "I'm sorry I did

that, Jim.” I said, “What are you talking about, Larry?” I said, “You were right on the money.” He said, “Yeah, but I just cost us our jobs.” I said, “Larry, that’s not possible. This is Princeton University, a bastion of free speech and free expression.” Two weeks later, we both got fired.

REED-WESTON: Were you just fired because you were—because he was your direct boss?

LAUGHLIN: I was fired because I was guilty by association.

REED-WESTON: So you did agree with him privately, though?

LAUGHLIN: Of course.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: He’s right. I was all in favor of they can protest all they want, but they can’t injure other people or burn down buildings.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Had anyone been injured in the initial Molotov cocktail—

LAUGHLIN: No, I don’t think so. Everyone recalls the iconographic photograph of the Kent State massacre, with the young woman over the bodies on the ground.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So [chuckles] you were guilty by association.

LAUGHLIN: That’s it.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: Today that probably would have resulted in a spate of lawsuits, but at the time, I was ready to move on. My wife was pregnant with our first child, and I just took it in stride, and that eventually led to me going out on my own and forming my own law firm, which you probably can’t do today.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.] Yep.

So going back to Vietnam before that happened—so after Tet Offensive, what happened specifically for you in terms of moving?

- LAUGHLIN: Well, I took over the aerial reconnaissance section—
- REED-WESTON: How soon after the Tet Offensive was that?
- LAUGHLIN: Within a month.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think it was connected in any way?
- LAUGHLIN: No, I think it was a freak accident. I don't know whether his plane just had a mechanical failure while it was on a low-level mission, whether he got shot down, whether the thing caught fire. I have no idea.
- REED-WESTON: So why were you reassigned to that particular unit from—
- LAUGHLIN: I had asked for a transfer to the Military Assistance Command in the hopes that I would get to serve with a couple of the guys I had gone through Benning with or that I would at least get out to a sector advisory post, which was more of a low-level interaction with the resident population.
- REED-WESTON: Did you want to really interact more with normal people?
- LAUGHLIN: I said it would be something that I could handle and do a good job at.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Were you frustrated at all with the job that you had been doing for the last few months?
- LAUGHLIN: Oh, yeah. I thought it was a total waste of time.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Why did you think that?
- LAUGHLIN: Because once they got into an American hospital, these VC and NVA weren't going to say anything.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: And they weren't beaten or tortured, so they had no incentive to inform on their unit, on their colleagues.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Okay. So you decided—so you put in a request for a transfer to—

LAUGHLIN: I did.

REED-WESTON: And then that was granted.

LAUGHLIN: Once they found a replacement officer for me, they transferred me.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So what was your opinion on—well, what was your general experience running the aerial reconnaissance?

LAUGHLIN: [Chuckles.]

REED-WESTON: Big question.

LAUGHLIN: My general experience, when it was all done, was we did a lot of work, and it was very difficult to produce anything positive. For example, we had control of [Grumman OV-1] Mohawk aircraft with what was called SLAR [pronounced SLAR, not S-L-A-R], side-looking airborne radar, which would pick up movements on the ground. It was, like, great, we'd fly a mission; there would be movement on the ground. How do you know what it is? And the same with nighttime missions. They would use infrared photography and pinpoint campfires and hot spots, but not able to delineate whether they were friendly or not friendly.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So do you think that you were able to produce good-quality intelligence out of that mission, out of those missions?

LAUGHLIN: No. We did a lot of other stuff, too, which was a waste of time. I was responsible for pre- and post-raid bomb damage assessments as a result of the [Boeing] B-52 [Stratofortress] flights. Well, they'd bomb a mile-long chain in the middle of a rice paddy. They didn't accomplish anything except burn up a lot of fuel, explosives and food crop.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think those weren't effective?

LAUGHLIN: No, they weren't effective.

REED-WESTON: Why do you think they weren't effective?

LAUGHLIN: Because they couldn't hit a damn thing from 35,000 feet. The maps were inaccurate.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think they had accurate information about where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were?

LAUGHLIN: No. No.

REED-WESTON: No. Do you think that any part of the U.S. military actually had good intelligence on that at the time?

LAUGHLIN: No. It was a joke. Two of my friends, one of whom I mentioned previously, was a Minnesota law grad; the other was an Iowa law grad. Were new at a battle section, and one of their responsibilities was to prepare the monthly road report. Well, the road report for our IV Corps sector was supposed to show green roads, on which you could safely proceed; yellow roads, on which you needed to proceed with caution and with armed escort; and red roads, on which you couldn't go unless you were an armed convoy.

So they diligently, the first month they were there, filled out the report, and it showed more red roads than green roads, and they presented this to the colonel in charge of the section. He said, "You have to redo it. It's not right." They said, "Well, Colonel, this is what we've got. This is it." He said, "No, it's wrong. We're better than we were last month, so change the map." So they changed the map.

And the same thing happened to me. When we went into the intensification of the war in the Delta in 1968, for some reason I was responsible every morning at seven o'clock for contacting the Vietnamese adjutant and getting their casualty figures for the previous day, which were broken down into three categories: enemy killed, enemy captured and suspects detained. Well, the American military, in its infinite wisdom, decide that wasn't detailed enough. They wanted the form filled out on a midnight-to-midnight basis for about twelve different categories, including estimated killed by air, estimated killed by artillery.

I presented this to the Vietnamese adjutant, and he smiled and said, "Yes, yes." The next day, he gives me the same three figures: killed, captured and suspects detained, which I

report to Saigon. After about the three days, the colonel who was in charge of our intelligence unit called me up, and he's screaming at me.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: He had me standing at attention while he's screaming at me. He said, "What are you trying to do to me, Captain?" I said, "Sir, what's the problem?" He said, "You're not providing the required reporting on casualties that you're supposed to do." I said, "But, Colonel, they only give me the same three figures." Well, he looked at me and said, "Well, that sounds like a personal problem, Captain."

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: "Get out of here and straighten it out." So I looked at it. I said, *Hmm, I've got a personal problem. I got a personal solution to that problem.* I took a sheet of paper and made a graph, and I took the three figures and allocated them around in different proportions each day and phoned those figures up to Saigon, and nobody ever bothered me again.

REED-WESTON: Do you think that was pretty common?

LAUGHLIN: Yes.

REED-WESTON: Yeah?

LAUGHLIN: What are they going to do?

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: If I submitted the same three figures, he'd have been down my throat again because he was trying to make the next rank on the road to generalship.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So do you think that that was pretty common in terms of the U.S. military fudging—

LAUGHLIN: Oh, horrible.

REED-WESTON: —all their—

LAUGHLIN: The body count was the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of.

REED-WESTON: Do you think that people actually believed the inflated numbers?

LAUGHLIN: I think probably President Lyndon Johnson believed them. I don't think anybody in Vietnam believed them.

REED-WESTON: Do you think that the U.S. government back in America actually had good-quality information about realistic figures?

LAUGHLIN: No, I don't think so because the American commanders just kept asking Johnson for more and more troops, and as we got more and more troops, the North Vietnamese sent more and more to fight them, and the thing just kept escalating.

REED-WESTON: So where do you think that the real pressure to inflate the numbers came from?

LAUGHLIN: From the senior military commanders in Vietnam. You have to understand, these guys are trained for their entire lives to become generals, and the only way to do that is to have some wartime experience. Well, they needed a war. And every time something happened and Johnson complained to them, they would tell him, "Well, if you give us more troops, we'll fix that problem." In reality, they didn't fix the problem; they made it worse.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So you think that pressure came down on a lot of different parts of the U.S. military effort?

LAUGHLIN: Well, in Vietnam, yes.

REED-WESTON: In Vietnam. Okay.

So going back to when you were really flying a lot of missions, what exactly did that entail when you were flying out on a mission?

LAUGHLIN: Well, when you take—most aero photography is done from a vertical platform, and it's straight down. That's great, but it doesn't give you side dimensions or the ability to get stereo photography, so you need to take what's called on oblique

[which he pronounced as oh-BLIKE] view, and to get an oblique photo, you've got to go down fairly low and take the pictures on an angle, and if you have a stereopticon (which he pronounced as stereo-opticon), you can make stereo vision. Even back in the '60s, you could do this with relatively primitive technology. [Chuckles.]

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: So they would tell us they "think there's a POW camp here or there or some new trench lines out there, go get us some photo recon on it, Captain." Off I went.

REED-WESTON: So you received areas that you were supposed to investigate from higher up?

LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?

REED-WESTON: So you were told where you were supposed to investigate?

LAUGHLIN: Oh, yeah. I never invented the missions on my own.

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.] How often did you actually find something significant on those missions?

LAUGHLIN: Not too frequently. Nothing that was useful. I mean, I can remember being told to go down to an area known as "the human forest." I mean, it was just a bad-ass area. You didn't dare fly there. And when I told the pilot where we had to go, he refused to fly. So I basically embarrassed him into getting a replacement for me to take me down there, and there was no prisoner of war camp there; it was just jungle.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So how many of these flights were you generally running? How many, like, per day or what was the general volume of it?

LAUGHLIN: Oh, there was preplanned reconnaissance every day, flown by both the Army and the Air Force. There were spot missions flown in response to specific requests. There were the isolated low-level missions, again, targeted at a specific area, but how many a day across the Delta? [Pause.] I'm going to say maybe 30 or 40 a day.

- REED-WESTON: Oh, wow! So how many people were you in charge of, running that scale of an operation?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, I was in charge of our aerial reconnaissance section, which was about five or six people, but I also had operational control over the planes we needed to fly the missions.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: So we had four [Cessna L-19/O-1] Bird Dogs. It was a single-engine spotter aircraft. And four twin-engine Mohawks, which were death traps. I hated flying in them.
- REED-WESTON: Why did you hate them?
- LAUGHLIN: They were death traps. They had a glide ratio of a brick. They had a long, elongated fuselage with a triple tail, so if you tried to crash land them, they would just disintegrate.
- REED-WESTON: Mmm.
- LAUGHLIN: They couldn't fly on one engine, so if you lost an engine, you lost the plane. And they didn't have the same ejection seats as the Air Force did. In an Air Force ejection seat, when you fire your seat it blows the canopy off and then a rocket fires the seat out. In the Mohawk, you just had a Plexiglas window over your head, and you sat on a 37mm cannon shell, and when we fired a shell, it literally blew you through the glass and out of the plane.
- REED-WESTON: So people didn't tend to survive ejection.
- LAUGHLIN: No, they were trying to ride them down, but then that was worse.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Did you have any issues coming into this type of command with no real training?
- LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?
- REED-WESTON: You said that you didn't have a lot of training specific for this type of command. Did you have problems with that at all?
- LAUGHLIN: No.

REED-WESTON: No?

LAUGHLIN: I went to Dartmouth.

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.]

LAUGHLIN: I can solve problems.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So it came down to problem solving instead of specific knowledge that you needed?

LAUGHLIN: I think some specific knowledge would have helped from the outset, but by the time four to six weeks had elapsed, we had the drill down pat. When I say four to six weeks—after I replaced my deceased commanding officer. I had a sergeant with me who was on his fifth tour in Vietnam, who was an aerial reconnaissance specialist, and he was a good ol' boy from Georgia by the name of Turner J. Hite. His background and my background were like night and day, and we hit it off like that.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: We just got along, and we made the thing work.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that it really helped having someone that experienced?

LAUGHLIN: Oh, no question about it.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. How common was it to find someone with that much experience to work with?

LAUGHLIN: I would say it was not too common because if you pulled two or three tours in Vietnam, your chances of coming back unwounded, let alone alive, were pretty slim.

REED-WESTON: So were people trying to get out? Get out in terms of—after they'd completed one or two tours?

LAUGHLIN: Yes. In fact, a lot of the—my three ROTC brethren who are here today all took regular commissions with the anticipation

of possibly making the military a career. They all got out when they could get out, as did I.

REED-WESTON: Did you know at this point when you were going to be able to leave Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: When I was what?

REED-WESTON: When you were going to be able to leave Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, I knew from the day I went when I was going to leave. It was exactly a one-year tour.

REED-WESTON: One-year tour?

LAUGHLIN: And I got gypped out of a day because it was New Year's.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.]

LAUGHLIN: Not New Year's, leap year.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Okay. So do you think that that was a good experience in Vietnam in terms of different types of things that you could have been assigned to?

LAUGHLIN: I would not call the experience in Vietnam as being particularly good. I think I learned that I could deal with stress, that I could lead men in every and any sense of the word, that I could get a job done if it had to be done, regardless of what the odds were. And one thing I learned was that when people told me they couldn't do things, I would find ways to do them, so I developed this philosophy that in most cases, "no" simply isn't a viable response.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: And I think that helped me out tremendously in my personal career. When people told me I couldn't do things as a lawyer, I went out and did them.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: I'm not talking about bad things. I'm talking about good things, those things that needed to be done.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Yeah.

So did anything really change throughout the next about eight months that you were flying aerial reconnaissance?

LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?

REED-WESTON: Did anything really change during the eight months where you were flying aerial reconnaissance, or was it pretty much—

LAUGHLIN: No, we were supposed to turn over, start transitioning to the Vietnamization of the war. I was tasked with preparing instruction booklets on various intelligence programs, which never got distributed. I think the whole concept that was foisted—it was just a way of getting out.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: And I think we're going through the same thing in Afghanistan, where they can't figure how the heck to get out. and not have the whole thing blow up in their faces.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think that you were affective, not being able to prepare some types of materials for the new, incoming Vietnamese people who would run the—

LAUGHLIN: Did I what?

REED-WESTON: Do you think that the U.S. military was effective at really preparing materials—

LAUGHLIN: No, no, absolutely not. There were some good units, but most of them were not. They couldn't stand up to a North Vietnamese regular unit. They probably couldn't stand up to a VC experienced, smaller unit either. Most of the troops the Americans had under their control were what were called the Ruff-Puffs. They were Regional Forces and Popular Forces [(RFPFs) of the South Vietnamese Regional Force]. And they were worthless.

But we didn't provide the material to them. When Johnson decided that we were going to start pulling out, they started

cutting the aid packages. Well, the Vietnamese had no means to support a large military organization. They didn't have the financial wherewithal to do it. So consequently—and I just watched a program on Netflix called *Vietnam in HD*. One of the things—it was a great show. Unfortunately, it's pretty graphic, so if you're queasy about watching anything like that, you better not turn it on. But one of the points they made at the end was an artillery piece that had been allocated 40 rounds a day to fire was cut to four. Well, suppose you got a fire mission and there's an enemy troop concentration moving across a field where you can reach them with your artillery. You fire four rounds and you're done for the day?

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: You can't fight a war like that.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So do you think that pulling out and trying to get the South Vietnamese Army—do you think that was a good strategy at the time, even if it was implemented badly?

LAUGHLIN: I don't know what would have been a good strategy at the time. None of the strategies we employed worked. Sometimes there would be a short-term fix, but eventually it caught up to us.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So did your opinion about your role in Vietnam or the U.S.'s role in Vietnam change throughout your year of service in Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: I thought the whole experience, both my personal role and the role of the American armed forces, was a total waste in, first of all, valuable American lives, capital, and in general, in terms of how it affected the fabric of this country and our society, it had an overwhelming impact, which is probably why your parents don't talk too much about it.

REED-WESTON: [Chuckles.] Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: It was an aberrational time, and when I tell people about the fact we had—I didn't dare wear my uniform in the United States. I was afraid we'd get spat on or egged. People wouldn't sit next to us on a bus. We said, "Why are they

taking this out on us? We're the warriors. We're not the policy makers." I think there's been a change in attitude, and I think that the American public now respects what the soldiers who are being ordered to do—do what they do in Afghanistan and Iraq. They didn't make the decision to go in there, and they probably don't want to be there, either. But at least the public I think to a certain extent has been able to segregate *their* role from that of the people in Washington who are making them do this.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that people understood the role that the draft had on you going to Vietnam? Because you said that you basically joined the military because you knew that you'd be drafted otherwise.

LAUGHLIN: I think, although I disliked the Army, it was one of the greatest experiences of my lifetime in terms of my education and development. I think that that's something that's missing out of our society now. I've got three sons, and I'm not sure that any one of them could do what I did.

And that shared bond of serving in the military is something that doesn't go away. So I don't think people appreciated what the draft did for this country. And I'm not saying that people should be drafted into the armed services. Maybe a couple of years of public service would be a viable alternative. But, again, it's over and done with. A decision has been made. And I think, as I told you earlier, that we're losing a great leveling effect and common sense that was otherwise transferred to the military. It's been lost because of the fact that we don't have the draft and we don't have these people going in.

Who volunteers to go into the Army anymore? People who can't make it financially, generally, in civilian life, so the standards have been eroded, even though the government won't admit that. They don't have enough people to staff the bases, so they're spending more money on private contractors than they ever spent on enlisted people. So you go on a military base now, and the military police aren't military; they are civilian, contracted employees, the same as some of the support units. It's crazy.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: And we have no control over the way these people work, so, I mean, like Blackwater—[Transcriber’s note: Blackwater (a U.S. government contractor now called Academi) received widespread publicity in 2007, when a group of its employees killed 17 Iraqi civilians and injured 20 in Nisour Square, Baghdad, for which four guards were convicted in a U.S. court]—and the soldiers who tortured the Iraqis at the Abu Ghraib prison. They’re not accountable to anyone.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. So you think that’s something that’s been changed since Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: Do I think it’s been changed since Vietnam? I think the attitude of the public toward the soldier on the ground has been changed. I’m not sure anything else has been changed.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So what was your attitude when you started getting closer to actually leaving Vietnam? Were you happy about that? Were you ready to go?

LAUGHLIN: I was ready to go the day I got there.

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: And I was flying up until I had about three weeks to go, and then my replacement got in country, and one day I just ran out of nerve, and I said, “I can’t do this anymore.” I turned in my wings and turned them over to my replacement, and I didn’t do anything except try to stay out of the line of fire until I got home.

I remember when we left Vietnam, we flew out of Ton Son Nhut Air Base, which is right in Saigon, itself. Everyone on the plane was pretty quiet, and then the pilot came on the radio and he said, “Gentlemen, I just want to know we just crossed the Vietnamese coast.” The place went crazy.

REED-WESTON: [Laughs.]

LAUGHLIN: The guys were screaming, crying, yelling, throwing stuff. It was wild.

- REED-WESTON: So that was a pretty shared experience. [Chuckles.]
- LAUGHLIN: We made it.
- REED-WESTON: You said that you had had enough of flying, flying the missions. Why do you think you'd had enough of that before you actually left Vietnam?
- LAUGHLIN: I think I ran out of nerve. My two close friends both knew my wife, and when I had about four weeks to go, they said, "You gotta stop flying because if something happens to you, we'll never be able to look Pam in the face and tell her about it." And I got out of the plane one day, and I started to shake, and I don't smoke, but I smoked a cigarette that day just to calm down, and I said, *That's it. I can't do this anymore.*
- REED-WESTON: How dangerous was it to fly the missions that you flew?
- LAUGHLIN: Hmm?
- REED-WESTON: How dangerous was it to fly the missions that you were flying?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, let me put it this way: We had to deal not only with hostile ground fire from time to time but very bad weather during the wet monsoon, mechanical problems and our own errors in judgment. We made mistakes in some of the things we did, inevitable human mistakes, and when you add them all together, I think I was—I used to gloat about the fact that I got out without a scratch until [chuckles] I discovered I didn't get out without a scratch. In a final irony, I was contaminated by my own government with a toxic poison that's so powerful it's the worst-known molecule to mankind.
- REED-WESTON: How did you get exposed to that while you were in Vietnam?
- LAUGHLIN: The last statistic that I recall is that about 20 million gallons of Agent Orange was dumped on South Vietnam, defoliating about 12 percent of the land area of that country. It destroyed thousands of acres of cropland, thousands of acres of forest and has created the worst contamination situation that you can possibly imagine throughout the country. I don't know how they're ever going to be able to get that place cleaned up. The half life of dioxin is horrendous.

Around our bases, they would use big machines called Rome plows to cut down the vegetation. When the vegetation dried, they would pile it up and burn it, so you got a double dose of the dioxin. They sprayed tremendous areas. We flew through those sprayed-over areas. It doesn't take much of an exposure to 2,4-D over much of a length of time for it to cause problems. It affects not only the health of the individual directly attacked but is a tremendous, major cause of birth defects in their children.

REED-WESTON: So you didn't have any—so it was mostly just coincidental exposure for you, just that it—

LAUGHLIN: No, it was—everybody who was with me there was exposed to it on numerous occasions, for extended times.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Did you know that you were being exposed to it?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, we did, but if you read the history of that—there's a book that I'm going to give to Professor [Edward G.] Miller called *Waiting for an Army to Die[^e]: The Tragedy of Agent Orange*, by Fred A. Wilcox], and it recapitulates everything that had happened and the fact that they lied to the American public. The VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] said, "Oh, there's nothing wrong with you. This stuff is harmless. It only kills plants." [Chuckles.] Well, it kills all living organisms.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Do you think that you potentially had a greater exposure because you were flying through areas where it was being sprayed?

LAUGHLIN: It's hard for me to say. I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2006. Around 2008 or 2009, that disease got added to the list of conditions presumptively caused by exposure to Agent Orange, by the Veterans Administration, which was the first time I really came to grips with it and said, *Hey, wow! Now I understand, to a certain extent, how this happened to me.*

REED-WESTON: What was your reaction to that?

LAUGHLIN: My?

REED-WESTON: What was your reaction to finding out that it was linked to Agent Orange?

LAUGHLIN: That I had it?

REED-WESTON: Well, that when it got added to the list of diseases that were—

LAUGHLIN: I think it was a relief to me because I had never been able to connect it to anything before. My family—there's no genetic history of it in my family, and if you don't have the gene, you have to be exposed to it to develop the Parkinson condition. So that explained to me how I got it. And, although it's small conversation, I was given a disability rating, which resulted in a disability compensation check each month from the Veterans Administration.

So it's all kind of helped, but it's like anything else, and your parents have told you this, I'm sure, many times: If you don't have your health, you don't have anything. I would turn over every last cent I had to not have this condition.

REED-WESTON: Are you angry at all about the U.S. military's role?

LAUGHLIN: Am I angry about it?

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: I'm more angry about the fact that they don't seem to be able to apply the lessons of Vietnam to our current political and international situation.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. You don't think they've learned?

LAUGHLIN: They never learned.

REED-WESTON: They really—no.

LAUGHLIN: They don't get it.

REED-WESTON: No. Do you think that they're going to encounter similar problems in Afghanistan and Iraq?

LAUGHLIN: I'm sorry?

REED-WESTON: Do you think that they're going to encounter more problems in Afghanistan and Iraq, similar to what they encountered in Vietnam?

LAUGHLIN: Well, at least—I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. There's so much sectarianism and tribalism in both of those countries that I'm not sure that any concepts of western democracy or how a country should be run can filter down to that level. I mean, the Shiites hate the Sunnis. They both hate the Kurds. The Turks hate the Armenians and the Kurds. You got ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham] and all these splinter groups: Al-Shabaz [sic; Al-Shabaab] and the Houthis in Yemen. I mean, who do you back? I mean, one day after another, it's a different protagonist and a different—

REED-WESTON: Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: And it even extends into continental Africa. It's crazy. I'm not sure we can do anything in those countries. But specifically I'm angered by the fact that we went into Iraq in the first place. I'm angered by the fact that I don't think that county is going to hold together without U.S. support, and Afghanistan has never held together for anything except their own tribal loyalties.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.

LAUGHLIN: So I don't see anything changing much there. We're just—at the present time, I think we're just prolonging the inevitable, the same as we did in Vietnam.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Yeah.

LAUGHLIN: It's the old story. If you don't remember history, you're condemned to relive it.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So when you first arrived back to the U.S. after touring Vietnam, that was in December of '68, correct?

LAUGHLIN: That's correct.

- REED-WESTON: Yeah. Did you have any problems, like, coming back to civilian life?
- LAUGHLIN: Uh—[Pause.] No, I can't say that I did, because I was able to step right into a job that I liked, that was challenging to me, that made use of my talents and my education. If you talk to my wife, she'll probably tell you a different story. She's going to be at the seminar tonight, so you can ask her.
- REED-WESTON: Mm-hm.
- LAUGHLIN: I had problems in staying awake. When we'd go out to dinner, I'd fall asleep at the dinner table, and I'm told that that's a symptom of dealing with stress, so I don't think I had the problem that a lot of the Vietnam vets had with what's known as PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. How soon after you arrived did you get your job at Princeton?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, I was assigned to the general staff at Fort [George G.] Meade in Maryland, which was a dead-end, desk job-y job, a desk job, which was difficult to fulfill because I couldn't stay awake. [Laughs.] I got that job in the spring of 1969 and I got out of the Army 30 days early so I could take it when it opened up.
- REED-WESTON: So you fulfilled a desk job for the rest of your time in the Army after you got out?
- LAUGHLIN: All the returning officers were—instead of just letting us out, because they knew we were getting out anyway, they made us stay for meaningless jobs in various posts around the country until our two years was up.
- REED-WESTON: Yeah. So when you got back to the U.S., what was your reaction to the coverage of Vietnam, particularly in the media and the public opinion to it?
- LAUGHLIN: Well, I think the coverage got better as the war went on. I think initially it was downplayed by the government, and I think—what's the word I'm looking for?
- REED-WESTON: They covered it up?

LAUGHLIN: The suppressed the information. I think that changed as more and more photojournalists got over there and got embedded with the troop units, but I think a lot of it—the footage was not released to the public. I don't think the public, until recently, has had a clear idea of what happened in Vietnam.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So even after the Tet Offensive had broke and coverage was increasing, they still didn't know the full story?

LAUGHLIN: They what?

REED-WESTON: They still didn't know the full story, even as you had—

LAUGHLIN: I don't think so, because I think there would have been an even more violent reaction to our involvement than was the case.

REED-WESTON: What was your reaction to the protests that were erupting around the U.S.?

LAUGHLIN: My reaction was: Why are they blaming the American soldier? We did what we were told to do, and we did a good job at it, and then they're taking it out on us.

REED-WESTON: Did you have specific experiences where people were blaming you because you were a veteran?

LAUGHLIN: No, I rapidly learned to keep my mouth shut. I didn't tell anybody that I'd been in the Army or particularly that I'd been in Vietnam.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Did you have any specific instances that stand out in your mind?

LAUGHLIN: Not that I can remember, but it's been so long that I don't think I could pinpoint one for you.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. Yeah. But do you think it was a widespread attitude?

LAUGHLIN: Yes, very widespread.

REED-WESTON: Why do you think that people specifically targeted veterans with that opinion?

LAUGHLIN: Why do I?

REED-WESTON: Why do you think people really targeted veterans with that opinion, as opposed to policy makers?

LAUGHLIN: I don't know. I don't know. I think first of all, you've got 58,000 dead people, who didn't have to be killed, who didn't accomplish anything except sacrifice themselves in a war which we eventually ended up not winning. But above and beyond that, I think there was a massive sea change in our political structure, and people were fed up with Johnson and [U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S.] McNamara. And I think they were fed up with the professional military because I think they began to realize they'd been hoodwinked on the whole story.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. And you think that the veterans were a target for that, for the frustrations with a lot of—

LAUGHLIN: Yeah. I've never understood why that was, that they would blame the soldiers and the airmen and the sailors when we weren't making the policy decisions. We didn't decide to go in there, and we didn't decide who to send where or what or for how much and how long a time.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. No.

LAUGHLIN: So I don't know the answer to that question.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that the protests that were happening around the U.S. had a big impact on the eventual decision to pull out?

LAUGHLIN: Oh, absolutely, yeah. I think it was instrumental in Johnson deciding not to run for a second term.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. You mentioned earlier that you were opposed to protests that were endangering other people's lives. Do you think that the peaceful protests were able to accomplish things?

LAUGHLIN: I think if they had only been peaceful protests, they would have accomplished the same sense of dissatisfaction that was instrumental in making us change our policies. I'm not sure that burning automobiles or setting buildings afire enhances the stature of the protestors. I mean, look at this situation that we just had in Baltimore. The leaders of the black community begged their constituents to remain peaceful, and yet small groups of them still burned vehicles, burned buildings, burned down a Revco [sic; CVS] pharmacy in a low-income housing neighborhood, depriving their own people—it's the only place they could buy local groceries and prescriptions. It just doesn't make sense to me.

REED-WESTON: Did you agree with the general antiwar sentiment when you got back to the U.S.?

LAUGHLIN: Did I what?

REED-WESTON: Did you agree with the antiwar—

LAUGHLIN: Yes.

REED-WESTON: —protesters when you got back?

LAUGHLIN: Yes. I think my colleagues will attest to the fact that they did also.

REED-WESTON: Why do you think that you had really grown to accept that point of view by the time you came home?

LAUGHLIN: Well, I just knew more. In 1964 and '65, I didn't know anything about Vietnam, to speak of. Once I'd been there and come home and seen what was happening there and on the home front, it totally turned me against the war.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Do you think that when Saigon fell in 1975—you said earlier you think that was inevitable. Do you think that the U.S. could have done anything—

LAUGHLIN: No.

REED-WESTON: —to change that?

LAUGHLIN: I don't think so. I don't think—let me put it this way: In order for the Americans to have succeeded in Vietnam, it would have required such a tremendously greater effort and a complete change in the restrictions under which the war was conducted for us to succeed, and I don't think the American public would have tolerated that.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. So looking back from where you are now in your life, what's your general—what have you taken away from your experience with the Vietnam War?

LAUGHLIN: You mean in terms of my personal—

REED-WESTON: However. However, really.

LAUGHLIN: Well, I think I'm much more skeptical about what the government claims is the right procedure to follow in a given area of the world than I was. I think that, from my own personal feelings, I'm proud of the fact that I served and the men that served with me. I regret that we were involved in a conflict that was so unpopular and didn't really produce any positive results. And—I'm not sure I can think of anything else to tell you.

REED-WESTON: Mm-hm. Yeah. How do you think that the Vietnam War really changed American society?

LAUGHLIN: I think it took us out of—the '50s were a very naïve decade, and I think it took us out of that and thrust us into the real world and gave us some idea of the limitations on our power. I don't think what happened in terms of the elimination of the draft in the [James E.] Jimmy Carter [Jr.] years was particularly productive. I think that the American people, as I said earlier, are more respectful of the roles of the American soldier and sailor and marine who's on the ground in the action.

I don't know. I think there's a greater skepticism about what's going on. And we're more prone to demand answers. We're demanding answers from [former U.S. Secretary of State and, at the time of the interview, declared candidate for the U.S. presidency] Hillary [Rodham] Clinton as to what happened in Benghazi [Libya]. We're demanding answers

from Baltimore as to what happened there. I don't think we had that in the '50s.

REED-WESTON: Yeah. All right. Well, I want to thank you very, very much for agreeing to do this interview. Do you have any last thoughts?

LAUGHLIN: Thank you, no. I hope I was of some help to you.

REED-WESTON: Yes. Well, thank you very much.

[End of interview.]