

Robert W. "Obie" Holmen '72
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Btari Laksono '26

LAKSONO: Today is Tuesday, February 11, 2025. It is 3 PM Eastern Standard Time. This is Btari Laksono, Dartmouth Class of 2026, interviewing Robert Holmen, Dartmouth Class of 1972, for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. This interview is conducted over zoom. I am located in the History Hub at Carson Hall, and Robert is located in his home in Minnesota. Mr. Holmen, I want to thank you for being here and for taking the time to speak as part of the Dartmouth Vietnam Project.

HOLMEN: It's my pleasure.

LAKSONO: Let's start with some basic information. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

HOLMEN: I was born in Minnesota, small city called Little Falls, so home of Charles Lindbergh, Central Minnesota. I grew up in a small town nearby. Scandinavian roots, and the town was Scandinavian then. Not so much anymore. It's now mixed.

LAKSONO: And what were your parents' names?

HOLMEN: My father is Robert. I'm technically not a Robert Jr. We have different middle names. Growing up, I was largely Bobby. And for a while, Big Bob and Little Bob. And my mother's name is Marilyn, but everybody called her Marley.

LAKSONO: And what did they do for a living?

HOLMEN: My father was a small-town businessman in, as I said, this small Central Minnesota community. He actually was the gas and oil man supplying gas to gas stations and farmers for their tractors and to fuel oil for home heating or the community. My mother was a registered nurse.

LAKSONO: And just for the record, can I get both of your parents' full names?

HOLMEN: Yes, my father was Robert Vernon Holmen, and my mother was Marilyn Aldo Lofquist. That was her maiden name. L-O-F-Q-U-I-S-T. But of course, Holmen, once she was married.

LAKSONO: Perfect. Thank you for that. And so what was growing up in Central Minnesota like? You mentioned it a little bit, but I would love to hear more about that.

HOLMEN: I had an idyllic childhood. As I said, my father was a small-town businessman. We were very middle class, but it seemed rather luxurious to me. We're in the middle of Lake Country. Spent my youth playing sports, water-skiing, swimming, fishing, camping. And then in high school, playing sports and other things. It was really a great childhood. Had a loving family. I'm the oldest of four, my three younger siblings, and lots of aunts around to spoil me. So, it was a great childhood.

LAKSONO: That was lovely. And would you say that there were any significant events, maybe current events, or anything of the like that occurred in your childhood?

HOLMEN: Well, there was the [John F.] Kennedy assassination. I was a high school sophomore, and I remember it was geometry class. And then the teacher had just given us an assignment and stepped out of the room and came back 10 minutes later ashen-faced and told us that the President had been shot. So that whole weekend, that whole experience was pretty noteworthy. The Cold War, certainly, always in the background. You know, nowadays, kids go through active shooter drills. In those days, we did nuclear fallout, and there would be nuclear fallout shelters. So that was nuclear fallout, and there would be nuclear fallout shelters. So that was kind of crazy. No, I don't think there are any other particular events in my childhood that would stand out.

LAKSONO: How old were you when the Kennedy assassination happened?

HOLMEN: I was a sophomore, so I was probably 15.

LAKSONO: And in the same vein, I'm curious, how far apart are you in age with your siblings?

HOLMEN: We're all two years apart. Just family planning, I guess.

LAKSONO: That's fantastic to have siblings so close together because --would you say you were close to them?

HOLMEN: Yes, my brother was two years younger than I was, and we were best buddies growing up. And then my two sisters were younger, so I didn't really hang out with them. But you know, I was always part of the family.

LAKSONO: And just for the record, can I please get their full names as well?

HOLMEN: My brother is Michael Duane Holmen. My sister is Rebecca. Her last name, her married name, is Helmeke, H-E-L-M-E-K-E. My baby sister is Susan, and she still has Holmen as her last name.

LAKSONO: Thank you. And I want to talk about, I think still in the topic of early childhood, I'm curious about your schooling. Since you and your siblings are two years apart, did you go to the same schools? What was that experience like?

HOLMEN: Yes, well, small town Minnesota. I went to K through 12 in the same building, and so did my siblings. My high school graduating class was 42 which was average, I think, for the time. Which was in many respects, it was just a lot of fun. Because with a small class, you knew everybody. We grew up together. You know, a lot of the kids went all K through 12 with me. Some didn't. Back in those days, Minnesota still had what was referred to as country schools: schools that would only go through sixth grade or maybe eighth grade. And then a lot of the kids that I graduated high school with did that. And then they'd end up coming to my K-12 high school, maybe in 7th grade or maybe 9th grade. But I had the same circle of friends.

I was a decent athlete. So, I was able to play on some great sports teams, and that was a lot of fun. And I still have a lot of very positive memories. I was a good player on some great small-town teams. And I was involved with whatever the school had to offer. So, a lot of stuff going on, a lot of extracurriculars.

LAKSONO: What kind of sports did you play?

HOLMEN: I was an all-conference quarterback on the football team. I was an all-conference guard on the basketball team. I ran a quarter mile and did long jump in track. And I was an infielder on the baseball team.

LAKSONO: That's amazing. Yeah, sorry I cut you off there.

HOLMEN: Well, in a small school, you're able to do that.

LAKSONO: So how did you balance your extensive extracurricular involvement with your academics?

HOLMEN: It wasn't hard actually. I guess it goes without saying that if I ended up at Dartmouth, I probably did pretty well in high school. And I did. I was the valedictorian of my class, and in many respects, I had

great relationships with the teachers. So, it was just overall a really positive experience.

LAKSONO: Were there any particular subjects that interested you?

HOLMEN: I was best at math, but I think my greater interest was in social studies. And ultimately, that has proven to be true with interest in history and politics.

LAKSONO: I see. And once again, just for the record, can I get the full name of the high school -- you said it was the same school K-12 -- so the institution that you attended?

HOLMEN: Right. The town that I grew up in was called Upsala. U-P-S-A-L-A, which was named after Uppsala, Sweden, which actually has two Ps. So Upsala, Minnesota was originally a Swedish community named after Uppsala, Sweden. And that was the name of the high school, Upsala High School.

LAKSONO: Got you. Kind of just taking the segue, I'm really interested about what made you choose Dartmouth. What was your college application like as a senior at that time?

HOLMEN: I was all set to apply to one college, and that was a private liberal arts college here in Minnesota called Gustavus Adolphus [College]. I was, as I said, all set to apply there. And I did. And that was all I was going to do. And then, at the end of the football season, sometime over, probably during Christmas break, I started receiving correspondence from the Dartmouth football coach inviting me to apply. So, kind of on a dare I did. I was actually late. I think there was a January 1 date that I missed, but I sent a letter explaining that I just got these letters from the football coach, and I'm just now starting the process. And lo and behold, they accepted me. It kind of started out as a lark — "Hey, I'm going to apply to an Ivy League college." And then they accepted me. Well, I guess I better go.

LAKSONO: What was your family's reaction upon hearing that you were accepted?

HOLMEN: Mixed. My dad thought I was in over my head. He also didn't understand scholarships. He said, we can't afford to send you there. So he was skeptical, ultimately supportive, but initially skeptical. My mom was basically supportive, but still, it kind of came down-- I had to make this decision between the two, and Gustavus Adolphus was putting pressure on me because they had offered me a pretty large scholarship and they wanted to know. And

I actually had a conversation with my mom's older sister, my aunt, and she basically said, "you can't pass up the opportunity to go to an Ivy League and get an Ivy League Education." So okay, I guess that's what I'll do.

LAKSONO: And how about your siblings?

HOLMEN: I don't know if they had much of an opinion. If they did, I don't know what it is.

LAKSONO: And just the wider community of Upsala, would you say that most people went to college? Was that a common trajectory for people ages 18?

HOLMEN: Yeah, a lot of the high school graduates would go to college. Some would go to technical school. Graduating in 1966, the war, of course, was going strong. So, a lot of my classmates ended up in the military. An awful lot. I think there are 42 kids in my class, and I think 30 of us were male, and most of us ended up in the military.

LAKSONO: Wow.

HOLMEN: And I was a few years later because I started at Dartmouth. But some of my classmates went into the military right out of high school.

LAKSONO: I see. And kind of taking the segue now to Dartmouth. Can you tell me more about the timeline between your graduation and then, I guess, your first day at Dartmouth?

HOLMEN: It was a fun last summer at home. A lot of golf, a lot of water skiing, a lot of hanging out with my girlfriend. And then it was time to go. And I had never been east of Wisconsin, and my folks were going to drive me out. So, mom and dad and me headed out, and we were going to take our time. I think we took at least a week, maybe even 10 days, and spent some time in New York City where my dad's older brother lived. So, we spent time with him, and then we spent some time in Boston, where dad had a navy buddy that we spent some time with. And then finally up to Dartmouth.

It was a very uneasy trip for me. I was very scared. I was very nervous--excited, but nervous. And I remember when we finally got there, and I settled into my dorm, French Hall, as I said. And my folks, I don't remember, I think we went out to eat or something. And then they went and stayed at a local hotel. Next morning, I was

up bright and early, and I walked over to see them at the hotel. I was already homesick.

LAKSONO: What were you mainly? Oh, no, sorry. Please continue.

HOLMEN: And later that, it was time to say goodbye, and family mythology suggests that my mom cried all the way across Vermont. And I was already homesick. I remember them as they were driving away from French Hall. Oh, this is tough.

But that weekend there was--remember there were no females at Dartmouth at this time, which was an entirely different experience, I'm sure. But that weekend, there was a mixer. Busloads of women from all over New England came in for a mixer. And I hung out with a girl, walked around campus with her and visited and got a good night kiss and suddenly all was right with the world again. That's not to say that I still didn't battle boats of homesickness for those first few months.

LAKSONO: No, certainly. And kind of in the same vein, you mentioned that you were scared. Like when you were coming in, what were your worries about? What were you scared of?

HOLMEN: I think I was optimistic that I could handle it from an academic standpoint. I'm sure there was still some concern there. I think probably the biggest thing that I was nervous about was that I was a small-town middle-class boy coming from a rural community in Minnesota. And I realized that there was going to be some people there who had money, who had lifetime experiences that I couldn't possibly understand. So, I think that was a little overwhelming. And just being away from home. Being away from home was a part of it. You know, nowadays with texting and with Zoom or whatever, it's so easy to stay in touch. In those days, it was always--if I wanted to talk somebody back home, there was letters, of course. But that took time back and forth. But there was a pay phone down at the end of the hall. And that was that was how you stay in touch. But it was a long-distance phone call. She had to be putting money in. So, there was some practical constraints that you weren't going to be doing that that often either. I was just being a long way from home.

LAKSONO: No, it certainly must have been such a new experience.

HOLMEN: Absolutely, yeah.

- LAKSONO: And do you think other people shared those same worries at all? Like when you were initially meeting friends, was that a sentiment you felt across campus among the freshmen?
- HOLMEN: You know, I couldn't really speak for the broader freshman class. I'm sure there was a lot of different experiences. Most of the guys that I knew in the dorm--there were a bunch of freshmen in the dorm. So, we very quickly had our own gang, and then there was a couple of older guys too. On the wing of French Hall that I lived, there were 13 guys living and I think probably eight of us were freshmen. There was a natural affinity there. Easy to make friends and we did.
- LAKSONO: Would you say that at first you met your initial friends through French Hall?
- HOLMEN: Yes.
- LAKSONO: And how did these friendships end up developing? Did you end up meeting new friends through other avenues?
- HOLMEN: Not so much the first year. Yeah, I did meet some other friends, but still the closest friends were the guys that I knew from French Hall. Obviously, you get to know people from class. I was also in Army ROTC when I was a freshman, so I met some guys there.
- LAKSONO: Yeah, I heard that ROTC had a large role to play on campus in 1966. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
- HOLMEN: Well, ROTC, as you know, stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps. And the basic idea is you would join ROTC in college and do some military training while you're in college. And then with the expectation that when you were through with college, you would go on active duty, probably do some basic training and so on. But you'd go on active duty as an officer. And I think there was a fairly active ROTC on campus when I was a freshman and sophomore. It was gone when I came back, it was part of the whole anti-war change of attitudes at Dartmouth. That came across in so many different ways, but one of them was no more ROTC.
- LAKSONO: So, after 1966, what were the main drivers behind your decision, but also perhaps your friends' decisions, to join ROTC at this time?
- HOLMEN: I'm not really sure why I did. I really didn't plan to go to the military. That really wasn't in the works. It was a little bit of fun. A little exotic in the sense--there was also kind of a subclass of the Army ROTC

called Mountain and Winter Warfare. What that meant is we went out, and we did rock climbing. And in the winter, we did skiing.

LAKSONO: Interesting.

HOLMEN: And in fact, we had a relationship with the Dartmouth Skiway. After a snowfall, we'd go out and ski and pack the snow just by skiing. The extracurriculars associated with ROTC were kind of fun. Actually, I didn't play college football even though the coach had gotten me interested in the first place. But I did play some intramural football, including on the Army ROTC team. It's a big game to play the Navy ROTC. I still remember a bit of that.

LAKSONO: Yeah, that's really insightful. Was there a particular reason why you chose Army ROTC?

HOLMEN: No, I have no idea. No idea.

LAKSONO: Would you say other people saw it similarly as an avenue of socialization?

HOLMEN: You know, I really don't know. I don't know what other people's motivation were for being there. I don't really know what my motivation was other than "Hey, this sounds like something interesting."

LAKSONO: Fair enough. But I guess shifting this conversation more broadly, what was the political climate like on campus? At the time, like 1966.

HOLMEN: It was definitely liberal, definitely anti-war. And there was some protesting on campus. My family was what I would refer to as a Rockefeller Republican. Back in the 60s, there were still liberal and moderate Republicans. Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, exemplified that. He was a very liberal Republican governor. In fact, sometimes people thought he was more liberal than some of the Democrats. And that's who my father wanted to be the vice presidential candidate in 64. Well, it wasn't. It was Barry Goldwater. And then again in 68, Rockefeller made kind of a half-hearted run that my father still would have supported. But of course, [Richard] Nixon won. So that was my background was Rockefeller Republicanism.

I think for my folks the party of the Republican Party was still very much the party of Lincoln, and I think they really felt strongly about civil rights even though that was not part of our culture. You know,

growing up in a small town in Minnesota, civil rights were simply not an issue. There were no black people around. But from an empathetic or from an intellectual point of view, I know my parents supported civil rights and that was that was part of my upbringing as well.

But my father was military. He served in the Navy in the Second World War. The community had a strong American Legion and every Memorial Day, there would be a parade, and the Legionnaires would lead the parade, and then there would be a kind of a 21-gun salute where they'd fire blanks into the air. All the kids then would go clamoring to get the spent shells and so on. So that was kind of my background. I was part of the baby boomer generation. We were the kids of what has been called "the greatest generation" in the sense that they fought Nazism. They fought Japanese colonialism. And in many respects, we respected that. And, you know, the Second World War was not a morally ambiguous war, at least from the standpoint of American involvement. Everybody was on board. There was no controversy to speak. That was the milieu I grew up in. So, when America first became involved in the Vietnam War, I didn't question it. It was just "Well, if that's what our military says we need to be doing, that's what we should be doing."

I remember I was in a speech class at Dartmouth, and one of the speeches I gave to the class was in support of the war. The feedback then was not harsh. It was not angry. But it was very reasoned and rational and kind of took down my points. And I ended up feeling, I think they've convinced me. I think I've changed my mind as a result of speaking about what I thought was right but then hearing the feedback from other people.

My views were changing. Not that it was just a snap overnight, now I'm anti-war. But it was an evolution. And I think that probably reflected Dartmouth as a whole. Yes, the anti-war sentiment was growing and probably was more prevalent than war support. But it was still kind of in a state of flux as things were playing out and developing. And over the course of the next five or six years, that completely changed. And I'm sure we'll talk about it when I came back. But in 1966, it wasn't entirely obvious everybody at Dartmouth was against the war. That wasn't the case.

LAKSONO:

Would you say that there was a lot of dialogue already happening on campus by 1966?

HOLMEN: Yeah, there was. Of course, a significant part of the conversation about the Vietnam War and a significant part of the opposition to the war was the compulsory draft, which of course hit my generation right between the eyes. Now, being at Dartmouth, we didn't necessarily feel that because we all had student deferments. There wasn't anybody at Dartmouth who was there just because they wanted a student deferment. College was always in the cards, and the deferment was just sort of an extra benefit that came along. But still, that also isolated us somewhat from the harsh realities of being 18 years old and facing compulsory military service.

LAKSONO: And on that note, could you walk me through your experience in the years of like late 1966 to 1967, and how that was like for you?

HOLMEN: I don't know that there was anything particularly notable vis-à-vis the war and me that happened at that time. You know, it was just getting to be a college freshman and enjoying being a college freshman. I think I mentioned earlier that I was what we call the straight arrow in high school. I didn't go to drinking parties. I didn't drink. And I got teased a little bit about that. Not in a negative way, but it was because I was -- at high school, I was the big man on campus, so people weren't going to tease me. But still, there were jokes about Bobby Holmen and his pop parties as opposed to beer parties, which I didn't mind. That was just who I was.

But I have distinct recollection of the first time I ever tasted alcohol was spring term of my freshman year. And I remember the incidents very well. I am a recovering alcoholic. I am of the mind that it is congenital with me, that it's in my genes. It's in my family. I mentioned my four siblings; three of us are recovering alcoholics. And it's also on my mother's side. Not my mother herself, but her sisters and her aunts and uncles and cousins. So, you can definitely trace that there's something in our genes. And in my instance that meant that I didn't gradually become an alcoholic. I jumped in with both feet, and I was out of control right now.

That started the spring term of my freshman year and then continued through 67 into 68. So that by the time of fall of 68, roughly 18 months after I had my first drink, I was just completely out of control. Also, 1968 was a tumultuous year. You know, that was the year of assassinations. It was the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. And the Tet Offensive really changed the public's attitudes and momentum regarding the war in many respects. In 1968, my three-and-a-half-year relationship with my high school girlfriend ended. That left me with kind of loose ends. When spring was winding down for my sophomore year, I didn't really want to go

back home because I knew she would be there. I ended up signing up with some other Dartmouth guys to sell dictionaries door to door in Greensboro, North Carolina that summer. So that's what I did. But as I said, I was very much at loose ends.

And when I got back to Dartmouth for my beginning of my junior year in the fall of 1968, I think I was about two weeks into the term, and I hadn't been to class, and I hadn't bought the books. But I'd been drunk every night. And I just, I didn't realize I was an alcoholic, but I realized that something was really haywire. So, I went to the Dean and said, "I think I need to take a leave of absence." And he looked at my record and he said, "Well, your grades aren't that bad." But I said, "Yeah, but I think I should be doing better." And he said, "Yeah, you probably should be." So, I was given a leave of absence. I came back to Minnesota.

My folks thought it was the end of the world, I'm sure. My dad in particular was extremely disappointed in me. And the first thing I did was headed to the West Coast. I had a little tiny car, an MG Midget. I don't know if you know what that is, but the tiny little British sports car. A little roadster. I headed west, stayed with some aunts in Idaho, and then in Portland, Oregon, and then with some other family in the Bay Area, and then back across this southern border to Louisiana where I had an aunt. So, I did this 40-day whirlwind trip kind of around the around the country.

Came back home and now I'm just waiting to get drafted. That's not what I wanted. But it was just an inevitability. I was hanging out with some high school friends who are going to college in St. Cloud, Minnesota at a state college and partying a lot. Again, just waiting for the draft. And it wasn't happening, and it wasn't happening, and I wasn't getting drafted. Time is going by and I still, you know, I didn't want to drag this on forever. So, I did some investigation, and it turns out that there are two things that I could have done. Number one, you can volunteer for the draft. You could have at that time volunteered for the draft, but they also had something like that called a special two-year enlistment. Usually if you would enlist, it would be for a minimum of three years or four years. But the advantage to doing that is you could also then sign up for a particular type of training. So, I thought, "Well, okay, I'll do that. I'll do a two-year enlistment. Let's get on with this." Time's wasting. And by enlisting, maybe somehow they'll give me a better job. Well, it didn't turn out to be the case, but I enlisted.

I don't remember the dates exactly. I think probably sometime in January of 69, I got the notice to go to a draft or to an induction

physical down in Minneapolis. I did, think I must have ridden a bus down there. And going through this room with a whole bunch of other guys who are joining and we're going through physical and we're going through interviews and so on. And at one point, there was a row of us standing buck naked. The doctor is going by with a chart making notes. He looked at me and he said, "What's that scar on your abdomen?" I had had some childhood surgery. I explained what it was as far as I knew. And he said, "Well, I can't let you go. I need to see the records." So, he sent me home. Six weeks later, they got the records and then they called me back. But that six weeks changed my life because in the meantime, I met my future wife and got to spend some time with her and started a relationship that would never have happened but for the fact that I got sent home because the doctor wanted to know more about my childhood surgery. But finally, I had to go again.

They took me to Fort Campbell, Kentucky for basic training which was absolutely miserable. They really beat you down and then try to build you back up in their mold. Best advice that I got was--they handed out a bunch of stuff at the beginning. And one of the things, the best advice I saw was maintain your sense of humor; kind of "this too will pass but someday you'll laugh about it." And then towards the end of basic training, they assigned everyone to some type of specialty training; what your military occupational specialty or MOS was going to be. Everybody would get something. I was one of the unfortunate ones who got assigned to infantry training. It's called 11B. It stands for Infantry, Eleven Bravo which was in Fort Polk, Louisiana.

So didn't even go home, just went straight from Fort Campbell, Kentucky to Fort Polk, Louisiana for infantry training and did that. They did allow us--there was one where it was Memorial Day weekend of 1969. They allowed us to have consecutive three-day passes, which meant that we got a very long weekend. It was towards the end of our training. And my folks, and my new girlfriend, and my brother and his girlfriend, who happened to be a college roommate of my new girlfriend--that's kind of how I met her--all drove down to Louisiana, and we spent a long weekend together staying at my aunt's house in Louisiana.

One evening, I walked with my girlfriend down a country lane with the live oak trees and Spanish moss hanging down over us. I proposed, and she turned me down.

LAKSONO: How did you feel about that?

HOLMEN: She just said, well--her rationale was I'm too young. And so, it didn't mean our relationship was over. It just meant we didn't get engaged that day. A couple weeks later, I was back in Minnesota for a 30-day leave before being shipped off to Vietnam. And I spent pretty much the whole 30 days with my girlfriend or she spent it with me. And at some point during the 30 days, she relented and said, "Okay, let's get engaged." So, we did. And we've been married for 53 years now.

LAKSONO: That's lovely. And just for the record, I would love to get maybe dates and timeline for this. You are initially class of 1970 at Dartmouth. That would mean you entered in the fall of 1966?

HOLMEN: Yes.

LAKSONO: And when you took your leave of absence, that would be?

HOLMEN: That would have started in the fall of 68, so at the beginning of my junior year.

LAKSONO: Okay.

HOLMEN: And I ultimately came back for the beginning of winter term in 1971. Because I took a leave of absence, I didn't have to go through any kind of reapplication or anything. I just needed to let Dartmouth know that I'm ready to come back and they said "Fine, no problems." I actually had about a month and a half left to serve in the Army at that time. But since I had already been in Vietnam, and they were already starting to wind down, they didn't need me. So, they were letting people out early if they could show that they're actually going back to college. So, I showed the Army the letter I got from Dartmouth saying "Yes, you're coming back." And so, I got out literally 10 days before the January term started, which was Christmas Eve of 1970.

LAKSONO: Got you. Thank you.

HOLMEN: Yeah, Christmas Eve, 1970, I was discharged.

LAKSONO: Thank you. That was great clarification. I kind of just want to circle back to our conversation again about your initial enlistment. How did your parents feel about this? Or your family?

HOLMEN: I'm sure they were nervous. You know, I told you earlier how their generation just had an attitude of "you do what your country asks of you." You don't question it. So, there was no questioning whether I

should--it was the thing to do. I will never forget leaving for Vietnam. Standing in in my front yard getting ready--I don't remember how I got to the airport. But standing in my front yard ready to get in the car to go to the airport that would take me ultimately through Vietnam. And there was no hugging. There was no crying. But the handshake that I got from my father was full of emotion. [Pause].

LAKSONO: That must be a very momentous moment in your life. Did your father also serve in World War II?

HOLMEN: Yeah, he was in the Navy in World War II and saw action in the Pacific.

LAKSONO: I see. And just kind of circling back to where we were, you were initially at Kentucky at Fort?

HOLMEN: Campbell. C-A-M-P-B-E-L-L.

LAKSONO: Sorry. Perfect. And then you went immediately to Louisiana, which is at Fort?

HOLMEN: Fort Polk. P-O-L-K.

LAKSONO: Perfect. Did you do your basic military training at Fort Polk?

HOLMEN: My basic training was at Fort Campbell. Fort Polk was infantry training.

LAKSONO: Okay. Around--when was this in terms of a date?

HOLMEN: I believe I actually started basic training around the middle of February. And that would have been roughly eight weeks. And I believe I came back from or finished with Fort Polk sometime in early June of 1970. And then started the 30-day leave process before going to Vietnam. So, I think basically both basic and infantry were roughly eight weeks each.

LAKSONO: After a 30-day leave, which was what you had mentioned about the story with your father and the handshake, what happened afterwards? And what was the road to Vietnam?

HOLMEN: I got to the airport in Minneapolis, flew to Seattle, Tacoma Airport in Washington and reported into Fort Lewis, Washington. And I went through some processing there. I don't remember exactly how long. Maybe 24, 48 hours. Maybe even a little longer. I'm not sure. When I got there, things were very in flux. People were coming and going.

People had been there one day. People had been there two days. So, it was kind of a--it wasn't as if everybody was doing the same thing at the same time. And I remember I got there, and I was supposed to go and stand in a formation. And I looked, I saw three guys that I had been in in infantry training with at Fort Polk. So, I went and stood next to them and ended up hanging out with them for the next two or three days while we processed. That was interesting.

There were three black guys. Didn't know them well at Fort Polk. There wasn't a racism problem per se, but that's not to say that we mixed or mingled very much either. So, this was kind of unusual for them and for me. That I'm hanging out now with three black guys and they're three black guys hanging out with a white guy. And for one of them, in particular, I know he had never hung out with a white guy before, and he was very uncomfortable and just didn't really know how to deal with it. And we went to some club, and we'd take turns buying beers for each other, and when it was his turn to buy beers he did. But I could just sort of see his brain working that "I'm buying beer for a white guy." And as it turns out, of the three, one of them in particular, we hung out together a lot. And then we ended up in Vietnam hanging out together in Cam Ranh Bay where we went through more processing. And then we were actually assigned to the same unit.

His name was Lewis Harris. At that point, he was my best friend in Vietnam. We ended up in the same place with the same unit. And it was actually Lewis who, at one point, said "We should go LRRPs." And I didn't really even know what that was but, you know, he explained what it was. But we didn't. We both got assigned to this line unit. And three weeks later, we had significant combat, and Lewis was wounded and was sent home. He wasn't wounded bad, but I remember seeing him off in the helicopter and waving to him. We corresponded a little bit after that. But I've lost touch with him over the years, obviously.

LAKSONO: I see. But within this initial period of entering Vietnam, you were in Cam Ranh Bay--processing, et cetera--and you were assigned to a line unit. Just for the record, what was your unit?

HOLMEN: I was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, which was a big, big unit that was up in the mountains in the jungle of the Central Highlands. Their base camp was in Pleiku. There was a camp, Camp Inari, next to Pleiku--a big base camp. That was their headquarters. And then within that I was assigned to Charlie Company, the 3rd

battalion, the 8th infantry. So, C38 of the 4th Infantry Division. C-3-8. And that was just a regular line unit, regular infantry unit.

LAKSONO: And can you tell me more about this initial first few weeks with your unit?

HOLMEN: The sequence of events I'm not entirely sure-- what happened first, what happened second. But I have three distinct memories of the time I spent there, which was probably maybe a month that I was with this company. I don't know for sure, but maybe a month. So, the three things that I have a strong recollection of.

One was very soon after we were assigned. The entire company was airlifted by helicopter into the boondocks, into the jungle, into the mountains. I think it was probably technically called a "search and destroy" mission. It lasted 23 days. And in many respects, it was the worst 23 days of my life. Living conditions were brutal. We experienced combat. We lost some people. I told you that Lewis Harris was wounded and airlifted out. I won a Bronze Star Medal for valor in a fight. But that still haunts me.

We also--I remember other things about that trip, that 23 days. It was rough, rough movement. We would move in single file. So, there's roughly 80 guys in this unit. And we're going through thick jungle. You don't walk in a line like this [gesturing]. You walked in a line like this: one guy in front, behind, behind. 80 guys spread out. Probably 200 yards in a snaking string going through the jungle. So, that's how we moved. Obviously, the people in front were the most in jeopardy so we would rotate that. Each day would be different people who have that responsibility.

I remember one day we came to the edge of a ravine, and there didn't seem to be any way to go around, but we had to get to the other side. So, the decision was that we'll go down, and we'll come back up. Going down wasn't too difficult. Going up the other side was near impossible because it was so steep, and you've got an 80-pound rucksack on your back, and you've got a weapon in one hand. You didn't have a lot of--there wasn't a lot of stuff to grab onto. And we didn't make it. We ended up not making it up that night and slept that way on the side of the ravine simply because it got dark, and we had to stop. So, we slept in place, if you could call it that. You know, you can try to wedge yourself up against a bush or a rock or something and try to get some sleep. And finally, morning came, and then we started up again, and we finally obviously did make it all up. But it wasn't a lot of fun. And it's scary too because when you're lying on the side of the hill, you haven't

created any kind of a defensive position, so you're completely vulnerable. Well fortunately, as I said in the book, there were no fool killers out that night, which was good because there were plenty of fools. So that was tough.

And then at the end, the last couple of days, we actually ran out of water. Now, we would have canteens and water bladders hanging all over our rucksack. We'd be carrying--each guy is probably carrying I don't know, 10, 15, 20 gallons of water at a time. But in the heat and humidity, you're drinking a lot, and we ended up literally running out of water. They tried to resupply us, but we're not in a position where a helicopter could land. So, they tried to drop water down to us in canisters, and some of it worked. Some of it split, and all the water went away. The resupply was not very successful. I remember the stuff in our C-rations that had any moisture in it, like some of the fruit, peaches and so on, that got eaten up real quickly. And then I remember actually licking the tins of jam, jam canister, just because there was a little bit of moisture in there.

So finally, we came to the last day, and word was that we had to go up another mountain, down the other side, back to civilization, and on the other side there would be friendlies waiting for us. So, it's just a matter of getting up there and getting back down. As it turns out, it was my turn. My squad's turn to lead the way that day. So, we went up the mountain, and we made it okay, and we got up where other people were waiting for us. We expected they're going to have lots of water, but they didn't. But we all got a couple glugs of their canteens, and then we went down, rather than waiting for the rest of our 80 guys to come up the hill. I had a--it was a radio. I always had a radio with me, tucked into my rucksack so I would hear all the radio conversation that was always going on.

When we got down to the bottom, there was a river. Fairly wide river, not deep. You know, knee deep with sand bars. And I'll never forget getting up in the middle of that river and drinking water. Taking my canteen cup, and drinking water, and drinking more water, and drinking more water, and then filling my canteens, and going to shore, and then maybe mixing the water with Kool Aid, or maybe hot cocoa or something. So, I just continued to drink water and continued to drink water as I'm listening to what's going on. People are passing out from heat stroke. There's almost mutiny in that people are throwing away their rucksacks that were too heavy to carry. Medevac helicopters came and evacuated, I think, as many as seven guys that day from the mountain as I'm sitting down at the bottom listening to all this stuff going on.

I'll never forget battalion commander flying around in his little helicopter as this crisis unfolds, and he could hear the angry talk, and people were very upset. And I remember he came on our radio frequency and said, "Keep the radios free for official traffic and use proper military procedure." And I remember somebody keyed their mic and just said, "fuck you, sir," and then keyed it again and said, "Oh, I'm sorry." No, no. First, he said, "fuck you." And then he keyed his mic again and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, fuck you sir." But that was, that was kind of--eventually everybody made it down. We climbed on the back of tanks that drove us a mile or two back to the highway where there were trucks waiting for us.

Somebody had made the wise decision to have--the back of each truck had a cattle trough full of ice and beer. So, as we drove back to base, we got really drunk, and it was kind of like we had won the World Series pouring beer over each other's heads and laughing and having a good time. So that's one of my three memories. It was that hump, and there are more things about it too.

But the second memory I have--I don't remember if that was before or after this, and I don't remember the circumstances--but for some reason, some of us were at a remote roadside firebase. What we're doing there, I don't know. And somebody decided that some of us should go out and be listening posts out in the jungle around this fire base. So, I think eight of us were sent out, and I was one of the eight. And I remember we went out, and we kind of came to a little hilltop, and me and three guys stopped there, and the other four were going to continue on. And at some point in the evening, after dark, the other four guys radioed back that they heard something. Not sure what it was, but we heard something. And for some reason, which makes no sense, but somebody back at Firebase decided, "Well, I'll send a tank out."

So here we are. We're hiding in the boondocks, and they're coming out with this tank coming up the hill towards us. And I remember the tank coming to my location, and I said, "No, it's not us, it's other guys. They're farther down the way." So, the tank continued on. Next thing we heard was the machine gun, the 50-caliber machine gun on the top of the tank, shooting. And almost immediately the other team on their radio was saying, "Cease fire. Cease fire. You're shooting at us!" And they killed one of our guys. So that's one of the guys whose name I know on the Vietnam Wall [The Vietnam Veterans Memorial]. Wilhelm(?) Don't know what went wrong but that's classic friendly fire. So, I remember that.

Third thing I remember then was kind of at the climax of all this. We had our stand down in base camp, and then for a few days they sent us and we established a camp. Kinda just outside the camp-- not in a very dangerous situation, but they just didn't have room for us in the camp, so they sent us outside, and we dug our bunkers, and did what we did for a while out there. We'd go swimming in a river. So again, it wasn't a particularly dangerous situation. There were villagers all around us, and they'd come and visit with us, and our medic would put salve on their cuts. And so, it was a pretty good time. During that time, I developed boils on my wrist and on my knee and a bunch of the other guys did too, probably from drinking that river water. Probably from drinking that contaminated river water. So, at some point, there was more than the medic could handle, and he sent us back to the base to see the battalion surgeon who actually cut the boils out. And I still have little scars there, but nothing, no big deal. Being back at base, I went and volunteered for the LRRPs.

LAKSONO: I see. I might be backtracking just a little bit, but you had mentioned that you received a bronze medal for valor in battle. When did the firefight for which you received this battle take place within this 23-day hump?

HOLMEN: Late in August. I have the exact date, but I don't remember it offhand. I think it was exactly three weeks after I arrived in-country.

LAKSONO: Do you mind telling me a little bit more?

HOLMEN: Sure, sure. Our normal routine is, as we are humping through the jungle, about maybe two or three o'clock in the afternoon, we'd stop and we would create a night location. November Lima would be the phonetic. The military speaks with phonetic alphabet all the time, so that becomes the army slang. November Lima--night location. And what that consisted of was we would dig holes, and with the dirt, we would fill up sandbags that we carried on a rucksack, empty and pile the sandbags in front of the holes we dug. So, we would create bunkers, kind of very temporary bunkers, protective areas. We also, if it was a brushy area, and this was, we would go out with machetes and chop down all the brush in a circle around the perimeter, so that we would create maybe a 30- or 40-foot open lane between us and the jungle.

Another thing we would do was we would set out Claymore mines. Claymore mines are directional mines that you can aim them in a certain direction. And they're not mines that you step on. They're mines that you hand activate with an electrical cord. So, we'd set

these Claymore mines also in a circle around us, with the electrical cords trailing back to the bunkers where we had the detonators set. So that's the second, another thing we would do to prepare for the evening.

It would also be the case that in three locations around the perimeter, four guys would be designated to go outside the perimeter for the night, to be a listening post. Obviously, it is more dangerous being outside, so we took turns at it. But it was meant to be a precautionary thing, that if someone was advancing on us, at least we'd have some advanced warning. So that was the theory behind it. I was scheduled to be on a listening post that night. And as I told you, I carried a radio. So being prepared, I took my rucksack with the radio in it out to the spot where the listening post was going to be, and then came back. And I was actually sitting on the bunker writing a letter to a Dartmouth buddy. And right at dusk, I heard pop, pop, pop, pop. Sounded like popcorn. And initially I'm thinking, it's some guys screwing off. What the hell, you know? Stop screwing around with your weapons. But very quickly I realized, no, this is--people are shooting at each other. And then the whole perimeter just sort of exploded in gunfire.

My initial reaction was exhilaration. I felt, "Oh, my God, I'm in combat." I am in a live action war, and my immediate reaction was one of exhilaration. That lasted about five minutes. I dove into the bunker, and my instinct was to grab the detonators to the Claymore mines, and I blew everyone that I could. Pretty soon, helicopters are circling. Artillery is firing, not explosive shells, but illumination flares. What it is, is they'd fire an artillery shell that had an illumination flare in it, which would be white phosphorus on a parachute. So it explodes, and then it would drift in the wind as the white phosphorus would burn out, but it would create light. It was, you know, it's like a spotlight in the sky. It was actually scary as hell, because as it moved; that meant all the shadows and the brush were moving. And I was sure it was enemy everywhere. Probably not, probably by that time the enemy was gone. At some point, fairly early on, I never saw him, but my squad mates hollered, "Here comes a dink!" And they mowed him down. Again, I never even saw him. When all the firing is done, the captain was calling around, "Have we got any dead?" It turns out we did have a couple dead, and that was part of the terrible thing too.

The next day, I'd help carry one of the dead bodies, and it was worst walk of my life. But in any case, the captain was doing a situation report. What have we got? And one of the questions was, "Are all of our radios accounted for?" And my squad leader looked

at me, and he said, "Where's your radio?" I said, "Well, it's in my rucksack, which is out in the listening post." So, he reported that to the captain. The captain said, "Well, we need to know. We need to know if the radio has been captured." So, I wasn't really meant to be a hero, I don't think, but I knew where it was, so I volunteered to go and find it. In infantry training, they taught you how to alligator crawl, keeping yourself very low to the ground and crawling through the scrub. I was alligator crawling out to hopefully find the radio. As I did so, I came across this dead body of the North Vietnamese soldier who had come attacking us. And this is something that I still have issues with. I hollered back--Gary was my squad leader. I hollered back, I said, "Gary, here's your dead dink!" And he hollered back and said, "Make sure he's dead!" And I did. I put a round in his head. He was dead, but still, it haunts me.

Well, then I continued crawling. We had also affixed trip wires around the perimeter, attached to smaller weight phosphorus grenades, and I accidentally tripped one. So now all of a sudden, I'm in the I'm in the spotlight. It wasn't close enough to burn me, but it illuminated me. So, I'm just laying there in the light. My nose is pressed as close to the ground as I could possibly get it, and just waiting for the-- for it to burn out. And it did, eventually. I continued forward and crawled right to where my rucksack was. The radio was still there. I grabbed it, and I lugged it back. Now I got my M-16 in one hand, and the rucksack in the other, and I'm crawling back. And so, I retrieved the radio, and that's what I got the Bronze Star for.

LAKSONO: It is really crazy, actually, that you had experienced so much combat and everything firsthand within three weeks of your enlistment. Chaotic but also overwhelming, it all must have been. You mentioned that this was one of the reasons why you volunteered be a LRRP. Can you tell me more about that process?

HOLMEN: Right. I volunteered to be alert for one reason primarily, and that is, although we would have to go on missions in the jungle, which could be dangerous, and were, but we also got to live in the rear. We would live in the rear in a barracks, in a bunk, eat hot food for four or five days, and then we'd be called to go on a mission in the boondocks for four or five days. So, it's this back and forth, but the allure of being able to live in a barracks and not have to live in the jungle like we had been doing, was what caused me to go.

I don't think it was had anything to do with patriotism. I don't think it had anything to do with a yearning for excitement or adventure. I don't think it was any of that. I went to Vietnam, not because I

wanted to, but because it was just in the cards. You know, that way my life was playing out. Leaving Dartmouth, I had to go in the military. There wasn't necessarily a choice about it. This was sort of a similar thing. It seemed to me at the time, to be the better of two bad options. So, I volunteered for the LRRPs, and it wasn't too long that I got word that that they were taking me. I left my line unit, went and joined what was then called the 1st brigade LRRPs of the 4th Infantry Division. And at that time, they were stationed at Camp Radcliffe, which was near An Khê. Same general area -- An Khê and Pleiku I think are maybe 30, 40, 50 miles apart. And I served a couple missions with the 1st brigade LRRPs.

Most of the LRRPs had either gone through Ranger training in the US before they got to Vietnam, or they went through a short-lived version called Recondo training once they got to Vietnam. I didn't do either, and that's probably because I already had experienced combat. I was experienced, plus they were already in a state of transition. They knew they were in transition, so they didn't bother to send me to any specialized training. They just started sending me on missions. And I don't remember how many missions I pulled; one for sure, maybe three. And then this transition that I had mentioned, that I didn't know about when I joined but was already in the works, was that all these various LRRPs outfits across Vietnam were all being rolled into one larger entity called the 75th Infantry Battalion Rangers. So, all the LRRPs in Vietnam, whether they're Ranger-trained or not, now suddenly were going to be part of the Rangers in Vietnam. And there were companies spread out all over Vietnam, but all part of this 75th Infantry Regiment, Rangers. 1st Brigade was rolled into was K Company now back in Pleiku, so we had to go back to Pleiku. There were two or three other similar, smaller units that were also rolled into K Company at that time.

When I got to K Company, probably in in October or so of 69, it was sort of a brand-new emerging company, consisting of LRRPs being brought in from various entities being made into one larger body. I then continued to be part of K Company for the duration of my tour. The duties, the missions, didn't change. It was always the same. It was always four-man teams sent via helicopter into hostile territory for the purpose of reconnaissance to determine if there is enemy activity here. And if so, then we typically did our damndest to avoid any contact with the enemy, and mostly we did. But there are a few times, obviously, that we didn't. When we did have contact, they would quickly come and try to pull us out. Because with just four of us, you know, we just didn't have much firepower.

What we relied upon was our camouflage fatigues, and our greased-up faces, and our ability to be stealthy, and to hide and sneak around in the bush. If need be, we had the ability to call in all kinds of support. We could call in artillery, we could call in helicopter gunships, and we did that on numerous occasions. There was even one occasion when we called in Air Force fighter bombers who strafed the valley. We're up on a mountain ridge, and we're actually looking down on the jets as they flew through the valley. We had crazy fire support at our beck and call if we needed it, and we always had good radio contact. There were a couple times when we'd get out there, and first thing you do is you make sure you have radio contact. And if we didn't, the helicopters would come right back and pick us up, take us back.

We moved around a little bit. This K Company was kind of back and forth between Pleiku and An Khê, and there were other times when certain platoons were detached here or there. For one month, my platoon was sent to a place called Buon Ma Thuot, which is about 60,70 miles south of where we were down in some rubber plantations actually. I ultimately think I probably was on 25 missions. Don't know for sure, but that's probably about right. When we would get back, we would always be debriefed and somebody-- it's a mystery to me who, because I heard the company clerk say "it wasn't me"--would then type up the reports; the feedback that we gave back. And it would be filed as an "after-action report."

Interestingly enough, many of those after-action reports--guys that I served with have discovered that they're on file at the National Archives. Some of the guys I know have spent time downloading them or copying them, uploading them to a website, and then actually making them searchable. I've been able to search, and I found 10 missions with the after-action reports that I was on, which is very interesting reading 50 years later. Some of them, I don't remember that; others I remember, but I didn't really remember that part of it. But it is fascinating to read these after-action reports.

LAKSONO: And once again, just for the record, LRRP stands for?

HOLMEN: Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, L-R-R-P. So, if you just say L-R-R-P, it's "Lurp."

LAKSONO: Can you tell me a little bit more about your day-to-day life as a LRRP? You gave me an amazing overview of your experience, but I would love to hear the details.

HOLMEN: Yeah, well, a mission would typically involve the day before, or two days before. But shortly before a mission, the team leader and the assistant team leader--and that would usually be me. Initially, I was an assistant team leader, and then later I was a team leader. We would fly out in a helicopter and look over the area we were going to be in, so we'd have some visual understanding of the terrain we're going to be in. We would probably pick out our landing zones that we'd get dropped off, maybe emergency landing zones we'd have to get to to get picked up. So that would be the day or two before the mission. And then in the day of the mission, we would--well, the day before the mission, we would load up our rucksacks with water, with ammo, with Claymore mines, with hand grenades, with smoke grenades. That would be fastening, pinning to our rucksack all over the place. And food--the food that we would take with us. We would go through traditional C-rations, which was in many respects, pretty nasty, but there's always some good things in there. But then mostly what we would take was actually something called LRRP rations, which was freeze dried food, and that was much tastier. So, we'd stock up on that, and we'd take some of the peaches and pound cake and that sort of thing out of the C-rations, and so we load up our rucksacks with food.

So then now, on the day of the mission, we'd be wearing our camo, we'd face paint or cover our face with face paint, and we'd move to the helicopter pad. There would usually be multiple teams going out at the same time. So, there would be multiple teams there waiting, and then eventually we'd get on our helicopters, and they would fly us out. The helicopter would go to the designated landing zone. The quality of the landing zones varied. Sometimes it was just a little side of a hill; sometimes it was marsh; sometimes it was just a postage stamp area, so the helicopter had a hard time even getting in and out. And we'd get off. If it was an easy landing zone, we'd be able to step off. Other times, we literally had to jump off the last four or five feet. So, as we'd come in, we would shift our weight. We'd have our legs hanging, dangling out the side of the helicopter, rucksack on the back, M-16 weapon in one hand, grasping the side of the helicopter with the other, and you'd lean forward and get your weight on the steel runners. And then when you got close enough, you jump.

We would then immediately head into the brush line. Being out in the landing zone, you're exposed, so we didn't want to stick around there very long. So, we would immediately head to the brush line. Helicopters would take off, we'd get to the brush line, and we'd make sure we had good communications. Assuming we did, then we just wait. We just rest for a while, catching our breath, being

prepared for stealth and quiet, whispering, finger motions and so on. And then eventually we'd start moving, four of us again, in a single file line, going very slowly, being very methodical. We're not trying to get anywhere fast. We're just trying to be stealthy and quiet and not step on any branches, not rustle any leaves. Taking you know--you're sniffing, you're smelling, you're looking everywhere, looking around. So, we're being extremely vigilant, and we're moving. And typically, what we're looking for is a good, thick patch of brush. Someplace that will be safe for us to crawl in and nestle in and be out of obvious sight, out of the open. Usually, we'd find that within an hour or two. Sometimes we would pick a spot that would have a vantage point over a valley, so we'd be able to observe and watch what was going on in the valley.

So, each night location was a little different. Oftentimes, we'd stay there for the duration. Not always. Sometimes for one reason or another--maybe we're just dissatisfied with it. After the first night, we would move and relocate. But if the first place we found was suitable, we would stay there. We wouldn't do anything other than sit there and watch and listen and observe. Establish radio communications. We would lay out--we'd sleep in a small area, four of us, side by side by side, and using our rucksacks as our pillow, and we'd have ponchos. We would probably set out Claymore mines, maybe some other type of trip wires or something, depending upon the circumstances.

We'd be in constant radio contact with base during the day. And then at night, three guys would sleep, and one guy would be awake in alternating two-hour shifts. And the one guy who would be awake would lean against the rucksack with the radio and with the handset for the radio just kind of right here, so you could hear. Every 15 minutes, base would call around to the various teams in the field. And our call sign was always our ranger, Romeo-One-Eight. Most of the time, that was my team. And eventually they would get to get to us. And base would ask Romeo-One-Eight, sit rep--situation report. And we didn't want to talk, but the protocol was, if everything was okay, you just key the mic twice. And that was saying, everything's okay. And I think the practice was probably put in place too as a means of keeping people awake. You know, if you had, every 15 minutes, somebody was talking in your ear, and you had to do that, that tended to keep you awake. So that's how we would spend the night. And then after two hours, you'd wake up the next guy and the next guy and so on.

LAKSONO:

Yeah.

HOLMEN:

We ate the LRRP rations. We actually cooked with a canteen cup and the plastic explosive that comes in Claymore mines. It's called C4. It's just white, plastic explosive, and it's like clay. You can mold it into a little ball, and interestingly, it burns and makes for a very good fire. Cook stove without being explosive. To be explosive, it requires something more than just heat. So, we would make little cook stoves out of C-rations cans and boil water over burning C4 and then use the boiling water into the LRRP rations and mix it all up. And it wasn't, wasn't bad. It was better than what regular line guys got to eat, which is just C4 or just C-rations. So that's how we'd spend our days. Quite often, that would be the end of it. After three, four or five days, we saw nothing. We heard nothing. We really had nothing to report, and the helicopters would come and pick us back up. Other times we did see things, did have contact.

I'll give you a couple examples of times when we did have contact. This went to--this was very early on, when I was in K Company. And for some reason, our team consisted of me, another GI, Stan Craig, his name was, and then two mountain yard scouts. It's just kind of unheard of. The two guys, two GIs and two Montagnard scouts would make up a team, which actually didn't work very well because the Montagnardscouts didn't have radio clearance, so they couldn't pull guard duty at night, which put a big burden on the other two guys to have to be up all night. But in any case, so the four of us are out. And this wasn't in mountains. This was more in a in kind of a grassy plain that perhaps at one time had been cropland, but now it was overgrown with tall elephant grass, with little patches of brush here and there. And we landed, and high tailed it for a brush patch, and we got set up kind of in the middle of this brush patch. And again, I don't remember if we set up Claymore mines or what we did, but we set up. And about that time, a helicopter gunship, like Cobra Gunship, I don't know if you're familiar with they are, but they were faster helicopters, and they would have rocket launchers on either side, plus what they would have would be on either side would be what was called a minigun. You're familiar with the old western gatling gun, where you crank it, and barrels rotate. This is, this was the modern version of that. A minigun had rotating barrels that was firing machine gun rounds, 6000 rounds a minute. So, you can--it's just extremely powerful. It's putting out a lot of bullets in a short period of time. Some very powerful offensive machines.

Shortly after we got set up, one of these helicopters flew by and got on our radio frequency and said, "I'm in your neighborhood. I'm around. Just so you know, I know you're down there, and you should know that I'm up here. So if you need any help, just let me

know." Well, it wasn't too much longer that we did need their help. All of a sudden, one of the Montagnards started firing his M-16. Not on rock-and-roll, just single shots. Bang, bang, bang. And then the other guys flopped down and started shooting too. And I immediately got on the radio and screaming on the radio. "Contact, contact, Romeo, one agent contact." Right. So the shooting is going on. Almost immediately, this helicopter comes back on a radio frequency and said, "I'm on my way. " The normal standard operating procedure would be this. The helicopter would advise you that "I'm on station, please pop smoke." So, one of us would take a smoke grenade that we had carried with which would come in four or five different colors, and pop it and let the smoke waft up. And then the protocol would be the helicopter pilot would say what color it is just to make sure that there's no Hanky Panky going on. He'd say, "I've got banana yellow, I've got goofy grape" or whatever. And then the guy on the ground would confirm, "Yes, banana yellow." And that was this. That would be a signal to the helicopter pilot. Shoot wherever you want, but not here. This is where you don't shoot. So that's a normal standard operating procedure.

In this case, I pulled a smoke grenade and I'm waiting for the helicopter pilot to ask me to pop smoke, and the next thing you know, he's flying over us with his machine guns blaring. Meanwhile, the other GI laying there, and he said, "He shot my fucking legs off." And I looked over there, and I almost laughed. I said, "No, they didn't." It's just a hot cartridge that fell from there and burned the back of your pant leg. We found so--eventually the shooting dies down. A rapid response team, a company of infantry comes in to sweep the area, and we meet them, and we go out. So, the first bird comes in, they offload, we get on, and we go back. Turns out that the reason the helicopter pilot didn't do standard operating procedure was that when he came on station, he reported he saw the enemy fleeing through the grass, and he just opened fire on them.

LAKSONO: Oh my god.

HOLMEN: The other GI and I, we didn't really do much other than we were there and participated in it, but we each also got a Bronze Star for that.

LAKSONO: I see. Okay, that must be extremely intense. It must have been such a stressful situation.

HOLMEN: Oh yeah, absolutely. So that was one incident. Second incident, we had moved around looking for a suitable night location. Didn't really

find one, and it was getting later in the day, and we decided we have to do something. We can't just keep walking around looking. And we're on a mountain ridge with, you know, a spine; maybe a couple 100 yards wide, and then a drop off on both sides. So, we had been walking along this ridge, and we decided that what we'll do is we'll just kind of get off on the side of this ridge, not right on top, but kind of in the side, in the tallest grass and brush that we can find. So that's what we did and set up our night location. This time we did put out Claymore mines, kind of uphill facing up to the top of the ridge. The back of us is now the steep decline behind us, and we're, again, we're setting up for the night. Starting to think, probably, I don't remember if we're eating, but all of a sudden we heard voices up on the ridge coming towards us. So, we all flop down on our bellies.

Somewhat instinctively, we, all four of us, did different things. Two of the guys put their M-16 on rock-and-roll. I, again, grabbed the detonators for the Claymores. Gary, my buddy, took all kinds of fragmentation grenades off his vest and laid them in front of him so he could quickly pull the pin and throw those. So, we're watching through the grass as we're waiting for these voices to come and get closer and closer and closer. And all of a sudden, there they are from, I don't know, 20 feet in front of us, walking past us. Had no inclination we were there, and I'm waiting for the slightest alarm, any hint that they recognize something's going on. And I would detonate the grenades, detonate the mines, and the other guys would fire and pitch. We never did. Just let them walk past us. Not on purpose. They never realized we were there, and we weren't. So, there was no sound of alarm. I never detonated. I'm sure those I don't remember, I don't know how many there were 4,6,8, I just don't remember for sure. But they had no idea how close they came that night. So that was another incident.

The third one. We had just gotten off. This time, the landing zone was about as perfect as could be. It was actually a meadow surrounded by a river on one side, steep ridges, wooded ridges on two sides, and then the fourth side was a banana grove. But this was like it had been a field or something, and was low grass, and helicopters actually could land right on it. So we got in and off very easily, and immediately we head into the woods like we always did. We hadn't gone very far, and Air Force starts dropping bombs on us. Makes no sense, and but there's debris flying and noise, and it's just crazy. And we're on the radio saying, "What the hell is going on?" And eventually it was done. And we're talking to a bird dog, the spotter plane up there, saying, "Sorry, didn't know you guys were down there." No harm, no foul, but it was crazy.

Then we moved up the hill, found our night location, stayed there for three or four days. There was another team nearby, so we could hear them on the radio, and they said they had somebody walk by. So all of a sudden, everybody's talking about -- our purpose is reconnaissance intelligence gathering. We could capture a POW [prisoner of war]. That would be great intelligence. This was the conversation we're having, but it's time to leave. So, we move from our spot up in the hill back down to the edge of this LZ [Landing Zone], just on the edge. LZ is here. The river's here. We're kind of right in the corner, a little brushy patch, waiting for the helicopters to come and pick us up. And then we get word that they were diverted so they're not coming to get you today, which pissed us off, because we've left our secure spot, and now we're in a less secure spot, and it was not as if we were going to go back up. So, I remember I was leaning against my rucksack, and I dozed off, and my buddy put his hand over my mouth to wake me up, but so that I wouldn't make any noise.

Across the river, somebody had come out of the woods and was standing on the edge of the river washing. Washing himself, washing fruit. We don't know, and we have no idea who this guy is, and we're just kind of wondering. And then he suddenly disappears. Shortly after, two other guys come from the same spot across and they cross the river in front of us, and they get up on this grassy spot, and they disappear. Probably going to pick fruit from the banana grove or something. So now, all of a sudden, this conversation is welling up again. We should grab one of these guys and get intelligence for us. Who are you? What's going on out here? So, we hatched a plan, the four of us. The plan was, if one or both of these guys came back and started crossing the river, I would fire a shot to splash water on them. Meanwhile, the other guys would holler in Vietnamese to stop and we'd have our POW. That was Plan A. Plan B was, if he didn't stop, I would attempt to shoot him in the leg to disable him. So that was plan A and plan B.

Sure enough, it wasn't too long that one of these guys came out. He's crossing the river, and he's out in the middle of the river. It's a shallow rivers with sandbars, and that's easily to walk across. Plan A, I fire the warning shot. Everybody hollers. He starts running. Plan B, I shoot at his leg. Doesn't stop him. He keeps running. We had no plan C, but the two 18-year-old guys standing next to me killed him. That wasn't what we were planning, but that's what happened. [Pause]. So we didn't get a POW. We killed somebody. Don't know who, don't know what he was doing out there. And of course, we report to base, and base in all their wisdom said, "Well,

you have to check the body for any documents." What the hell. You want us to go out in the middle of the river and expose ourselves to check and see if there's any documents on this guy? There's kind of a veiled warning that we felt. Well, if we don't somehow prove that this actually happened, they're going to doubt. They're going to think we're making it up or something. So, what the hell. Squad leader and me ran out, splashing through the water. There are no documents on the body. No weapon that we saw. Probably just a kid. Maybe 15,16 years old. Still to this day, have no idea who he was, what he's doing out there, if he was an enemy, or if he was just a mountain kid who lived out there. And we don't know. It's another thing that haunts me.

LAKSONO: In situations such as this, what is the dynamic within your team? Because I'm sure that you might have conflicting opinions at the moment, and it's such a tense situation. What is usually going on amongst you guys?

HOLMEN: For about a four-month period, including a couple of these incidents that I just mentioned, my team consisted of the same four guys. Team leader, who was a college graduate and actually had gone through Ranger training. My best friend in Vietnam, and still my best friend from Vietnam; we still talk occasionally. Me, with two years at Dartmouth. And then these two 18-year-old kids. I don't think either one of them was a high school graduate. So that was the four of us. Now, in many respects, I was the leader, simply because I grew up in rural Minnesota. I had hunted as a kid. I knew how to walk in the woods. The other guys didn't, so they kind of instinctively looked to me, even though technically the other Gary was the team leader, and I was the assistant. But he, to this day, he says, "You saved our ass more times than not Holmen, just because you knew what was going on." So that was kind of -- the two young guys, you know, they're just doing their thing, one from St Louis and one from Texas. They both passed within the last couple years. And I think they both had real tough times back in civilian life.

LAKSONO: I guess, just for the record, can I get their full names?

HOLMEN: Their names? Yeah. My friend is Gary Heald, H, E, A, L, D. One of the young guys was Mark Estopare, E, S, T, O, P, A, R, E. He's from St Louis. And Billy Powers was from the Dallas area.

LAKSONO: I see. And because it's a four-man team, how did your relationship with them evolve over the course of the time you serve together?

- HOLMEN: In the field, as I said, they kind of look to me. Back in the base, Gary and I were best of friends. We sang Peter, Paul and Mary songs. He had a guitar and played "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" and that kind of stuff. Put it on tape and send it home to my wife, my fiancée. I didn't hang out with Mark and Billy too much. They kind of had their own circle of guys. Another thing that happened for all of us, basically, including me, at various times in Vietnam, and for me, it was more towards the end is--I said I was an alcoholic, and we drank when we're in the rear, never when we're in the field. We were completely sober in the field. So that was a non-question. But the other thing that was going on in Vietnam and probably back in the States as well was marijuana. Yeah, there was a lot of marijuana. And so, I started smoking weed in Vietnam, and pretty much everybody was. It was just kind of--it's what you did in the rear, never in the field.
- LAKSONO: Kind of in the same vein, can you tell me more about what your free time in the rear looked like, and what the culture was like in the rear amongst the different LRRP teams?
- HOLMEN: Yeah, the free time was very free. We had to get up in the morning and go through a morning formation where they'd pass out Malaria pills and maybe make any announcements, and then you guys would head off for breakfast. Pretty much the rest of the day you're on your own, literally. So, there'd be card games in the barracks. People would go to the PX [post exchange]. There was a mountaintop right in the middle of Camp Radcliffe, where there was a little village of radio operators and stuff on top. Sometimes we'd go up there, and there'd be parties going on up there. Sometimes, we'd go to a club on base. At night or in the evening, there would often be live music, mostly Filipino bands, some Australian. I never saw a USO show. So, a lot of card games, a lot of just goofing off.
- LAKSONO: For instance, you went on a mission. How many days of downtime did you get afterwards? Was there a regular set time?
- HOLMEN: It was set. My recollection is there was typically supposed to be four or five days on a mission, three or four days in the rear. It never worked out that way. If you went on a mission and you were in contact after one day, they'd come and get you. So now your mission was only one day, not four or five days. And maybe they'd send you right back out, but maybe not. You're part of a schedule, so now all of a sudden, maybe you're back in the rear for five, six, seven days. There are other times when we were scheduled to go on a mission, but the helicopters got diverted into some other

emergency, so we didn't go. So, the four or five days was delayed a day or two. So, I think the way it probably worked out was, instead of three or four days in the rear and four or five days in the field, it was probably reversed. We probably spent slightly more time in the rear than in the field.

LAKSONO: And kind of on that note, I was wondering what had happened--like the timeline nearing the end of your service. How did that look like?

HOLMEN: Toward the end of my service in Vietnam, I spent about a week in hospital. I had a cut on my leg, and it was nothing serious, but because of the potential for infection, they put me in the hospital just as a precautionary thing. And as I said, I was perfectly okay. And in fact, while I'm in the hospital, I'm helping the nurses serve food to the guys and so on.

It was about that time that my brother got orders for Vietnam. But he had an entirely different military occupation; he was going to be a radar operator, which sounded like rear echelon safety. So, he said, "I'll go and you can come home." That was the policy. Two brothers didn't have to be serving in a war zone simultaneously. Only one, which meant that then I got, when that all came down, I got orders--I feel bad about this cough. So, I got orders that I was going to be back in the States, maybe six weeks before I was scheduled to go back, which now meant that my whole timeline got moved up. So, about the time I got out of the hospital, I was a short timer. I didn't have that many days left in Vietnam, and it was often the policy that when that happened, they pulled you out of the field, or they would send you on other missions that weren't as dangerous. So, I was pulled out of the field. And I actually was the team leader on two missions after that, but neither one was particularly dangerous.

One was-- a LRRP team had discovered a trail through the jungle that was obviously being used as a branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So, intelligence decided that they wanted that trail mapped. They created a special eight-man LRRP team that was going to go out and follow this trail and map it. A special mission. But because it was in somewhat remote territory, they're concerned about having effective radio communications. So, what the plan was that the military sent a platoon of combat engineers--they're the people who do the grunt work and build structures--to go out and with chainsaws, clear off the top of a hilltop, create some bunkers for a radio relay team that would be up on the on the hilltop, that would communicate to the team in the valley and then back to base. This

radio relay team--I was the leader of that radio relay team. So, that was a mission I pulled when I was a short timer.

Another mission. And there's a lot more to that story too. It turns out that it was probably the most famous mission. The guys in the field-- it was a tragic story, actually. The most famous killed-in-action of my unit when I was over there was killed in action on that mission. I was the guy on the radio who was reporting that. And they had to-- they're in the middle of the jungle, so being extracted under fire. So, they actually dropped a rope ladder down. The guys clamored up a rope ladder to get to the helicopter. And we're up on this base, this temporary spot, watching so we could see it. And everybody's wondering, "How are they going to get the body out?" Well, at some point, the helicopter just lifted straight up, and as the rope ladder cleared, you can see that there's one LRRP hanging on to the bottom, holding on to the body. So, there are two guys on the bottom. As I said, I'm the guy on the radio; back and forth between base, reporting what's going on and giving instructions. And immediately the helicopter pilot says, "I can't fly like this. This takes way too much gas. I'll never make it back to base." So, I got in the radio and I said, "Well, we're here. We're close by. Come here and drop the body off here." But for other reasons, that was the person who was killed was--. Everybody who was served in K Company would have heard that story. So that was one mission I pulled as a short timer.

Another mission I pulled was--I told you about this mountain inside the base with the radio village up on top. The side of the mountain was still jungle, but it's inside the perimeter. It should be completely safe, but there were some sappers, which would be Vietnamese people who came in and set satchel charges and blew up a bunch of helicopters one night. So, all the military brass is wondering, "Where did they come from? How do they-- how did they get here?" And there was some theory that, well, maybe they were in tunnels in this mountainside. So, I was the head of a team to go out and spend a couple nights pulling a mission inside the base. But on the side of this interior mountain, we didn't see anything.

Other than that, I hung out, played cards, went to parties. Because of my time in the hospital, I got to know some nurses, invited some nurses to come over and have a steak fry, which made me real popular with the guys, that I got women to come to a steak fry. Stuff like that, just goofing off for the last month or two.

LAKSONO:

After this transitory period, how did you return back to the United States? What was the process like?

HOLMEN: I knew I was coming, but I didn't have a specific date until, literally, the day it happened. Just a day or two before, actually. You have to get on the plane at such and such time. And flew back to Fort Lewis, Washington again, and processed out. I called home. My mother bawled. Processed out, got on a Northwest now Delta flight back to Minneapolis, and my fiancée met me at the airport. Spent a month back home in Minnesota. But then I still had six months of active duty to serve back at Fort Lewis, Washington. But that was just kind of silliness after being in the war. This was just killing time, basically doing nothing.

LAKSONO: What is an approximate date for this?

HOLMEN: The approximate dates for?

LAKSONO: For your return to Fort Lewis. When was this around?

HOLMEN: I have some recollection that I was out of Fort Lewis for Fourth of July, but I don't really think that is possible. So, I think I probably got out to Fort Lewis maybe around the second week of July, or something like that.

LAKSONO: In 1970?

HOLMEN: Yes, 1970. And then served out at Fort Lewis until literally December 24 Christmas Eve, when I was discharged in order to come back to Dartmouth.

LAKSONO: How was your transition back into civilian life? Was that something you had difficulty with?

HOLMEN: Probably the fact that I still had six months of active duty in Fort Lewis was sort of transitional because that was back in the US, but it was still military. So, I didn't go suddenly from Vietnam back to real life. There was kind of a transitional period which probably smoothed things out. So, then I get out on literally Christmas Eve in order to come back to Dartmouth. By then the class of '70 has come and gone, and I wouldn't have known any class of '72. The only people I knew were class of '71 who had been freshmen when I was a sophomore my last full year there.

One of the guys from the dorm was my friend from French Hall days. I lived there both freshman and sophomore years. He was a freshman when I was a sophomore, and he was from Minnesota. Not only did we have the connection from Dartmouth, but we had

the Minnesota connection. So I called him up and said, "I'm out. I'm going back to Dartmouth. You want to ride out with me?" So, he did. We drove from Minnesota out to Dartmouth to be out there in time for winter term to start, which was kind of a breaking in period too, in that I could ask him, "Well, what the hell is campus like? How has it changed?" That sort of prepared me, and it had changed so much.

So much had changed since I was gone. Parietals were gone. Parietals were rules about women in the dorms, women in fraternities. And if I recall correctly, it was that they could be in, but they had to be out by 11, I think. Well, by the time I came back, there were no parietals anymore. There were women on campus, not full-fledged co-eds but transfer students. I mentioned Vassar and so on. Drugs were everywhere. ROTC was gone. Kids on financial aid, like me, could now have a car. First time around, we couldn't. So, the whole campus life had changed just so much in the time I was gone. Rules were just not being enforced or non-existent anymore in many respects.

LAKSONO: And how were you received on campus, both by students and perhaps on a wider institutional level?

HOLMEN: I was actually received well. Not as a hero, but somewhere between a curiosity and a celebrity in the sense that this was the great event, the great tragedy, the great adventure, the great whatever of our generation, and I had lived it. So, people wanted to know what it was like. People wanted to know about my experience. There were a few other vets on campus that I met and didn't really know them. Met them, and that's about all I remember.

But here's the example I use, and I might have already told you this, so I'm repeating myself. But while I was in Vietnam, I bought a Super Eight movie camera at the PX, and I shot Super Eight movies, which would be three and a half little canisters of eight-millimeter film that as soon as I'd shoot it, I'd send it home and my folks would develop it. So, I didn't even see them until I got home. Well, I took these movies with me to campus, along with a movie projector. And I was at this fraternity, Harold Parmington [Foundation], which was, you know, a strange name. It was formally Tau Epsilon Phi. I don't know what's there, if anything, now. But it had been a national fraternity that went local. And then going local, they came up with this strange name of the Harold Parmington Foundation, and it had a lot of guys from French Hall in it. So, I hung out there quite a bit. I had actually pledged at Tri-Kap [Kappa Kappa Kappa] when I was a sophomore, but I hung out at Tri-Kap a

little bit when I went back. But that really wasn't me. One evening out at Harold Parmington, we're drinking beer down in the basement. Not much going on. And I mentioned these movies, and somebody said, "Wow, let's get them." So I went and drove and picked them up in my dorm, came back, and I showed them in somebody's bedroom upstairs. And because it was near a bathroom, people kept coming by and poking their head in and looking. And I ended up showing the movies three times, the whole series of them three times that night, to a packed room. People just wanted to know. People just ate it up. So that was kind of typical.

I also took a class, a Vietnam class, by a professor named Jonathan Mirsky, who was extremely left wing. In fact, during my one-on-one session with him, at some time during the term, he literally said that if Nixon came on campus, he would feel compelled to assassinate him.

LAKSONO: Wow [laughter]

HOLMEN: And he said, "Everybody knows that I'm extremely left wing on Vietnam, so in order to take any grading pressure off, I'm going to let everybody grade themselves." And later, he said, "Well, that was a bit of a bad idea. Everybody got As." But it was actually a very good class. It was an interesting class, and so I learned a lot more about Vietnam. You know, I learned at a certain level, but then now I'm learning about it in a historical, academic level. So that was very informative.

Jim [James] Wright, recently deceased president of the college, was my seminar history seminar professor and advisor. I was a history major. And a few years ago, he wrote a book about Vietnam, "Enduring Vietnam." And as part of that, he interviewed guys, including me, and he said, "you know, Bob, I didn't even know that you were a Vietnam vet when you were in my class, in my seminar." So I didn't, apparently, necessarily wear it on my sleeve. Although I do remember I wore old Army shirts a lot, but a lot of guys were doing that, I suppose. Other than that, I don't recall any conversations with professors. Clearly, the sentiment had moved to being almost 100%; really close to 100% anti-war. And there were protests, but there was one time. But this was just more--Parkhurst [Hall] was taken over by students. I don't know if you've ever heard about that, but there was a kind of a sit-in and, yeah, students held Parkhurst for a day or something.

LAKSONO: Was this in like 1971?

HOLMEN: I think it was maybe when I was gone. I don't think it was when I was there, so it was probably while I was gone.

LAKSONO: But you know, given the rise in anti-war sentiment, did you feel at all that the sentiment manifested itself as disparagement towards you or other veterans?

HOLMEN: No, no, never. And I know that not just at Dartmouth, but just in general, that doesn't fit the stereotype. You know, the stereotype is that vets were spit on, called baby killers. And I think that's probably true in a lot of respects, but it was not my personal experience. I'm going to take a break. I need to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back. [pause] I'm back.

LAKSONO: Hi. Do you feel ready to continue? I'm totally fine to take--

HOLMEN: Yep

LAKSONO: Okay, no worries. So, can you tell me a little bit more about your, I guess, final few months of Dartmouth and your experience graduating, and the like?

HOLMEN: I came back winter term of '71. I was a gunner. With the military discipline, I was a gunner in the sense of I studied hard, read my books twice, and thrived. Did really well with my grades last two years. That year, the rest of that year, and then senior year. The summer of '71, we got married and came back to Dartmouth in June of, I guess this would be '71. Rented a professor's house who was on sabbatical in London, I think. So, we rented his house, and I mentioned that I rented out some of the bedrooms to my friends from the class of '71 that were back from Vassar. And so, it was through them that summer we had Meryl Streep as a dinner guest.

LAKSONO: Wow, that is an--

HOLMEN: Yeah, she was apparently at Dartmouth doing summer theater or something. And of course, at that time, we didn't know what the future held for her. So, then my senior year, I actually, you know--I don't know how Dartmouth does it now, but in those days, three classes a term was a full load. You know, all classes were the same, and three classes were a full load, but I think I took four somewhere in there. Plus, Dartmouth gave me two term--two class credits for military service. So, I was able to then graduate after, uh, taking five terms. When I came back. I hadn't started--I was thinking I was going to be a poli sci, government major before I went. But when I came back, I switched to history and thrived again in history.

That's really where my head is at. I love history, and history makes sense, so I'm sure you appreciate that. Well, took a lot of history. Just finished up and enjoyed the last year and a half.

LAKSONO: And when did you graduate exactly?

HOLMEN: With the class of '72 in the spring of, you know, after spring term of '72.

LAKSONO: What did you do after graduation?

HOLMEN: Didn't participate in graduation. Don't remember why. I think I was just anxious to come home, but I remember actually driving past the Green while graduation ceremonies were going on, as my wife and I were pulling a U-Haul trailer heading back to Minnesota. So came back to Minnesota, rented an apartment in St Paul area, Minnesota. I worked that summer as a cab driver. My wife found work in a corporation. Well, corporate home office. Started law school at the University of Minnesota that fall and did that for three years and graduated with the class of '75.

LAKSONO: What did you work as after getting your juris doctor degree?

HOLMEN: Between my junior and senior year, I took a job in a small city, St Cloud, Minnesota, which is closer to my home. It's about 60 miles out of the Twin Cities metro. At that time, it was a city of maybe 50 to 75,000. I took a job clerking that summer for a law firm in St Cloud. As it turns out, what they did was--they were civil trial attorneys. They worked for insurance companies. When someone would get sued as a result of a car accident or slip and fall or medical malpractice or even product liability there would always be an insurance company that would be involved. The insurance company would have to pay any damages, and the insurance company also would hire the attorney to defend the car driver or the doctor or whoever was being sued. So that's where this law firm came in. They were the law firm in central Minnesota that the insurance companies hired. So, I clerked for them that summer.

At the end of the summer, then they offered me a position when I graduated. So that's what I did. I went and started working for them, starting in the summer, late summer of '75, and worked for them for four years. Basically cut my teeth as a civil trial attorney in those four years. I think I tried 100 cases to a jury, a lot of them really small. But I got to know how to handle myself in front of a courtroom. And then in '79 I started my own firm and wasn't sure what I was going to do. You know, I knew how to try lawsuits, knew

how, knew my way around the civil courtroom, so I assumed I'd be doing something like that. But it wasn't as if I was going to steal any insurance company clients. They were pretty set. But as it turns out, I started getting referrals from other lawyers in town, and now, all of a sudden, I'm a plaintiff's lawyer. And did well with that for a while.

LAKSONO: I also saw on your Facebook page that you eventually went to a theology school, and we had also spoken about this in our previous conversation. So yeah, I would love to hear more about your theological background and involvement for the record.

HOLMEN: After practicing law in St Cloud for, I guess, probably six or seven years and living in the general St Cloud area, we ended up building a lake home back in back in Upsala, Minnesota, on the lake where I learned how to water ski and fish and so on. So, we built the lake home. So, we moved back to the community that I grew up in, which meant that I also now was back in the church that I grew up in, which was Scandinavian Lutheran, Protestant. It tended to be fairly conservative, and I wasn't very conservative. So I wasn't--I didn't jump in with both feet.

There was a political crisis in my wider denomination and in that congregation having to do with LGBTQ issues, with the start of the gay rights movement. And, you know, in '69 and gay pride and all that the churches, the various churches, suddenly had to come up with policies. You know, for the first time, there was a recognition that there are people in our pews who may be gay. What do we do about that? So churches suddenly had to come up with policies. And by large, the policies were restrictive in the sense that, well, you're welcome, and some would be more onerous than others, but basically, my denomination's policy became that you can't be gay and in a relationship and be a church leader. In the sense that you can't be ordained to the ministry. So that was the policies that grew out of the 70s.

For the next 30 years, that continued to be contentious and struggled over at church conventions and so on. In my local congregation in Upsala, which, as I said, was conservative and I was not. And so, there was a fight in my local congregation, not necessarily over days in the church, but that was kind of right in the middle of it. And so, I became involved in order to fight for a more progressive policy, and we were successful. We won that fight, which meant that that, I guess if I'm going to be in this fight and be a leader in this fight in my local congregation, I better be involved in my local congregation. So, I did.

I became involved in my local congregation and learned some things about the Scriptures that I hadn't learned, again from a very progressive standpoint of scriptural analysis and interpretation. I was intrigued by it, and it was not what I had grown up with, which was more fundamentalist, more literalist, certainly more conservative, but I was being exposed to a more progressive, enlightened view of the Scriptures that I found compelling. I actually toyed with the idea of becoming ordained clergy, and I didn't follow that, but that did lead me to taking theology classes. While I was practicing law in St Cloud, there is a Catholic Benedictine community, St John's Abbey and university that's about half an hour away from St Cloud. The Benedictines tend to be rather progressive Catholics, and they're both monks and nuns. Part time for three or four years in the early 90s, I went out and I studied with them. I studied with the monks. I discovered that with my historical, natural historical leanings, I found that I had a keen interest in the background through the scriptures. Who wrote these books? Why? What were the historical circumstances? You know, the whole complex of historical questions, and the whole idea of treating the Scriptures from an academic standpoint, from a scientific standpoint, if you will, and trying to understand who wrote them and why and for what purpose I found that that intrigued me. So I kept, kept studying that, and then ultimately wrote some books about that.

LAKSONO: And just for the record, can you please tell me the name of your denomination?

HOLMEN: It is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ELCA for short. Evangelical is kind of a misnomer, and I have advocated that it should be changed, because evangelical has come to mean something different than what it originally meant. Evangelical originally simply meant Protestant, going back to the Protestant Reformation. So if you were Protestant, as opposed to Catholic, in Germany and in Europe, you were referred to as evangelical. So that's the historical background to evangelical. Within the last several generations, it has come to be understood as conservative Christian, more fundamentalist. So the evangelical in our name doesn't accurately describe who we are, according to present usage of evangelical. So I have advocated we should change it to ecumenical. Ecumenical meaning more reaching out and embracing other faiths and cooperating with other faiths and learning from each other and so on.

LAKSONO: Did your experience in Vietnam impact your religious beliefs or involvements?

HOLMEN: I don't think so. I don't really think so.

LAKSONO: And I'm also curious about so far, like career as a writer. So I have read, "Gonna Stick My Sword In the Golden Sand." You have "the Point Man and the Peacenik." So you have a range of books that talk about the Vietnam War and some about some about the church, the Christian belief, etc. What prompted you to choose autobiographical fiction, historical fiction, as genres of text to write?

HOLMEN: Well, the first book I wrote was very much related to the experience at St John's and what I was explaining--how I found a keen interest in the stories behind the stories, the stories behind the books of the Bible. The New Testament, so called Christian Scriptures, as opposed to the Old Testament, which is your own Torah. You Muslims share with all three faiths of the book. You know, Christian, Jewish and Muslim all have the same basics. Well, the Christians have their own New Testament Scriptures, which consists of 29 books, 13 of which were purportedly written by the same man, a man named Paul, who came along in the generation immediately after Jesus of Nazareth. In many respects, he was the interpreter of the Jesus experience, the chronicler of the Jesus experience. Open to some criticism that he may have, how do I put this, changed the Christian experience from what Jesus of Nazareth had actually been like.

This Paul is an extremely important person in the history of the church, and while I was studying at St John's, there was a suggestion by a noted current scholar that he thought Paul may have been a repressed gay man, which would explain some of some of the things he wrote. So I thought I want to write a novel about Paul and characterized him as a repressed gay man. I did. So that was the first book I wrote called "A Wretched Man," which is a name Paul called himself. That was first book I wrote. Another book with religious background was sort of a sequel to that. If Paul wrote his books in the 20 or 30 years after Jesus' death, the next book that came along in the Christian Scriptures was written maybe another 15 or 20 years after that. It's called the "Gospel of Mark," although we have no clue who Mark was, if that was even his name. But I wrote also a novel about Mark. So that was the next book.

When I became involved, I mentioned the political struggle over the issue of gays in the church and within my own denomination, and some of our sister denominations. Sister denominations that would be similar to the ELCA would be Episcopalians; would be

Presbyterians; would be a smaller church called the UCC [United Church of Christ], which is actually, I think, the White Church I think they still call it in Hanover, that would be a UCC church; and the Methodists. Those five denominations are sometimes referred to as mainline Protestants. Mainline Protestant churches, they historically tend to be more progressive and less fundamentalist, and they were all kind of on the same path together, struggling with the issue of gays in our church. And I ended up writing a non-fiction piece about that, about that 50 year struggle, and ultimately, in the early decades, in the early decade of this century, all five of those churches, maybe not quite the Methodists--they're still wrestling--but the other four completely reversed their policies, and instead of excluding gays from church leadership, they now not only accept gays in the church leadership but welcome them with open arms and support them. And right now, I think the ELCA has 65 bishops in the United States, and I think maybe 8 or 10 of them are gay. So it's been a complete reversal of policy and attitude, and I wrote a book about that.

And then most recently, I've written the Vietnam book and point man book. And I also, two years ago, wrote a book about an immigrant to Minnesota that, again, is fiction, but it kind of parallels my family's story.

LAKSONO: Kind of just now shifting towards a leg of our conversation about reflections on Vietnam. Generally, how do you think your experiences in Vietnam influenced your life in the aftermath of the war?

HOLMEN: I mentioned earlier that I come from a Rockefeller Republican family, so more moderate in background. So I started there. Two things in this. Graduating high school in '66, over the next 5,6,7, years, two things really moved me further to the left. Moved me really completely away from Republicanism into liberal democratic politics. One of which was Vietnam, but that was only one. The other one was race. It was the recognition that the party of Lincoln really wasn't the party of Lincoln anymore, and that there had been a complete reversal in race relations relative to the two major parties. It was now the Democratic Party that spoke for civil rights and spoke for human rights and now continuing with women's rights and gay rights and so on. So my transition was based upon the Vietnam war experience, but also the recognition that that my basic liberalism was more at home in the Democratic Party than the Republican Party, starting with race.

LAKSONO: Also kind of in the same vein of your experiences in Vietnam, I was curious--you had mentioned that you still stay in contact with some of the men you serve with. Can you tell me more about that and the LRRP community today?

HOLMEN: Historically, I didn't really want too much to do with it. I never joined the American Legion. I never joined the VFW, Veterans of Foreign Wars. I never went to reunions. I had probably a, basically an anti-military attitude. That has changed.

I went to a reunion back in 2007 and got to meet some of the guys that I had served with. It was really an excellent reunion, hearing stories that I maybe knew about, but now I'm hearing it firsthand. Or something that I participated in, and now I'm hearing people who were participating in it, but with a different point of view. So that was positive, but it still wasn't as if I was going to jump whole hog into playing the role of being a Vietnam vet. I never wore a hat, although, if I'd see somebody wearing a Vietnam hat, I'd often talk to them and just visit with them.

In March of this year, there's another reunion that I went to, and that has really motivated me to become much more involved again. It was very interesting, hearing stories and meeting guys that I maybe knew in Vietnam. Didn't really remember them, but there was one incident, for instance. We were talking and there was a bar scene where some crazy guy at the bar was showing how tough he was, and he smashed a glass on the table--no, a light bulb--and then started eating it. And somebody was telling that story, and I said "I was there too. I remember that story!" So then, you know, it was just all of us coming back and that sort of thing. That was real positive. I have actually bought a Vietnam hat, and I wear it sometimes.

Another thing that came out of that reunion was I was encouraged to look into VA [Veterans Affairs] disability claims. I had never even thought about it; nothing wrong with me. Well, it turns out there's a lot wrong with me. Small little things like hearing loss and vertigo associated with hearing loss and exposure to Agent Orange left me with an underactive thyroid. I have all sorts of squamous cell carcinoma in my forehead from sun exposure and from Agent Orange exposure. I have all these little things, nothing standing by itself is particularly disabling, but they all lead to a little bit of a disability claim. So I'm in the process of filing claims for that and receiving some benefits. It turns out that these guys have gotten in contact with a foundation that's going to send some of us back to Vietnam.

LAKSONO: Oh, wow

HOLMEN: Sounds like in maybe March, April or May this year, I might be going back with a dozen of the guys I served with. I have also remained in contact with my friend Gary from California. We talk on the phone every now and then. More in recent years. There's probably 10 years or so right after Vietnam, that we didn't remain in contact.

LAKSONO: And how do you feel about this, about getting closer once again to the LRRP community? I also know that you're the administrator of a Facebook page for LRRPs and the website "The Liberal Spirit," which is also dedicated to memorializing LRRPs. How do you feel about this?

HOLMEN: How do I feel about--state the question again.

LAKSONO: I think more like--how do these kind of recent developments and your increased involvement in the LRRP community make you feel again? But also how does that make you feel about the memory of the war itself? I'm sorry. I feel like that was kind of a convoluted question on my part.

HOLMEN: I have mixed feelings to be sure about the war. I have in my mind, there's just no question, that it was a huge mistake for the Americans to be involved in the first place, in a huge series of continuing mistakes as to how the war was conducted. So, it is a black mark in American history, to be sure; something that we as America should not be proud of. Hopefully, we should learn from it. And I think in some respects we have, there are also--I have some emotional feelings about it, and I mentioned some of those things that bother me. At the time it was--it didn't bother me so much at the time as it does with reflection. On the other hand, on the whole, I'm proud of my Vietnam service, not in the sense that I'm proud as somehow serving America. You know, I did what America asked me to do. But that's not really why I'm proud. I'm proud that I maintained, to a large extent, a morality. A sense of right and wrong.

Let me give you one incident that I'm very proud of. Four of us had just gotten off the helicopter again. It was not in a jungle setting. It was more in a fields and crop setting. And as soon as we got off, we suspected that there are people here, people who are not enemy combatants. And this is not what we were told. We generally where we were was in a so-called free fire zone, which meant that

nobody's supposed to be there unless they are enemy. But there we were seeing signs that was not the case; that we were not in a free fire zone, even though that's what we had been expecting; that there were people here who were not enemy combatants. We called back to base and said, "What's going on?" And the guy at the other end said, "Let me check. Let me check with higher up." And he came back on very quickly and said, "Our policy is to shoot first and ask questions later." That's what we were told.

It wasn't long after that that we heard voices coming toward us, and it was obviously voices of women and children, and we hadn't set up in a night location yet. We're just kind of tucked into some tall grass up against some bushes, and they're getting closer and closer, and we're just praying that they turn and go some other way. But they didn't. They came walking right up to us. So, what did we do? We jumped up and started screaming, "Run, run, run!" And they ran one way, and we ran another way. We disobeyed orders. We were supposed to shoot first and ask questions later. But thankfully, our moral touchstone kept us from that situation, and so I'm proud of that, and proud that I maintain my moral bearings. I'm also proud that I was calm and a leader in stressful situations. So, I have mixed feelings about Vietnam. It was a tragedy, and it was wrong. And I have some bad feelings about it, but I have some positive feelings also.

LAKSONO: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me. I guess you know, as we kind of reach the final part of our conversation, I was wondering if you have any final remarks or anything to add.

HOLMEN: No, this has been very thorough.

LAKSONO: That's fantastic. And I guess once again, just want to say thank you so much. And it was really a pleasure speaking to you, Obie.

[End of interview.]