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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Herb Silva
Conducted by Jonathan Bernstein
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Transcribed by Jennifer McIntyre**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Jonathan Bernstein: This Jonathan Bernstein conducting an oral history interview
2 Mr. Herb Silva. It is the 1st of May 2002 and I am in the Special Collections Library
3 interview room and Mr. Silva is just outside of St. Louis, Missouri?

4 Herb Silva: Chesterfield, Missouri, just outside St. Louis.

5 JB: Okay, now Mr. Silva I guess could you start off with a brief biographical
6 sketch of yourself from birth pretty much leading up to your decision to enter the
7 military?

8 HS: 7-20-46, born in Providence, Rhode Island, second generation, my
9 grandparents all came from Portugal. My dad was Army artillery. I grew up lower
10 middle class neighborhood, background high school, East Providence Senior High
11 School. Graduated, '64, went away to a small liberal arts school in Illinois, McMurry
12 College, went up there, just to get away from back East and go out onto a new horizon,
13 Played soccer, graduated in four years, 1968, in about '60, I lose track of time. In about
14 '66, obviously you know the history that was going on, I came from a military
15 background, was not afraid of the service, actually was looking forward to it. I connected
16 with the Marine recruiter that was on campus and I joined through what's called the PLC
17 program, Platoon Leader's Class. Marine Corps does not have anything with ROTC
18 (Reserve Officer Training Corps). But basically I signed up to go for ten weeks to the
19 OCS (Officer Candidate School) class during the summer between my junior and senior

1 year and upon successful completion then I was commissioned when I graduated in,
2 whenever that was, May of '68 and went right from college to Infantry School at
3 Quantico. During the course of being there in Quantico, actually I had tested when I was
4 in the PLC program. I joined what was called a PLC Air Contract; theoretically I could
5 have gone right to Flight School when I graduated from college. At that time Marine
6 Corps did not require all their officers to be infantry officers first as they do now. And
7 when I went to the thing in Quantico, I enjoyed it; I got offered a regular commission.
8 Didn't know what that meant, so I signed a piece of paper, said, "Yes sure I want to be a
9 lifer." And got a piece of paper right about Tet of '68 that said, "Congratulations, you've
10 been accepted for a regular commission in the Marine Corps. Your Aviation Contract is
11 null and void, report to Infantry School on such and such a date." So I did that and
12 actually had orders with the 26th Marines, was going as a grunt scheduled to get married
13 to my college sweetheart. But at the last minute they found on the records that I had
14 taken the Aviation aptitude test and they were screaming for helicopter pilots because
15 they were, I guess, losing them or short of them or whatever the case was. And I was just
16 one of the first groups that went to the Army Rotary Wing Class and went to Fort
17 Walters, Texas and started that in November of '68. Went through the Army Flight
18 School. When we finished with those wings, which was probably that following August,
19 we went to New River into Marine squadron, got my instrument wing, instrument
20 qualification, then went back down to Cobra School with the Army for a month and then
21 right to Vietnam. So that was basically it in a nutshell.

22 JB: Now, I guess, stepping back a bit, the ten week training program while you
23 were still in college, what exactly did that entail, what was it like, I mean was it basic
24 infantry training?

25 HS: When I was in college, Marine Corps has a ten week OCS thing, it's at
26 Quantico. And in fact we were with the same people that we were with, some of them
27 were commissioned right then and went on active duty right away. The Marine Corps'
28 version is like I say, its called a Platoon Leader's Class, and it's a summer program and
29 it's the way that they screen their people as well as people see if that's what they want to
30 do without an obligation and so it worked.

31 JB: Now, I'm sort of assuming that's the basics, basic infantry tactics etc.?

1 HS: Yes, correct. A lot of weapons stuff and just getting used to the military,
2 military background, Marine Corps history, and then basic tactics, weapons qualification.
3 The basic school is like a five; six-month infantry Platoon Leaders Class that when you
4 get out of that place you're ready to go get a platoon.

5 JB: What kind of weapons were you trained on?

6 HS: In Infantry School basically everything that the small unit would have. At
7 that point we were shooting US rifle 7.62 millimeter M-14s and then transitioned into the
8 M-16, .45s, .38s, M-60 machine gun, do a little bit with tanks, call in artillery. Just small
9 unit tactics, everything that the Platoon Commander is going to do.

10 JB: Okay, now I guess moving down to Fort Walters, dealing with the Army,
11 how did that compare to the Marine training you'd received so far and what was basic
12 flight training like?

13 HS: Well, that was right away, you went flying in the first week, you did a little
14 bit short Ground School and that was...The way the Army was structured at that point or
15 I guess maybe they still are, I don't know, it was called an OWRWC class, what did that
16 stand for: Officer and Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Class. And the, a lot of the Army
17 was taking the Warrant Officer, high school kids. And that was their transition, they
18 were putting younger folks, I was twenty-one, twenty-two years of age, college graduate
19 and they were taking eighteen year olds, nineteen year olds right out of high school or
20 wherever and making them Warrant Officers. And basically it was the same, just basic,
21 an H-55 which was a little recip engine, manual throttle and so forth. And then you
22 worked your way up, by the time you graduated you were flying a Delta model Huey,
23 which is what basically all the Army tactics were. Their small unit tactics at that point
24 and those kids were going right from there into the flight battalions that the Army used.
25 We were, as I recall there were about twenty Marines in the class, I don't know how
26 many were in the class, maybe a hundred, a hundred in each class and they were starting
27 classes of course every week or every other week, it was just running people through.
28 Helicopter pilots were cannon fodder at that point in time and they were going through
29 quite a few of them. And basic flight stuff and a lot of it was hands on, you studied
30 during the morning, go out for hop during the day, basic maneuvers and then of course
31 had to solo and then they ran through a training syllabus going from the basic flight at

1 altitude to doing the thing done the ground, to then tactics, to then navigation, and so
2 forth getting more sophisticated. Half of it was at Fort Walters, Texas and the other half
3 of it was at Savannah, Georgia: Hunter Army Air Field and that was the track that I did.
4 Some of the guys then went to the place in Alabama, a little bit later I think; eventually
5 the Army closed the place in Savannah. But at one point they were running two tracks
6 because they were just running people through so frequently. So that like I say, it was
7 nine months basic stuff, you finished up in a Huey, a Delta model Huey, as I recall by the
8 time you finished Flight School you had close to two hundred hours of flight time. And
9 then what the Army did is they didn't give you a standard instrument ticket that a Naval
10 Aviator required so went to Jacksonville, North Carolina and got my Navy wings there.
11 Which was basically just go through the instrument qualification. Got the Navy wings
12 there, as I recall I was there for a few more months. Actually I got involved with an
13 Advanced Infantry Training Unit at the kids that were right out of college, finally they
14 because they saw that I'd been to infantry training and then we waited for a slot to go to
15 Cobra School, attack helicopter pilot. It wasn't called that at that point in time but they
16 were just phasing in the Cobras with the gunship platform and with the skinned down
17 Huey, that just short wing stubs as you are well aware that their stealing their gun
18 platform. So when we got to Vietnam, late December of '69 the Marine Corps had just
19 transitioned into those aircraft, they'd been flying Huey guns and HML 367 got the
20 Cobra. The Cobras actually went through the Army's procurement system, they weren't
21 even in the Navy supply system and we were some of the first guys that showed up in
22 country having been through the Army's Flight School.

23 JB: Now, what was your first impression first starting off in the TH-55, feelings
24 about that particular aircraft and moving up, did you have any H-13 or H-23 time?

25 HS: No, in fact that was, I don't know, I think they were still running those
26 parallel, but we were in the H-55. It was smaller, as I recall of that thing, it was just very
27 sensitive and you didn't know how dangerous it was, actually there were quite a few
28 people that were injured and worse there going through school. It was a dangerous place
29 with kids trying to run into each other running into each other all over the place. Lots of
30 aircraft going all over West Texas or wherever that was. But it was challenging, learning
31 the hand-eye coordination and getting that stuff down. In that thing it was very difficult

1 from a fixed wing aircraft, which I didn't found out until centuries later, it seems. But
2 none the less, that's where it went and if you could get that thing down with your skills
3 and the manual throttle coordinated with the pedals and understanding all the
4 aerodynamics that were involved, the more sophisticated the aircraft got, it got a little bit
5 simpler because you had the coordination and you have to have the manual throttle, to
6 just set it up into the speed range. So then it was all more tactics and of course more
7 weapons systems and navigation and communication and coordination with troops as it
8 got more sophisticated.

9 JB: Basically they were teaching Army air assault tactics?

10 HS: No, not all. All through Flight School it was just basically, "Here's how you
11 do this maneuver to land on a spot, to change air speed and altitude." There was
12 instrument training although they didn't get an instrument ticket, basically how to get
13 from point A to point B, then reading maps and so forth. But basic technique was hover
14 technique, first on the ground and when I came back from 'Nam I was a Flight Instructor
15 at Navy Pensacola. So I got to compare the training. Of course when its down at the
16 ground and this is what the collective does, this is what the cyclic does, doesn't get too
17 much different. But the Navy was using H-57s, which was basically a much more
18 sophisticated aircraft and we got students after they'd had a hundred hours in fixed wing.
19 And so it was a significantly different transition, you had students who were getting
20 reasonably proficient in fixed wing and then you go put him in a hover over the hundred
21 feet hover and the kids wouldn't know they were doing because they were thinking they
22 were going to stall. So then they had to relearn, get into the helicopter mode. So when
23 people coming through the Navy's pipeline, again about the same two hundred hours
24 worth of basic flight time, would have a hundred hours fixed wing, a hundred hours
25 rotary time, the Army's helicopter pilots, they never saw fixed wing aircraft so from the
26 initial first couple of hundred hours, they were maybe just a touch more proficient. But
27 no, group tactics and so forth I think is that with something that the Army did after they
28 would graduate from Flight School, they'd go to a unit for short term as they were getting
29 into the air assault or whatever they were going to do and they got into, certainly different
30 tactics than what we did in the Marine Corps.

1 JB: Now when was the first time you ever saw a Cobra, and what was your first
2 impression?

3 HS: Cobra first time I saw was at Hunter Army Air Field coming back down
4 there, actually we saw them when we were training there, going through the advanced
5 half of basic flight training, and we saw them and of course that was The Thing, that was
6 the most sophisticated aircraft. And everyone wanted to be in a weapons delivery system
7 and that's kind of like, certainly that was my mind set, that's what I wanted to do and so I
8 put in for that and was fortunate enough to be selected and run that route. The Slick, the
9 weapons on the wing stores sticking out of everywhere, the mini-gun was of course a big
10 deal and like I say, having had a little bit of infantry training and knowing what those
11 weapon systems could do in support of the grunts, I had a full appreciation for it, was
12 anxious to get into it and was happy to do so.

13 JB: Well, actually going back to advanced training were you given any gunship
14 training there?

15 HS: No, as I recall from the Army's basic class, it was just more sophisticated
16 maneuvering as you transitioned. Actually, they got them transitioned to a Delta model
17 Huey and there was a lot of actually, point to point instrument training and ADF (Air
18 Defense Force) and they didn't have VOR (VHF (Very High Frequency) Omni-
19 directional Radio-range), they didn't have TAC (Tactical Air Control), and with the DME
20 (Distance Measuring Equipment) Equipment that the Marine Corps had in all of their
21 aircraft. But a lot of ADF training which was very difficult in short distances and flight
22 planning and then getting into a little bit of group tactics if you will, where you were
23 flying formation and landing into a zone with a couple of birds and so forth. But no,
24 there no guns in basic schools, in the basic flight training as I remember it. We didn't get
25 into that actually until back down into Cobra School.

26 JB: Now were all of the Marines in your class on a similar track or did some go
27 to Fort Rucker, Alabama, do you know?

28 HS: Yes, actually I think that was going on simultaneously. I don't know if it
29 was a little bit later. But that was the parallel course and became actually the primary I
30 think ultimately, they did away with Hunter, I don't know when. Yes, but the Marines
31 that, there was a big contingent of Marines that went to the Army training and then when

1 you graduated from the Army training, you went back to New River or some guys went
2 to the west coast and then you would get your distribution and some guys would go to 53,
3 some guys would go to 46 and some guys went into Hueys, and some guys went to the
4 Cobras as we did. So that was basically, at that point is where you get farmed out to the
5 different squadrons and that's when people got their MOSs (Military Occupational
6 Specialty) and went from there.

7 JB: The reason I ask is I know that several of the Army pilots I've spoken to
8 actually got into Bravo and Charlie model gunships during advanced training at Rucker
9 and I was just wondering.

10 HS: Yes, there may have been some of that, you're dealing with somebody with
11 beginning Alzheimer's John, and I don't remember that we did stuff with guns in Army
12 school, but I do remember being on the ranges down there out west of Hunter. But it
13 seems to me that was all when we were shooting live ammo; it seems to me that that was
14 all in Cobra School. But that ran together because I went right back down to the same
15 place.

16 JB: Okay, getting into Cobra School, what was the curriculum like, how much
17 flying as opposed to classroom time?

18 HS: Oh, full days, five days a week, full days and as I recall basically you did a
19 half day in the classroom and then you take up a half day with your hop and of course
20 you'd have pre-briefs and post-op briefs and do whatever the mission required and so
21 forth. A lot of it was transition into the particular aircraft and getting just your basic
22 skills of hovering it or getting the thing from point A to point B. And then developing
23 the skills with the weapons systems and delivering because now you got into trying to put
24 ordnance onto a particular target, and then of course you had to deal with a turret and
25 then you had to deal with the wing stores and so forth. So you had to, there was a
26 transition as I recall with front seat and then ultimately to back seat and different
27 weapons systems in each position. That was, I don't know how long that was, it seems to
28 me that was a relatively short period of time, maybe a month, not much more than that
29 and so you were pretty well clammed into that, you were busy the whole time you were
30 there.

31 JB: What was it like flying the Cobra from the front seat?

1 HS: Front seat, beautiful perch, the sticks were offset so the cyclic was over, if
2 you just sat in an armchair and you just let your forearm rest to the right of you, it was
3 just off to the right hand side and it was short and stubby, so therefore you didn't have as
4 much feel for the stick as you will and you can fly the thing from there, some people will
5 tell you, you basically control it, its very difficult getting into tight spots. And it took a
6 little bit of getting used to, learning how to use the force trim was an important thing
7 versus in the back, you typically had just like with it all it went all the way down between
8 your legs down to the floor and the thing was, I don't know probably three and a half,
9 four feet in length and so you had a much more gentle touch that would flow through into
10 the controls and that's basically what you are trying to do is develop that light touch and
11 that hand-eye coordination, a little bit more difficult from the front seat, but doable.

12 JB: What exactly was the force trim?

13 HS: Force trim was a little button that was up on the cyclic that would, if you
14 were working against a...Let's say you were working against crosswind or something,
15 the force trim would set just a little bit of an offset of pressure to that and take it, so you
16 wouldn't have to hold as much pressure with your hands. I'm using terms that I haven't
17 used in thirty years, but they're coming back.

18 JB: Now, getting through training, obviously at this point I assume you're certain
19 you're going overseas, when did you get your orders for Vietnam, what did you think
20 about it?

21 HS: Anxious to go, I was trained to go. When I came out of the basic school,
22 when I came out of infantry training, I had orders, going over as the next free Platoon
23 Commander. Was getting married based on those orders, and then as I recall it was like
24 the last week or two and the orders got changed for Flight School, we had to change the
25 wedding date in order for me to report down to Flight School at the proper time frame.
26 So I was psyched, I was ready to go the first time and certainly was ready to go by the
27 time we were done with the Cobra training. That's kind of like what you're geared for,
28 that's certainly the people that I was with, all the people, most of whom I ended up with
29 in the squadron in 'Nam, that's what you wanted to do, that's where you wanted to go,
30 that was young Marine officers want to do is go where the combat is. So that's what we
31 did.

1 JB: Now were you aware of the political situation, what was going on, any ideas
2 of what we were trying to do in Vietnam?

3 HS: Well, you understand I was programmed, I was programmed to be a Marine
4 officer, you didn't question that stuff, it was like, "What's my mission, sir?" And
5 "Where's that brick wall and I'll go run through it." They were very efficient at what
6 they did.

7 JB: Heading overseas, what was your route of departure, did you go with your
8 aircraft, how did that work out?

9 HS: Went as an individual as I recall, I think I flew out of Norton Air Force Base,
10 you get on an airplane and kiss your wife goodbye and get on an airplane and get off
11 another airplane and then you start seeing more jarheads all together. And as I recall I
12 hooked up with some Major who said, "Come with me son," and took me into the
13 Officer's Club and the next thing I knew I woke up in Hawaii. That's basically how that
14 went and then as I recall, you have an aircraft change in Hawaii and then from there to
15 Okinawa is what I recall, spending a couple of days in Okinawa trying to get on a C-130
16 that then took us into Da Nang, so it was several days en route. Got into Da Nang and of
17 course now new batters shortly thereafter, but really wasn't too far from where I was
18 ultimately going. But ended up spending the night in some transient quarters at Da Nang
19 and of course there are all the sights and sounds that were going on already and not
20 knowing what was going on before I got to my unit which was at Marble Mountain. It
21 turns out it was just a short hop away and I could have bummed a ride with any one of a
22 number of aircraft that was there, but didn't know where I was going, so I wanted to go
23 on a truck the next day. Checked into MAG 16 (Marine Aircraft Group) and with my
24 jacket and my training background run I got into the HML 367 Cobra Squadron (HMLA
25 367 Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron) and as I recall there was like a ten day,
26 they called it an acclimatization period or whatever they waited for you to get used to
27 being in the tropics, whatever and then went on your first hop and then it was just work
28 from there.

29 JB: Now, what was your first mission like?

30 HS: Funny, I remember I flew with a guy named Paul Williams, I saw him at the
31 most recent reunion. The system was that in the Marine Corps the young officers were

1 the gist of the people that stayed with the squadron for the entire tour and the heavies, the
2 Majors and the Colonels and so forth, would come through on a more frequent basis, they
3 were, it seems to be rotating on a six month tour, I guess so they could get their jackets
4 punched, that they'd been in a combat Cobra squadron. So the young Lieutenants were
5 there the whole time and so they got to be the salty dogs and you wanted to go with the
6 Lieutenants because they had the most time in country, they had the experience and
7 typically they'd put a new guy with one of the old experienced fellows and that's how it
8 would get passed along. So part of it was getting accustomed to the terrain and the map
9 reading and knowing where things were and then of course getting into all the jargon of
10 how it went in combat, nothing prepared you for that until you get there and seen how it
11 went. You went out as a copilot in the number two bird and that's basically the way that
12 it went. You went as a copilot, we always flew in a section of two or a flight of four as
13 the case may be, but typically most missions were in a section of two. The new guys
14 would go into copilot in the number two aircraft and ultimately when you get good with
15 the maps and then you go copilot in the lead aircraft and then at some point, he was
16 working his way through the syllabus to become a HAC, terminology: Helicopter Aircraft
17 Commander which was the number two pilot if you will, the number two aircraft pilot.
18 And then transition from the number two pilot to become a Flight Leader and that was the
19 progression, it took you so much time and it was relatively structured, you had to do so
20 many ops in so much time, in going through in each kind of segment if you will to earn
21 that and you'd go on check rides on all of those kinds of things with people that were
22 more experienced to make sure that you could go do the job, so that worked pretty well.
23 Ultimately you had a collateral duty, mine was in operations, I was in scheduling so this
24 was getting into some of the way that we scheduled people and it was all color coded on
25 the boards and we'd know where the new guys were in relation to what his training was
26 and what we needed for the requirements of the mission, to serve the missions and so
27 forth that we were handed each day. So that's how that came down and I'm kind of
28 fluent with that jargon.

29 JB: What kind of terrain were you flying over mainly, was it triple canopy jungle,
30 was it savannah?

1 HS: All of the above, we were in I Corps, Marble Mountain was just a few miles
2 to just outside the southwest of Da Nang, and all the way up in I Corps, we went up to the
3 DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) and out west towards Laos and up in A Shau, which was very
4 mountainous triple canopy jungle and then we went down along the plains down by Chu
5 Lai, which was the flat stuff and the rice paddies and so forth. We did a little bit of
6 everything with tree lines and the rice paddies and then most of it was up into the, we did
7 most of our stuff with the recon teams, Putin, that was the big "Shoot 'em Up" Missions,
8 we had recon teams putting them up into their zones up into, didn't matter which of the
9 mountains: Khe Sanh mountains or up into A Shau like I say where they were trying to
10 interdict and see if people, the gooners, were coming down the trail. But the mission was
11 again methodical, if you think people needed to be re-supplied, people needed to be
12 Medevaced, they were C & C (Collection and Classification) missions, then they were
13 like I say, the ones that everybody liked to go on were the recon missions if you will,
14 because typically it was a little bit more of a, "I don't know what's going to happen type
15 of thing" and you want to test your skills. Getting people out of contact if it was, again if
16 you were doing an extraction in a hot zone then you knew that there was going to be
17 something happening, so it kind of went up in pucker factor I guess I should say. There
18 were troops, everything that we did was gun ship support, typically when we go and our
19 package consisted of two gunbirds, two Snakes and usually two H-46s, sometimes it
20 would be two H-53s depending upon the mission. If you were doing a Medevac mission
21 it was two Snakes and two 46s, if it was a re-supply you might have a couple of H-53s
22 and then gunbirds. If the missions were bigger, if we were putting troops in and they
23 were going to do a search and clear type of thing it depended on the size of the unit, then
24 you would just be multiples of both, of those aircraft. If it was a big unit, you'd be
25 working with H-53s and 46s and probably even significantly greater number of Cobras,
26 so that just depended on the missions and most things would come down on a daily basis
27 and flags that we'd get from group who would get them from Wing as to what the current
28 thing was going to be.

29 JB: Any real memorable missions, memorable incidents or anything like that?

30 HS: Sure, you remember the good ones and you remember the bad ones. I
31 remember the ones we were frustrated that we couldn't get... We had a wounded, it was a

1 critical wounded Marine that was up in the mountains and we couldn't get him out.
2 Every time we put a 46 into the zone we were getting shot at and they weren't so close to
3 the friendlies that we couldn't really put down any oppressive fire and we ended up
4 losing that Marine. Probably the one that, taking recon teams out under fire, those were
5 certainly positive memories. They used a spy rigs in many instances where we've had an
6 H-46 over a triple canopy zone or over a jungle zone and they'd drop the rope out of the
7 thing and the team would clip on with their harness and B-rings and they'd just kind of
8 go up vertically on the elevator while we were trying to shoot and keep the bad guys off
9 of them. And when you get those and they were successful completion, you get back and
10 you put those people down where they belong then, they're standing there showing their
11 appreciation. That was probably some of my memories of the most satisfaction that we
12 had, but like I say everything that we did was supporting the troops and that went well
13 with my background and knowing where that came from and what we were there for.
14 My experiences in that whole regard was just a mindset of supporting the grunts and I
15 bought into that and that's what we did.

16 JB: Now, stepping back for a second, when exactly did you arrive in country?

17 HS: Really late December of '69. As I recall I did my first, I flew my first
18 mission right around the middle of January. And you know it seems to me I left home
19 right after Christmas and then it was a question of getting there and so many days,
20 waiting a day here and waiting two days there and by the time you got into country I
21 think it was probably just after the first of January maybe, and then I think I flew my first
22 mission around the fifteenth or sixteenth of January. And then was there through
23 December of the next year.

24 JB: How soon before had 367 transitioned to the Cobra?

25 HS: As I was recall it was late in the middle of December. They'd been flying
26 Huey guns out of Phu Bai and they transitioned and came south to Marble Mountain and
27 made that transition into the Cobra right about the same time.

28 JB: So, did they have a full compliment of Cobras by that time, or were there still
29 Hueys?

30 HS: I think we get up to twenty-six aircraft with pole light. I know there was a
31 big deal at one time, they had a fly over, all the aircraft were up which was a big deal and

1 all the aircraft flew over Marble Mountain in formation, that was a pretty big deal that we
2 had, one hundred percent availability in a combat environment. But again a credit to the
3 ground troops that worked on those things twenty-six hours a day it seemed. Because
4 we'd bring them up banged up or beat up or with holes in them that they needed to fix,
5 put them under a lot of stress as you can well imagine and putting them through their
6 paces, putting the aircraft through their paces. I want to say it was twenty-six aircraft but
7 I wouldn't know exactly when they got to that, I would think that would be a matter of
8 record someplace as to when they got to that compliment. As I recall we still had to, it
9 was a little bit difficult, because the procurement system that the parts for the aircraft
10 weren't necessarily in the Navy's procurement system through the Marine Corps and we
11 used to go over to a place called Red Beets as I recall and try to beg, borrow and steal
12 whatever we could get from the Army, for parts and so forth. But they were basically
13 Army Cobras that were painted a different color and had Marine markings put on them
14 and we went from there.

15 JB: I was looking at the picture you had sent me, and there were actually a couple
16 questions I had about that particular aircraft, or just the aircraft in general. One thing that
17 I noticed was on both sides of the cockpit you could see a couple other aircraft so
18 marked; there was a number on yours that BT10, what's the significance of that number?

19 HS: BT-10, squadron numbers and probably the designation of the aircraft.
20 That's just the way that they would keep track of the aircraft

21 JB: Also, saw that wicked looking snake nose arc, that is very cool, were all of
22 the aircraft in the unit so marked?

23 HS: That's probably some of the creative guys in the shop doing that and of
24 course at some point I would think that that had to be approved, that had to be approved
25 someplace up the chain of command, but certainly we liked it. It didn't make the aircraft
26 shoot any straighter or fly any faster or carry anymore weapons or fuel as the case may
27 be, but it sure made you feel bad when you were going to get in the dang thing. And
28 again I think that they were pretty much the squadron was painted that way. Each
29 squadron had its own little thing and certainly we were the Snakes and the Scarfaces and
30 so forth, the Cobra thing on the front there kind of went with it.

1 JB: Yes, definitely. I've seen a couple of...Speaking to some of the other pilots
2 in the unit as well; I've gotten some photos sent to me. There have been a few with
3 various stages of that being painted on, there's one with just a black outline over the nose,
4 there's another one with a just a black outline and the eye a couple fangs, so it's
5 interesting in evolution.

6 HS: Yes, it probably has to do with who the crew was that was working on it at
7 the time that it was in the hangar.

8 JB: Moving up from front seat in the number two ship to commanding missions,
9 first of all did you fly lead HAC (Helicopter Aircraft Commander) in the lead ship?

10 HS: Sure.

11 JB: How long did the transition process take, what was it like?

12 HS: I would guess that if I started flying in January, I'll bet you it was probably,
13 by the time you got to be a gunship pilot, it was probably May or so. I would think that
14 its a four month time frame in there and then probably another few months June, July,
15 probably August before you become a Section Leader and then you do that for a bit. I
16 got into flying post-maintenance test ops as well, I became a test pilot in addition to
17 writing the schedule and so whenever there was, the aircraft, we were really hard on
18 them, the aircraft were high maintenance in the sense of...Again that should be a matter
19 of record; I want to say it was a hundred and some odd hours of maintenance time per
20 flight hour and the crews would be all over those things as soon as we'd get them back,
21 but they'd have a twenty-five hour maintenance check and a fifty hour maintenance
22 check and a hundred hour maintenance check and each one of those then would require a
23 post flight, a post maintenance inspection flight and I got into doing that as well as
24 writing the schedule. I was in the area a lot and so we could go out, so most ops were
25 simple and some of them were a little bit more complex. But if the aircraft came back
26 with holes and they had to change the blades or we were having trouble with beer boxes,
27 they were throwing tail rotors and we were getting cracks here and there and just the
28 typical things of, in a combat environment being hard on the equipment and the
29 maintenance was terrific and I did that in between someplace in there. But as I recall I
30 was a Section Leader sometime in August and I think a Flight Leader which then went to,
31 I think that was four aircraft and that was in late August and again, it would take you that

1 long of the Lieutenants to do that if you will, we were quite proud of that, that we earned
2 it through so much time and grade in a sense of going through in those steps if you will
3 and fulfilling certain missions and being able to control. Whole lot different bag
4 controlling multiple aircraft in a sortie than it is just worrying about what you've got to so
5 with these switches as the copilot in the number two aircraft. So the command and
6 controlling coordination with the, whether it was the Da Nang task or whether it was
7 dealing with, worth going through and getting our tardy clearance, going through a
8 particular area or with what the mission control with was back with DMC (Defense
9 Movement Coordinator). So all of those kinds of things, that had to mill around for
10 several months to sink in, at least for some young impressionable kind like I was, so
11 that's about how it worked but it took several months in each of those going on through.

12 JB: Were there any major maintenance problems, you mentioned tail rotors
13 there?

14 HS: Well, that was a function of the aircraft and again, I won't have the specific
15 dates but I know that I, I want to say we had three aircraft that went down that they lost
16 the ninety degree gear box was a problem with the gear box as far as I know, something
17 with that and certainly until that gets figured out, that you're going through aircraft. As I
18 recall I don't think we lost any people in those, we were lucky. I know that there's one
19 that's written up on the website that my buddy Joe Gallo and George Curtis, he's a good
20 guy, I can send you his email, was one of the Crew Chiefs, which will give you a
21 different perspective because he did multiple tours. He did a tour up in Phu Bai with as a
22 Crew Chief on the Hueys and then came down and was in the maintenance crews
23 working on the Cobras. And I know, for example, Gallo and I used to take this young
24 Sergeant up flying with us when we do the post-maintenance ops, we'd put him the front
25 seat as we went and did our checks on the back and I know that Curtis and Gallo when
26 they were up over the bay, they lost the tail rotor at umpteen thousand feet or whatever it
27 was, I think it was seven or eight thousand feet and they were going to ditch it at sea and
28 Gallo rode the thing and put it down on the beach and saved the aircraft, which was a
29 biggie at the time. But like I say, and they walked away from it so those were the happy
30 endings. You had engine failures that would happen, you had, like I said we had
31 problems with the 90s, but you had holes that would come through from flying lead and

1 all those things took time to take care of them. The helicopter people that were flying
2 them, they would overstress the thing or they would over torque the thing or they could
3 beat it, if they weren't, combat environment you're putting the aircraft through its whole
4 bevy of its maneuvers and its stresses and probably in many instances, exceeding the
5 limits for which it was intended. So a lot of post-op checks to put those things back up in
6 the air, keep them in the air.

7 JB: Now what was the most severe threat to you as a Cobra crew on a mission?

8 HS: Well, it was usually people trying to hurt us. We were there, the tactics that
9 we used with two birds supporting the two 46s, mutual support when the 46 was going in
10 the zone if all things went well and we did stuff that we were out over the zone, what we
11 called at a 180 on out, and so you had, particularly with the turret coverage from the
12 Cobra you could fire down anywhere around that thing in a 360 in a heartbeat so we
13 would return fire with fire superiority. I learned that real quick, that that seemed to work
14 if you knew that you were going to get something, or you saw that you were getting
15 something from someplace, you try and put more ordnance down there to have the bad
16 guys keep their head down. So certainly we were there to protect the grunts, we were
17 there to protect the transport aircraft, that was our primary mission, then to protect your
18 wingman. So you have to say that but having said that, again it was my experience that
19 those were things over which you didn't have control and so you just picked out whatever
20 you could focus on and do good at what you could and hopefully you'd contribute
21 positively to the success of that mission.

22 JB: Was there any heavy anti-aircraft fire, was it just small arms?

23 HS: Usually it was small arms; you'd see some of the 51 stuff every now and
24 then. I didn't see any air bursts, we'd get, like I said, there's 50 cal, we'd run into
25 occasionally, but mostly the small arms 30 cal.

26 JB: No, SA-7s or anything?

27 HS: No, no thank you very much, no. Most of our stuff, we were down pretty
28 low too. At that time they didn't have the handhelds and heat seekers and so we would go
29 en route about fifteen hundred feet which was pretty much safe haven above from ground
30 people, we'd go fifteen hundred feet ATL and then when we get down over the zone then
31 we get down lower to be able to suppress or whatever. But the transports had to go down

1 on the ground, so we would get down, probably as I recall, seven, eight hundred feet over
2 the top of the zone when we were doing our 180 stuff out.

3 JB: What was the standard weapons load or was there such a thing?

4 HS: Yes, we had a standard weapon load, we carried a six barrel, 7.62 that I
5 recall, there were two configurations, it was either six thousand or eight thousand rounds,
6 maybe you carried six thousand rounds and it would shoot six or eight thousand rounds a
7 minute. And then we had a forty millimeter automatic grenade launcher and that had
8 another three hundred rounds as I remember and it was right underneath where we sat
9 there. And then wing stores, we had four wing stores and typically we went with a 19
10 shot inboard HE (High Explosive) and as I recall we used to go mostly with a seven shot
11 Willy Pete marking revs on the outboard. We could go to a max of four 19 shot pods, the
12 problems there of course was the density altitude is that any time you tried to, it was a
13 tradeoff between carrying ammo which was heavy or fuel which was heavy and basically
14 you could never max out on both, where we were, you just couldn't lift those things up
15 and lift straight up. They were single engine and we had good power for what we could
16 do, but you had to use it judiciously to get the damn thing airborne.

17 JB: I've heard, spoken to a couple of ARA (Aerial Rocket Artillery) pilots, they
18 always say that if you're going out in a heavy hog configuration, four 19 shot pods and
19 they could only load them with fifteen rounds each.

20 HS: Yes, you'd kind of get at the end of a runway and you'd kind of go one foot
21 forward in time trying to get into translation to lift. When we could go on missions if we
22 were going way out west when you'd want to take the ammo or you'd want to take the
23 fuel to be on station longer if you needed to be, then it was a little bit of a challenge to get
24 airborne. We didn't have any airborne refuel so you have to get back home on fumes it
25 would seem sometimes.

26 JB: Did you use flechette rockets at all?

27 HS: Yes, we did. We had small nails and the larger nails, as I recall there was the
28 restriction, you couldn't use them within two clicks of friendlies and we used them way
29 out west or we'd use them after we had the friendlies picked up out of the zone, we knew
30 there was nobody left in the bad places up in the northwest type of thing. But it wasn't
31 something that we carried all the time. Typically, we were HE.

1 JB: Okay, so it was mission specific?

2 HS: Right.

3 JB: Okay, any experimentation with different turret configurations, twin minis,
4 twin grenade launchers, anything like that?

5 HS: I don't remember that no, I think our aircraft were all set up for mini-gun and
6 chunker and I liked that. Later they started bringing in, as I recall they brought in the
7 twenty millimeter on some of the aircraft and then later, I think now they've gone to a
8 thirty. And what I remember and I don't remember doing those missions, that we were
9 having problems with the mounts, that it was shaking the hell out of aircraft at that point
10 they weren't deputed enough. But what we did for close air support, I liked the
11 configuration that we had. I used everything as a point weapon, you got good with
12 putting that stuff where it was supposed to go and the mini-gun, you'd just walk the
13 traces right in there. The thing was to get good with the chunker and put it right where
14 you wanted to do that. I liked what we had, but like I said, I had the infantry training, so
15 I knew what that stuff would do for the grunts.

16 JB: I guess that definitely gives a different perspective. I've heard a lot of guys
17 talking about how much they hated the chunker, just couldn't use it, wouldn't use it, so
18 that's interesting.

19 HS: Well, I remember practicing with it and you had to get used to using the
20 sight and it was like anything else, a little bit of Kentucky winded, you had to leap things
21 sometimes, but it will go where you pointed if you point it in the right spot. I liked that
22 weapon.

23 JB: Were there any Vulcan Armed G-models as far as you know?

24 HS: I'm sorry, were there what?

25 JB: With the twenty- millimeter under the left wing?

26 HS: No, we did have some mini-gun pods that we did on wing storage and it
27 seems to me that we were playing more with that than used it in a regular sense. It made
28 a lot of noise and it certainly put a lot of 7.62 out there, but my memory of our standard
29 configuration was as I said was HE inboard, Willy Pete on the outboard and then the
30 chunker in the mini-gun up front.

1 JB: Were there, I guess the J-model started coming in I think in April of '70, did
2 you have any opportunity to fly those?

3 HS: I did not and it seems to me that's early. Let me think a second, because I
4 was there through all of 1970 and to my recollection the J-model didn't come in until the
5 end of my tour and I don't ever remember seeing one in country. I knew that they were
6 playing with them someplace and we knew that they were coming, or there was a
7 contingent that came in, it might have been toward the end of my tour and I did the last
8 month of it in group ops and I was just flying test on the G-models and it may have been
9 that that's when those birds were down there, but check with the other folks, because I
10 had no time in the J in country at all.

11 JB: Did you fly it later?

12 HS: I just did with a couple of guys that transitioned. When I came back I went to
13 the Training Command and Gallo as a matter of fact, my buddy Joe Gallo, I can
14 remember him coming down and him taking me up in the J-model in Pensacola and we
15 would play around in that. It was like, we would look at the engine, wouldn't that be nice
16 for more power and more engine support, but it was a little bit more capable than what
17 we had. But again to say weapons delivery systems concept, still using similar to that
18 today I think with the Whiskeys.

19 JB: What was, I guess, what was the main difference, well I shouldn't say the
20 main difference, I don't know if you had your choice between a G and a J, which would
21 you choose and why?

22 HS: I don't have a reference point. The G was right out there, the G was bang
23 kind of thing when we got it and we were happy to have it and thank you very much, it
24 sure as hell was a little bit better than what the Echo model Huey, wasn't the Bravo
25 model Huey I guess is what the Marine Corps had been using and it was a nice weapons
26 system, as was the Huey. But you get to do a little bit more ordnance and stay on station
27 a little bit longer and get there a little bit faster and that's basically what the grunts want
28 you to do and so it keeps getting better in that regard. I wouldn't know what to do with, I
29 think pretty much now; they're getting pretty sophisticated with what they've got in the
30 Hellfire and the laser guided weapons systems. We did a lot of stuff with infinity sights,

1 just a little Plexiglas thing with an X on it and some guys putting stuff up there with a
2 grease pencil where they want the things to go.

3 JB: Actually, I've heard a lot of guys using that rather than using the sights
4 themselves.

5 HS: Like I say, it was a question of getting used to it and what I remember was so
6 many pounds of torque up on the perch when you're rolling in and then you could use the
7 sight if you varied from your torque or if you didn't have your rudder setting, if you
8 didn't have your ball in the center then you're going to be having trouble with getting
9 your ordnance on a target so it was a question of getting good with what you did and
10 staying that way.

11 JB: Were you aware of what was going on back in the States? The anti-war
12 sentiment or anything that was going on?

13 HS: Vaguely, I came from a military background myself. My wife I left at home,
14 her Dad had been in the Navy, was a Navy carrier pilot in World War II, so we both came
15 from that kind of a background where it wasn't into that. I grew up tolerable of all of that
16 stuff. What I remember is one of our COs (Commanding Officers) sitting us in the ready
17 room and saying "Gentlemen, you know, here's the deal, here's what's going on back
18 home, but the way it is here, if you don't fly, young Marines die." And that cut through
19 all the bullshit and I was just ready to go do my mission, so I was very focused just to go
20 out and support the people, the young kids that we were dealing with. We were all kids
21 but they were a little bit younger at the time and so I got focused just to be proficient in
22 what we were doing and didn't deal with any of that. Actually even when I came back
23 home, other than a few incidences, everybody did where you get confronted someplace
24 going through an airport or whatever. But when I came back home I went into a military
25 environment again in the Training Command and we had all students that were doing just
26 the reverse, we were getting kids ready and they were finishing training through the
27 Training Command and going to their squadrons and going right back out to Vietnam
28 again. We weren't up in the Berkeley places, weren't up in the places where you were
29 having all of that of course, we saw the edited stuff if you will, but we got on Armed
30 Forces Network and I don't remember seeing that much of what's going on. You'd get it
31 from what folks would pack, whatever they would send in this video or wherever in the

1 general sense, but nothing specific on a day to day basis, for me, that's the way it worked
2 for me.

3 JB: Actually from what I've heard, you got more information than most.

4 HS: Well, we were at Marble Mountain, like I say it was outside Da Nang and
5 again, you've got to know the time frame and I think that's on a curb of, when they guys
6 first get there and they were putting tents up and they were in the mud, certainly we
7 worked out of tents if we flew out of someplace we were working off of martial matting
8 type of thing at An Hoa or some of those places. But where we were at Marble
9 Mountain, you were susceptible to whatever they were doing at night and they could put
10 rounds in at night. But we lived in a Quonset hut and most of the time had hot showers.
11 If you went out on a mission someplace you were eating C-rations but it wasn't like we
12 were out in the boonies. We didn't suffer as much as the grunts did and that's just the
13 way it was, at that point in time as I say.

14 JB: Did you have an assigned aircraft?

15 HS: No, that didn't happen. It just kind of rotated through depending on what
16 came back from the previous days missions and what kind of shape it was in and where
17 that aircraft was in the... You know, there was a board on each aircraft and they tracked
18 the time on it and tracked whatever the problems were with that particular aircraft and
19 there was just no way to do that. The missions would come down from group and by the
20 time they got down the maintenance shack it was just basically which aircraft were ready
21 to go and how many were up ready to serve their missions and the particularly priority
22 and that's how it worked.

23 JB: Now, obviously missionary all has its individual quirks, was there a
24 particular hangar queen or favorite aircraft to fly?

25 HS: I don't remember that. I vaguely remember that there'd be a particular
26 aircraft that would have a beat to it that would have a certain thing or that you'd feel that
27 gun system was a little bit more reliable than something else. But like I say, we had top
28 drawer support from our maintenance people and whether it was the ordnance shop or
29 whether it was the engine, we just had really top drawer people and I worked with them
30 in the post-maintenance phase if you will, so I don't remember the problems with that.
31 I'm sure that somebody would dig out the boards, or from a different perspective. But for

1 me as a young pilot that was going out there, I went out kicked the tire, light the fire and
2 away I went, it worked, couldn't kick the skids, it was on tires on the decks, then it would
3 go.

4 JB: Well, I can't think of any other specifics, I've actually got a list right here of
5 all of the tail numbers that 367 flew as far as G-models go.

6 HS: I got a kick out of that, that's someplace on the website, have you been
7 there? Somebody was tracking them, where those aircraft ended up and which ones were
8 lost on such and such a mission or what happened to them back in the States after they
9 came back. I have to think of a time frame. I left active duty in about '74 and I went to
10 dental school and I was still flying in a reserve squadron, 773, out of Atlanta and ended
11 up that some of those aircraft were the same bureau we'd flown in the 'Nam, umpteen
12 years before that. That was up through probably '77, '80; I don't even remember when
13 the last year I think I flew was, in probably 1980. And they were the same aircraft; some
14 bureau numbers and lord know what happened to them. They were on static display
15 someplace I would think.

16 JB: Actually, I'm working with a, well it was converted to a S-model, but when I
17 return home to New York next week I'm starting to work on, what was a G-model,
18 served with first of the Ninth Cav, from '70 to '72 and we're just starting bringing it back
19 to G-model standard and everything. It's quite interesting.

20 HS: That would be fun. The group I think I put you on to with the web or the
21 web put you on to me type of thing, there's been a couple of those guys that have been
22 involved in restoring, I think H-34 and someplace along the line I'm pretty sure there's
23 Huey involved as well and maybe someday there will be a Cobra. I'll remember to do
24 that. Its probably well worth your while to connect with George Curtis and I've got his
25 email, I've exchanged email with him in the recent past so I know he's around.

26 JB: Actually, now that I think about it he and I did speak fairly early on, when I
27 first started the project.

28 HS: He's a plethora of information, that guy, he was a lifer and went to a lot of
29 different places after Vietnam but I think the kid had like three tours over there and had
30 some crazy experiences here, there and wherever. He's a good source for you to touch.

1 JB: I've been meaning to get back in contact with him. They've been pushing me
2 informing volume that I'm working on, the Marines, eight months, twelve months later,
3 but I'm trying to gather all the information together now, make it just a bit easier. The
4 first book is going to be due in February and I guess the second one probably months
5 after that.

6 HS: Good for you, certainly an undertaking that you can wrap your arms round.
7 Talking to us old farts I'm sure that, I might be curious to see how things get exaggerated
8 although it's interesting to me to hear some of the jargon that I've not used in years just
9 came flowing out. It's buried back there someplace.

10 JB: Yes, it really has been an amazing experience just getting to talk to everyone
11 and hear just the varied experience, talking to guys from the 235th Air Weapons Company
12 down in Can Tho, and for example you up at the Marble Mountain, completely different
13 world.

14 HS: Well, especially were that happened to us a couple of times, the guys that
15 would be out with the ARA if you will, would come in to the real red beach was in the
16 shows on television and so forth was really close by to us. We used to go over there to
17 party a little bit, every now and then and it really was sort of an in country R&R (Rest
18 and Relaxation) center as well a little bit of rehab going on, but I can vividly remember
19 some guys that I flew with from the Army schools that would come down and they just
20 lived in a different world. It was just totally different, their tactics were different, those
21 guys would go away, particularly that Army, we worked with them infrequently but the
22 tactics of aerial rocket artillery where they would blow away whole grid squares type of
23 thing and just go back and rearm again with those four times nineteen and go back out
24 and shoot some more. And ours was all oriented towards dealing with individual aircraft
25 going in to pick someone up, or as the case may be, you'd see an Army dust off pilot
26 come into something, an M-60 on one aircraft and God bless those guys, they'd go in and
27 do that, they had cahones that were huge. But the tactics were entirely different. We
28 tired to do things with mutual support and hopefully that would work well.

29 JB: You never did anything like Air Cav, 100 killer type stuff with...?

30 HS: Well, we did actually, there were a couple of missions but again it would be
31 a section of Cobras going in with one little LOACH or something like that, we had

1 missions that we'd go out on the rocket belt or whatever looking for suspicious things
2 and some people were a little bit crazier than others in that kind of stuff and that was
3 more along the lines of what was fun, but we would do that, that's for sure.

4 JB: Yes, it appears that it's fairly universal that LOACH (Light Observation
5 Helicopter) pilots by far are the craziest.

6 HS: They were a little but nutso, they'd be down hovering over a hole and say,
7 "Wait a minute I think I've got a live one. Oh yeah here he is, oh yeah he's shooting at
8 me, okay let me get out of the way." That was the real thing. But like I say, most of the
9 stuff that we did, our stuff coordinated either with the small group tactics with the recon
10 guys or with larger units if we were putting a company or sometimes battalion operations,
11 that would be a little bit unusual but we did a lot of support to platoons and companies
12 out in the field and so you'd get to connect with...If you were put in a search and clear
13 mission then it would depend on the size of the unit and how far and how big they were
14 trying to work that day.

15 JB: Would you be used for LZ (Landing Zone) prep there or would that be
16 strictly artillery?

17 HS: That depends where we were going, sure all of the above. If they were going
18 into someplace new they'd prep with whatever and we'd be the initial prep and go down
19 and do his own prep and typically we'd do a little bit of...Wouldn't know which zone you
20 wanted to go into, so you'd prep multiples or you wouldn't want them to know which
21 zone you were going into, so you'd prep multiple zones and then pick one at the last
22 minute, not giving them the opportunity to set up. But after a while there's only so many
23 clearings you can go into in the jungle and with small unit operations it was down where
24 the rice paddy areas. You don't want to put somebody way out in the middle of nowhere,
25 now they've got too much distance to go out to get to that tree line, so the gooners were
26 good troops, the enemy they were well trained people and of course that's been born out
27 by better historians than I am.

28 JB: Now primarily I guess in the north you're dealing with NVA (North
29 Vietnamese Army) rather than Vietnamese?

30 HS: Yes, well we were dealing with whoever was shooting at our people. It was
31 probably, certainly it happened on a routine basis, but in many instances when you are up

1 in the jungle you're not really seeing individual things, you can see that occasionally.
2 But most of the time it was putting it where the grunts were telling you to do it or where
3 you think that that's going to be coming from that tree line, you put the fire down in
4 there, type of thing and you knew it would work. Go review your stuff; if you need me
5 come back at me again; I'm always on email as you're aware.

6 JB: Okay, well let me end this officially right now. This will be the end the
7 interview with Mr. Herb Silva on May 1st.

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