Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Larry Fraser
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
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Transcribed by Sherri Brouillette

NOTE: 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.

Stephen Maxner: When were you born?

Larry Fraser: I was born in Bidwith, South Dakota, June 3, 1940.

SM: And how long did you live there?

LF: Oh, I didn't live there; my mom just went there for my birth. My dad worked just across the line in Wyoming at a saw mill.

SM: Where did you eventually move to?

LF: I lived in northeastern Wyoming until I guess about sixth or seventh grade, then southeastern Montana and back to northeastern Wyoming. I graduated from high school at Sun Dance, Wyoming.

SF: You said your father worked in a saw mill?

LF: Yeah, he did at that time and then he became a rancher. He was a rancher and later on a government trapper.

SF: What kind of ranching?

LF: Cattle, sheep, grain products.

SM: And how long did he do that before he became a trapper?

LF: I guess he became a trapper when I was about in the seventh grade and he was probably a government trapper for seven or eight years.

SM: What did that entail? Did you help him with that at all?

LF: He was in a carnivore control program. His job was to keep the population of coyotes and bobcats down, primarily. He did other things, too, but those were the animals that killed a lot of sheep and calves and things and his job was to control them to the point where they didn't do a lot of damage to the local ranchers.

SM: Did you assist with that type of activity?

LF: From time to time, yeah.

SM: Did you find that interesting work?

LF: Not uninteresting, it really wasn't my bag of tea. It's like hunting. Everybody I grew up with hunted, so did I, but my perspective is more a matter of putting meat in the freezer than a sport.

SM: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

LF: Yes, I had a brother three years younger than me and then when I was about fifteen a sister was born.

SM: As you were growing up with your younger brother, what was it like growing up in Wyoming and South Dakota, is that correct?

LF: No, Wyoming and Montana.

SM: Montana. What was it like growing up in those areas.

LF: I don't know how to answer that. It was a good way to grow up, in retrospect. I never, I was not a ranch person. My dad, all he ever wanted to do was work with animals. Myself, I found no particular interest in that. It was, ranching is hard work. It begins about five o'clock in the morning and doesn't end until well after dark everyday. I don't regret having done that of course, but I didn't get the same kind of satisfaction from it that my dad did.

SM: Did your brother like it?

LF: More than me, yeah. He's not ranching now either, but he liked it more than me.

SM: What about your mom, did she work as well as being a homemaker?

LF: She was a school teacher as well as homemaker.

SM: What grade level?

LF: All elementary grades.

SM: Did she teach you?

LF: Yes, for one or two years. Well, no, longer than that. I guess probably four years all together. At least one of which my brother and I were the only students. It wasn't home school. She was hired by the county, I guess, to teach at a rural school, within a mile or so of our home and it just turned out that we were the only two kids that went to school there.

SM: What was it like with your mom as a teacher—I mean, you being her son and her student at school—did it keep you on your toes a little bit more?

LF: I don't know how to answer that. It worked out alright.

SM: Did you enjoy school?

LF: Yeah.

SM: Any particular favorite subjects?

LF: I liked to read.

SM: What lead you to enter the Marine Corps? Did you go to college first and then go in the Corps?

LF: Well yes. Out of high school, out of Sun Dance, I was, I can't remember what, an appointment, I received an appointment to the Naval Academy and I flunked the spring semester of English. I had pretty good leadership scores, so they gave me a re-exam, which I flunked, and then we had a little conference and they decided to send me on summer cruise, come back and gave me a couple of weeks of extra instruction in cruise and gave me another exam and I flunked it, too. So they discharged me from the Naval Academy, but in the meantime, I developed a keen interest in a military career. The English, incidentally, I just…for some reason at that time, I absolutely could not understand metaphors. That was my big problem, along with spelling, but when I was discharged from the Naval Academy I had to go into the Reserves and I asked to be discharged in the Marine Corps Reserves, which I was. I went back and attended school for two years at Montana State, discovered that the Marine Corps had an aviation program that you could enter with only two years of school [worked out to two] years of college, which I did and the summer then of '62 I entered the Marine Corps as what they called a Marine Aviation Cadet which put me in a cadet status, kind of like a mid-shipman status in the Navy. I was in a cadet status until I got my wings, and I was commissioned at that time.

SM: Where did you go for your initial training in the Marine Corps?

LF: Pensacola, Florida. I had…even though I was in the Marine Reserves, it worked out I just never went to boot camp, I just…so I got all my initial training in Pensacola as part of that MarCad program.

SM: What year did you enter, or month in '62 did you enter active duty Marine Corps and go to Pensacola?

LF: It was July or August of '62. August, I think. I think it was early August.

SM: What was that transition like, from civilian life to going into the Marine Corps?

LF: It was uneventful. Having spent a year at the…particularly having spent plebe year at the Naval Academy I was pretty well indoctrinated into the military already.

SM: That's an interesting comment. What was that like, that plebe year.

LF: It was tough on me. I just…at least in those days they believed that in order to develop the kind of character and personality traits needed to be a good officer there was a lot of hazing involved. And I was struggling with the academics, so it was a tough year for me

SM: Were there any particular things that stand out?

LF: No.

SM: When you say hazing, could you give some examples of that.

LF: You know, hollering and yelling, telling you to do silly things, having to, anytime you were outside your room you had to walk in a brace and square all your corners. You ate meals on the front three inches of your chair in a brace. At meals they would ask professional questions and if you didn't know the answer you had to find the answer by the next meal. Hazing in the same sense as fraternities use hazing; just trying to provoke you and push you in a way that you learn self-control and how to cope with adversity. A lot of physical things, you know, drop and do push ups. They had a thing they called shove-out which was, I guess it had its origins in the chow hall where you'd shove your chair out from under yourself and just maintain a sitting position until they give the chair back or you collapse. But that was one of the favorite things everywhere. If you were out on the sidewalk and somebody told you to shove-out, you assumed a sitting position without the chair.

SM: And they did this to, again, to try to build character

LF: That was the theory. And I'm not sure but that it had some merit. I think maybe at least in some companies they went overboard.

SM: Anything else that you remember or want to talk about with regard to your plebe year at the Naval Academy?

LF: No, just that it turned out that I was not sufficiently prepared for the academics. Although I passed all the subjects except English, I really struggled. It's unlikely that I would have had a hard time all the way through. In retrospect, I would have been a lot happier and probably successful if I'd had a year of prep school or something.

SM: What did you focus on when you went to college?

LF: I entered since I'd come out of the Academy, which was kind of an engineering curriculum, I entered engineering. I began an industrial engineering curriculum and then changed to, I don't remember what…some kind of an industrial curriculum that was not engineering the second year that I was there, but I don't remember exactly what it was called, industrial arts, maybe, but I don't know.

SM: When you went into the Marine Corps it was with the express purpose of becoming an aviator, a Marine aviator.

LF: That's right. Everybody that went into the MarCad program was an aviation cadet.

SM: Did you have a choice in what kind of aviation you entered—fixed wing, rotary wing—or was that a decision that was made somewhere else?

LF: That was made somewhere else. It just depended on what they needed at the time. I got to make your request which…ninety percent of us requested jets and eighty percent of us got helicopters.

SM: Eighty percent?

LF: Something like that. They weren't taking a lot in the jet pipeline at the time I went through. Maybe more like seventy.

SM: But a substantial majority. What did you think when you learned you were getting helicopters?

LF: I was a little disappointed, but not terribly. I just…not terribly.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe your first introduction to the Marine Corps, that is, when you arrived at Pensacola what did you have to do? When did you begin training? And what was that training like?

LF: We went into kind of a military indoctrination for, oh I don't know, the first couple months I guess of what they called pre-flight which was kind of like boot camp—you learn to march and we were trained by Marine drill sergeants, you know, with all the intended yelling and things that you would get at boot camp—and then gradually started learning the academic things about flight school and somewhere along the line, after a month or six weeks or some period of time with just the MarCads getting the boot camp type stuff, then we were joined by some Marine officers, well Marine and Navy officers that were going to flight school, and that's when the real flight training began. We finished some more pre-flight training which was basically academics at Pensacola Main Side then went over to Saufley Field to begin actual flight training in the T-34, and then began ricocheting around among the fields in the Pensacola Complex. We got basic T-34 training in Saufley, went to…after Saufley, some few went on to jet training, went to Meridian, Mississippi and/or there were two bases in Texas, the rest of us went over to Whiting Field, which is near Pensacola, and trained in T-28s. At the end of that, we went back over to Saufley for T-23 carrier qualifications then after carrier qualifications there was theoretically a chance to again go to jet training. Only two people ever made it at that time that I know of, during the time I was there. The rest of us went back to Whiting for instrument training in the twin beechcraft, the old C-45, after instrument training we went to Ellison Field for helicopter training and finished…the flight school typically took about eighteen months at that time, the last four of which were in whatever your specialty was going to be, in my case helicopters.

SM: Very quickly, what was your daily routine like before you went into flight training?

LF: As a civilian or pre-flight?

SM: When you first got to Pensacola you were going through that period, that phase of military indoctrination, where it was more like boot camp with the DIs and everything else, what was your daily routine like from wake-up to lights out?

LF: Well, kind of like initial officer's training or even boot camp would be. You woke up before or at the crack of dawn and were pretty much getting yelled at for the rest of the day—marching and spit shining and doing exercises and push-ups and military training.

SM: What about weapons training?

LF: Yeah. As a matter of fact we did. We qualified with the M-1 and the, let me think, I don't remember pistol training at pre-flight, but we must have had it. We just about had to have had it.

SM: Then the tenor of your training changed completely when you transitioned into your flight training?

LF: Yeah, there was no more drill sergeant type training. We were still cadets, we had to live in the barracks and we had to do some military training as we went along, but it was a whole different flavor. It was not like boot camp, it was more like any kind of military training.

SM: Were the officers that were going through that flight training treated any differently than you were?

LF: They had more privileges. We were, oh, I guess, in basic, I'm not sure that we could even leave the base at night, whereas they could. Gradually that relaxed, as you got further and further along you got more and more privileges. But the people who were already officers were treated more like officers and we were treated like cadets.

SM: You probably went through ground school first, and a training regime of instruction, classroom instruction for part of the day and then flying for the other part of the day?

LF: Yeah, pre-flight was purely ground school and military training. Once we got to Saufley, yeah, you'd typically have at least one flight a day and a fair number of ground school classes. I think you usually…I think the way it was set up pretty much all the way through was that you'd have your ground school either in the morning or in the afternoon and you'd have flight training the other half of the day.

SM: What was the most challenging part of flight training for you, that is when you actually got to Saufley Field—how do you spell that by the way, do you recall?

LF: Saufley, but I'm not certain.

SM: When you got there, what was the most interesting or challenging part of that training for you, when you started flying.

LF: I can't think of anything that stands out. It was…the whole thing was both interesting and challenging.

SM: Did you ever receive training in celestial navigation?

LF: No. That had been discontinued shortly before I got there. Now let me take that back. I think I did get some theoretical training, at least, in ground school, but never practiced it in the aircraft.

SM: What did you think about…you had an idea that you were going to be flying helicopters as you said the majority of you would be, yet, instead of throwing you straight in the helicopters, you went through a significant amount of fixed wing training.

LF: Yeah, the Navy training philosophy at that time was that all Naval aviators went through fixed wing training, through carrier qualifications. You had to have, I guess it was four, arrested carrier landings to then move on to anything.

SM: What was that like?

LF: That was kind of the pinnacle of everything. That was great.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and talk about your first experiences in taking off and landing on a carrier.

LF: We only did that once. There was a couple months of preparation where we did what they called field carrier landing practice, FCLPs, on a runway. We learned to use what they called the meatball, the light system that lets you know when you're on the flight path and how to come down…how to set the aircraft up for a carrier landing and how to use the meatball to assist you in landing in the right place. It was interesting, you flew with the cockpit open, you put, maybe full flaps. I know the plane was pretty dirty so that you could…the idea was to carry…to get in this condition where it tool quite a bit of power just to keep it straight and level and then you just, a reduction of the power would cause you to start to descend and that's the way you'd come down the flight path. And then…anyway, the big day finally came and we went out to the ship—that was a thrill in itself, just flying in formation out to the ship and then, there it is, you finally see it and get set up and do your carrier landings. It really felt like you'd accomplished something when you finished your carrier landings.

SM: You mentioned that you would practice on a runway first. Was there any difference in terms of the attitude of the aircraft when you would bring it into a carrier versus bringing it in for a standard landing strip landing.

LF: Yeah. If you were just going to land at a standard runway—yeah, quite a bit of difference. You wouldn't carry as much power, you'd be more casual about your set up—yeah, quite a bit of difference. The carrier landing is a very precision event and you want to get yourself well set up before you ever get close to the fantail of the ship. Whereas coming into the runway, you've got a lot of latitude for adjust—not a lot, but comparatively a lot.

SM: Was there any kind of a simulator training that you went through before even beginning your practice runs on the runway?

LF: Not for carrier landings. We had simulator training for instruments—the old link blue box, which was a little bit of a nightmare for everybody, I think. But you did get simulator training for instruments, nothing like they have today, with the visual displays and everything, but nothing at all for carrier landing practice. I don't know, I suppose they might have that nowadays, but I really, I don't know if they do even now.

SM: Was there anything in particular that you found most challenging about landing on a carrier?

LF: The whole thing was challenging, just the precision required, it was just…it was a distinctly different level of precision.

SM: After you finished that part of your training, that's when you went on to your helicopter training.

LF: Yes. I went to Ellison Field, had…flew in the TH-13M which was a bubble-bell, if you know what I'm talking about

SM: Yes, sir.

LF: You know, the big glass bubble. We got our initial training in it and then moved on to H-34s and H-34s is what I flew then on through Vietnam.

SM: Was there anything that was difficult transitioning from fixed wing aircraft to rotary aircraft?

LF: It's different, but the fixed wing training is good preparation for helicopter training. You know, there's the flying, taking it from point to point is quite similar; it's

just the beginning and the end that's different. You don't hover in a fixed wing—I guess you do now in the Harrier jets.

SM: Was that difficult at first, hovering?

LF: Well, the first time or two, you bet. They typically take you out into the middle of a big field and the instructor, he's hovering and you're just like you're on the end of a stick right there and then he passes the controls to you and just asks you to try and keep it inside the field boundaries and its usually a little bit wild that first time.

SM: About how long does it take usually…

LF: By the end of that first session you're kind of starting to get the knack of it, and then a couple more and you just…it's just kind of learning a feel for it and learning not to over control. You already have a sense if you want to go left, you would bank to the left, in a hover you still move the stick in the same direction, and things like that. It's not totally foreign.

SM: And so that's what, several hours…you're getting the rhythm and stuff?

LF: Yeah.

SM: Just out of curiosity, throughout the entirety of your flight training, fixed wing and rotary wing, were there any significant events, accidents or anything like that?

LF: No. There were accidents, but I had none. There were now and then, somebody that you know would be in an accident and once in a great while, somebody would even be hurt or killed that you know, but I was not involved in an accident.

SM: Do you recall…you said some people were, that there were some people killed in flight training while you were there.

LF: Yeah.

SM: Any idea what caused those accidents?

LF: No, I don't remember.

SM: Do you remember if that was during your fixed wing phase or your rotary wing phase?

LF: I think there was a couple and they would have both been in the fixed wing phase. The only one I remember specifically was at Whiting Field in the P28s.

SM: But you don't recall the cause of that?

LF: No, I don't.

SM: Now, your transition from the small bubble bell to the H34. Was that difficult at all?

LF: No, it was a much more powerful machine, but the bubble bell was pretty good preparation for it.

SM: And how long did your total helicopter, your rotary wing training last—about four months, you said?

LF: I think just about four months, yeah.

SM: After your training, that would have been about '64, is that right, 1964?

LF: Yes, May of '64…must have been five months, or maybe even six, I carqualed in November, or early December, and I didn't finish until early May. So yeah, it must have been more like five or six months.

SM: And then where were you assigned?

LF: Then I was assigned to Santa Anna, California.

SM: Do you recall the unit?

LF: Well, I initially went to HMM363, that was a huge, huge squadron, just kind of a holding company for all the new people coming in, but I was only there no more than a month and went to HMM362. So for all practical purposes, I went pretty much directly in 362.

SM: And what was the primary…and you were going to fly the H34s in that unit and you said you flew those throughout Vietnam, too.

LF: Yes.

SM: Now what was the primary role or roles of the H34?

LF: Troop transport. It's what the Army…same function as the Army huey. Slicks, the Army would call them. They just…troops and supplies.

SM: What was the HMM362 like when you arrived?

LF: Good squadron, it was a good squadron all the way through. Kind of unremarkable beyond just saying it was a good squadron until the Vietnam experience. We had a particularly well liked and well respected CO for, oh, I guess, three-quarters or at least half of the Vietnam tour…I think there was a total of three COs, but the latter two were short tours toward the end of my tour there. I, most of my tour in Vietnam was

under Lieutenant Colonel James Aldworth, who we just loved. He was a particularly well respected CO and that kind of helped make the experience enjoyable.

SM: A question I forgot to ask, at what point were you commissioned in your training?

LF: Commissioned at the time we got our wings. As a cadet, when we finished helicopter training, when we completed all our flight training, we got our wings and our bars at the same ceremony. Now the date of commissioning then was back dated to your date of carrier qualification. So I, the day I was commissioned, I already had officially about six months as a second lieutenant.

SM: Your time with HMM362—before going to Vietnam—was it…what kind of training regimen did you have?

LF: We were a training squadron. We transitioned the jet jockeys into helicopters. They were …I don't know exactly what the philosophy was, but they…I guess the philosophy was to just get some cross-trained aviators and HMM362 was the squadron at Santa Anna that took the guys who'd been flying jets and transitioned them into helicopters. So we were getting some really good aviators and we trained them and that was the purpose of 362, until the whole Marine air group went to Vietnam.

SM: Some interesting events were going on internationally when you first entered the Marine Corps cadet program and all the way really through to your time when you were assigned to 362. I was curious if you recall the Cuban Missile Crisis in the fall of 1962.

LF: Yeah.

SM: And if that was talked about a lot when it was going on and what was going on.

LF: Well, we kind of knew from the newspapers and the news. We didn't really know much more than that. The…we saw the…there was an unusually high number of aircraft that came into Pensacola, that was one of the staging areas I guess, but that was just kind of explained as a…some kind of exercise going on. Nobody at my level knew the severity of the crisis that was going on. We knew that they discovered…we knew the things on the news, that's all

SM: Were you concerned?

LF: Not particularly.

SM: And, before going to Vietnam, from the time you entered cadet training until you received word that you would be going, how much did you know about what was happening in Vietnam?

LF: You knew Vietnam was going on. There had been a …the big build up happened in the summer of '64—that's when we went over, that's when the Army sent the big Red One over, that's when Johnson started the…made it become what we kind of called a real war. But prior to that, there had always been military advisors there, some of which were Marines, and there had been a Marine helicopter squadron there for several years, but only one or maybe two, I think. They might have rotated one from Okinawa down there from time to time, but there was for at least several years before '64 there had been at least one Marine helicopter squadron that was in Vietnam all the time. So we knew it was there and we knew that we would probably some day go there and for career Marines, it was kind of something that in a perverse way you kind of looked forward to, because everyone kind of regarded a bit of combat experience as beneficial to a Marine Corps career. But I guess that's about it.

SM: Were any of your instructor pilots former aviators in Vietnam?

LF: Yeah. As a matter of fact there were at least a couple that I'd come across coming through the…I think my primary instructor at Ellison in helicopters had been there.

SM: Did you talk much about what he did in Vietnam and what you as future Marine aviators might encounter?

LF: No, I suppose he would have if you'd got aside to talk to him, but I don't remember ever talking to him about it

SM: How about other instructors that spent time in Southeast Asia, too? Any of them ever talk about it?

LF: Not in any length. When I got to Santa Anna then there was a larger number in 362 that had been there, and they talked about it, but I don't remember ever having any sessions specifically about Vietnam. It's kind of something that got talked about the same way you'd talk about basic training or some operation at Camp Pendleton or anything else that was just a general part of what was going on.

SM: I'm curious as far as any kind of lessons learned that they might have talked about and one of the problems, I'm sure you were very familiar with, the problems with the hueys early on—they were underpowered, they would have problems depending upon the altitude, the weather conditions and things like that—did the same circumstances pertain to the H34?

LF: No, I never…nothing that we ever got instructed in. There was the NATOPS way of doing things—I don't remember exactly what NATOPS means, Naval Aviation Training Ops, I guess—but the…that's the way you learn to do all your maneuvers and that's the way you were expected to them when you got to Vietnam. Now, as it turn out, once you got to Vietnam then you learned some tricks of the trade and I suppose they kind of got passed back. It's kind of hard to change the inertia of formal doctrine, though.

SM: Yes, sir.

LF: The NATOPS was by golly the way you did things and it didn't take very long…our flights in Vietnam would typically be organized by rank—you know, the CO might be the flight leader, the senior guys would be up front and the butter-bar lieutenants would be at the back of the pack. Well, you flew formation in helicopters in a step-up situation, where the guys at back were above those in front, you know what I mean?

SM: Yes, sir.

LF: Each succeeding rank was a step up from the one in front of it, which if you shot a typical NATOPS approach into a hot LZ, that resulted in the guys at the back of the pack, you know, spending more time high and slow than the ones in front. Does this make sense?

SM: Yes, sir.

LF: As you come into a zone, because of the fact that you just more or less start off higher, but you have to land further back, it ends up with the guys at the back kind of staggering along up there almost at a hover at a relatively high altitude for a while and if there's people shooting at you you feel kind of vulnerable. So it, those of us who were at the back of the pack kind of learned to hold back and the Marine Corps was big on tight formations, but we kind of got away from that for purposes like this, the back element or two would just let the…when you start the final approach into a hot LZ, you just kind of

let them go ahead, you'd learn to time it so you came blazing on down there and landed the…actually got on the ground about the time you would have anyway, it's just that you were able to carry more airspeed and spend less time exposed than you would have if you'd been in the NATOPS position that Marine Corps doctrine says you should have been in. I don't remember now exactly what the question was

SM: I was curious about lessons learned. And how that transitioned

LF: Yeah, ok. You learned things like that. You learned to go in and out of just a resupply zone, even if it was just a single ship that…get on down there. Keep your airspeed up and the high rated assent and then just, the last little bit of your final approach would always be the same, it would always be the, like a NATOPS approach, but you wouldn't start it way back and creep in there like doctrine indicated that you should. You'd keep your airspeed up, increase rate of assent and just get the hell down there and intercept that glide path in close to the landing spot and from that point on would be the NATOPS approach. And you learned, of course you learned a little bit about the area as time went on. I think that's the thing that made Air America, that was one of the things that contributed to Air America's success, is that the people, you know, we'd been there a while. We learned the areas. You learned that if you flew on this side of this particular mountain you'd likely get shot at, if you flew on the other side, you wouldn't, and you learned, you knew your work area a lot better than we did when we were in Vietnam. Although the same there, every time you went out you learned a little more and you were better at the end of your tour than you were at the beginning.

SM: I want to talk more about that. Let's just take a little step back just for a second. When you first arrived 362 the Gulf of Tonkin incidents had occurred—very shortly after your arrival there—August of '64. Do you remember that and do you remember what you were thinking about and what you and your fellow aviators talked about with regard to that.

LF: No, I just remember it was in the news.

SM: Ok.

LF: It was just a part of the war. We didn't…the group I was with anyway, didn't get very philosophical about it; we were just there to do a job. We knew there bombing going on in Laos for instance, but never thought anything about it one way or

the other, it seemed like it kind of made sense, we knew a lot of the supplies were coming down through Laos

SM: Did it occur to you that this might be then the opportunity for you guys to get that combat experience that might be good for your careers?

LF: Yeah.

SM: When did you finally get word that your unit, 362, would be going to Vietnam?

LF: It must have been about June of '64. All of a sudden, the whole Marine air group—MAG 36, we were all a part of MAG 36—I guess there was probably, maybe six H34 squadrons and one or two gun squadrons. And now that I said that I don't remember the gun ships while we were in the States worked out of Camp Pendleton, I don't remember if they were a part of MAG 36 or not, but anyway, we ended up with one or two of them with us there at Ky Ha when we got to Vietnam. I don't remember if their designations were 36 something or if they had another designation.

SM: By MAG, you're not talking about Military Assistance Group?

LF: Marine Air Group.

SM: So you got word before the Gulf of Tonkin incidents occurred.

LF: Yeah, I think we got on ship in July. I had forgotten just when Gulf of Tonkin took place, I'll have to take your word for it that it happened in August, but that's…but we were on the ship in July. As a matter of fact, they were having the famous Watts Riots as we steamed out of Long Beach.

SM: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

LF: In August.

SM: Of '64 or '65?

LF: '64. No, no, '65.

SM: OK. When you got word it was June/July of '65.

LF: Oh, did I say '64?

SM: Yes. I think when I entered the Gulf of Tonkin information; I think there was some confusion. I'm sorry.

LF: Tonkin was August of '64.

SM: Right, and you guys got word in June of '65 that you were going to Vietnam.

LF: Yeah

SM: OK, then that's when the Watts Riots were occurring and everything.

LF: Yeah.

SM: So basically your mission…you knew going in the 362 mission would be troop carrying, resupply, the standard use of the helicopter which you'd been training back at Santa Anna, California.

LF: Right.

SM: What was it like and how did you arrive in Vietnam?

LF: We went over on the aircraft carrier. The whole Marine Air Group was on, I think, the Lexington, but I'm not sure. While I was in Vietnam, I was on the Valley Forge and at least one other, I think the Lexington. But in any event we went over on aircraft carrier, stopped in at Subic Bay in the Philippines, probably spent about at least a week there before we went on to Vietnam, but I remember the watch…the two anecdotal things that I remember as we steamed out of Long Beach was that the Watts Riots were going on and there was some remarks about why don't we stay and fight the war that's going on here and the other thing was that I remember my squadron commander saying that his mother-in-law had told him that if he voted for Goldwater there'd be a war in Vietnam. She was sure as hell right because he'd voted for Goldwater and now we're on our way to Vietnam.

SM: Now, just out of curiosity, when you said that, was it one person that remarked or was kind of part of a conversation that you had with other people that 'Why don't we stay home and fight the war here?'

LF: It was just kind of in the spirit of humor.

SM: Yeah.

LF: There were pictures of buildings burning and stuff.

SM: Was there a sense that perhaps there should be a military option in dealing with some of that crisis that was going on here.

LF: I don't think so. I don't think…none of us lieutenants thought that deeply about it.

SM: And let's see. How long was the trip over? Total.

LF: It must have been about a month.

SM: About a month at sea.

LF: Yeah. Now that might have included the time in the Philippines, but we left some time in July and we got there some time in August. I think probably more than a month total.

SM: Including, you said, a couple of weeks at the Philippines.

LF: At least one. I'd say a week or ten days probably.

SM: Did you receive any special training from the time you got your orders that you were going to Vietnam, or actually from the time you went to 362 in '64 till the time when you arrived in Vietnam, did you go through any kind of special training? Survival training, jungle training, anything like that?

LF: I'd had survival training as a part of flight training. I don't, let me think…yeah, yeah, as a matter of fact I went to survival training at a place called Pickle Meadows, that's up in the High Sierras up in northern California. I had a couple weeks of survival training up there

SM: What time of year was that, do you know?

LF: No, I don't.

SM: Was it cold?

LF: Yeah, yeah it was pretty cold but there was not snow on the ground so it must have been late spring or early fall.

SM: And certainly not all that applicable to what you'd find yourself in Vietnam.

LF: No, just in a general way. Part of it was…no, not geographically applicable at all.

SM: Anything that was geographically applicable that you remember?

LF: Not while I was in States. No. Once in Vietnam, I got sent back to the Philippines for a couple weeks of survival training in the Philippines—which was excellent training and very applicable. We were trained by the little negritos who'd been guerilla fighters during the second world war. They were our survival trainers. We actually went out in the jungle and spent a week or ten days.

SM: Do you recall much about that training?

LF: No, not very many specifics. You learned how to eat bamboo and things like that and build fires and make shelters. I guess the singular event that I…well a couple. I remember the instructor telling us war stories about World War II and some of the guerilla actions they'd taken against the Japanese, and I remember once, there was wild chickens out there in the jungle and those little negritos were, they could do some really great things with those knives they carried, I think they call them bolos, kind of like a machete, but I remember this chicken running across this little open area ahead of us and out little guide flipping his knife underhanded and slicing the chicken's head off probably fifteen yards ahead of him.

SM: Amazing.

LF: Yeah. I don't know if he could do it every time or not. He just…that chicken was making tracks and he just sliced its head off.

SM: Did they pass that kind of knowledge onto you?

LF: Yeah. You know, I don't think you pass that kind of knowledge directly. That's something that probably took twenty years' practice to get to that point. But, yeah, they showed us how to use the knives.

SM: When you said they taught you how to eat bamboo. Could you explain that?

LF: One of the things I remember learning was that if you could get into a bamboo patch you pretty much had everything you needed. You could get water out of the bamboo, you could eat the tender little shoots and stuff and you could build almost any kind of a tool out of bamboo and…but you know, they showed you how to find the tender parts, eat them, and how to use the bamboo to like I said, get water, and how to make a cooking utensil out of it. Bamboo is a very versatile jungle product.

SM: Could you make spears and stuff from it?

LF: Oh sure, you bet.

SM: When did you actually, you said you went to survival training in the Philippines. About when did that occur?

LF: Oh golly, let me think. That would have been December of '65.

SM: So you had been in country, in Vietnam, for a little bit before that.

LF: Yeah.

SM: What were your first impressions upon arriving in Vietnam?

LF: Well, I guess my first impression was 'oh gosh' or something like that. On the way over there it was our understanding that the [CBs] would have a base built for us when we got there. Well, we arrived and the base consisted of a bunch of fuel bladders laying along the side of a hill. We pitched out pup tents and just started operating and little by little we got the base built, but in the meantime—I guess we got there in late August, and maybe three weeks later the monsoons started while we were still in pup tents—and then we pretty quickly got general purpose tents up. So I…but anyway, we got the general purpose tents up but still, they're just kind of on the side of the hill on the ground and when the monsoons started, it was almost continuous rain.

SM: Where did you arrive?

LF: We arrived at a place called Ky Ha which is just seven or eight miles east, northeast of Chu Lai. The Chu Lai base was there although it consisted of a lot of mast and marting and general purpose tents and things like that at that time. It wasn't nearly as sophisticated as it quickly became. But over at Ky Ha, there was virtually nothing except some fuel bladders when we got there.

SM: When you came over in the carrier, were the aircraft or aircraft with you?

LF: Yes.

SM: And so when you got there you just flew those aircraft to Ky Ha?

LF: That's right.

SM: The base itself, as it evolved, and especially as the monsoons hit, did you have to take any kind of special precautions to protect the aircraft?

LF: I don't know. If we did it was the maintenance people that pretty much took care of it. I don't remember anything specific. The base started shaping up pretty quickly. We got some general purpose tents up, I think I inferred that we lived in pup tents for three or four weeks, it probably wasn't that long. We might have been in pup tents a couple weeks. The first tents that went up, the first general purpose tents of course would have been the ones to conduct business from. The maintenance tents, the administration tents and things like that. And then quickly after that we got some general purpose tents up to live in; although, the rain was a problem even then. The rain typically ran across the floor of your general purpose tent, and we'd scrounge around for anything we could find—boards, cardboard, things like that—to kind of to of get out cots up in the

air a little bit so they didn't sink into the mud and to have a dry place to set our belongings.

SM: About how many men, how many personnel were in HMM362?

LF: Hmmm. Good question. I don't remember. Let me think. I think there was twenty-four aircraft, so there must have been at least fifty pilots or so, whatever, I guess a couple hundred probably.

SM: What was the total crew for an H34?

LF: In Vietnam it was a pilot, co-pilot, what we called crew chief and a gunner. I don't remember exactly what the term for the gunner on the other side was. The main cabin door was on the right side. The crew chief sat there and he had an M60 and then back along the left side, back toward the rear of the cabin, took a window out back there and put an M60 back there and that's where the left side gunner sat. So a crew of four.

SM: And how many passengers could you put into that thing?

LF: I think it was thirteen passengers.

SM: Thirteen. Now did…what…did you support a specific Marine infantry contingent there at Ky Ha or did you kind of fly around and support all kinds of different groups?

LF: Marines pretty much had the whole I Corps at that time and we supported them wherever they were at. Now there was another Marine air group at Monkey Mountain out in Da Nang and another one yet up at the place right up on the DMZ, I think, I can't think of the name of it…Hue Phu Bai. Then and there was a squadron from 362 that was at a place quite a ways south down toward, maybe it might even have been in II Corps I don't remember…I think it might have been called Qui Non, or something like that. It was quite a ways down the coast from Chu Lai. And we just we supported Marines wherever they were. There were also some Special Forces camps in I Corps and we supported them a little bit and now and then the Army would send some gun ships up to support us. Our gun ships had six guns. The Army had what you call flex guns which you could would swivel around and point in different directions. The guns on the Marine hueys were fixed, they just pointed straight ahead, like a fixed wing. The flex guns gave the Army gun ships a lot more flexibility so we really welcomed them when they'd show up and they were really ballsy guys too. They could get right down there with you, they

could come into the LZ with you because those flex guns could reach out pretty much any direction, whereas the Marine gun ships had to stay up a little bit and they'd have to rock in on a target. But those Army guys would come right down there with you and they were real ballsy. I remember one just setting pretty much nose to nose with a fifty caliber once just hammering away. We always liked to see those guys.

SM: Did the Army helicopter take out the 50?

LF: I don't remember. I remember…I was just interested in getting the hell out of there. But the…I remember it just…he was shooting rockets, guns and everything else. There was just a big cloud of dirt up where the 50 was. I don't know if he actually got him or not.

SM: Now did you…your area of operations as a pilot, where did you primarily fly around in?

LF: All over I Corps.

SM: All over I Corps.

LF: Probably in the area…you know, you split the difference between Chu Lai and Da Nang, probably up to roughly that line on down for quite a ways south more than anything.

SM: What was the range of the helicopter when it was fully loaded.

LF: Good question. I don't remember.

SM: Would you ever have to refuel on a mission?

LF: Oh yeah. You typically refueled several times during the course of a day. If you were on a mission like refugee evacuation or something that would take all day you'd refuel a couple times.

SM: Could you describe for me the first operation where you went out in support of Marines and found yourself in a hostile environment being shot at?

LF: Oh golly, I don't know. The…I don't remember just specifically which one was first. There had been a big operation just before we got there. I think it was called harvest moon. It was one of the first where they ran into a really large group of NVA. But we started operations immediately and started picking up holes immediately, but I don't remember the specifically the first one that I was on. I hadn't been there too long, however, until one that kind of stands out in my mind we were we had brought a couple

officers, maybe even the company commander in to a group of Marines that were out doing one of their search missions and we were sitting there pretty much a whole company of Marines right along side of us and we were sitting fat, dumb and happy just turning a way and some little guy had snuck up in the brush or cane break, probably not more than ten yards away from the helicopter. I was flying co-pilot on the left side and that's where he was and all of a sudden, although I didn't know that he was there, but suddenly there was pieces of stuff flying around and noise, the cockpit was full of flying debris and I felt something hit the back of my legs and luckily I was flying with an experienced pilot. This had to have been…I couldn't have been there very long when this happened…the guy I was flying with had been from a squadron from the squadron that had been in Vietnam six or eight months at that time. They took those guys and kind of spread them out among the new squadrons and I was lucky enough to have been flying with one of those guys at that time because what it turned out it was is this little guy sitting in this brush pile or cane break probably about ten yards from me started shooting at me with probably a AK47 and I didn't even know what was going on but while I'm wondering what's going on, the guy in the right seat is getting his tail out of there. Just all of a sudden something confusing is happening, there's stuff flying all around and I feel pieces hitting me and we're getting out of there and then I see that the windows are all shot out. I looked around and there's bullet holes in my seat, I've got blood running down the front of my vest, and things like that. That certainly wasn't the first operation I'd been on, probably not the first time I'd been shot at but it was the first really memorable thing that happened.

SM: And typically when you would fly these operations, I assume that you would pick up Marines, take them into an area, drop them off, and eventually pick them back up. Is that how it worked, or was it different?

LF: Well, yeah. If we were hauling Marines it was often…well, sometimes you'd just take somebody out to an outpost or something, but it was often an assault type mission. Where you'd be taking a large group of Marines, maybe a company or a battalion, there were big operations and there were small ones but you'd often be taking them in in an assault type thing—taking them in to engage the enemy. But then there were probably even more missions where you were just resupplying people, either the

people that you'd taken out there on an assault mission or people that were just out at fixed outposts, or things like that. Then there were the Medevac missions and the emergency extractions and things like that. There were apparently a fair number of recon units out there poking around at that time and anytime you got an emergency extraction for a recon unit it was likely to be hairy because those guys just…they'd typically be just a couple jumps ahead of the enemy, often carrying a couple of their own wounded and things like that when you'd you go in to extract those recon guys.

SM: The recon guys were Marine recon?

LF: Yeah.

SM: That's force reconnaissance.

LF: I guess so.

SM: What size patrols would they usually be that you'd pick out up? That is, recon patrols.

LF: More than anything, I guess about squad size. I don't remember…I don't really know the answer to that but I think they probably, generally six to eight man teams.

SM: And you said that a lot of times they'd be carrying wounded.

LF: Oh yeah. You kind of got the impression that once they were out there they didn't want to come back until they really had to, or maybe they walked back or something. I don't remember ever picking those recon guys up peacefully. I remember inserting them a time or two, taking them out and you'd try and just duck in right after dark or something and get them out without being noticed. But more times than not, when you would extract them, there was shooting going on, and often, some of their guys were wounded. I think their mode of operation was to only shoot to try and get away. But then, if they were packing a couple of their own people then that would give it the getting away and that's often when we'd have to come get them.

SM: The enemy composition, that is, when you would go in to pick up say a recon team that's under fire, was it typically Viet Cong or PAVN combinations, or did you even know?

LF: I don't know. I know that from about the time we got there there was more and more instance of engagement with, I think we called them NVA, North Vietnamese

Army, I don't remember what NVA means for sure, but I think we called them NVA. What did you just call them, PAVN?

SM: Yes sir. People's Army of Vietnam—P-A-V-N. But NVA is also synonymous.

LF: I know that there was…I don't think there was ever…I didn't feel like they'd ever taken over completely except on some operations like maybe at Khe Sanh. They were, we were running into them pretty regularly by the time I got there.

SM: When you'd go out on a mission, and when you were in the preparation phases, what kind of briefings would you receive, and how much information about enemy strength, enemy units you might contact, how well were you briefed about those types of things?

LF: Pretty thoroughly. We'd have a thorough mission briefing and virtually always a part of that would be the briefing by the Intel people that would tell us what they thought was there and we were likely to encounter. They weren't always right, but they tried to give us as much information as they could.

SM: Although, how often were they right? Were they right most of the time, some of the time, hardly ever?

LF: I don't know. I'd say they were hardly ever totally wrong, or probably ever totally right either. But their information was valuable and useful.

SM: What were some of the heaviest weapons you came under fire, enemy ones?

LF: Fifty caliber, there were mortars. I don't remember rockets, they encountered rockets when I got to Laos with Air America, but I don't remember any rockets while I was there with the Marine Corps. Ninety percent small arms, occasionally…or fairly frequently fifty caliber, 12.7 I guess is what they used, and once in a while mortar or maybe artillery, once in a great while, too. I can't really remember for sure anything beyond mortars.

SM: Would your base come under fire, mortar fire and artillery fire?

LF: I don't remember that ever happening while I was there, they probed our perimeter while I was there, but I don't remember there ever being anything beyond grenades and small arms [and small probes].

SM: Now did Marine engineers come in and help you construct the bas at Ky Ha over time, and build bunkers and stuff?

LF: The Seabees were probably there pretty quickly and helped us construct it. It just about had to have been. Cause there were bulldozers involved and things like that.

SM: And you said these were Seabees that did this, not Marine Engineers?

LF: Don't know. Maybe both.

SM: They'd build obstacles and put concertina wire up and all that kind of stuff.

LF: Yeah. I'm pretty sure the Seabees were involved because there was a big seabee contingent there at Chu Lai. I think they came over and helped us a lot.

SM: Was there a mine field outside your perimeter?

LF: I don't remember.

SM: How much contact did you have with Vietnamese people at Ky Ha? Was it nearby?

LF: Almost zero. There was a little village right close to Ky Ha, and after we'd been there a month or two, they…I remember the big day came and they open the vil up so Marines could go into the village, and I think three of us got killed and they closed it back up and never opened it again.

SM: How did the three Marines get killed?

LF: I think one got shot and two got blown up.

SM: My goodness.

LF: One of those things…a little girl with a hand grenade or some similar thing.

SM: My goodness. Was this the case throughout your time in Vietnam, from '65-'67?

LF: Yeah. I hardly had any contact…every now and then you'd be out on some kind of a mission. I can remember several times being shut down waiting for the mission to continue and there being Vietnamese around, typically, a lot of kids. But never…beyond that, no real contact with the Vietnamese civilians at all. I remember once, we were shut down somewhere and there was what appeared to be a family, a man, woman, and a couple kids digging gravel that they had a pick and shovel and they'd pick this, they dug a little place into the side of the hill there and they were loading those baskets, you know that they carried at each end of a stick, with gravel and taking it down

to the road or something. I remember helping them dig them gravel for an hour or two while we were waiting for our mission to continue. That's probably the closest thing to social contact I had with the Vietnamese while I was there.

SM: What about Vietnamese military? Did you fly ARVN Marines around?

LF: Once in a while. Probably at least eighty percent of the time I was transporting or supporting U.S. Marines and maybe twenty or thirty percent of the time ARVN or some Vietnamese military contingent. And then a fair amount of our re-supply missions, however, were to Vietnamese outposts. There was quite a bit of that, but as far as the personnel transportation, it was mostly U.S. Marine.

SM: You mentioned before that you also supported a number of Special Forces camps in I Corps.

LF: Yeah.

SM: What was your contact with them? What was the primary mission, again, re-supply, stuff like that?

LF: Yeah. We would usually take supplies into them. We must have been from time to time transporting people there for meetings or something, too, because I can remember quite a number of times just shutting down and then waiting for people to come back to take out of there.

SM: What about civilians? Did you ever fly American civilians in country?

LF: Other than the newsmen, there'd frequently be a news guy or two going along on some of the missions, but I don't remember ever hauling any civilians except news people.

SM: You mentioned also that you would engage in some refugee relocation operations.

LF: Yeah.

SM: What were those like?

LF: Usually pretty frantic. They were…a good part of the refugee extractions turned out to be keeping too many of them from swarming on where you couldn't take off. They were…it was usually because they were threatened and they knew they were threatened and they were anxious to get out of there. But not always. Sometimes it was more orderly than that.

SM: Do you remember, or have some more memorable refugee relocation operation or one where there was a significant number of refugees that had to be relocated.

LF: Oh golly. I remember one where we hauled refugees…there was at least a couple squadrons of helicopters hauling refugees all day long. It just…incalculable number of people that we moved. That one was pretty orderly. We had an S-2 guy, a grunt S-2 lieutenant named Moncrief Cochrane and I remember he did a real good job of getting them organized and expedited and into the helicopters. We moved a lot of people that day and they moved in a pretty orderly way.

SM: The larger group, where you said it was pretty incalculable how many, do you remember where you picked these people up?

LF: Not with any precision. It was south of Chu Lai, there was a major town down there that I think might have been called Nontai and I think it would have been probably somewhere a little bit west on Nontai, if that's the name of the town. I can't remember with very much precision.

SM: Do you recall where you took them?

LF: Nope. My…I guess we picked them up and flew kind of to the east/northeast, probably taking them back to the Nontai area.

SM: Had you heard of anything called strategic hamlets, or anything like that, or new life hamlets?

LF: I couldn't hear that, Steve.

SM: With regard to refugees and refugee relocations, did you ever hear of the strategic hamlets or new life hamlets? Where they were taking refugees from their villages and putting them into these pre-made hamlets, you know, cinder block buildings, that kind of stuff?

LF: There was a refugee hamlet kind of off to the west of Chu Lai there, but I don't remember any specific name associated with it.

SM: When you picked up refugees do you remember how they responded, how they reacted. Did they seem happy that you were there to pick them up, was there hesitancy at all?

LF: No I don't ever remember there ever being any hesitancy. They were happy to get the hell out of there.

SM: Do you remember hearing any stories associated with why those refugees were being relocated. You know, particular actions by the enemy or anything like that?

LF: No, not specifically. There were Intel reports all the time about things going on out in the countryside. A fair amount of reports of terrorist type things where the bad guys were killing a village chief or something. But I don't know how all that tied in to the refugee situation.

SM: I was also curious, what did you think as a Marine aviator, what did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam when you arrived in 1965, what was the overall strategy and then where did your unit fit into that strategy?

LF: The overall strategy was to restore peace and democracy in South Vietnam, I guess, and keep it from being taken over by the communists. I don't know…we were just a part of the war effort, I don't remember ever being, doing any critical thinking about how we fit into the grand strategy or anything.

SM: What did you think was actually going on in Vietnam when you got there and over time? By the time you arrived until the time you left, did your perspective of what was happening in that country change at all?

LF: Oh yeah, but it'd be kind of hard to describe how. You got there not even knowing what it was like or what Vietnam was like or what war generally was like and you came back with a pretty good taste of both. I don't know exactly how my view of it had changed. I guess, for one thing, there seemed to be a fair amount of silliness with regard to rules of engagement and things like that. Now and then on these assault missions there would be instances where the bad guys were running and throwing their uniforms away and stuff, and I don't remember specifically—you couldn't shoot at them unless they were shooting at you and that they were clearly identifiable as bad guys, I don't remember if that meant a uniform or just what. I remember that there seemed to be a fair number of situations where we were losing opportunities to kill the enemy because it just didn't fit within the parameter of engagement that had been imposed by Washington, D.C. And I guess that's kind of an over-arching thing. There seemed to have been a lot of control exerted by people that didn't really know what was going on in

the field, and I think it was probably later that I learned about the tactics in specific directions coming out of the [place] for the White House and things like that. I don't think we actually imagined that it was micro-managed to that extent while it was actually going on. But we did have a keen sense of things being directed by people who didn't really know what was happening.

SM: Did that sense of frustration increase over time as you…from when you arrived until when you left?

LF: I don't know if rose to the level of frustration, Steve. It was just kind of a complaint.

SM: You mentioned before that there would be times when the rules of engagement seemed rather silly, and one of the examples you cited was that retreating enemy soldiers would throw off their uniforms, you couldn't fire on them. Were there other similar types of strange or bizarre rules of engagement that restricted and limited your ability to engage the enemy and therefore maybe increased some frustration on the part of you and other pilots in the Marines.

LF: Nothing that I recall specifically.

SM: When did you come to realize, or learn, that a significant amount of micro-management was occurring from the White House?

LF: Oh, I think the micro-management thing was apparent rather quickly, but I don't think that I imagined that it was coming all the way from the White House. I just learned that much, much later. I think if you'd have told me that the White House was involved to the extent that they really were, I don't think I would have believed it.

SM: Was your aircraft ever shot down?

LF: Oh yeah. Yeah, and I guess there again it depends a little bit on definition. I think I was compelled to land because of bullet holes about six times, six or seven. But it never caught fire or anything. As a matter of fact, the H-34 was a terrible, terrible machine to have catch fire. It was a magnesium skinned helicopter carrying about 1400 pounds of 115/145 av gas, so it ever did catch fire, unless you're right close to the ground, you're just totally out of luck. There was one operation where one of the helicopters in the sister squadron caught fire at about 2000 feet and, oh probably, and

started right for the ground, and probably by 1500 feet it was just a solid mass of flames and people were jumping out of it.

SM: Did anybody survive?

LF: No. No, there were people that rode it all the way in, and there were people that jumped out, too. Nobody survived. It was months later before they were able to get back in there to even get some of the remains.

SM: Do you recall where that happened?

LF: That was northwest of Chu Lai, but beyond that, I don't know. Over against that first little range of mountains.

SM: Would you always fly in the same aircraft, or did you and your crew change aircraft?

LF: You'd change. You just took whatever aircraft they assigned you.

SM: Were there any personnel that were always with the same aircraft, like the crew chief or anything like that?

LF: I don't remember, I think the answer to that is yes. I think the crew chief was always with his own plane, but I'm not absolutely certain of that.

SM: How about the gunner?

LF: I think he was, too. He was a maintenance person as well. I think both gunner and crew chief were with the same plane that was kind of their plane to take care of.

SM: Did you find that the aircraft were pretty consistent in terms of their performance? Jumping from aircraft to aircraft did you ever experience anything that you weren't aware of or prepared for because that was just a particular quirkiness of that particular aircraft?

LF: No bizarre quirkiness. You kind of learned which ones were the stout ones and which ones were weak, and things like that, but nothing really bizarre.

SM: When you say which ones were weak, how would they be weak?

LF: They just wouldn't pick up as much.

SM: So their power train was perhaps just a little bit more worn or whatever.

LF: Yeah, probably the engine.

SM: Did you ever have any difficulties with the 34 in terms of its performance being underpowered or anything like that.

LF: No, we kind of learned to carry fairly heavy loads. Typically, you were trained to be able to hover with a load as kind of a gauge of when you had enough, but you quickly learned in Vietnam that…of course, you'd been trained all along to do rolling takeoffs and you learned to try and work from places where you could take, do rolling takeoffs so that you could take bigger loads and save at the other end, do a rolling landing.

SM: So you would be able to increase the load if you were able to get the aircraft just off the ground enough to get to transition and then actually gain more power and lift that way.

LF: You know the…do you know what translational lift is?

SM: The translation, right.

LF: Yeah.

SM: That's when the aircraft goes from being a hover aircraft to actually flying.

LF: Yeah, yeah, and you pick up an incredible amount of lift as you go into translational lift which requires a certain amount of forward airspeed, ten knots or so. If you don't have the power to hover, if you have room, you can still go into translational lift while rolling, kind of like a fixed wing, and at the other end, if you don't have the power to hover you can roll it on, just not come out of translational lift until you're back on the ground. We learned how to do that very…we learned a lot in Laos with Air America. You learned, for instance, one of the remarkable things about the H-34 was that it didn't…if you were coming into a large pad, you didn't room, you didn't need anything like a runway or anything. You could fly at probably 20, 25 knots right down to the ground and put that tail wheel on the ground at the near edge of the pad and then just haul back and kind of not stand it up on end or anything, but like that, just…you could stop it in probably fifteen yards pretty easily. The same with take off, working in the mountains, if you could extend the struts a certain amount, you could hop it or roll it over to the edge of the pad if you had a situation where you could dive down the side of a mountain, you could snatch it off the pad and then drop the collective and dive down the

mountain and get into translational lift. It sounds kind of hinky talking about it, but you learned how to do it safely.

SM: Anything else stand out in your mind from you time in Vietnam, your first tour in Vietnam.

LF: Nope. No, I can't think of anything else. You mean as far as events or situations…Steve, can you let me get rid of this call, I'll be right back.

SM: I was curious, were there any strange or interesting incidents involving wildlife while you were in Vietnam? Cats or snakes or insects or anything like that?

LF: No, although I can tell you a couple about Laos.

SM: OK, when we get to Laos let's talk about them.

LF: OK.

SM: I want to finish talking about Vietnam and then we'll transition into your time with Air America in Laos. Let me see, what about food. Did you consistently eat military food or did you also eat on the economy some?

LF: Yeah, that's kind of an amusing thing. We got there…we started eating C-rations, of course, which aren't really too bad, but we complained about them as staunch Marines usually do and finally the big day came, they opened the mess tent. We'd probably been eating C-rations for two months by the time they opened the mess tent. The mess tent had been open for about two days and they had to put a guard on the C-ration dump to keep people from stealing C-rations. The food from the mess tent was so bad. I don't know, they just…I don't know the reason for that, but I know that the C-rations were distinctly preferable to the mess tent's food.

SM: Well, that's not good for morale!

LF: No. And it got sorted out after a while. There was a month or so where they wouldn't let you have C-rations and you didn't really want to eat the mess tent food.

SM: Speaking of morale, what was morale like at 362 in Vietnam?

LF: Pretty good. There were good camaraderie and a lot of support, mutual support. It was pretty good. We complained about things like micro-management that I talked about earlier and things like that, but not in a way that hurt morale or anything. We weren't happy to be there but we felt like we were doing a job that needed to be done, and morale was pretty good. There was…yeah, I'd say generally it was real good.

SM: Were there any draftees in your unit or were they pretty much all volunteers?

LF: As far as I know, they were all volunteers. Now wait a minute, I remember meeting a draftee somewhere while I was in Vietnam and being surprised because I didn't know until I met him that the Marine Corps had taken in any draftees, I though everybody in the Marine Corps was a volunteer. But I don't remember who or what his job was or anything.

SM: What about racial issues? What was the racial composition of your unit and as you mentioned, when you guys were leaving, Watts Riots were going on, a lot of racial tensions and strife. Did that appear at all in your unit?

LF: I don't think that had any effect at all in our unit. We had black people and mostly white people, of course. But I don't remember there ever being any tension. We knew about it; it was happening here and there and I know while we were in the Philippines there was some things that went on, something to do with one of the ships, and there were things going on in the Marine Corps, too. There were some racial tensions, but I never was exposed to them personally.

SM: Do you remember the incident on the ship when you were in the Philippines, what that was about?

LF: No. I just remember that it was some kind of an interracial brawl or something that occurred somewhere. It was a liberty type thing.

SM: It wasn't on board the ship?

LF: No.

SM: What did you think about the ARVN units that you did have contact with, in terms of their efficiency, their effectiveness? Did you, when you left in '67 what did you think about what the United States was doing and how ARVN was playing a role in that?

LF: Generally speaking, we had the felling that the ARVN were not very enthusiastic about fighting. They were not as aggressive as we would have liked them to have been. That was the general attitude, but there were a fair number of instances where they fought like tigers and you've got to give them credit for that, too. I don't…what was the last part of your question?

SM: Well, I curious that when you left in ’67 did you leave feeling that the United States was there supporting South Vietnam and South Vietnam was doing its part.

LF: I don’t remember having a firm feeling one way or the other about that.

SM: I was curious if you had contact with other country forces—Korean, Thai?

LF: Yeah, Koreans. Worked with the ROKs. The ROKs started coming, we were already there, pretty well established when the ROKs started to come in, and we were impressed, you’d take some ROKs into a hill or someplace and they’d start digging and never stop. You’d come back a month later and it’d be different, you’d come back a month after that and it’d be different, yet they just never stopped improving, never stopped digging. They fought like tigers.

SM: While you were there with 362, what kind of information did you receive from the States, in terms of what was going on in the United States, as the anti-war movement started to pick up a certain amount of speed, what were your primary means of news from the United States.

LF: The *Stars and Stripes* and the radio, and our attitude about the protestors were that they were commie sympathizing assholes. I don’t think there was any of us that had much sympathy for the anti-war movement. And then when they started accusing us of being baby killers and things like that, that just kind of intensified the antagonistic way that we felt about it.

SM: As your time progressed there in county, there was some kind of a shift. You got there very early in ’65 and by the time you left in ’67 there had been something of a shift in the emphasis of the strategy in Vietnam and of course, the big emphasis became the body count, racking up as many enemy killers as possible.

LF: Yeah, the body count was a big deal from day one.

SM: From your arrival.

LF: Yeah. Every Intel report you saw had a body count and it was apparent that that was a big deal.

SM: Did you give that any thought, did that mean anything to you? This heavy emphasis on just generating enemy kills?

LF: I never got very philosophical about it. I think, to me, like most of us, it seemed liked a pretty incomplete measure of how the war was going. I guess I did have a

sense of frustration that developed somewhere along the line, and I don't know at what point, but it kind of became apparent that we weren't doing everything that we could be doing to win the war. I think most of my Marine buddies thought that the war was something that needed to be done. But it became kind of frustrating that it appeared that we weren't doing the things that were necessary to really win it. The rule of engagement, the safe havens, the off-limit targets in North Vietnam, all of that just kind of combined to make us feel like we were just engaged in a holding operation, the people that could make a difference weren't really going to do the things it would take to…what did they call war, the application of…the strategic application of overwhelming force, I think, was simply not happening.

SM: How about the war to win the hearts and minds?

LF: I never had a good feeling about, well, let me start over. I never had a sense of what was going on there. I knew that was happening, but I didn't…because you heard about it on the radio and read about it in the *Stars and Stripes*, but never had enough contact with civilians to have any sense of whether it was succeeding or not.

SM: How about support for the CAP Marines, the Combined Action Platoons, did you ever support them in I Corps.

LF: I don't know, we supported the…were those Vietnamese Marines?

SM: No sir. These were U.S. Marines that were being co-located with villages and provide training for Ruff-Puffs and advisory kind of stuff.

LF: I don't know, Steve. Probably. Those were probably some of the personnel that we were transporting here and there, but we never had any discussions about what they were doing or how successful it was.

SM: Is there anything else you want to talk about regarding your first tour in Vietnam?

LF: No. I guess, one thing I might mention is how in retrospect, how much we got accomplished with as little experience as we had. My good fortune of being with somebody that was experienced probably saved my life in that one instance that I mentioned. There were fair numbers of us over there with very little flying experience and we were doing some pretty demanding missions from time to time and pulled them off, either through luck or good training or something. I remember right around

Christmas, going out on some kind of an extraction, I don't remember if it was recon—probably not recon—some kind of an extraction up in the mountains where there was just an opening down in the tall trees, you kind of had to come to a hover over the opening and then hover down, oh probably at least 150 feet, maybe 200, straight down, pick up a guy or two and then hover back up to tree top level and come out of there, which is pretty demanding under the best of circumstances, but this was a little bit windy and was at night. There we were, we got it done. As a matter of fact, the last ship didn't have a landing lane so I was next to last. I got my guy or two whatever we were able to take and hovered back up to tree top level and then just slid off to the side and shined my light down so the last guy could see down into the hole and he came down and went on down and got the last guy or two and came back out using my light. I don't know if it's apparent or not, but that whole thing was kind of a hairy thing for kids with 300/400 hours of flight time to be doing. But we didn't think much about it, it just was something that needed to be done and we went ahead and did it.

SM: You said you had to leave Vietnam because of an emergency situation.

LF: No, no, no. Leave the Marine Corps and I meant to correct that earlier. You said something about being in Vietnam until '67. I wasn't, I was in Vietnam about fourteen months. I came back to the States in the fall of '66 and then I…I had a fixed wing tour then at the training command in Pensacola. I went back as a P-28 instructor.

SM: And then you left the Marine Corps?

LF: And then I left the Marine Corps. Yeah.

SM: So when you arrived back in the United States in the fall of 1966 what was that like?

LF: We came back on a commercial contracted flight. I can't even remember where I left from now, but it must have been right out of Chu Lai, stopped somewhere along the line, probably Midway, and then came in to El Torro. I remember with the International Dateline and stuff and was…we got back at about the same time we left, date and time wise. Came into El Torro and just went home, my wife had stayed there in Santa Anna, we had just…I'd gotten married the summer of '64 and then that winter we bought a new home and then the summer of '65 I went to Vietnam and left my wife there

with a new baby and so she and my oldest son were there when I got back. So I just went home and started getting ready to move to Pensacola.

SM: Did you get any leave time?

LF: Yeah, probably. Yeah, certainly. Because I went up through the northwest and visited my parents and stuff. It took a while to get on out to Pensacola.

SM: What was the atmosphere like in the country from your perspective in late '66 when you got back?

LF: I never had any face to face confrontations with anti-war people. I knew it was going on, but most of it was occurring in the cities and I just never had an occasion where I had to go into the big city. I was pretty contentious of the anti-war people, but simply because I just didn't regard it as a moral thing to do, but I never had any personal confrontation.

SM: Then you arrived in Pensacola in early '67 or so.

LF: No. It was October, I guess, of '66. Started flying P-28s, I was in instrument training.

SM: How long did you do that?

LF: Until my discharge in September…I guess ten months, maybe a little longer.

SM: That's when you left the Marine Corps, September of '67. Why don't we go ahead and end the interview here. Thank you very much. This ends the interview with Mr. Larry Fraser on February 5, 2001.

Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Larry Fraser
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
February 5; April 3, 2001
Transcribed by Sherri Brouillette

Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Larry Fraser on the 3rd of April 2001 at approximately 10:20 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Fraser is in Jackson, Florida. Sir, why don't you go ahead and tell me about your transition after leaving the Marine Corps to joining Air America and how you were approached and how you joined that operation.

Larry Fraser: Okay. When I came back from Vietnam in the fall of '66, I became a flight instructor at Whiting Field near Pensacola. I was instructing in T-28s. I took a cross-country with one of my students up to Washington, D.C. I was an instrument instructor and cross-country was part of the syllabus as I recall. We went to Washington, D.C. and I stopped in to do business with Air America, kind of out of curiosity, I guess. And then just went back. I had no real plans to get out of the Marine Corps at that time. Somewhat later, the late spring of '67, my father died having just purchased a dairy farm. So I requested and was granted a discharge from the Marine Corp in order take over that family farm and get it straightened out and positioned so we could sell it, intending then to come back into the Marine Corps. I was discharged from the Marine Corps in September '67. I took over the dairy operation in eastern Washington. About a year later, about the next June or July we had the farm situated to where we could sell it and I was intending to come back into the Marine Corps. About that time, I guess it would have been about June or July of '67 I got a call from Air America. I got a call from Red Dawson. He asked me if I'd be interested in working for Air America and told me a little more about what they're doing and what he had in mind for me. It sounded interesting

and I figured I could always go back into the Marine Corps. So, I accepted and in the August of ’67 or ’68 then, having completed the sale of our dairy farm and gotten my mother and my little sister situated, I went to work for Air America. I started off with a couple of weeks of indoctrination and familiarization or whatever they called it in Taipei. Incidentally, in Taipei, they'd hired me as a helicopter pilot, at Taipei they discovered I was also a fixed wing pilot so they moved me from the helicopter program at Udorn to the Volpar program in Vientiane. I got to Vientiane and discovered that I wasn’t really enthusiastic about the Volpar program. So, I traveled down to Udorn to see if I could get them to transfer me back into helicopter program and was told that they didn’t really need anymore helicopter pilots. They were full up. But somewhere in the course of my conversations there, somebody learned or I disclosed somehow that my wife was a school teacher. So I was waiting to go back up to Vientiane that same day and somebody came by and asked me if I would stop off and talk to the acting base manager, Clarence Abadey, which I did. He said, ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I understand you’d be interested in coming to work here at Udorn.’ I said, ‘I would.’ He said, ‘As you know, we don’t really have a helicopter slot available now, but,’ he says, ‘I understand your wife is a school teacher.’ I said, ‘Yes she is.’ He said, ‘Well, we desperately need teachers for the Air America school for this fall. If your wife would be willing to teach school for Air America, then we’ll bring you in as an additional helicopter pilot.’ I’m not sure he used that term, but he said, ‘We could certainly make a space for you here if your wife could teach school.’ So I volunteered my wife and then spent the next two days- in those days it was kind of hard to call from the Far East back to the States- I spent the next two days trying to get in touch with her to let her know that I’d volunteered her. In the meantime, she got a call from Red Dawson or one of his people saying that, ‘Congratulations on becoming a teacher at Udorn.’ She says, ‘No, you’re very mistaken.’ She said, ‘I have no intentions of teaching the school in Udorn or anywhere else this year.’ I finally got in touch with her and was able to get things straightened out. She taught school that year at Air America school and I became a helicopter pilot at Udorn.

SM: What classes did she teach?

LF: I don’t know. I really don’t remember. I think the teachers kind of each had a grade. I don’t remember how that worked, but I think that was the case. Some of them

specialized in this or that, but basically I think you had the first grade teacher, the second grade teacher and so on. I think she taught about the eighth grade or something. Seventh or eighth grade.

SM: Is this your wife, Glenna? Do you think she would be interested in being interviewed?

LF: Well, I don't know.

SM: How long did it take you to convince her that it would be a good idea for her to teach in Udorn?

LF: She never did become convinced it was really a good idea. But she agreed to do it. She had taught a couple of years at that time in the States. She was kind of disillusioned with the teaching profession. She didn't really enjoy it like she thought she would. Then, with two pre-school kids, she just thought it would be an opportunity to relax and take care of the kids. When we went to Washington to straighten out that dairy, she had a pretty tough year. She'd get up about 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning and come down, while I milked the cows, she and my little sister would clean out the barn and get all the manure and everything out of the barn and get the hay put down for the cows and then she'd go take a shower and drive about 30 miles to teach school over country roads that got pretty icy in winter time. It would usually be dark by the time she got back. Then she'd help with the evening chores. She was looking forward to a little relaxation, I think.

SM: How many children do you have at this time?

LF: Two.

SM: Two. And they of course came with her to Udorn?

LF: Yeah.

SM: What was that like having your family, compared to say your first tour with the Marine Corps, now you're going back to Southeast Asia for another tour with Air America, but this time you get your family?

LF: It's a better way to be involved in the war. With Air America you'd go up country and you'd do your job for a week or ten days and then you come back and your family was in a relatively secure situation. You've got to have a family life, too.

SM: What were your concerns about the security?

LF: I was not too concerned about security at Udorn. There was always the theoretical possibility that something could go awry, but it was a secure place. Sappers came in at least once or twice and tried to blow up parts of the airbase. Then when you have a big military presence like that, it kind of attracts some of the criminal elements to the town. So, there was some of that, but no more than you'd expect in a town of that size pretty much anywhere. Just by being careful and staying away from certain areas and things. I never felt that my family was in any real danger.

SM: How many missions, how many Air America missions had you flown before you went to Udorn?

LF: None.

SM: You hadn't flown anything yet?

LF: No. I was just in training in the Volpar. They had several weeks or a few weeks of training to learn to fly the Volpar. And as I recall, I probably had to wait a couple of weeks or a week at least before the class began. I was just kind of, I was in the training program. I never even actually, the Volpars operated out of Savannakhet. I never even made it there.

SM: What did you think of the Volpar as an aircraft?

LF: As an aircraft it was alright. It was the old C-45. Civilian, they called the Beach 18. They'd taken it an put turbine engines on it and made it a nose wheel aircraft instead of taildragger. It was okay as far as an aircraft. It was a miserable mission. They had a huge fuel tank that pretty much filled up the bottom part one side of the cabin which allowed them to stay up all night. The mission was to take off about dark and climb way up. I don't remember the altitude but it was above 20,000 feet where they operated and stay up all night. You're so heavy, it took a while to get up there and then it was just droning around with an oxygen mask on for 8 or 9 hours or maybe longer than that. I don't remember. I think it was basically a sundown to sunup operation.

SM: So this was an unpressurized aircraft?

LF: Yeah.

SM: It sounds like this was an intelligence mission or no?

LF: Yes. Well, radio relays and intercepts and things like that. I honestly don't know exactly what they did there.

SM: When you arrived at Udorn, what did you do? What was it like there?

LF: I got checked out in the H-34 and I went to work.

SM: What was that work? What was your primary mission?

LF: Everything. Anything that moved in Laos moved by air and we provided the helicopters. Now, the Laos had a few helicopters of their own, but very few.

SM: What kind of briefing did you receive once arriving at Udorn?

LF: Oh, I don't know. The checkout was pretty thorough. My first thing that was kind of funny, I guess, was when I had come through Taipei. In the hiring papers, Air America had mentioned and I had signed a paper acknowledging that drinking, even in moderation, would absolutely not be tolerated. So, I got down to Udorn and Bob Clamp was the personnel guy there. He got me all checked in. He said, 'Okay,' he said, 'It's almost quitting time now anyway. Come on over. I'll take you over to the Rendezvous bar.' That was the little Air America club there. He said, 'I like to buy the new people their first drink.' I thought, 'Oh God, this is some kind of a test.' Because in Taipei they had reminded us two or three times that drinking is absolutely not tolerated. So anyway, I thought, 'God, I don't know what to do. Whether to order a Coke or what.' I decided to play it by ear and went along and as we get closer and closer to what turned out to be the Rendezvous bar, the noise is getting louder and louder. We walked into a scene that would make that bar scene out of *Star Wars* look tame. There was arm wrestling going on and arguments and dart games and I can't even describe it. It just was terrible. The bar was full of people that had already been drinking a considerable amount.

SM: I guess that rule, there was flexibility.

LF: Well, the rule certainly applied when you were working. When you were up country, I don't even remember. Certainly booze was available up country on the economy and I don't know but what people would have a beer or two when they're eating meals from time to time. I don't really remember. I don't remember. Well, I do remember one instance where there was drinking, probably in excess up country, but very, very, little drinking up country.

SM: Was the rule very similar to the military where as long as it was not impeding the mission and safety to a degree?

LF: Yeah. Eight hours bottle to throttle. I think that was followed pretty religiously. Now that I'm thinking about it, I can remember quite a number times when there was drinking in the evening after work. As a matter of fact, my first trip up country at my introduction to Tony Poe. I got up there and I changed into civvies and was waiting for him. The rest of the people, the rest of the round eyes must have been off somewhere. Anyway, I was sitting around waiting to meet the guy I was going to fly with and meet Tony Poe. I was flying with Bing Benston and he came in and he'd had a few drinks that time and he learned that I was there as a co-pilot to get training. Somehow he thought it would be funny to tell Tony Poe that I was a reporter. Tony, it turns out had had a few drinks himself. I was just sitting there on the sofa, I don't know, reading a magazine or whatever and somebody grabbed me by the hair of my head and slammed me back with that sofa onto the floor and here's this big, gruff guy standing over me threatening to murder me, I guess. That was my introduction to Tony. Of course Bing interceded, let him know that it was a joke, that I wasn't really a reporter, that I was the new co-pilot.

SM: This guy was Benston?

LF: Bing Benston was the pilot.

SM: He's the one that came up with the idea for the joke?

LF: He's the one that thought it would be funny to tell Tony that I was reporter.

SM: How do you spell his name? Do you know how to spell his name, his last name?

LF: B-E-N-S-T-O-N, or something like that.

SM: What was Tony Poe's response, reaction when he was told this was just a practical joke; you weren't really a reporter?

LF: Well, then, 'Happy to meet you. Have a drink.'

SM: Okay. I was curious, based on what you just talked about in regard to your initial introduction to the bar scene and all that. The movie *Air America* has received a lot of critical acclaim from Air America personnel and rightfully so in a number of respects, but, I was curious, how closely does some of that movie represent a sort of rambunctious ness or zest for life or whatever you want to call it and the fact that you guys, when you were working, you worked hard and when you played, you played hard?

LF: Well, in that regard, I suppose it was accurate. I think what everybody found offensive was the insinuation that the customer and Air America, by association was involved in drug trafficking. Actually, they bent over backwards to try and make sure there was none of that from everything to inspecting planes when they came back from up country to everything you can think of. I don't know. I didn't find it as offensive as some of my counterparts did. I don't think people would expect a movie like that to be particularly authentic. It just, I think, would be unrealistic if they did. I'll tell you, the scenery and the aircraft looked authentic. There were a lot of inaccuracies including the fact that people didn't jump from aircraft to aircraft. If you flew [Porters] you flew CORDS. If you flew H-34s you flew H-34s. At least for the helicopter crowd at Udorn, it was a rambunctious group.

SM: While you were at Udorn, did they begin using dogs at all?

LF: I think so. I don't specifically remember. Somehow I think I remember that they had dogs. I know that they would frequently come out to the aircraft and look at whatever was aboard and that sort of thing.

SM: The reason I ask is I have seen photographs of dogs near Air America aircraft and it looks like they're basically being used as drug dogs.

LF: They may have been. I just can't remember. Somehow I have the impression that they have dogs, but I don't remember specifically ever being examined by a dog or seeing one do its work.

SM: Now, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

LF: I think the drug thing, that book McCoy wrote, got that started. It was just, it was almost a joke among the people that were there. You look at it, you see sources, unnamed blahdeblah in the Purple Porpoise bar. You go to the Purple Porpoise bar, you here anything you want to hear. Buy a few drinks, you just kind of hint at what you want to hear, you're going to hear it. I just think the guy got it wrong, just plumb wrong.

SM: Where was the Purple Porpoise?

LF: In Vientiane.

SM: In Vientiane.

LF: It was owned by a Caucasian guy.

SM: But not an Air America employee.

LF: Monty.

SM: Monty.

LF: Monty.

SM: Were there any other particular bars frequented by Air America people in Vientiane?

LF: Yeah. There were. I don't remember the names. There was one, I guess would be the equivalent of a girly bar. It was kind of a raunchy place called the White Rose. That was kind of famous. Every now and then when a new female employee for instance, the people would take her there to shock her. Everybody thought that was funny. It was not unusual to see a naked girl dancing on a table and that sort of thing in the White Rose.

SM: How about at Udorn?

LF: At Udorn, you had the airbase there and all the things that are typically associated with that stuff.

SM: Any particular hot spots that were coveted?

LF: The Wolverine bar.

SM: Wolverine?

LF: Yeah. The Wolverine bar was owned or managed by a guy named Sam who came to be known a Wolverine Sam. He kind of took Air America people generally under his wing and he'd help them out with problems and in turn we spent a lot of time and money in his bar. He left the Wolverine long before Air America left over there and started another place called the Rama bar. The Air America people kind of shifted their business then to the Rama, but he was always known as Wolverine Sam.

SM: Is that R-A-M-A, Rama?

LF: Yes.

SM: What was the first bar that you went to again, Rendezvous?

LF: That was the Air America Club. That was operated by Air America.

SM: Was there a name for it?

LF: Pardon?

SM: Was there a name for it?

LF: The Rendezvous bar.

SM: It was called Rendezvous?

LF: Yeah. The bar top from that bar made it back to the States. I think it's in the Post One collection.

SM: China Post?

LF: Yeah.

SM: They haven't actually created an archive or museum or anything. They just are housing it. Is that correct?

LF: Yeah. They have fund going. Someday they'll have a museum.

SM: I'm curious, have you read Chris Robin's book, *Air America*?

LF: Yes. It was quite a while ago.

SM: Do you remember the book at all and what you thought about it when you read it?

LF: I didn't have any quarrel with it. I expected the quotations were accurate. Different people had different opinions about different things. One thing I remember there was at least one, maybe more, said things like, 'We're all here just for the money.' I don't think that was accurate, but I think some people were. I think there were others that it was more complicated than just the money.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and discuss your first operational experience with Air America, flying up country.

LF: My first up country trip was that one that started with my introduction to Tony Poe.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and give a little more detail in terms of what happened after your introduction to Tony Poe and what else you did there?

LF: Well, the next morning, I go down and I pre-flight the aircraft and pretty soon Bing comes down. I don't remember which seat. It was probably the right seat. He was training me. But anyway, I get up there and he gets in the other seat and I start going through the checklist and Bing starts loading his pipe. Bing, they called him 'Shaky Bing'. He had some kind of a malady that gave him the shakes. But , I didn't know this. He's sitting over there loading his pipe and he's shaking like you can't believe and there's tobacco flying all over the cockpit. That piled on the preceding evening. I thought, 'Oh my God.' As it turns out, Bing, when he takes the controls would be just so steady and smooth. Excellent pilot, excellent control touch. But when you'd see him doing

something like loading his pipe, you'd wonder, 'How can this guy fly?' So anyway, we just went out and did a days work which is anything that you can think of. Everything that moved, moved by air and we moved it. Resupplying outposts, transporting personnel. Occasionally, extracting wounded and bringing them back for attention, Medevac type things. More than anything, it was just taking supplies and replacements out to the outposts.

SM: What typical mission briefings would you receive? How much detail was there in those types of briefings?

LF: You'd get all the detail that you needed and all you wanted. The customer would tell you what you needed to know, tell you where you were going, what the situation was there and in whatever detail you wanted. Like that first trip, the briefings probably seemed a little short to me because that was my first time in the area. One of the advantages that Air America had over the military was, you were there long enough to learn the area in great detail. Now, I was flying with Bing, he had probably already been there at least three years. He knew every outpost and what the situation was and all he really needed to do was just a little update if something had changed. That's the way it got to be for the rest of us over time. By the time you were checked out, you knew the area well enough to at least know the questions to ask and make sure that you did have all the information that you needed. The customers were never hesitant. Some people had quarrels with some of the customers. They thought from time to time that if they had a place that was hazardous that they would down play the hazard; maybe weren't really being totally forthcoming. I never had that experience. Everybody was, as far as I know, from my personal experience, was always candid about what the situation was wherever they wanted to send you. There were a few of them, and Tony Poe was one of them, that if he thought the area was hot, if he was particularly concerned about it, he'd come along. He wanted to see first hand what was going on.

SM: Did he fly himself?

LF: No. He'd just come on the aircraft.

SM: How long did it take you to be checked out and fly your own missions? As I understand, they always attempted to try to limit one pilot per helicopter. Or is that not the case where you were?

LF: You flew one pilot per helicopter unless you were going into an area where there was a strong likelihood of getting shot and then they'd always put two pilots.

SM: How long until you were flying by yourself?

LF: I don't remember. Probably a couple of months. I know it was long enough to get an introduction to most of the areas and then a checkout. I really don't remember, Steve. I think it was probably a couple of months.

SM: What areas did you principally fly into? Was it all over Laos?

LF: All over Laos. The Hueys worked primarily out of the 20 Alternate at Long Chiang. Then they would work other places, too. But they primarily worked there and the H-34s were pretty much everywhere.

SM: Do you remember working with any customers in particular like Norm Gardner, Tiny, or Mule, or anybody else?

LF: Well, Tony, I worked for a lot. Also, it turned out, I rented a house from his wife back in Udorn later on.

SM: This is Tony Poe. Wasn't he chief of station?

LF: Say again.

SM: Wasn't he chief of station for Laos?

LF: No.

SM: Oh, he wasn't. What area was he in charge of?

LF: The Long Chiang area. 188 Alternate. I said Long Chiang. I'm not sure that's the right name.

SM: 118 Alternate.

LF: 118 Alternate I'm sure is correct. Zing Moung, or I don't know. 118 Alternate. It was from Ban Houi Sai north in east. He had the whole northwestern part of Laos up against the China border, up against the Burma border, and up against northern Thailand. Golden Triangle area. I worked for him quite a bit then there was a customer, I think his name was Burr Smith. I called him Mr. Clean.

SM: Oh yeah. I've seen pictures of him in Neal's book.

LF: He had a place, I think it was 69 Alternate that was south of 118 Alternate, south of the Mekong River. I did quite a bit of work for him and another customer at least at that same location, named John. I worked a lot with a guy named Frank Odham. Call

sign The Bag. He had sight 36 when I first went to work over there and then somewhere along the line he transferred over to that same area where Tony Poe is. He had Ban Houi Sai himself.

SM: You don't remember John's last name or his call sign?

LF: Woolery, but I don't remember his call sign.

SM: I'm sorry, his last name again?

LF: Woolery or Woolsey. I don't remember which. Woolery, I think.

SM: Have you maintained contact at all with any of the customers that you were flying?

LF: Frank Odham is dead. Tony, I've seen at a couple of reunions. Burr Smith is dead. Another guy named [Ban Moo], which is his call sign, his name I can't remember. He's dead. I did quite a bit of work for Kent Tessle in Savannakhet, but I don't know what has become of him. I guess the short answer is no, I haven't. I've run into a few of them at reunions and here and there.

SM: What was Ken's last name again?

LF: Tessle.

SM: Tessle. What are the more memorable experiences you had flying with these gentlemen? Anything that comes to mind readily?

LF: With them aboard or working for them?

SM: Working in support of them, flying out to their various camps. Whatever you were doing at the time. For instance, when was the first time that you were fired upon or were you ever fired upon?

LF: Oh yeah. Lots. I don't remember the first time.

SM: Do you remember any particular incident where you were shot at and where your aircraft was hit or were you ever shot down?

LF: I guess, two times, shot at many times. You got really, but not hit nearly as much as in Vietnam. That was part of just becoming familiar with the area. We didn't have the assault missions like we did in Vietnam. Although, we did have similar things from time to time, it wasn't a regular thing where you were going right into the enemy to engage them like we had in Vietnam. Very little of that. But even resupplying outposts and things like that didn't get hit nearly as often in Vietnam because you knew the area.

You knew where to stay away from. You knew the safe routes in and out and things like that. Two missions really kind of stand out in my mind. One was when Billy Hicks got killed. I wasn't in that plane. Bob Charters was flying with him. But I remember I was just in a position where I was looking right down at them when Billy got hit and he immediately lunged or fell or spilled onto the controls and the aircraft went into such an extreme attitude that thought they were going to auger in. Bob managed to get control of it somehow and get Billy back off the cyclic and bring him back into [Longfon] and then of course, maybe what makes it stick out in my mind, too, is the fact that then it took Billy a while to die. But anyway, I remember that and I remember a Medevac operation taking a couple wounded Thai soldiers working for Burr Smith and John. We had to wait all day to get into the area to get them and there were supposed to be T-28 cover planes coming to provide cover when we went in. It was getting late in the day and it was obviously going to get dark and they hadn't shown up, so we agreed—I was flying with Dave [Anchorbert]—we agreed to go on in and get them with just nobody there but the Raven to kind of look out after us. It was a tight zone, hard to get in there, they'd just chopped some trees down on the side of the bridge line, but we got them. As I come lifting out of there, the wind was coming from the other side pretty strongly and I didn't really have room to turn around and go out the way we come in which would have been downhill. I couldn't get…there wasn't enough room to get around in either direction without getting the tail rotors in the trees, so we pretty much had to come out straight over the ridge line there, and as we broke across the ridge line, the whole world kind of erupted right in front of us, willie pete. It turns out that the Raven had seen a couple guys that had been laying there waiting for us and they raised up and would have been probably no more than thirty yards with us heading right straight towards them, but the Raven was able to just almost instantaneously rock in on them and zap them with a couple willie petes. So I remember that, it looked like all of a sudden the world just kind of blew up in front of us, but he probably saved our bacon.

SM: What was he flying, do you remember?

LF: Oh, that high-wing bird dog plane that they flew.

SM: Ok, the O-1.

LF: Yeah.

SM: The area in which you were flying, was it typical of…was it like the rest of Laos in terms of the Karst Mountains and stuff like that?

LF: This mission I just described?

SM: MMhm.

LF: It was typically Laos, but not Karst right there. Just a series of ridge lines, kind of paralleled the Mekong.

SM: When you were in areas where there was heavy Karst, did you ever encounter anti-aircraft or even individual weapons fire from altitude? That is, you're flying in low, someone's up above you firing down at you from those positions.

LF: No, I don't remember that.

SM: When you were fired upon, what was typically the biggest threat? Was it typically just small arms fire, or did you guys get heavier…

LF: Well, the thing that frightened me most was going across the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I had been across a few times, but then I had a couple back-to-back missions across there, where we took flack, which frankly scared the crap out of me. You get as high as you can, you're just barely staggering along, maybe 13,000 feet, and all of a sudden these little black puffs start materializing around you and about that time you remember that you've got what's left of 1400 pounds of 115-145 av gas all encased in a magnesium aircraft. So I, after a couple of times of that, I refused to fly across the Ho Chi Minh Trail without a parachute, and I took some ribbing about that. But then we had one, I can't remember the name of the site, it's where the Mekong River turns from east to west and goes south, it ends up going on down a bit to Savannakhet and [Paxakett] Right up there at the corner there was a strip from which we used to fly a number of these across the Ho Chi Min trail. I came up from Savannakhet to join the planes that were up there and I insisted they bring me a parachute. I was flying with Billy Hicks that day, and he ribbed the shit out of me about my damn parachute and away we went. Well, on the way back, here came the flak 'kapoop, kapoop, kapoop' and everybody dove off in every direction and got the hell out of there and we got back and he said 'Fraser' he said, 'we gave you a lot of shit about that damn parachute,' he said 'I've got to admit, there was three or four minutes there when the only thing I could think of was how I could share that God damned parachute with you.'

SM: But you never had to use it?

LF: Never had to use it, and as far as I know…I don't think an H-34 ever got shot down by flak. But, it's still, to this day it strikes me as a dumb position to put an H-34 in.

SM: Would you typically fly at that high an altitude? You said 13,000…

LF: No, we flew as high as we could to minimize our chances of getting hit. They had some heavy stuff along the trail. And the customer would send us across a place where they didn't…to the best of their intelligence, that sort of thing was not going to happen, but it still happened once in a while.

SM: The Raven FACs, did you guys have much interaction with them?

LF: A fair amount. Not a lot of social interaction.

SM: Mostly in the air?

LF: Yeah.

SM: What would they bring in, typically. Was it close air support or what other fire power?

LF: Yeah, that's what they did. They directed the fighter bombers.

SM: And these are fighter bombers usually stationed out of Thailand, too?

LF: Yes.

SM: Air Force?

LF: Yes.

SM: How would you rate their assistance?

LF: Excellent, just excellent.

SM: Both the FACs and the fighter bombers?

LF: Yeah, well the FACs at least. The fast movers, frankly, in my opinion are not good helicopter close air support. They move so fast, they got to rock in from so high, not that they can't be accurate, but when somebody's up there at 15,000 feet looking at something that you're seeing at ground level, it's hard to explain to them where you're taking fire from and that sort of thing. And then, by the time they get there, it's…hopefully you've gotten the hell out already, and I've just never been very favorably impressed with…you know they're ok to prep a zone and things like that, but as far as close air support for helicopter assault work, the only fixed wing that did a particularly good job were the A-1s, and they did an excellent job. They could get right

down there with you, they could see things from the perspective that you were seeing them, they knew what you were talking about, they could stay around for a long time, they carried a lot of ordinance and they were really good helicopter close air support aircraft. The fast movers, I was not very impressed with.

SM: Did you ever receive close air support, especially A-1 support from Royal Laos Air Force?

LF: As far as I know, the Laos never had any A-1s. But, yes, I did receive A-1 support…well, no, received close air support from the Lao T-28s, and they did a pretty good job. They just had a couple small bombs or a few small bombs and 50-caliber. I don't remember if they carried any rockets or not. I don't remember them having rockets, but I guess there's no reason why they couldn't have. But they just couldn't carry very much armament. A-1s carried, I think, up to 12,000 pounds armed and their guns were 20 [mic/mic] like little hand grenades, almost. But I guess the T-28s probably were better than the fast movers as far as getting you in and out of a Medevac zone or something like that.

SM: Earlier you said that A-1 was the best fixed wing platform. Where there any rotary wing close air support platforms?

LF: Yeah. Any of your gun ships did it. They were the best of all.

SM: And you're talking about Huey gun ships, Cobras…

LF: Yeah, that sort of thing. But then again, we didn't have them in Laos. Toward the end, they put some mini-guns on some Hueys and so we did have, and there were Thai pilots that flew them, so we did have them toward the end of things, but most of the time I was there, there wasn't any, there were not any helicopter gun ships.

SM: I'm curious, did you ever hear of any Air America Cobra gun ships?

LF: Nope, never heard of any.

SM: I was also wondering, again this is just based on your experience, since Air America was a civilian run airline, and basically you were acting as a civilian run airline in that you had customers and what not…

LF: See in those days, nobody except management, knew who owned the company.

SM: Right, that the CIA was actually behind the whole thing.

LF: Yeah. There were rumors and suspicions in one thing another, but nobody knew that with any certainty. Which is kind of a sensible thing when you stop and think about it, and it worked out in everybody's interest probably. But it just…you know, you filled out your sheets and everything, you did work for a lot of different agencies and they got billed for it, and it was just like…you operated like a for-profit organization. And I suppose, in retrospect, in a sense it was a mechanism of getting money funneled into the operation from other agencies.

SM: Well, from the standpoint of being a civilian agency, being a civilian airline, you said that eventually they did put mini-guns on helicopters, were those Air America helicopters?

LF: No. They were Royal Thai and they might have been border patrol, but they were flown by Thais.

SM: Do you remember there ever being an armed Air America aircraft, fixed wing or helicopter?

LF: No. No, I don't remember one. There was a B-26 over there for a while, but I don't think it had guns on it. You see, our helicopters didn't even have door guns.

SM: Were there any rules about you carrying personal weapons.

LF: Yeah, there was a prohibition. Most of us carried some kind of a survival weapon. I had a little ultra light .22 caliber pistol that I carried because I didn't want to become a damn combatant if I was down out there, I wanted something I could kill a small animal or a snake or something with. I thought becoming a combatant would probably be nonproductive, but other people had different ideas. Some people carried heavier caliber guns. Some people didn't carry anything, I suppose. And then after a while the Air America allowed us to carry…I think we had training with Uzis and then they would issue an Uzi when you went out and take it back when you came back. I remember carrying it toward…later on in my tenure I remember having an M-16 that I carried, too. But I think that was just kind of my own and I don't think that was ever sanctioned by Air America.

SM: At what point did you become suspicious or did you just consider that perhaps the CIA was behind Air America? Or did that not happen until much later?

LF: I never knew that until it was published somewhere mid or late 70s.

SM: How about the fact that the primary personnel that you were supporting, that is, the customers, that they were actually CIA?

LF: Yeah, you kind of knew that, although it's kind of hard to sort who was who here, too. I guess in retrospect they were probably all CIA, but that was uncertain at the time. There was, well, there were DOD people mixed in there and a lot of USAID people. If you stop and think about it, you could kind of figure out who was mostly involved with military things and who wasn't but even the USAID customers would kind of, you know, they would kind of, they would coordinate the movement of ammunition and things like that, whatever was needed out there. I don't know if they actually had anything to do with getting it to the site and getting it on your helicopter or things like that, but it kind of seemed like they did.

SM: The USAID personnel that you flew in Laos, were they engaged in humanitarian missions as well?

LF: Yeah. Yeah, but you know you would have a load of rice and then a load of what we called hard rice going to the same place, maybe in successive loads, the same customer. If there were a contingent of soldiers at a village where USAID was sending rice to, you might have rice one load, you might have hard rice the second load, or even a combination and I never gave much thought to their being a differentiation in customers or agencies at the time. There certainly was, technically, but it didn't seem to me that there were any great pains to…you know, it wasn't like the USAID people couldn't also load some hard rice on, nor that the people turned out to be CIA people. They also sent rice rice and all of the other things that were incidental to just living as well as waging warfare.

SM: When you would make deliveries of rice and hard rice, would you land or would these be air drops?

LF: Mostly land. Yeah, I don't remember air drops….very, very seldom. There was one time, again out of 69 alternate, where I do remember they had, there's a technical name for it I can't remember, but when you pushed the load out there was a line that dangled down below it with some kind of a gizmo on the end of it. When that gizmo would touch the ground, then the chute would open. It's almost on the ground when the

chute opened, so you didn't get a lot drift. You could go over and you could be fairly accurate about where you put the stuff. But I only remember doing that a couple times.

SM: Would the line remain attached to the helicopter?

LF: Oh no. It hung below the load and when it touched the ground it somehow activated…the parachute was up there but it was like a streamer. It was just streaming along. The load was pretty much in a free fall with this streaming parachute up above it until that thing on the end of the line touched the ground and then the parachute would blossom open.

SM: Interesting. Yeah, so that would allow for accuracy.

LF: And there was a time or two where I remember just flying across a zone that was real hot and pushing the stuff out, but that was pretty low level. Usually, the vast, vast majority of the time you landed.

SM: Well, with a helicopter, that's appropriate. You know, doing air drops from a fixed wing is understandable at times, instead of airstrips. I'm curious about Medevac missions that you conducted. Did you have many, did you have to fly into hot LZs, stuff like that in Laos?

LF: Well a fair amount I guess. You know compared to a percentage it wouldn't have been very high. But we flew a lot. I mean, a typical year you would fly between 1,000 and 1,200 hours, so not a lot of that would be Medevac or that sort of thing. It was not uncommon.

SM: Any particular operations or missions stand in mind that come out?

LF: No, not other than the one I mentioned.

SM: How about downed pilots? Did you yourself ever pick up a pilot that had to bail or crash land?

LF: Yeah. Yeah. But I don't remember their names.

SM: But you remember the incidents?

LF: Yeah, I remember one off to the east of Vientiane along the river. We were doing a USAID supply mission over there and heard this T-28 bailing out. I think he was up near a site called Lima 212, that wasn't too far from where we were at, and we just put our passengers and stuff out at the pad we happened to be on and flew on up there and located the guy pretty quickly—saw his parachute—and hoisted him aboard and took him

back and we were back to work on our regular USAID mission probably in less than an hour.

SM: He wasn't injured or anything?

LF: No, he was fine.

SM: Any others that come to mind?

LF: A couple in the 20 Alternate Area. Matter of fact, I remember one we weren't able to get. We had our hoist down into the tree—the guy was hung in the tree—and the Jolly Greens showed up, so as soon as we could disentangle our hoist we moved off and let them come in and send a PJ down for the guy.

SM: The Jolly Green, was that an Air America Jolly Green or Air Force?

LF: Air Force. I don't remember ever referring to the Air America as Jolly Greens.

SM: What about Air America personnel. Well first of all, did you have to rescue a fellow Air America pilot and do you know if any Air America pilots were captured after being shot down?

LF: If any of them what?

SM: Were captured?

LF: Captured. That's a good question, I don't remember anybody being captured. There were a couple…you know Emmit Kay was captured. There was another guy whose name I can't remember earlier on that was captured. But I don't remember…Emmit was working for Continental and I don't remember who the other guy was working for. It might have been Air America, but I'm not sure. I don't know the answer to that, Steve.

SM: But Emmitt Kay was working for CAT?

LF: Yeah. You know one of the things…there were a few Air America pilots that were fanatics about rescue. There was hardly anybody that wouldn't come to your aid if you were down. But there were a few, Don Henthorne and Harold Miller, for instance, that were just fanatic about it. If there was a downed airman anywhere within range, where they could…well hell, even without. Harold Miller, I don't remember where he was working now, but when Bob [Karrin] and whoever was with him got shot down up in Luang Prabang area, Harold was working somewhere and he had to refuel en

route to get up there and it was still him that ended up pulling Bob out. And Don Henthorne was the same way. If there was somebody down, wherever he was, when he heard about it, he started heading that way.

SM: Was that not typical for most Air America pilots? Well, I think it was typical for the ones in the area to head that way, but there were a few that just, they were going to start coming wherever they were. Even…there might be ten other planes that were closer, they were still going to come. In that one instance, at least, with Bob Karen, it's a good thing that Hal did.

SM: Now, do you remember, or did you ever hear, of Project 404.

LF: No. I doesn't ring a bell.

SM: Do you know if you ever supported six Special Forces group in Laos?

LF: Well, there was a Special Forces operation north of 20 and 20 alternate. There was a big long neutralist site up there that I can't remember the name of, a big red clay airstrip that ran east and west. There was a Special Forces artillery site in conjunction with that back in the late '60s. There was a Special Forces officer named Bob [Molberg] was there in charge of that for a while. He later on retired from the Army and went to work for Continental. But anyway, Molberg was involved in Laos things all the time I was over there. At that time he was in the Special Forces and had an artillery unit at that site that I can't remember the name of. I think the artillery people were Thai, but I'm not sure of that. They were either Thai or Lao. We worked in and out of there quite a bit, and as a matter of fact, when it got overrun we extracted the people out of there. Molberg, at that time, jumped in a FAC plane and was directing the fixed wing close air support. That's the only Special Forces operation that I remember working with.

SM: Did you provide any support, that you recall, for LAM SON 719?

LF: For what?

SM: LAM SON 719? The South Vietnamese operation into Laos?

LF: No. Not me.

SM: Anything else that you would like to talk about with regard to your time with Air America in Laos? Flying out of Udorn?

LF: No, I can't think of anything. You know it all…I can't think of anything particularly.

SM: What was the best thing about flying with Air America from your personal perspective?

LF: The people. Customers and pilots both. It was a unique group of people. They took care of each other like I was just describing about coming to get you if you were in trouble and they also pretty much got along. Everybody tolerated everybody else's shortcomings. There were…it was kind of an unusual group of people, unusual attitudes and things. I suppose it takes a little bit of being unusual to just go there and stay there, but whether that's true or not, everybody got along pretty well even though there were a lot of that had personal and personality characteristics that probably if we'd back in the States we wouldn't have been particularly friendly with each other. Being there, doing that at that time, there somehow developed a kind of camaraderie, I guess, that's hard to describe, but it really it made us tolerant of each other.

SM: And how about the effects of being in Udorn on your family and having your family there?

LF: Well, that's hard to know. It was. I think it was kind of hard on the wives. For about fifty dollars a month you could have a maid and a washgirl and a cook and a garden and gardener. In that respect, it was an easy life for the women, but that was part of what made it tough for them, I think. They didn't have…it wasn't like living in the States. They didn't have to do a lick of housework if they didn't want to. The maids would take care of the children for that matter, if you wanted them to. But it was a kind of environment that…it wasn't like being in the States. I think it put more strain on the women than we realized at the time. No that they didn't make it through ok, I don't think the men really realized that it wasn't, it was probably harder on the women than the men realized at the time.

SM: What was your typical time out in the field, time back at home situation? When you left in the morning, was it just for the day or was it for a week, two weeks.

LF: A week. You'd usually be out a week, back a week, out a week, back a week, something like that. And then, most months…well, I shouldn't say back a week, because they would try and arrange your time so you'd be back a few days and then out,

but then sometime in each month if they could, they'd give you one entire week back at home. They called it SDOs, scheduled days off. So you'd have time if you wanted to. You could go to Bangkok or you could do something. But usually you'd go up country for a week or ten days and come back for a few, and then most months somewhere during the month you'd get one entire week off. And there was a time where they had a kind of a rotation system so once or twice a year you would likely get back to back SDOs—you'd get the last week of one month and the first week of the next month, which would give you an opportunity to go to Australia or something if you wanted. You could take a little bit of leave time along with an SDO. That was another nice thing about Air America, was the opportunity to travel. CAT had formed a legitimate airline, part 121 airline, and as a part of the same company complex we all got airline discounts on travel and hotel rooms and that sort of thing. So my family and I we spent a couple weeks in New Zealand, spent ten days or so in Singapore, had several week-long trips to Hong Kong and innumerable weeks in Bangkok, that sort of thing. People would go to Changmai for a week. We went to, golly I can't remember the name of—Malaysia's capital—we spent some time there. That was another nice thing about the time with Air America was the opportunity to travel and see places.

SM: Well, something I forgot to ask in terms of operational support you provided. Did you ever fly prisoners back from base camps? That is captured Pathet Lao, captured NVA? That customers and their Lao forces had captured?

LF: I don't remember. I remember transporting refugees a lot, but I don't remember carrying prisoners. It could have happened. It almost certainly happened with some of us, but I don't remember personally doing that.

SM: The refugee movements or resettlements. Were these again all over the country or isolated to certain areas?

LF: Well, you know, we called them Mao then, I guess even then they were more properly Hmong, but Mao is what we called them. We certainly didn't regard it as anything but a good term in those days. But anyway, they'd have their families with them out there then there were villages out there. I guess they didn't always have their families out at the outpost, but sometimes they did. And when they were about to be overrun we would extract them—both villages and outposts, military outposts.

SM: Where would you take them typically?

LF: We'd typically take them to some bigger airfield, and then as I recall we would then often, you know they'd set up a camp for them there, and then we'd take them back out to their own village if we could eventually. If not, then someplace where they could live.

SM: Now did they engage in subsistence farming?

LF: Yeah. They did slash and burn, I think was the term. There was a smoky season. You had the rainy season and the smoky season. During the smoky season was when they were cutting down the jungle and burning it. I mean, it was smoky. It was as bad as you've ever seen L.A. You couldn't see 200 yards a lot of the time. But that was because they'd cut down the jungle and burn it and that's where they'd plant their crops.

SM: And then they would move on.

LF: Yeah, I don't know how long they'd stay in any one spot, but there was a lot of burning every year.

SM: Did there ever seem to be any hesitance or reluctance on the part of the Hmong to move, to have to be relocated?

LF: Well not that I was aware of. I'm sure that they were unhappy about having to leave what they would regard as home, but it had kind of become a way of life. They were the only thing really out there holding on and when it got to the point where they couldn't hold on, they'd move, regroup and start over.

SM: What about entertainment, besides the bar scenes? What was available and what would you do typically just to relax with your family in Udorn when you weren't traveling?

LF: There were things on the base. The base had movies, learned to play golf—had a little sort of a golf course there in Udorn—sight seeing. God, this ought to be an easy question to answer! What did we do?

SM: Did you have T.V., radio?

LF: Well, they eventually put T.V. on the base, but it was designed so that it…it was not intended to be available to civilians, but you could get a directional antennae. Some people were able to get it, sort of. There was Lao T.V. which you could get but

couldn't understand, and radio. Did a lot of socializing. You know, just talking and visiting family.

SM: Anybody you became particularly close with?

LF: Well, it was kind of a community. You know there were…golly I don't know, there were probably no more than thirty pilots when I got there and probably an equal number of flight mechs and a little bigger maintenance community. But particularly among the pilots…there was come to think of it, everybody had a group that they were more a part of than the whole group. But the whole group was reasonably familial, too. Out at the Air America compound they had a pool. People spent a lot of time out there. They had movies and up country you'd have movies in the evenings quite a bit, too, at the hostels they'd call them, where we stayed.

SM: Now when you stayed up country overnight, would you guys get hit much in terms of harassing fire, mortars, that kind of stuff?

LF: Very seldomly. If the enemy were getting that close, we'd go back to a different location.

SM: With regard to radio, do you recall anything particular about it? Was it Armed Forces Radio that was heard kind of throughout Vietnam and Southeast Asia?

LF: Well. Yeah. You could get things like Hanoi somebody, Hanoi Jane is the only thing comes to mind.

SM: Oh, radio Hanoi.

LF: Radio Hanoi, yeah.

SM: You did listen to that?

LF: Yeah

SM: What did you think of it?

LF: Oh it was amusing.

SM: Do you remember anything in particular about it?

LF: No.

SM: Did you ever hear about a broadcast called 'Radio Firstermer' around '70, '71?

LF: Nope.

SM: OK. You mentioned maintenance before. Well actually a clarification before I get into maintenance. You said thirty pilots. Thirty H-34 pilots?

LF: Yeah.

SM: What was the contingent in general, the Air America contingent do you think, while you were there?

LF: I don't know. I suppose…Americans?

SM: MmHmm.

LF: I suppose a couple hundred. That's just a guess, and then more than that with Thai and Chinese.

SM: How much in Udorn, where you were flying in and out of in Udorn, I guess that's the Air American compound, where there many foreign national civilians in there? Or was it pretty restricted in terms of access?

LF: In the compound?

SM: Yeah.

LF: Oh yeah. There were a lot. There was…things began in China and Taipei and then those employees, some of them would come on to help get the next site set up and stay there.

SM: Not employees. I mean non-employee civilians.

LF: Non-employees, very few. It was rare to even have round eye Air Force guys there.

SM: Was it a gated, secured facility? Where you only could come in at a certain location and there was a guard there.

LF: Yes, as I recall.

SM: And how was that different say compared to flying out of Vientiane?

LF: Vientiane was gated, too, even though it was part of [Watai] airport there, it was a segregated part. You'd have to go by a gate guard to get in there. Now if you were a Caucasian, they'd probably just wave you right in. But if not, you'd probably have to explain what you're doing there.

SM: In part, the reason I ask is, I hate to get back to this movie, but one of the things that struck me in the movie *Air America*, there seemed to be an awful lot of civilians intermingling among, within the compounds, among the aircraft, Buddhist

monks and all kinds of people. One of the more silly looking scenarios from that movie is this Buddhist monk blessing the aircraft for a pilot. Did that kind of stuff happen to your knowledge?

LF: No, not that I know of, but I'll tell you one story. The Laos had a helicopter in Luang Prabang that they'd had massive problems with. It had all kinds of vibrations, just couldn't seem to get rid of it. Every time they'd take it out it would shake worse. Tom Moore who was the, at this time, was the lead H-34 test pilot there at Udorn, got sent up there to see how he could contribute. He said it was just the most god awful thing. You'd lift off and you're afraid it's going to shake itself apart in midair. It got better instead of worse. They did everything they could think of. In the meantime, the Laos started talking about bad Pi – Pi is spirits, bad spirits. They wanted to have, I guess, what you'd call an exorcist. Of course, the Americans just laughed at them and just continued down the road of science and technology. But anyway, Tom had been up there a few days now and things had gone from bad to worse and everybody's at their wit's end. The Laos were getting, maybe a little bit insistent about getting somebody in here to take care of the Pi. So finally, they threw their hands up, 'What can it hurt. Go ahead.' So they brought monks in and they chanted and clanged their thing and made smoke or whatever they do and blessed it and then just to show them how silly this all was Tom said he cranked it up and lifted off and it flew like a new airplane.

SM: Interesting.

LF: He said it was just smooth as the day it came off the factory.

SM: Any other similar examples?

LF: No. That's the only time I ever heard of anything. That wasn't an Air America aircraft.

SM: It was not?

LF: It was a Lao aircraft. Tom from Air America had come in to help them out, but everybody was … We just couldn't figure out why they couldn't fix it.

SM: Did you hear this from Tom Moore yourself?

LF: Yeah.

SM: Okay, that's pretty fascinating.

LF: Yeah, it is.

SM: That really kind of answers my question. It's a rare occurrence with the monk interaction with aircraft.

LF: Yeah. As far as I know, it never happened with Air America, but it did happen with one H-34. That doesn't mean it didn't happen, either. I don't think, if somebody wanted to bless an aircraft, I don't think Air America would have objected to it.

SM: You mentioned earlier that there was a lot of, amongst the Air America personnel themselves, there was a good comradery, good morale, and accepting mentality. Working with the people, you accept them for who they are. Was that also evident in terms of the American-Lao, American-Thai relationships that you witnessed?

LF: Pretty much. But for whatever reason, the Americans kind of associated with the Americans, socialized with the Americans. Now, there were individuals that would have Thai friends and be acquainted with Thai families and things like that. But other than the employees, in my impression, there wasn't that much socialization even between the Americans and the Thai employees. For whatever reason, Americans socialized with Americans. Not that they didn't get along with the locals or anything, there just didn't seem to be much social interaction taking place. Now, the guys that were married to Thais, I'm probably wrong about that. They probably associated with their wives families quite a bit, but I just wasn't a part of that and I didn't see that happening.

SM: What about amongst the different groups of workers within Air America? How much social interaction was there say, between pilots and mechanics or maintenance personnel?

LF: A fair amount among air crews, pilots and flight mechanics. Not a lot beyond that. Well, I shouldn't say that. When we lived in the compound with one of the maintenance supervisors and his wife, there was … There weren't that many American maintenance people. Most of the people who actually twisted the wrenches were Thai, Chinese, and a few Filipinos. The Americans were mostly supervisory. There was quite a bit of socialization that went on then.

SM: I was curious also about the organizational nature of the Air America flight line compared to the military. Of course, the military, you have the pilot, co-pilot, crew

chief, and gunner on most helicopters, but in the Air America organization, all you had was the pilot, is that correct? You didn't even have a crew chief?

LF: We had a flight mechanic.

SM: A flight mechanic but not a crew chief.

LF: Well, the same thing. The guy that would have been called crew chief in the Marine Corps was flight mechanic in Air America.

SM: Would the flight mechanic typically fly with you in all of your operations?

LF: Yes. Always.

SM: Always. Okay.

LF: It would be unusual to have a flight without a flight mechanic. I can see how that was misunderstood. What we called a crew chief in the Marine Corps was a flight mechanic in Air America. Always with you.

SM: These flight mechanics were typically Asian, Pacific Asian?

LF: Well, there were a lot of Air American flight mechanics, too. There were Filipino flight mechanics; there was a few Thai flight mechanics, not very many.

SM: Well, the American Air America flight mechanics, were they also typically prior military?

LF: Yes.

SM: Do you remember anybody in particular that you flew with as a flight mechanic?

LF: Well, I remember a lot of them.

SM: By name?

LF: Nobody really stands out. I'd see them at these reunions, Gary Gents and Hal Augustine and a number of them. Now, the Filipinos like Joe Gacalioth, I haven't seen or heard of any of those guys since I came back. I don't know what became of them. But, the Americans, there's a lot of flight mechanics that show up at the reunions.

SM: Let's see. In terms of the mechanics and the maintenance that you guys had a support there, what was your general impression of Air America maintenance?

LF: Excellent. Excellent. It was just, no problems.

SM: How did it compare to Marine Corps maintenance?

LF: Very favorably. I don't mean considerably better. Marine Corps maintenance was good, too, but it was on a par.

SM: At least on par if not better or just on par?

LF: Yeah. I think so. Now and then there would be quirky things that would come up. We had complaints about maintenance, but in retrospect, it was darn good.

SM: When you say complaints, what do you mean?

LF: Well, my tenure with Air America ended with a situation that I'm not sure but what there was an engine problem. I ended up plowing through some trees and getting myself jammed up with Air America. I really don't know what happened, but it felt to me like we just lost power and then when we looked at the maintenance records, there were other idiosyncrasies that happened that kind of supported that hypothesis. Certainly nothing resulted from negligence or anything like that. They did good work, they test flew the aircraft. Pilots always complain about things. There's always some area that warrants complaint, but they work on it and make it better. You'll have a time when it seems like every aircraft you're flying has a certain kind of vibration. You whine about it, write it up, and they look at it, do what they can, and they finally find something that takes care of it. That sort of thing.

SM: Did you ever find yourselves short of anything? One of the complaints that I've heard from some military people is that at times it was difficult to get your hands on certain things. Did you ever encounter that as an Air America pilot?

LF: Not that I know of. The maintenance people could answer that question better. I was not aware of anything. Sometimes you would have an aircraft that would be up country for a few days awaiting a part or something. That was unusual. Usually, you went down, they got a part up there to you on whatever next flight coming that way was. It was unusual to have to wait.

SM: How about in terms of just your everyday living? Did you guys primarily buy on the economy or did you have the Base Exchange or how did that work?

LF: When we first got there, of course, it was totally on the economy. About the time I got there, Air America quickly set up a little store, but they didn't have much. What they did have was useful. But you could find just about everything you needed on the economy. You might not find the brand of catsup that you wanted, but you would find

catsup and things like that. It wasn't too long until the military had a big BX and commissary and stuff. It took a while before we had privileges in those things, but we eventually did. Of course, every little bit helped, but in the meantime, particularly, if you got a maid that knew what she was doing, she could get it. Our maid, for instance, could cook American style food. She would find everything she needed out on the economy. I don't know how she did it, but she was a good cook and she cooked American style food. Everything she cooked, she got on the economy. Later on when we were able to get a fair amount of stuff from military for instance, she'd ask us to pick up a bottle of something or a certain kind of spice or something that was hard for her to get. You could live pretty comfortably on the economy.

SM: You left Air America in 1973. This was after your accident. How long after you accident was that?

LF: A few months. I don't remember. I'm not sure it rose to the level of an accident, either. It was a mishap. That was probably late '72. Then, I left in January '73.

SM: You went from there to work for Arizona helicopter. Is that correct/

LF: Yeah. That's right. First, I went to Bangkok. I was going to start an ag operation down there with some people. Then there was the Coup. The guy that my group had partnered with got thrown of the country as part of the Coup that occurred that spring. Hell, that might have been late '72. I don't remember. That quickly became impossible and about the same time I learned that Arizona Helicopters was looking for a pilot and I called them and they hired me. So, I went back up to Vientiane and worked for Arizona. Jack Knotts came to work for Arizona shortly thereafter. That fall, Arizona lost the contract with Bird Air and since Jack and I, Arizona had no expense bringing us there, they had no quarrel with us just staying and going to work for Bird. That's what we did.

SM: Was there anything else you wanted to discuss regarding your time with Air America?

LF: I can't think of anything, Steve. You'd think that I could. It was maybe the most productive time of my life and right in the prime of my life. It was interesting and I value having had the experience, but I just can't think of any other specifics that you might be interested in.

SM: When you left you felt like you had accomplished something?

LF: Yeah.

SM: When you went to work temporarily for Arizona and then for Bird Air, what were the most important things you took away from your Air America experience that you brought with you to those positions?

LF: Local knowledge. Knowledge of the country. They had just got there. Well, Arizona had been there a while at that point, so most of their pilots didn't have the sight knowledge that I had. I went to work for them already knowing the country very well.

SM: Well, the time that you did fly for Arizona, what was your primary mission with them?

LF: USAID.

SM: USAID.

LF: Almost exclusively, maybe exclusively. Except we would break off and do things like Medevac or downed airmen or something like that. I remember Ted Cash and – the other guy's name doesn't come into my mind- they had crashed up north of site 20, rolled down the hill up there. Ted got a broken neck out of it. The other guys was in pretty good shape, but I went in and picked him up and somebody had already taken Ted. I can't remember why they didn't take him, too. But they didn't. I went in and picked him up and took him back to 20 Alternate. Other than things like that, I don't think we ever did anything that wasn't directly for the USAID.

SM: What about inadvertent or complimentary support for ground operations in Laos, or that was it?

LF: USAID was it.

SM: Did you get some of the briefings about enemy concentrations, particular areas and things like that?

LF: Yeah. You could get extensive briefings if you wanted. The areas that we worked in, we flew over some pretty bad areas to get to our work areas sometimes, but the work we were doing involved significantly less enemy hazard than Air America's missions did.

SM: Did these USAID missions include hard rice drops as well?

LF: I don't think so. I don't remember ever carrying hard rice when I was working for Bird Air or Arizona Helicopters. It could have happened. There again, it wouldn't have raised my eyebrows at all if we were taking something out to wherever we were going and they were putting some ammunition aboard. It just wouldn't have seemed out of place. I don't remember that ever happening. We transported lots of rice, lots of rice and even brought rice in from harvest. They'd load it up and bag it and did a fair amount of swing load work bringing rice back into 272.

SM: Was there any difference between flying for Arizona Helicopter and Bird Air except the obvious?

LF: No. They were different companies and had different corporate personalities, but the mission was the same.

SM: How did it compare to flying with Air America?

LF: It was alright. It was pretty enjoyable. They didn't pay as much as Air America did but it was enough to live on. It was a far more relaxed kind of flying. The work Air America did had gotten progressively more and more hazardous. The same hazard had always been there, just a higher percentage of the missions they were doing involved the hazard. Meanwhile, the stuff that we were doing with Bird Air and Arizona Helicopter was oriented towards things that didn't involve a lot of that.

SM: Did you get shot at much flying for Arizona and Bird Air?

LF: Not much at all.

SM: You never got shot down?

LF: No.

SM: Working for them, were you still involved with any emergency type operations, downed pilots and stuff like that?

LF: If there was a downed pilot or something like that, you'd just go do it. As far as being called out to do a Medevac of Lao or Thai military personnel, I'm not aware of that ever happening.

SM: To your knowledge, these were truly civilian run contractors?

LF: As far as I know. They were both companies that had other legitimate things. Arizona Helicopters had a sizeable operation out of Scottsdale, Arizona. They flew in other parts of the world. They went right on down and went to work. Took the planes

when they lost the contract, they went down to Indonesia or somewhere down there and went right to work on oil contracts.

SM: Is there anything else that you recall or would like to talk about regarding your time with Arizona and Bird Air?

LF: I can't think of anything.

SM: Did the situation stay the same for your family or they moved with you to Vien Chiang at that point?

LF: Yeah. We went to Bangkok when we thought we were going to be starting that ag spray operation. Then I went to Vientiane. I lived in the Arizona Hostel up there for at least a couple of months. My family stayed in Bangkok and then they came up and joined me. We rented a house there at Vientiane. The kids start school at the American School.

SM: Were you able at all to maintain with Air America, you Air America friends?

LF: Oh yeah. Most of the people that I had been close to were then in Udorn and I was at Vientiane. In the meantime, some of the Udorn people were moving and going to Saigon. They were winding down the things in Laos. I already knew a lot of the people up in Vientiane. It was just kind of like moving from Jacksonville to St. Augustine.

SM: You mentioned that Jack Knotts had joined you in changing over, did other Air America pilots follow suit?

LF: No. The chief pilot for Bird Air was a guy named Bobby Nunez and he had been Air America back before. But that was before I came to work for Air America. I don’t remember him. He’s the only one that I can remember up there other than Jack and I.

SM: Anything else you want to talk about in regard to Arizona and Bird?

LF: No. I can't think of anything. There again, they had decent operations in maintenance and stuff.

SM: You stopped flying for them in ’74, is that right?

LF: That’s right.

SM: Where did you go from there?

LF: I just came back to the States.

SM: I had put down something about Continental Air Services. Did you do anything with them at all?

LF: No.

SM: You came back to the States. Well, when you came back to the States, what were things like? Where did you come into, where did you fly into?

LF: I came in, we just visited our relatives for a little while and then we ended up in Prescott, Arizona. I started a little business there and after about a year I decided to go back to school. I had not finished my bachelor's degree at that point. I'd had a couple of years of college, well about three, actually. I decided to go back to school with the objective of going to law school and then that's what I did. I finished my bachelor's degree there at Arizona and went on to the University of Kansas to go to law school.

SM: Did you practice law after that?

LF: No. Between my second and third year, I took a summer job with the Forest Service, flying for the Forest Service. They invited me to come on full time, so I did that. I flew for them for about five years and worked for them in different capacities and then transferred to the Customs Service. That's where I retired from.

SM: Did you fly for Customs?

LF: Yeah.

SM: Helicopter and rotary wing platforms?

LF: Yeah. Black Hawk was my primary aircraft. I flew fixed wing aircraft, too. Black Hawk's what I flew mostly.

SM: What was that transition like for you from conventional rotary wing? The Black Hawk is highly computerized, isn't it?

LF: Yeah. It's an easy aircraft to fly. It's a very complicated aircraft and they sent us to Fort Rucker for training. We got all the Army training. But it's a delightful helicopter to fly. Fast, strong. It's the only helicopter I've ever flown that had all the power I wanted. Heavy, but maneuverable. It feels like a Jet Ranger or a Goose 500 or something the way you could snap it around.

SM: I'm curious, what did you think? When you came back shortly thereafter, of course, was the December '74 Christmas bombing, January '74. No, I'm sorry that happened before. December '72 Christmas bombing, the Peace Accords in '73 and then,

of course, the fall of Saigon in ’75. You were still in Laos during some of that, but when you came home, of course, was when the fall occurred. What did you think about those events as they unfolded?

LF: I don’t remember what I thought. I don’t know the answer to that, Steve. I just don’t remember. I felt kind of empty, I guess, that the war ended that way. But other than that, I don’t think I had any particular emotions.

SM: Let me think. What were the most important things you were able to take away from your experience in Southeast Asia?

LF: I don’t know. I don’t think I gained any profound insights. I guess, as one of the philosophical things that that whole experience left me with was the feeling that if you’re going to fight a war, it’s better to try and limit that. I guess there’s circumstances where there’s a valid tactical purpose not intended to limit. It’s hard on the people that have to fight it that way.

SM: Something I forgot to ask. When you were in Air America and Arizona and Bird Air, what kind of retirement system do they have set up for you guys? Do they have anything?

LF: Yeah, but it didn’t amount to very much. When I left Air America, I got whatever was in my retirement fund. I don’t remember what it was, but it wasn’t anything to speak of. I was putting money away, hopefully investing it as many of us did. We were kind of gullible, a lot of us. There were a lot of investment opportunities that came through there that turned out to be fly by night and we bought shares in Mexican Mercury Mines and whiz bang technology things and things like that. Most of us still managed to save some money. That’s one of the thing that seemed attractive to Air America, seemed attractive about Air America to me. When I went over there, I had come from a family that never had any money and this seemed like an unusual opportunity for somebody my age, to have the opportunity to actually put some money aside. That’s one of the things that enthused me about going to work for Air America.

SM: Is there anything else you would like to talk about with regard to your experience overall?

LF: I can't think of anything, Steve. There’s probably a lot of things, but I’m not quick-witted enough to remember what they ought to be.

SM: Well, let me go ahead and end this officially. Thank you very much. This will end the interview with Larry Fraser.