The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Robert Eaton
Conducted by Steve Maxner
December 10, 2001
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel Lyon

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

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Robert Eaton on the 10th of December, the year 2001 at approximately 11:20 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas. If you would, Mr. Eaton, tell us exactly where you are?

Robert Eaton: I am in Brazil, Indiana.

SM: Sir, why don't we start by discussing your early life and if you would, tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up?

RE: I was born in Burlington, Iowa but lived my entire life in Indiana in the Brazil area, moving here like a couple of weeks after my birth. I spent my entire youth here until I went in the Army in Brazil.

SM: What was it like growing up there?

RE: It was great; it is too bad kids don't have an opportunity to grow up as we did here. It was a wonderful childhood and had the free run of the land. There was very little trouble to get into, so we were quite free and easy.

SM: What did your parents do?

RE: My stepfather was a food broker. My natural father died when I was three years old. My mother remarried. My dad was a food broker and raised my brothers and sisters, five of us all together.

SM: Wow. What do you remember most about your real father?

RE: Very little because I was three when he died, so I have only sort of snapshots in my mind. I really didn't…know him in a sense that I can remember.

SM: How well did you get along with your brothers and sisters, and where were you within the five?

RE: I am the oldest son. I have an older sister. There were actually two older half sisters with whom I was not raised because they were grown by the time I was born. My father was actually a World War I veteran, so it puts me in rather an unusual group there, too.

SM: And what did you enjoy most about growing up there near Brazil, Indiana?

RE: Just having the freedom and the friends and the sort of unrestricted lifestyle because there wasn't much to get into here that could cause a problem. I lived out in the country for my first 12 years, just hanging around on the farm. Although we were not farmers, most of my friends were so that's where we spent a lot of our time, getting into the things that farm kids get into.

SM: Did you learn to hunt?

RE: I've hunted, but I'm the world's worst hunter and fisherman, so no, I wouldn't consider myself a hunter.

SM: Were you able to use firearms as you were growing up?

RE: Oh yeah. I had a shotgun from relatively early on that was given to me, willed to me, actually, by an uncle. So, we used to squirrel and rabbit hunt and small stuff like that. I've never been deer hunting in my life. I maybe have caught three fish in my life; I'm the world's worst fisherman. But, I don't mind going on the riverbank and drinking beer and watching the other guys catch them.

SM: What did you enjoy most about school?

RE: The sports probably. I was not a particularly good student, but I did participate in football, wrestling, and track, and enjoyed them very much.

SM: Was there any subject that you enjoyed in particular?

RE: English probably was my best subject, and most difficult was probably chemistry.

SM: When did you graduate from high school?

RE: In the spring of '65.

SM: Well the spring of ’65, the United States had really just started sending ground forces into Vietnam. Had you heard of Vietnam at all as you were growing up?

RE: I don’t recall being aware of Vietnam at that time. Perhaps I was. I went on to college in that fall and certainly became aware quickly in college that there was a war going on. But, I have no specific memory of it in high school.

SM: When you turned 18, do you remember registering for Selective Service?

RE: Yes, I do.

SM: Were you at all concerned about the draft?

RE: It was always there but I really didn’t care one way or the other anyway. I was prepared to go and it wasn’t something I worried about.

SM: Did you go to school on a sports scholarship of some kind?

RE: No, I just went to school and I was only there a year and a half before leaving somewhat under duress and then joined the Army shortly after that.

SM: Where did you go to college?

RE: The Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

SM: What were you majoring in?

RE: Oh, I was trying to major in English but as I said, I only got a year and a half under my belt and I wasn’t doing very well, so I wouldn’t call it a major.

SM: That year and a half that you were there, did you notice too much…did you notice any kind of change in the atmosphere on campus concerning either Vietnam, American policies, or things like that?

RE: No, it didn’t seem to be, at least among the people that I knew; it didn’t seem to be particularly a politicized campus. I don’t think they ever had the kinds of problems that occurred on other campus perhaps a year or two later. There was some concern of course among people that if I don’t stay in college, I’ll be subject to the draft. In fact, I sort of had mixed feelings about that anyway because a lot of the kids that I grew up with had already gone in or been drafted and I felt just a little bit guilty for not being in the military, frankly.

SM: Did you talk at all with your friends, other guy friends, about that feeling you had about not being in the military?

RE: Oh perhaps. I have no specific recollection. It probably came up at one time or another. But, it wasn't really that big of a deal to me one way or another. We didn't spend a lot of time dwelling on that. As I say, it was not a particularly political situation.

SM: Okay, were political issues discussed much in your family, at dinner conversation and that kind of stuff, just in general what was going on in the world, what was going on in the US?

RE: Generally it was but I don't recall anything specific to Vietnam prior to my going in until I got ready to join and then my dad tried to convince me the Army wasn't the way to go having been in the infantry himself in World War II.

SM: But how about the Cold War? I realize that Vietnam itself specifically was not discussed too much.

RE: I was aware of the bomb shelter business and all that, but I never felt I had a nuclear cloud hanging over my head. Although, I do remember Kennedy giving a speech reference to Laos which actually seemed initially to be the hot potato before Vietnam as I recall. That must have been very early '60s. He was in, what, from '61 to '63 so it had to be during that period.

SM: What made you decide Army when you were getting out of college and had to decide if you were going to go in voluntarily or wait to be drafted? What did you do?

RE: I had heard somewhat through the grapevine that you could get training to fly helicopters in the Army and it was the only branch of the service that I was aware of anyway at the time that would send you to flight school without a college degree. It was process of elimination. It was pretty easy to make that decision. I was never an aviation kid. I had no interest in aviation until I found myself in the situation where I had to make some decision, and then that sounded rather appealing so I decided to go that route.

SM: When you went to the Army recruiters about this, did they try to sway you to do anything else or were they willing to accept you and try to get you into aviation?

RE: No, they were very supportive of what I wanted to do and in fact the recruiter was helpful. He asked me if I knew anything about helicopters and I said, "No, nothing." He said, "Well, before you go take the initial test at least look it up in the encyclopedia so you have an idea of why they fly," and I did that and in fact it was

helpful because there were some questions on the test that I'd only learned the night before.

SM: Oh, okay. When you were going into the Army perhaps just before you left, what did you think was going on in Southeast Asia? What was the United States doing? What were we trying to accomplish?

RE: Of course by that time I knew there was a war going on, and the assumption was we wouldn't be in a war if it wasn't justified. Basically the line which was standard at the time was we were going over to save the Vietnamese from communism.

SM: What was it like going into the Army? If you would, describe your first experience. Where did you go?

RE: I went to Fort Polk which I think at the time was where everybody slated for the flight school was going, at least in the warrant officer program. So that's where I went initially. That was in January of '68; coldest place I've ever been in the winter and the hottest place in the summer. Basic training was essentially uneventful, I got through that without a problem because I had a sense of humor and I'd been in sports environments and that kind of thing so there was really nothing they could do to me to bother me. I was in good physical shape so I could handle that part of it. I met some interesting folks and basically it was a good time. After basic training there was a little snafu with my paperwork, so I didn't go directly to flight school. I was sent to AIT to learn wheeled vehicle mechanics. I had finished that and was home on leave. They'd been trying to get the paperwork straightened out unsuccessfully, and I thought, "Well, that's the end of it. I'll just do my two years in the Army and get out," and I came home on leave. I was on orders to Korea as a mechanic and a lady from Fort Polk, a civilian woman called me. She worked in personnel, and she asked if I was still interested in flight school and I said, "Yes," and she said, "The Spec 5 that was handling your paperwork was just discharged and we were cleaning out his drawers and we found all your approved paperwork that he just threw in the drawer somewhere," and she said, "If you want to go, if you'll get your tail down to Fort Polk early next week, I'll cut new orders for you." So, I drove to Fort Polk. Actually, my sister drove me down. I went to her office at Fort Polk and she cut me new orders and I went from there straight to flight school.

SM: What did your parents think about you going aviation?

RE: I don't remember anything specific involving aviation. My dad didn't want to see me go in the military in the first place. He didn't want to see me go to war. He said, "If you insist on doing that, go in the Navy or the Air Force. At least you'll sleep in a clean bed and get three good meals a day." Of course I thought, "Well gee whiz, this is the new Army. This is 20 years after you were in, Dad. What do you know?" I realize now he knew more than I thought he did!

SM: Was that really his primary objection? Did he have any other objections to you going in the Army?

RE: No, nothing philosophical.

SM: I didn't know if it was other opportunities perhaps as well.

RE: He wanted me to go back to school and I really didn't want to do that because I had already determined that I was wasting my time and his money, so I didn't think that was the answer.

SM: So what was it like? In terms of the initial training you went through, basic training in particular, what was the greatest challenge you faced?

RE: Jeez, I didn't find it very challenging, frankly. I suppose actually that came more in flight school, the challenges, and the biggest challenge in flight school was learning time management, really, and I guess to a degree in basic training. I already knew…I mean, I didn't know the military things but basic training is basically just whipping you into shape and teaching you a little discipline and I had no problem with that. I was already pretty well squared away on that. I knew how to shine shoes. That served me very well. They figured if you could shine shoes and you looked sharp on Saturday morning, you're okay, and run a mile in six minutes and all that.

SM: What about mechanics school?

RE: I have little recollection of that except the people that I met. That was sort of classroom stuff really, classroom and then some hands-on. It was not particularly military in that kind of a sense. We didn't go on bivouac and all that stuff.

SM: How detailed was the training? What level would you say? Did you go all the way down to taking apart and putting back together engines and transmissions, or was it more…

RE: No, it was field maintenance. It was basically just keep them running, what the Army refers to as organizational level maintenance. The MOS was a –20 MOS which infers organizational level, at least that was my understanding at the time, so it was basically just keeping them running. We didn't overhaul gear boxes and that kind of thing.

SM: So fluids, filters, just basic…

RE: Troubleshooting engine problems, that kind of thing, but it was all pretty easy stuff.

SM: Okay. Well, what happened when you got to flight training school? Where did you go again? Was it Fort Wolters?

RE: It was at Fort Wolters, yeah.

SM: What was that like?

RE: Well of course it was all an unknown to me. The first week or two we were held in sort of just a holding situation before we were actually assigned to a flight and began training. Most of that time was just spent with Army Mickey Mouse harassment, trying to get those who weren't going to make it to quit before they ever got started, and there were some that left. So, there was a lot of what's in the Army known as chicken shit. But, that was no problem. I could handle that stuff. I had a sense of humor. It really didn't bother me any.

SM: What was the…in terms of the academics or the actual flying, what was the most challenging aspect of flight training?

RE: As I said before, the most challenging part of the whole thing really I thought was learning time management because I know in the beginning you just felt overwhelmed, "This is not possible to do all that they want us to do in the time allotted," and so you'd end up late at night with a flashlight hiding under your covers trying to read something or shining your shoes by the light of a flashlight or whatever. Of course they would do things to try to make life difficult for you. But, I realized that there really was a method to their madness. The Army does know something about training people, and I found by the time it was over, or not even half way into it, that you could do all the same tasks assigned that you thought were an impossibility and then have time left over to goof

off, once you got yourself organized, and that was what they were trying to teach you. It worked.

SM: What were you trained on initially?

RE: Bell 47 is the civilian designation, OH-13.

SM: What was the hardest part about learning to fly that thing?

RE: Oh, learning to hover I suppose, that was the big initial hurdle, and once you got through that then basically everything kind of fell into place. I didn't have…I really had no difficulty with the flying in flight school. I was blessed to have had wonderful instructors all the way through and many people did not. I was just very, very lucky.

SM: What was the washout rate for your class, do you remember?

RE: I don't remember, but I don't think it was very high because during the period I was going through they really, really needed bodies and you had to be some kind of real mess to get washed out. They would recycle you and send you through…you might not make it through primary so they'd send you back to…they'd want to start all over. There was one poor fellow that I started out of Fort Wolters with who just never had a clue; nice fellow, but he just didn't have it. They should have washed him out very early in the program and they didn't wash him out until two weeks before graduation at Fort Rucker, which was a real shame because he was a nice fellow, but he just didn't have it, and someone should have realized that long ago and saved him anguish I think.

SM: Where did you go after your initial flight training at Fort Wolters?

RE: After Fort Wolters I believe I had a little leave. It may have been around Christmas, I don't remember, and then I was assigned…the second half of training was at Fort Rucker.

SM: That was where you went to Huey?

RE: Initially we did our instrument training in TH-13s which was just a different version of the same aircraft with an instrument package in it, so we learned basic instruments in that aircraft and then we transitioned into the Hueys.

SM: Throughout this training, the first initial flight school and then when you got to Alabama, what if anything were they saying about Vietnam and were they introducing

specific types of flying or specific ideas about flying that would be specific to flying in Vietnam?

RE: It depended on what stage of training. I remember very specifically when I as at Fort Wolters, I had one instructor, Fred Salatore was his name, Fred Salatore, and he was my first military instructor. I started out with a civilian in the very beginning and then I got Fred. He was my first military instructor. As I said, I was blessed to have good people teaching me. One of the things he used to tell his students, I think there were three of us that had him in our period and at the end of the flight period we'd always debrief, and of course you'd have many tables sitting around, each instructor with his students going through the debrief all in the same room, and he used to tell the three of us that, "You're going to hear more bullshit here in this room from these guys than you can believe," and he said, "90% of it is just that, is just BS so don't pay any attention to it. When you get to Vietnam just fly the helicopter, don't kill yourself trying to avoid the bad guys and all this stuff, just fly the machine and the bad guys will take care of themselves," and that was excellent advice because the fact is that most aviators that died in Vietnam died because they screwed up, not because somebody shot them; at least the Army helicopter pilots I should say.

SM: Now what was it like going…first, what was the most challenging part of instruments for you?

RE: The whole thing was too challenging! The secret to it was keeping the ball in the middle I ultimately discovered, which is the turn and slip indicator and if you didn't have…basically that shows you whether the aircraft is level in the sky I suppose, and if you didn't have that ball in the middle, which looks like a little level, I don't know how much about this you know.

SM: A little bit.

RE: If you didn't have the ball in the middle, then nothing else works right because none of the other instruments make sense and they don't do what you want them to do. The airplane doesn't fly like you want it to fly. So, that to me was the secret and remains so to this day really. If the ball's not in the middle, nothing else is going to work.

SM: You mean the indicator that signifies level flight?

RE: Yeah, essentially that's what it does. It really looks like a little level with a ball and a fluid filled race, and when the ball's in the middle, then you're essentially level [balanced/coordinated].

SM: What was the most challenging aspect of transitioning from the OH-13 and the instrument model 13 to the Huey, UH-1?

RE: Oh, I suppose just the size of the aircraft and getting used to…we were all novices so we'd never been in anything bigger than the OH-13 and that was a bit of a challenge because I can't remember anything really specifically, I just remember being very impressed with the power and the size of this thing. But, I can't recall any sort of specific thing that challenged me more than anything else. It was just learning a new aircraft.

SM: Do you remember what model Huey you were trained on?

RE: Well, we started out and actually we flew some A models, As, Bs - we didn't fly Cs - As, Bs, and Ds.

SM: Was there any attrition in your class as far as Huey transition?

RE: There may have been. I don't know. Perhaps not because the transition really wasn't that big a deal. In fact, in many ways the Huey was easier because you didn't have to manipulate the throttle. So, if you could fly the OH-13, you could fly the Huey.

SM: Well when did you graduate from flight training, to include Huey training?

RE: I finished flight school in March of '69.

SM: Did you know from that point where you were going?

RE: Upon graduation I had orders so I knew at that point, but right up to the last minute I didn't know.

SM: Did you suspect that you were going to go to Vietnam?

RE: Oh, I knew I was going to Vietnam. Yeah, we virtually all were going to Vietnam. I think there were a handful that went to Germany or somewhere, but no, it was assumed we'd go to Vietnam.

SM: What went through your mind when you did get your orders confirming that?

RE: Actually I was quite delighted with my orders because by that time I was already comfortable with the idea of going to Vietnam; in fact, I thought that's where I should go. That's where I wanted to go. I got orders to fly Dustoff, which was what I wanted to do. Interestingly enough, we were always told that Dustoff was a volunteer thing, but I didn't volunteer, but I sort of secretly hoped that's what I'd get and that's what I did get. So, the old idea about it being volunteer only was not true. But, it worked out very well.

SM: What was your unit of assignment?

RE: 57th Med Detachment.

SM: Where in Vietnam was that?

RE: It was in Lai Khe when I joined them, and once again I got lucky. When I went over actually initially…well, to back up a little bit, when I got out of flight school then I had a brief leave I think. I'm not sure how the leave sequence worked out. My next assignment then was to Fort Sam Houston to go through sort of a medical introductory course and I believe that lasted four weeks. I'm not sure. We were just introduced to some of the medical elements of what we'd be doing so we had some knowledge of what was going on in back, and then after that I may or may not have had some more leave, I don't remember, and then got to Vietnam ultimately in June, very early June, like the 2nd of June I think of '69. What happened there was that you'd be assigned initially to the 90th Replacement Company in Long Binh and there you would get orders to a unit and I was sent to the 45th Medical Company and they were a parent or a higher organization above the 57th Med Detachment. When I got to the 45th of course then they would dole us out wherever they wanted us from there. Some would stay at the company, others would go out to detachments that were subservient I guess is perhaps the word to the company. The old man asked me where I wanted to go. I'd been assigned to sleep in a room, somebody had gone on leave or something or gone back to the States, so I was given a bed in this one hooch and one of the guys that was already in there had been…Lai Khe had previously been operated by a platoon that was a part of the 45th and then that platoon had been pulled back to Long Binh and the 57th had moved in and taken that over from wherever they'd been previously, and I don't know where that was. This guy had told me, "Look, if you have a chance get the hell out of Long Binh. This place is

horrible. Get to Lai Khe," and I said, "Okay." So when I went to the see the old man to interview with him and he asked if I had any preferences where to go I said, "Yes, I'd like to go to Lai Khe," and he said, "Okay, you got it." So, that's how I ended up with the 57th.

SM: What was the flight like when you left the United States and went to Vietnam?

RE: Nothing remarkable. The only thing I do remember is as the airplane was leaving the States there was a lot of loud bravado and joviality and that sort of thing going on, but that last half hour before landing in Vietnam you could have heard a pin drop. It was quite interesting, and I made that trip again after a leave but when I went back on an extension and noted the same thing again. Of course I was an old timer on that trip, at least had been there. There were a lot of new guys on the plane. It was the same thing, everybody's jolly and loud and joking on departure but they get real quiet before you land.

SM: At this point a lot had changed. When you left to go to Vietnam in 1969, quite a bit had changed since you went into the Army?

RE: Well it was post-Tet by then.

SM: Right.

RE: The politics had changed, but being from a small town in Indiana we never had the anti-war thing here, never, I mean through the whole thing it didn't get here. When you came back to Indiana, you were still viewed as doing something that was honorable. I never had the problems the guys from California and some of these other places had.

SM: When you say that, what do you mean the problems with guys from California?

RE: I remember one of the guys coming back from having been on leave and talking about people spitting on him and calling him a baby killer and all this stuff, and here's a guy that's flying Dustoff trying to save people, Vietnamese at that time largely because the war was beginning to wind down so we were no longer in an area serving Americans. We were flying Vietnamese. People had these ideas that were without foundation.

SM: I don't know if you're familiar with this but while we're on the subject I'd like to cover it briefly. I don't know if you know that there are people that say that the idea that Vietnam veterans are spit on and called, "Baby killers," that's just a bunch of myths. What do you think about that?

RE: I don't think the fellow who told me it happened to him made it up.

SM: This was during the war?

RE: This was during the war, yeah. He had come home on leave for some reason and I remember him telling me that story. I have no doubt that it was true. I mean, there's always going to be flakes out there. I'm not saying that that was the general feeling abroad in the land, but gee whiz, out of 200 and something million people you think you're not going to have a few jerks?

SM: Yes, sir, there probably will be a few jerks.

RE: And California might be a good place to find a couple of them! You don't have to print that.

SM: Well, unfortunately it's in the recording! Anyway, okay. What were your first impressions after landing in, arriving in Vietnam? What do you remember most when they opened that door to the aircraft?

RE: The first thing was the heat, and then the next thing that I had a real vivid memory of was these short little brooms these old mamasons were using to clean up this open area where we were sitting. I thought, "Wow, I've never seen a broom like that before." That's what really struck me, strangely enough.

SM: How about when you were transported to I guess the replacement detachment or wherever it was you had to go first?

RE: I remember the bars on the windows, the screens more precisely on the bus. I don't know how I got the notion but somehow I heard or someone said that it was to keep people from throwing grenades in the bus. Whether there's any truth to that, I don't know, but there were screens over the open windows of the bus, I do remember that, and just driving along, of course seeing a totally alien environment, the appearance, the dress of the people, the signs in a foreign language, all that kind of thing. I find it interesting; not particularly alarming, but interesting.

SM: What about your first interactions with Vietnamese people? What did you think about the Vietnamese people themselves, whether they be military or civilian?

RE: It's hard for me to pin down when my first interaction would have been that was at least notable. You would see them around, but I suppose the first Vietnamese I may have talked to would have been a girl that worked in the bar at the 45th Med Company, the little officer's club, and I remember she was a very pretty young lady and very pregnant. That was probably the first Vietnamese that I can say I have a memory of.

SM: When you arrived, what kind of briefings did you receive?

RE: If we received briefings, they didn't register because I don't remember them. I'm sure we did. We probably received briefings about health issues and all the rest, but I really can't remember any of that.

SM: And go ahead and if you would describe I guess your movement to your unit and the first impressions of your unit?

RE: I do remember specifically the flight up there because I remember getting on the helicopter. Of course they sent a helicopter. Lai Khe was only, as I recall, a 20 or 30 minute flight from Long Binh. It was all in III Corps. They sent a helicopter down from the 57th to pick up these new guys. I think there was a couple of us got on the helicopter. Yeah, I think there was one other pilot I believe that came at the same time that I did. I remember sitting on this helicopter and away we'd go, and just sort of looking out the door because they flew with the doors open, and looking at the countryside and then of course on arrival, I don't have a specific memory of the arrival per say, I remember where I was first assigned to sleep. We were in tents at that time. I don't know, I was welcomed. It was a comfortable thing. It was nothing uncomfortable about it, lots of questions of course, not particularly verbalized or even well formulated, but you know the curiosity, what do we do next and what's this all about?

SM: Okay, well when did you actually get to fly your first Dustoff mission?

RE: Probably two to three days after I arrived. I don't remember specifically. There was some training involved of course at the local level before I actually got in a helicopter and went out and flew.

SM: Do you recall what that training involved?

RE: Well it was just the normal emergency procedures, auto rotations, tail rotor failures, hydraulic failures, that kind of thing, and probably as I recall some introduction to some of the flight techniques that we used in that environment, low-level flight, how to spot smoke and make an approach to a landing zone and that kind of thing.

SM: When you finally did get to fly in Vietnam, did you think that the training you had received both back in the US and then locally, had that adequately prepared you?

RE: Yes, definitely.

SM: Was there anything you recall saying maybe to yourself where, "I wish they would have covered this a little bit more thoroughly," or, "I wish they would have covered that?"

RE: No, not really. I felt I'd been well trained. I was aware, of course, that I was very much a novice so I've always worked on the theory that when you're the new guy in an outfit, you just keep your mouth shut and your ears open, and that's the way I approached it and it worked very well for me.

SM: Well, if you would, go ahead and describe what you do recall about your first Dustoff, or do you not recall?

RE: I don't recall the first mission. I recall specifically the first time we were shot at.

SM: Okay, why don't you talk about that?

RE: What's interesting about that is I didn't realize we were being shot at. I've heard some noises, but the first time I heard an AK-47 it was always remarkable after that. I always thought it sounded like some kind of a toy gun. They don't sound particularly threatening. Of course once you know what they sound like, you do know it's threatening, but they sound almost like a cap gun going off, a very unique sound. The first time we were getting shot at I didn't realize it until the pilot that I was flying with, the aircraft commander says, "You know we're taking fire?" "Oh, okay," so I don't know what we did. We waived off and came in from another direction or something I suppose, and it all worked out well. We didn't take any hits. But, that's probably the first mission that sticks in my mind.

SM: Okay, well what was morale like in the unit?

RE: The morale was superb. My whole life has been charmed. I was fortunate to have been assigned to a unit that had the highest morale of any organization I've ever been involved with before or since then. I wish I knew how they arrived at that point. I don't know how. It was already in place when I got there. But, the unit had such high morale that it virtually ran itself. Nobody had to be told to do anything. If it needed to be done, it just got done automatically. It was just a superb bunch of people, a wonderful, wonderful organization. At that time the 57th was by all statistical analysis doing the best job of any unit of that kind in the country. That's not to put down any other unit; it had to do a lot with where we were and the timing. We were just busier than a lot of people because that's where the action was at the time. Morale had also developed to the point where in that unit a mission was virtually never turned down. No one ever refused to go in an LZ regardless of the circumstance, and that was just a point of pride. We never said no. One of the beneficial results of that was that the 1st Infantry Division, who were our biggest customers, Lai Khe was the headquarters for the 1st Infantry Division. We didn't support them exclusively. We supported anyone that was in our area of operations, but of course that coincided largely with the 1st Division so that's who we did most of our work for. Because they came to realize that we would come in regardless of the circumstances, it developed to the point where they never lied to us about what was really going on, and that was a problem in some other areas or with some other units. Of course if you don't get good information, then you're in trouble. They were the 1st Division and consistently would give us the straight, honest information and then once you have that, it's just a matter of figuring out, "Okay, if this is what the deal is, if this is what the situation is, how can I deal with it?" and you could almost always figure out an approach that would work; not always, of course, but it sure increased your odds.

SM: Was that something that trust between the 1st Infantry Division and your Dustoff unit, and this is the 57th, right?

RE: Right, the original Dustoff.

SM: The original Dustoff, between the 1st Infantry Division and the 57th Dustoff, was that already formed by the time you got there or that also evolved while you were with the 57th?

RE: Well I think both. It was pretty well developed by the time I got there and it continued to be reinforced because there was always a turnover. In fact, one of the things we used to do was go out occasionally to the firebases and have little briefing sessions with the people at the firebase. Of course the guys would be out in the field, and would come back to the firebases when so many days out in the field were over. So, you're talking to the infantry people when you're at the firebase and one of the things we would show them was how to use…I suppose the official reason for our being there was a hoist demonstration because we would show them how to use the jungle penetrator, how to unfold the arms on it and run them through that whole thing. In a larger sense, then, it was a PR sort of thing and we always made the point to them that we're going to come in. It doesn't matter how bad it is, we are going to respond but you've got to tell us the truth, because if you don't tell us the truth and we get shot down, then nobody's helped. They understood that and they were always honest with us. That was an ongoing process, I suppose, to answer your question, to keep that trust going.

SM: Did you hear stories from other Dustoff pilots and other units where that did not exist?

RE: Absolutely. In fact, it happened to our unit with other ground units. A fellow with whom I shared a tent was killed as a result of being lied to.

SM: The lies involved I would imagine a specific area or LZ was not hot when it was hot, so a pilot came in not anticipating contact and instead met contact. Is that correct?

RE: Precisely.

SM: My goodness. Now how many Medevac units or Dustoff units did you eventually serve with?

RE: I was with the 57th the whole time.

SM: Just the 57th? Okay.

RE: Yeah, now the unit moved, but I stayed with the unit.

SM: Do you have any idea how many other units you were supporting besides the 1st Infantry Division?

RE: The time period I'm talking about is from June of '69 until about January of '70 and after that point we moved to another area so this was in III Corps based at Lai

Khe. We supported 1st Division, part of the AO encompassed the 25th Division until they left, 11th Armored Cav was there, there were odds and ends, smaller units. We did some work occasionally to back up the 1st Cav Division. They had their own organic Medevac but occasionally it would be something they couldn't handle and for whatever reason we'd give them a hand because our areas did overlap, then a lot of smaller units. I don't know, there were four or five major outfits and then a handful of smaller ones I guess.

SM: How about other country forces, whether they be ARVN, Vietnamese units, or ROK or anybody else?

RE: There were no ROKs in that area to my knowledge. I never had anything to do with the Koreans. There were some Australian aviation people there because we had a stand-by. We kept one aircraft and crew at Dau Tieng 24 hours a day. You'd do a three day RON up there and there were Australians there flying OV-10s as I recall. I'm not aware of any ground troops in that area, although there were Australians in other areas further South but that wasn't where we were. I don't know if there were any others, like Thais or any of those in that area. I'm not aware of it. We would occasionally get involved with the Vietnamese a bit, but that was largely an American AO up there at that time.

SM: When you arrived, did you hear much about Hamburger Hill?

RE: No, I don't think I'd heard of Hamburger Hill to that point. That was up North as I recall.

SM: Yes, a little bit further but not too far from III Corps. Well, if you would go ahead and discuss the Dustoff missions you do remember, not wanting to focus on necessarily gory details but Dustoff was a very difficult job at times, I would imagine.

RE: What was actually the most challenging probably was when weather got involved because we did fly 24 hours a day, all-weather, and going back to the training thing in fact if there was any inadequacy in the training I suppose it would have been on the instrument end of things because we were trained for a very basic "save your butt" level on instruments and particularly flying Dustoff, we could have used a little more training with that because we routinely flew in all weather, whereas most Army units didn't fly at night and when the weather got too bad they may or may not be out there, but we flew regardless of conditions. So, we were a little unique in that. We also flew

one aircraft solo so it wasn't like follow the leader as was the case in many other operations. So, we could have used I suppose a little more instrument work. Probably the most hazardous were night hoist missions because during a hoist mission of course you're a sitting duck and if the guys on the ground were savvy enough, and they sometimes were, they would wait until you had your wounded about halfway up on the hoist and that's when they'd start shooting at you, knowing that there is nothing that you can do. You're not going to chop the cable on these guys, that was another unwritten rule. You never, ever chop the cable. You're not going to drag him through the trees, so you're basically stuck until you get him either in the aircraft or close enough that you can leave. Of course you're doing this thing with your lights on, at least your landing light because you've got to be able to see the trees that you're snuggled in amongst. So, that was when you were really hanging it out. Interestingly enough, those were the missions that several people really loved to get because they were the most challenging. Usually going back to…I don't know, I'm reluctant to get into telling war stories so to speak, but in a more generic sense you could almost always figure out a way to get the job done if you had a complete picture of what was going on. Sometimes it would take a lot of time. I do remember one specific mission, to get into I guess a bit of a war story without getting into the gory details, but it was a mission out of Dau Tieng and we had gotten called out mid-afternoon I suppose and all hell was breaking loose. There were friendlies in a Rome plow area. Are you familiar with that term?

SM: Yes, sir.

RE: Okay, there were friendlies in a Rome plow area, bad guys in what was later discovered to be concrete bunkers in the tree line, and they had a number of our guys wounded and pinned down. We made an attempt to get in and they really, really drilled us before we ever terminated the approach. We basically had just come to a hover and they nailed us quite well. So, we left. There was no future in that deal. We weren't going to get anybody under those conditions. So, we left. The aircraft was shot up so we had a replacement aircraft brought up, returned to the scene within an hour probably. In the meantime, a lot of armament had gone into the area where the bad guys were and we made another attempt with the same result, and because of tree stumps and all this kind of thing we couldn't get right to where the guys were. They were going to have to come

five yards or so to get to us and they wouldn't get out of their hole, so we left again without success. The aircraft, again, was damaged beyond being able to fly so we got a second replacement, so we're on our third aircraft now. We went back out, and by this time it's nightfall and lo and behold, everybody's gone home! All the gunships are gone, all the Air Force is gone. It's nothing but one helicopter and some wounded out there, which was rather shocking to me. Anyway, it was like the war quit when the sun set. We did hear a guy coming up the river who was doing a routine night patrol, just happened to be on the same frequency. He was a guy with these big xenon lights that just light up the world, and mini-guns, and he was just doing a routine night patrol, unaware of what we were involved in. But, he heard us on the radio and picked up what was going on and asked if we needed a hand and we said, "Yeah, we could use some help!" So he came over and literally hovered over these bunkers and just laid down tons of fire with these mini-guns, and we went in and picked these guys up and nobody fired a shot. I think they all had their heads down because this mini-gun was scaring the hell out of them, and he was literally just hovering right over those bunkers. I wish I knew who that guy was because he sure saved us that night.

SM: When you'd go in like this, this was for live wounded?

RE: Correct.

SM: What were the rules about going in for people who were killed, to pick up KIAs?

RE: If they had KIAs and wounded, then they'd throw the KIAs on too, assuming we had room.

SM: Right, wounded first and then KIAs?

RE: Right. We would not go in exclusively for KIAs. I think that rule was set by the medical corps. Ultimately, our commander was a doctor, our ultimate commander, and we belonged to the Army Medical Corps. We were also prohibited from doing anything of any nature outside our specific mission. I know earlier on in the war, before I got there, there had been some political problems with that, an infantry general trying to grab this Dustoff helicopter to fly some ammo to somewhere or something like that, and there'd been some political problems with that, but it had been ironed out by the time I got there and I was never asked to do anything I wasn't supposed to do.

SM: So no beer runs, resupply missions, stuff like that?

RE: No. Occasionally we would grab a helicopter for a supply run for our own purposes, to go down to a direct support facility and pick up parts or something, but not in support of others.

SM: And I understand your hesitancy to tell as you put it war stories, but I don't know, it's also part of why we're talking today, to get some specifics of the experiences you had. Were there any other specific Dustoff missions that you remember?

RE: A couple stick in my mind, I suppose. Later, to put this in context, we left Lai Khe in I believe January of '70 and relocated to the Delta to Can Tho, and we were co-located with another Dustoff unit who'd been down there since when they got to Vietnam. I believe that was the 82nd Med Detachment, which was coincidentally the detachment with which Mike Novosel was flying when he got the Medal of Honor. You may be familiar with that story, I don't know.

SM: No, sir, I'm not.

RE: The oldest man ever to win the Medal of Honor. He was there when I…in fact, I knew him and his son both who were in the unit at the same time. In any event, we ran a joint operation with them. We maintained our individual unit identities, but in essence the operation was mix and match. We didn't intermingle crews too much or aircraft, but all the missions came from the same place and we supported the same AO. I do remember down in that area a mission one night which was really not…the problem on this particular deal was not so much the bad guys as it was the weather, and it was absolutely the worst weather I've ever flown in in my life. The guy on the ground, there was one American advisor down there with a bunch of Vietnamese and we had had an aircraft shot up making a pick-up for this same unit earlier in the day. In fact, it had gone down in flames and burned, burned to nothing. We got the crew out all right. He landed before it fell out of the sky. They knew they were on fire. So later on that night we got called back into this guy and it's a horrible, horrible thunderstorm going on. He's down in the middle of trees, one of the few areas of the Delta where there were more trees than rice paddies. This guy, his call sign was like 62 X-Ray or something. In the area there was a 62, a 63, and a 64 and all of them had Yankee, X-Ray, and Zulu suffixes. So, you had nine guys on the same radio frequency with very similar call signs. You'd call one

and you'd get answers from three different ones. We finally got this guy isolated and found him. We were only able to find him because he was burning flares because you couldn't see a strobe light in heavy rain and so forth and lightning and thunder and all that, and we found him and then we lost him because he was just down in the hole and we finally picked him up again. He was asking, "What can I do to help you," and I said, "Man, you've got to keep the flares going the whole time. Once the flare goes out, we lose you, so you've got to…that's all you can do for us is keep the flares going non-stop." "Okay," so he kept the flares going. Then it got real quiet. There was nobody else flying in the Delta that night I don't think. I said, "Oh yeah, one other thing, man, just keep talking to us. It's awful lonely up here," because it was quite a tense situation. Anyway, we began the approach. I was the aircraft commander. The co-pilot was actually flying, and I was just sitting in there sort of monitoring his approach because it was essentially an instrument approach to a flare. He was doing a fine job, no problem there, and we got through I don't know, three or four hundred feet I guess and I reached over and switched the landing light on and the guy on the ground, the advisor, said, "Turn your light off!" So this pilot that I was flying with turned the light off. Then he said, "Bullshit, turn that light back on. He's not flying this thing. There's no sense…don't worry about the bad guys. It's not going to do us any good if we run into a tree." It was raining so damn hard I figured the bad guys were all trying to stay dry anyway. So, we went in and landed. Sure enough, nobody shot at us, and although he said he had bad guys all around him, we went in and got the people loaded up. There was supposed to be…I don't remember the number, eight or twelve, something like that. Anyway, there was a specific number of Vietnamese wounded we were supposed to pick up. So we pick up the number we were given and they all had little medical tags on their shirt, and they fly away. Well, a couple of minutes after we get out of the zone or maybe five minutes later this guy calls us on the radio and says, "How many did you pick up?" and I said, "Well, we picked up…" the number, whatever it was, and he says, "Are you sure?" he says, "I've still got two wounded down here." So we counted again and sure enough, we had the number we were supposed to have and they all had tags. Well, it turned out that two of these guys were not wounded. They had stolen the tags from their wounded buddies because they wanted to get the hell out of there. So we called ahead to the town we were taking them

to, where there was a Vietnamese hospital, and asked the TOC there to have the QCs, which is their equivalent of the MPs, standing by to pick these two slackers up and of course there was nobody to meet us when we landed so we just dumped them all out and it was somebody else's problem because we had to go back and pick up two more out of that same LZ again and really didn't have time to sort out their problem. I don't know, probably nothing happened on that, but we ended up making a second trip in at which time the weather had passed on a bit so it wasn't nearly as memorable on the second trip.

SM: No contact, though?

RE: No, nobody ever fired a shot. Now there were bad guys all around the area because as I say, they'd shot up our aircraft earlier in the day, but I guess it was just raining so hard. In that sense, the weather worked for us I guess.

SM: If you would, describe a mission that was the heaviest in terms of the anti air threats or the ground fire coming at you?

RE: Jeez, that's…

SM: Were there many?

RE: Probably the heaviest I'd been shot at would have been probably this deal that I was mentioning earlier where I took three trips in and three aircraft, and in fact we went in the following morning into that same area because it had spilled over into the next day. In the meantime, these guys had moved from the Rome plow back into a tree line, the friendlies had, away from contact. But of course the bad guys had sort of followed them and regrouped, too, so they were now surrounded by bad guys back in the trees. So we went in the next morning and it was a hoist mission and it had the hoist. These guys were pretty sharp, too. We had the hoist about halfway up with two Americans hanging on it, both wounded, and they opened up on us and we started taking hits but we couldn't do anything. Of course I thought, "No problem." You could put a lot of holes in the tail boom of a Huey and it doesn't matter, and that's where they were hitting. But, then they hit something and knocked out our hydraulics at which point the aircraft seemed like it dropped about ten feet. It certainly dropped something. Of course the light comes on the instrument panel. Again, the other guy was actually flying. I was just along for the ride on that one and I got on the controls with him and between the two of us we got it out. Actually, the aircraft just did the right thing because at that stage you

just don't have any control, but we got it moving forward and once you get some air speed it sort of streamlines out and it's flyable. The guys in the back continued to wheel these guys up on the hoist. We were real lucky. Nobody got hurt dragging through the trees or anything. We got them back to Dau Tieng, did a running landing there, and put these guys in an ambulance and got them to the aid station. What I do remember, I don't remember whether it was the medic or the crew chief, but whoever was operating the hoist said, "Man, you should have seen the look in those guys' eyes when that happened!" One of them had actually taken a glancing blow off his steel pot from the fire that was coming from the ground, so he had every reason to be a little concerned I think.

SM: How well secure were wounded to the jungle penetrator?

RE: If they did it right, and this was one of the reasons we went around the firebases because we would get guys that if they didn't understand why that thing worked, occasionally we would get these guys and say, "My God, it's a wonder they made it all the way up to the helicopter," because they wouldn't be secured the right way. If they were secured properly, there was a little fold down seat which really just looked like a little angle-iron bar thing that would flip down. There were three of those. Then, there was a strap that as I recall was supposed to wrap around the guy and go under his arms so he would sort of sit on this thing facing the penetrator, and then this strap would go under his arms and secure him to the penetrator. So, he was pretty secure at that point if they did it properly. Sometimes they wouldn't understand how it worked or in their haste and whatever wouldn't get the guy in right and you'd say, "Man, this guy is lucky he made it in!"

SM: Did it ever happen that someone did fall off?

RE: I'm not aware of it. It never happened in my experience.

SM: Well that's good.

RE: Yes, you wouldn't want to fall from 100 feet or so.

SM: No, sir. When you moved from Lai Khe to Can Tho, what were the biggest changes or differences between flying in the former versus the latter?

RE: The primary difference was that Lai Khe was a relatively small area of operations. The way we operated in Lai Khe was when we went out on a flight, if there

were more people than we could pick up in one trip, we would fly out to an LZ…well, every mission was sort of self-contained and wrapped up all at once. We got a flight, the mission came in, we would crank up, go to the LZ, pick up whatever was there, make as many trips as necessary, but after every pick up we'd come back to the aid station and drop those people and then go back and get more. When we moved to the Delta, it was a huge, huge area of operations. In III Corps out of Lai Khe we could be anywhere in the area maximum maybe 20 minutes and normally within about ten. When we moved to the Delta it could take us an hour one way to get somewhere, or 45 minutes at least anyway. The result was that we didn't pick up one mission and then go straight to the hospital. We would continue to pick people up, just keep loading them on until we either had someone who's death was eminent if we didn't get them to a facility or until we had so many people on board that we couldn't pack another one in, and then we'd swing into the nearest hospital and dump everybody off and start the process all over again. So, it was perhaps akin to an ambulance run in III Corps more like a bus operation in IV Corps. We'd just keep picking them up until we had to drop them off in IV Corps. It was a much more frustrating situation, a much lower level of service that we were able to provide, and that was just because we didn't have the assets to cover an area that big. Things were winding down, so they weren't giving us the kind of support we had previously, either. When we were in III Corps supporting Americans during the height of the war, we had excellent support. We had the best aircraft probably in the country. At one time out of six helicopters I recall five of the six had 300 hours or less total air frame time. They were brand new machines, and if we had one damaged it would take more than two weeks to repair, they just gave us a new one. By the time we got down to the Delta it was a little different story down there. Operationally it was quite different.

SM: So it seems like in the Delta, were there ever occasions where you could not get to somebody and get them back to a hospital within like half an hour, 45 minutes?

RE: Well, if they had to get to a hospital, we could, if it was that bad, because there were hospitals…now these were Vietnamese hospitals, and I can't comment on the level of care, but there were hospitals throughout the Delta. Every province capital had a hospital. So, there were plenty of places to drop them. We were just so overwhelmed with work! You might have five missions in a row that you know about, and that doesn't

count the ones you don't know about yet. We would normally have three or four aircraft in the air at a time out of a total between two detachments of 12 aircraft. Of course you're always going to have some in maintenance. But, we would normally have about four in the air at a time to cover a huge, huge area. One of the ways actually that we did that was by once we'd worked off what we knew about and we were in a given area, we developed a routine of climbing up to altitude, get as high as we could, and then call virtually everybody we could think of to see if they had any missions for us because if you waited for the system to work the way it was designed, by the time a mission got to us through channels it could be maybe a half hour old. You may have just left that area not knowing that a guy you flew over had a flight for you. So rather than waiting for the system to work, we'd just call all the guys on the ground directly and get it straight that way, and that did streamline things quite a lot because I know our radio operators, after a while they came to realize that although they would have received missions they were not able to pass on to us because we were out of radio range, they knew damn well if we were in that area we were cleaning them up anyway so they really didn't worry that much about it. When we'd call them in, we'd give them the specifics on the last four flights we just did so they could at least erase those from their list of things to be done, and that system did work pretty well within the limitations we had.

SM: That was acceptable within the chain of command, within the Medevac chain of command?

RE: Oh, I suppose. I never heard any negative comments about it. We were doing a better job that way than if we'd done it the way the system was designed, and that's just because communications were slow. The way it would work I suppose is the unit on the ground that had the problem would call that into the TOC, the tactical operations center. They would forward it to somewhere in Can Tho I suppose on up the chain of command and it would go through about three or four radio calls before we found out about it, with the subsequent time delay involved with that. We were just getting it direct from the guy on the ground for the most part. Actually, we would call the TOC but the guy on the ground would be on that same frequency. We'd call the TOC and see if he had anything. So, if we didn't have anything to do, 99 times out of 100 you could find yourself a mission before you came home and save that flight time coming

back. There's no sense to fly all the way back only to turn around and return where you just left.

SM: Yes, sir. That's good that there seemed to be some flexibility there in conducting your missions.

RE: That was something that the pilots themselves just sort of developed that technique. There was never a plan to do it that way. It was never directed by anyone. We just did it, and it worked, so it just sort of grew and became at least routine for a lot of folks. I can't say that everybody did it, but a number of us did and it worked well.

SM: The area that you flew out of, I guess what would be considered your base area, were there many Vietnamese people that worked there or was it pretty much just an American base camp?

RE: Well, in the Delta?

SM: Yes, sir.

RE: There were Vietnamese around and then later on towards the end of my time with the Army we actually started training Vietnamese. We were flying with the Vietnamese as well. That was the final months that I was there because they were trying to get the Vietnamese to take over these operations and subsequent to that when I went back as a civilian I do remember seeing, after the military had pulled out, the Vietnamese were operating some sort of a Medevac operation and in fact had sort of stolen our logo and put it on their helicopters, so they'd picked that much up anyway. What kind of a job they were doing, I don't know.

SM: That was of course part of Vietnamization, the training of the Vietnamese pilots. What did you think about that, as it was being implemented during your time there?

RE: I personally thought it was okay. I didn't have strong feelings about it one way or another. Of course life was easier if you're just flying with all American crews. You don't have the communications problems and all the rest and there was always a certain amount of sort of instruction or training involved when you were flying with Vietnamese because we were trying to teach them how to do what we were doing, so that was sort of an inherent part of it. So, that increases your workload. I didn't object to the

concept, although I can't speak for others. I'm sure there was a whole range of opinion on that.

SM: Okay, and who comprised the crew on a Medevac ship?

RE: Two pilots, a crew chief, and a medic. The really good teams…normally a crew chief and a medic would be assigned to a specific aircraft, whereas the pilots just floated. You had some crews that were better than others as you would in any environment. The better crews would go through the trouble to cross train each other informally, so we had some crews where the medic was just as good a mechanic as a mechanic was, and the mechanic was just as good a medic as the medic was. They were essentially interchangeable and they would help one another with their relative jobs.

SM: Who would run the radios?

RE: Generally speaking, the non-flying pilot. The pilot not manipulating the controls would run the radios and organize the mission from that standpoint, and often times that required more savvy than just flying the aircraft, especially in the Delta and dealing with Vietnamese and going through interpreters and often the interpreter was not located at the scene.

SM: What would you do in that instance?

RE: We'd just do the best you can. You know there would often be some problems because you were getting inaccurate information. In the Delta, it was a whole different game because you weren't dealing with Americans and so you had a different mindset. In retrospect, of course we have to realize that the Vietnamese were in it for the duration. They weren't there for a year or two and go home. So, they had a different outlook on the whole thing. They were a little bit more concerned perhaps about self-preservation than some of the Americans were, and that was reflected in the kind of information you would get which was much less reliable than what we had with the 1st Division, for example.

SM: In either Lai Khe or Can Tho, could you ever – if you knew you were going into a hot LZ – could you ever rely on getting some helicopter gunship support?

RE: Oh yeah. In either case, in III Corps out of Lai Khe often in fact the guns would be there when we arrived because they would have been there because there was a firefight going on, so oftentimes they were there. One of the rules we had which was

occasionally broken because of circumstances, but generally speaking we were supposed to have gunship support for any hoist mission. So, when a hoist mission came in, someone in the system, and I don't know who did this, would call the guns and get the guns en route. So, ideally they'd be there and join up with us about the time we arrived. Sometimes they'd be a little bit late. There were occasions where the guns were late or not available and we just went on and did it anyway, and that was kind of hanging yourself out politically because you could certainly get your hand slapped for that. Sometimes it would have unfortunate results because the gunships, primarily they just made a lot of…and I'm not belittling what they did, but their primary function in supporting us was to make a lot of noise, lay a lot of fire down, and just keep the bad guy's heads down, and they did that pretty effectively.

SM: Was there ever an occasion where you were able to get something better or something different in terms of your support, maybe some close air support that was in the area, FACs flying in the area, jets, things like that?

RE: Well occasionally you could get, particularly in the Delta, the OV-10s that operated by the Navy down there were very effective. They were good because they had a lot of fuel. They had a lot, a lot, of loiter time. If something was a long, drawn out process, they could hang around where the gunships didn't have enough fuel. They were pretty effective so that was a nice little addition to the arsenal when we got to the Delta. We didn't work with that much in III Corps. However, in III Corps we had TAC air, we had anything the military had that was available there from B-52s on down, depending on the situation. We didn't always organize that directly, but working with the 1st Division or someone like that, of course if it was a big deal going on you'd have probably a general in the air somewhere. He could organize all that. What we ended up doing actually in the Delta quite often again was just bypassing the system. If you called back to your operations and said, "We need guns," and they called somebody else, it goes through three or four people and there was a long delay. What we would often do in the Delta was just call the nearest facility that had a rearming point for fuel and say, "Hey, is there any guns over there that wants to shoot at something," and you'd always get somebody that would say yes, and you'd say, "Well, here's where we are. We need some

help." And we'd just bypass the system and do it ourselves. That worked pretty effectively.

SM: Was there ever any want in your unit, especially when you were in Can Tho, for any kind of equipment, supplies, support, anything like that?

RE: I have no specific recollection of that. I suspect there was. This was 30 years later or something. I couldn't comment on that directly.

SM: You don't recall any specific shortages or anything?

RE: Well, shortage of medics. We did definitely have a shortage of medics at one time and we were borrowing medics from Special Forces. These guys would…well, see we were based at a place called [Navy] Binh Thuy which was at Can Tho, just down the road from Can Tho a few miles, and it was a Navy base but there was also an Army element there. We were one of the Army units there, and there as also an Army hospital there, a surgical hospital. So, that's where we took any non-Vietnamese patients went to the American hospital. Part of that hospital was occupied and run by Special Forces to take care of their CIDGs if you're familiar with that term, civilian irregular defense group I think it stood for.

SM: Yes, sir.

RE: Largely in that area it was the Cambodians working for Special Forces and that's where they treated their people in their own wards of that hospital. It was actually sort of separate from the rest of the hospital and those guys, the medics that were taking care of that would work over there all day and then come and fly with us all night. I don't know when they slept. They were excellent medics. That was the only real critical shortage that comes to mind; there definitely was a medic shortage at one point.

SM: Do you remember what time period that was?

RE: Well it was '71, probably mid-'71. I'm just guessing, but definitely it was '71…not '71, '70. That was when the Vietnamization deal was in full swing and they just weren't sending people over as they had been before.

SM: Did you ever utilize Vietnamese medics?

RE: I think we had Vietnamese medics when we got into the training program but that would have been the only time we used them.

SM: Do you recall the names of any of the major operations that you flew Dustoff in support of?

RE: No, I don't remember any of the names. I know there was one big, big deal. It must have had a name. It escapes me what it was and I doubt if I knew it at the time. Really those things didn't matter much to me. There was a huge operation that took place in an area in the Delta near the Cambodian border called the seven mountains area, and I mean casualties were coming out of there like you wouldn't believe. I hauled as many as 300 a day out of there, and it went on for weeks.

SM: Was this part of the Cambodian Incursion?

RE: No, this was separate from the Cambodian Incursion. The bad guys had long owned those mountains basically, and we were trying to dislodge them. They had their caves and all the rest and it went on for a long time. That was a Vietnamese operation. We were just supporting them. We were them hauling out of there like cordwood.

SM: My goodness, both dead and wounded?

RE: Yes, primarily wounded though. If you had room they'd throw the dead on. So many of the trips you were just chock a block full of wounded. You couldn't have got anybody else on. A friend of mine actually hauled something like 40 people out of there on one load.

SM: 40 people?

RE: Which is not supposed to be able to be done, but he managed to get it off the ground and get it back on the ground.

SM: What model Hueys were you flying?

RE: The H Models.

SM: The whole time?

RE: Yes.

SM: Did you ever find yourself wanting with that aircraft?

RE: Not at all, not at all.

SM: Always enough power?

RE: It always did the job. Keep in mind we were working essentially at sea level, so I can't speak for what the guys up in the highlands were doing. Where we were, it was certainly adequate.

SM: Did you ever yourself, especially for instance during that very heavy fighting near the Cambodian border, did you ever have to fly into Cambodia yourself?

RE: Oh yeah, we went into Cambodia. In fact, we went in…it was kind of interesting because we were not briefed on an impending incursion or anything, and actually Vietnamese units started going into Cambodia before the Americans crossed the border. So, it was two or three weeks before the American incursion we had begun flying into Cambodia in support of the Vietnamese. We were not briefed that it was going to happen. The way we found out was you just get a mission on the radio, you plot the coordinates out, and lo and behold it's in Cambodia. You just go on and pick them up. Interesting little footnote to that was that when this whole thing started with the Vietnamese elements before the Americans got involved, apparently the powers that be hadn't figured out all the ramifications and when we first started going in on occasion we would pick up Cambodian soldiers, and no one had briefed us on what to do with these people when we picked them up, but we by that time knew if you drop a Cambodian off in a Vietnamese hospital, you might as well not even take him to a hospital. He's going to die for sure. We would bring the Cambodian soldiers back to the U.S. Army hospital, and that really ruffled some feathers politically. A few days after that first began there was a directive came down from on high saying, "Henceforth…" to back up, the procedure was in bound to the American hospital you would call them ahead of time to tell them what you were bringing, and that would always include nationality as well as the nature of wound or illness and so forth. So we were calling these things into the hospital as Cambodian soldier with a gunshot wound or whatever. That had gone on for a few days when this directive came down saying, "Henceforth any personnel picked up on the other side of the border will be referred to only as unidentified civilians of a Mongolian origin." That was supposed to be the official report to the hospital, which I always found rather humorous.

SM: Yes. As a Dustoff pilot, although they did not probably apply to you as much as they did your Slick and Gunship pilots and of course the ground forces, but what did you hear about rules of engagement and what did you think about them? How did they affect anything that you might have done?

RE: We were aware that there were certain rules of engagement and it impacted us in a negative sense sometimes because in the Delta you would get these ridiculous situations where…just to give you one example, and this basically summarizes the whole thing I suppose, but I remember a mission one night in the Delta into a little firebase to pick up some wounded, gunshot wounds so obviously there's been some contact with bad guys. We had made an approach in and when we turned the light on a short final they really started shooting at us, so we turned the light off, did a go around, came back around, tried it again, same result. So we climbed up, called the nearest refueling area and asked if there were any guns over there. Somebody answered and was with us in five or ten minutes. We told them the situation. In the meantime, now we're talking to the TOC on the radio and the whole thing, the advisor who was probably not at the site, but he told the gunship driver that the tree line from which we were taking fire was a friendly tree line. The district chief is telling him this, who is a Vietnamese, that that's supposed to be a friendly village over there. Well, somebody over in that village is not so friendly! He (the gunship pilot) was told, I never quite understood this, but he was directed that he could only shoot mini gun into that tree line but not rockets. I've never understood that logic. But anyway, that was sort of a rules of engagement problem there. Well, we began our third approach now with a gunship supporting us, and the third time around they hit us this time and knocked our radios out. We could receive but we couldn't transmit. Of course we had our lights off by that time. So, this gunship saw that we'd been taking fire, that we'd probably been hit and he can no longer make contact with us, so he doesn't know what the hell's happened to us and he just loaded that tree line with all the rockets he had, of course which caused a little bit of a problem with the district chief and all, and he was catching hell for that, and his answer to that is, "I don't give a damn what you say. They're shooting. They just shot up this Dustoff, and I don't care if you like it or not. I'm giving them all the rockets I got." We would run into those kinds of things occasionally where an area was supposedly an area where you couldn't shoot but they could shoot you. That happened right at Can Tho a lot in fact; take fire from within the town of Can Tho but it was not acceptable to shoot back. This is stuff I've heard from gun people.

SM: But you never personally witnessed that?

RE: Not the Can Tho thing. The story I related of course I was there on that one. What often happened, in the heat of the moment if things…often the people on the scene just went ahead and did what had to be done regardless of the rules. There was a certain disdain for the rules I think; not always healthy, but sometimes it was. I mean, that plays both ways.

SM: The pilot who ignored those rules about rockets, did anything happen to him? Do you know?

RE: I have no idea. I would tend to think not, though. He was justified I thought, and I never understood the difference of why you could shoot mini gun into an area and not rockets anyway; they're both lethal.

SM: That's a good question. Did you have an opportunity to talk with other pilots that you worked with about these types of things?

RE: We must have kicked it around occasionally. I have no specific recollection of conversations about that, but surely we must have.

SM: What did you and the other pilots and your crews, what did you do for rest and relaxation? When you're not out there flying the choppers, what are you doing?

RE: Oh, drinking, hitting the bars I suppose. This was in the Delta. In III Corps there really wasn't anywhere to go, so we played a lot of cards or would occasionally manage to sneak away to Saigon for an afternoon, and that was pretty much what the recreation was there. Down in the Delta, there was an area that was on limits which was a honky tonk area and we spent a lot of time down there.

SM: Any USO shows come through?

RE: Yeah, we had USO shows in Lai Khe. I never saw any in the Delta.

SM: What do you remember most about the USO shows up in Lai Khe?

RE: Well, actually I had to work when the USO show was there, so I don't remember the USO show specifically. I was in Dau Tieng when the show was in Lai Khe, so I didn't see it. We would occasionally have USO tours that would come through. The one that I do remember, there was a guy on the radio, on the Armed Forces Radio called Johnny Grant I think, and he came around with half a dozen pretty young ladies. I do remember that group, and they spent some time with us at our unit. That's the only time I really remember any of that stuff.

SM: You said you were at Dau Tieng?

RE: Well, Dau Tieng was where we had a stand by, so we always had an aircraft there and it just happened that I was there when the USO show came to Lai Khe.

SM: Now was the 188th Assault Helicopter Company still there, do you remember, the Black Widows?

RE: That name vaguely rings a bell, but I can't say. I never knew the unit designations except for the Delta Troop, Quarter Cav, which was the Dark Horse. Usually we would just know them by call sign.

SM: Any other missions or operations that stand out in your memory from either location?

RE: No, not during that period really. There was some stuff going on in the U Minh Forest.

SM: What was it?

RE: Say again?

SM: What was going on in the U Minh Forest?

RE: Well, I just remember sometime during '70 there was a push into the U Minh which generated a lot of business for us, but I don't have any…I can't remember any specific missions into there. I just remember that there was an operation into the U Minh, which had been sort of a no-man's land for a long, long time before that.

SM: You may have already said, but I just want to confirm; what American units were you principally supporting in the Can Tho area?

RE: In the Can Tho area, we were not supporting American units.

SM: You were not supporting any Americans?

RE: No, it was all gooks, Vietnamese. There were some SEALs there and some Special Forces, but there were no major…they were all support units down there. That had generally through the whole war been a Vietnamese area. I think the US 9th Division had been in parts of the Delta before I ever got there, but they were gone by the time I got there. And, of course, the Navy was there with their patrol boats, the PRBs they called them, I don't know what it was.

SM: PBRs?

RE: PBRs, Patrol Boat River, yeah.

SM: Well what kind of correspondence and what kind of news were you getting from home?

RE: Just the normal letters. I do remember one sort of humorous anecdote; when we were in Lai Khe the old man had called us all in for a meeting at one point, or all the officers and the 1st Sergeant and Maintenance Sergeant and told us that there had been a big build up of NVA or at least enemy troops near the fishhook area which was up by Loc Ninh in northern III Corps, and that they didn't know what these guys were up to but they suspected there might be a major push across the border in that area. So, he was just alerting us to be ready. If you get a call at two o'clock in the morning saying, "Grab a helicopter and get to Loc Ninh, you know what's going on because we may have to position a couple of aircraft up there to respond to this potentiality." That was kind of out of our area was why this was all being brought up. He made a big point at the time to tell us all that this was top-secret classified information; we were not to discuss it with the enlisted men or even among ourselves. Once you leave this room, forget about it. I got a letter about a week or so later from my mother saying, "I read in Time Magazine that there's a big buildup of bad guys up by the fishhook area," giving me the same briefing that I got…she'd mailed the letter about the same time I got the briefing! It really wasn't all that secret!

SM: Which of course means that Time had had the information well in advance because the publication…

RE: Exactly!

SM: Oh, for crying out loud. That's funny. What about information about the home front, some of the political agitation, Kent State, that kind of stuff?

RE: We were very much aware of that, and of course I had a sister who was a couple of years younger who was in college at the time, so she was seeing that stuff first hand and I would get letters from her. We read the publication so we saw the same news everybody else saw. We were aware of it, and thought perhaps they were a little misguided but largely ignored it. It really didn't have an impact on anybody that I knew, at least that was discernable; because we were sort of…we were just doing our thing. We were just taking it day by day and doing what we had to do and it really didn't matter what the rest of the world thought at that point.

SM: Well what was the relationship like in your unit between the enlisted men, the warrant officers, and the commissioned officers? What were the relationships like?

RE: Generally it was pretty good, particularly at Lai Khe. The atmosphere changed a bit when we got to the Delta, and that was for a number of reasons I suppose. But, at Lai Khe, as I said earlier, esprit was just phenomenal. We all got along very well. There was always sort of a good natured rivalry between warrant officers and commissioned officers, and that was largely in a good humor sort of way, jokes about real live officers versus warrant officers and so forth, and that was ongoing. Generally I think the relations were pretty good. You're always going to have some individual differences, even among those who are in your own group, but by and large I thought it was pretty good. The relations between the officers and the enlisted men were pretty good, especially in Lai Khe. In that environment with esprit as high as it was, rank really didn't make a whole lot of difference. We were all just trying to do a job, and we all did a job as a team. It was a fun place to be, from that standpoint. It was a wonderful experience.

SM: What about between various ethnic groups within your unit? Was there a good relationship between Caucasians, blacks, Hispanics?

RE: Yes, we did have at least guys with Hispanic surnames, although walking down the street you wouldn't have said, "He's Hispanic," I don't think. We did have a smattering of blacks in the outfit. Again, at Lai Khe it was never a problem of which I was aware of. I can't speak for the black individuals concerned. They may have felt some things that I didn't see. I wouldn't say that couldn't happen. I'm sure there were those who were less open minded perhaps than some others about those kinds of issues, but it never developed into a problem that would have affected the unit effectiveness in any way, at least that I can see. Later on when we moved to the Delta, I do remember one particular individual who as a slacker trying to excuse his behavior by playing the race card which really, really irritated me. That was one example with one individual. But really those who could more directly answer that question as to whether there was ever any tension would probably be the minority folks themselves. It wouldn't be correct for me to address that because I don't know what they were feeling.

SM: But you yourself did not witness any overt acts of racism, any kind of specific racial tension?

RE: Not within our unit. However, there was within the Army and that was apparent. You would most likely see that in a social setting rather than a work setting. Actually what would happen I think when it was time to work, everybody did what they had to do. When it was time to relax, then everybody splits off into their own little group and that's when sometimes tensions might rise to the surface. But, I think by and large when you had to get down to business, then everybody got down to business and it didn't matter who the guy next to you was at that point. But, it did exist. That was during there was a big black pride thing coming on stream at that time and I remember the elaborate handshakes that some of the black guys used to go through and all that which was an expression of that I suppose. I just remember that, and one of the guys in our unit, one of the black guys going to the mess hall on duty so he only had about ten minutes to eat and get back to the aircraft, trying to go through the line, and here's all these guys that want to soak up this whole ten minutes shaking hands. Man, I don't have time for this crap! I've got to get back to work! Let me get my food. We'll shake hands some other time.

SM: Okay, and how about drug use? Of course that's something that's talked about in conjunction with American forces in Vietnam. Was that ever an issue in your unit?

RE: It was not an issue in Lai Khe. It became an issue in the Delta with some individuals, and unfortunately it was pretty destructive to the unit. I'm not saying that the drug use itself was the destructive element. I think what became destructive was within the enlisted ranks there came to be a rift between what was known as the juicers and the dopers, so you were either a drinker or you were a smoker so to speak. There developed a rift between those two groups, which was very unfortunate. I never could understand why that had to be because in actual fact, I have a specific individual in mind who I won't name, but was an excellent medic but he did like to smoke a little weed on his time off, and that was never a problem to me. I didn't care what he did when he was not on duty. He was a damn good medic and a very good guy to fly with and he had his act together. But, he got branded as being in the doper group and it caused some problems within the unit and it shouldn't have really because perhaps I'm a little more open-

minded about that than some others, but he always did his job and I thought it was…I didn't see any difference between him being high and somebody else being drunk on their time off.

SM: Was that attitude shared much among the other officers that you know of?

RE: Probably among some of the younger guys, and it would depend I suppose a little bit on whatever the guy's socio-economic background was, how he grew up and what his…you know, the Army only reflects the civilian life from which it draws its personnel, and so the Army had the whole range of attitudes just like the larger society did. There you have it, it depended on where the guy came from, I suppose.

SM: Was there random urinalysis?

RE: No.

SM: Did that occur at all?

RE: No, not in those days, no.

SM: At that point they did have the capability?

RE: I was not aware that they did, but it certainly was not used. I never heard of that. That stuff didn't come in until I was out of the Army.

SM: How about this one medic in particular; when it started causing problems in the unit, did he get removed?

RE: I think he did. I'm a little unclear on that but I think he ended up leaving the unit and I don't know the exact circumstances. I'm sure he wasn't the only one, he was just the most visible one or the one that somebody decided they were going to make an example of, I don't know.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about with regard to your time at Can Tho?

RE: No, but you brought up the drug thing. When I was with Air America, we would spend time in Can Tho as well. In fact, whoever the local area commander was there with the Army, by this time I'm a civilian, but I remember going to work one morning to the base at Can Tho and the base was just locked down. We managed to get on because of what we did, but whoever the general was had decided he was going to determine for sure just the extent of this problem. So, he locked that place down like a prison and no one could move in or out without special clearance to do so. Any aircraft

that landed was subject to a search of any personnel below the rank of bird colonel and no Vietnamese were allowed on or off. He found out real quickly what his problem was, at least as far as the serious drug use, the guys who had a drug habit, because by that time…this sort of happened I suppose as I was leaving, heroin got into the scene. At that point, that particular commander was the first one down there that really faced it head on I think. He found out in about three days who had a habit and who didn't because they just couldn't get it anymore so these guys were going through withdrawal and so forth. I don't know how many were discovered to have a problem but I was impressed at the time that this guy was sort of, "Damn the politics, I'm going to find out what's really going on," because I suspect there was a temptation by commanders in some instances to bury their head in the sand and let the next guy have the problem. It's not a good thing to admit I have a drug problem in my unit. Maybe that's impolitic for me to say that, but I suspect that would have been the case for some.

SM: Yes, sir. Heroin of course becomes an issue when looking at Air America because there are all sorts of allegations that had floated around through the years that Air America itself was involved in some kind of drug trade. What do you think about those allegations?

RE: I think they're ill founded. I've read the books, the same books that everybody else has read where those allegations are laid out and I have no direct knowledge of some of the events that are outlined. I can say this; I know of no one in the four years that I was with Air America that was involved in the drug trade in any way at all. I don't know of anybody that retired from Air America a rich man from drugs. Some guys invested their money fairly wisely and are comfortable, but nobody got rich. The analogy that I often use with people when I'm asked about that is, "Hell yes we carried dope, so does TWA! So does American Airlines! It doesn't mean we're in the business." Undoubtedly it moved on our aircraft. When you're loading up a bunch of hill people and somebody's shooting at you, you don't inspect their baggage. Okay, from that standpoint yeah, maybe we were…it did ride on our aircraft I'm sure occasionally without our knowledge, but in fact those allegations became so widely made that in '72 I guess sometime, by the time I got there anyway in '72 to Laos Air America had put in place their own sort of customs service, and when you landed back in Vientiane from

having worked up country, you were met by these people, anybody getting off your helicopter was searched, the aircraft was looked at, just as if you would have landed in Chicago and gone through customs.

SM: Yes, sir. Did that involve dogs?

RE: I couldn't say. I don't recall.

SM: What did you hear about Air America while you were in Vietnam? When did you first hear about them and what was it you heard?

RE: Well I first was aware of their existence when I saw their helicopters, and my commander identified…I just happened to be flying with the old man one day when we saw one of them around Saigon. "What's that?" and he said, "That's Air America." "Well who are they?" He said, "Well basically that's the CIA's airline," and that was the first knowledge I had of their existence.

SM: And he told you straight up, straight away it was CIA?

RE: It was common knowledge by then.

SM: Of course they maintained that secrecy all the way through the war and even after?

RE: Those three letters were never spoken when I was associated with them. It was never overtly acknowledged but of course we know it's all become public knowledge since then?

SM: Right, and you knew at the time?

RE: Yes. Well, everybody seemed to know but nobody acknowledged it!

SM: Right. What made you attracted to switching from military to Air America?

RE: I had enjoyed my time in Vietnam, as strange as that may sound. It was a very rewarding way to occupy your time I thought, and I still believed that we were doing a worthwhile…that we had a worthwhile goal. I wanted to continue in aviation. That's what I wanted to make my life's work, and that was the best job around in the place where I wanted to be, so it just seemed natural. That was the job I wanted of all jobs, that's the one I wanted most and I was fortunate enough to get it.

SM: Now when did you attempt to get employment with them? Was it while you were still in Vietnam?

RE: Yes, I had extended. I had volunteered for a six-month extension of my tour in the Army. I had decided after two or three weeks in Vietnam that I was just going to stay in Vietnam until I got out of the Army, however long that took. So, I had extended and at the end of the regular tour they would customarily give you a 30-day leave and then you'd come back and do your six-month extension. So, I first started investigating Air America when I was on my 30-day leave between my normal tour and my extended tour, and that's when I made the initial inquiry.

SM: What were your initial inquiries met with?

RE: That sort of, "Don't call us, we'll call you; never mind, we don't need you." Then when I got out of the Army, having gotten sort of the brush off on my initial inquiries I didn't know quite how to approach it and I decided, "I'm not going to call this guy because I know what he's going to say if I call him, so I'm just going to drive to DC and knock on his door." So, that's what I did. I didn't literally knock on his door. I drove to DC, called him the morning after I arrived, and said, "Look, I want to talk to you about a job," and he started to put me off and I said, "Look, I just drove 800 miles to get here for the express purpose of talking to you. Can you give me five minutes?" "Okay, come on down." So, I went down and talked to him and I don't remember…it wasn't particularly encouraging what he told me and the lo and behold, a couple of months later I got a telegram.

SM: And it said…

RE: It said, "If you're interested in employment in Laos," actually it said, although I didn't end up in Laos immediately, but, "If you're interested in flying Bell Helicopters in Laos, give us a call," so I did and then went back out for further interviews and testing and so forth and was hired.

SM: What kind of Bells?

RE: 204s, almost a Huey B Model but not really, the civilian version. The Army never really had the aircraft that we flew, or at least they never had the 204 Bs. We did have H Models in Laos also.

SM: Before we talk about your time with Air America, I'd like to briefly discuss the end of your tour leaving Vietnam and getting back home. You already mentioned

that you extended six months so that you could finish your time in the military in Vietnam. What was it like when that time was finally up?

RE: That's a bit of a story, actually. I had already put in for a second extension and was prepared to just stay until I got out of the Army thinking normally in the warrant officer program you had a three year commitment upon graduation from flight school, so I assumed that I was just going to hang in and do the whole three years in Vietnam. I put in for a second extension, which had been granted. About two weeks before my first extension was over, I got a call while flying one day saying, "We just got a message from Long Binh that you're AWOL. You need to get back here right away." I said, "What do you mean AWOL, man, I'm in a helicopter in Vietnam. What do you mean AWOL, you know where I am!" When I got back that night and read the message, it was to the effect that I should have reported to Long Binh already because I was being separated from the Army. I don't remember what the exact message said, but what had transpired was that the Army had made a decision that they were winding down, and that any warrant officer who had a year in country could leave immediately and get out of the Army. So, that was what they were telling me the deal was. At that time I had about two weeks left to go and I wasn't ready to leave yet. I had already sort of programmed my mind that this extension is not over until such and such time. I told them, "Tell them never mind, I'll be there when I get there. I'm going to stick to the original plan." So, that's what I did. I was supposed to leave on I think the 2nd of January and when I got to Long Binh I kept getting bumped for emergency leave. So finally around the 4th or the 5th of January, after repeated trips to the airport only to find that I was bumped for an emergency leave, finally after one of those trips the guy said, "Look, I know you've been back here four or five times. Do you want to wait for the next airliner going back, next charter, or do you just want the next thing leaving?" and I said, "Man, just put me on the next thing out of here." He said, "Okay." There was a C-141 leaving later that day so I got on that aircraft with about five or six other guys and a bunch of pallets of something and that aircraft flew us to Japan. In Japan I got bumped for emergency leaves again. So now I'm stuck in Japan with nothing but khakis in January, colder than hell, and sat around there for a day or so. Finally some high ranking Air Force fellow who was also in the same boat having trouble getting out made enough of a squawk they laid down another 141 for him because

there were a number of us caught there. So, we finally left Japan for the States in a C-141 with maybe 30 or 40 people aboard, with proper seats this time instead of web seats and that kind of thing. It was configured for passengers. We got back to the States early in the afternoon and I had to get from Travis Air Force Base I think it was to the Oakland Replacement Station, whatever it was called, and I had had the foresight that I had taken a flight physical about a month before after I knew I was leaving the Army so it wouldn't have been that long before, maybe a couple of weeks before, and had the doctor put a note on my paperwork that I was qualified for separation. So, when I got to Oakland to get out of the Army the guy said, "We can't process you today. We've only got a couple of hours left and there's a lot of stuff we've got to do and the physical takes an hour and a half," or something like that, and I said, "Whoa, never mind the physical, I've already had that." He said, "Okay, got paperwork?" "Yes, sir, here it is," and I showed him my paperwork and he said, "Okay," and I was out of the Army a couple of hours later and on my way back to Indiana that night.

SM: Did you encounter any kind of war protestors or anything like that?

RE: No, no I didn't.

SM: What was your backup plan in the event your travels to Washington DC and trying to get an appointment with Air America fell through?

RE: I had applied with several places. I wanted to work overseas, so I had applied to a couple of British companies that had operations in various parts of the world. In fact, I got positive responses from both of those companies after I'd already been hired by Air America so I just wrote them thank you letters and said, "I've already found something else," so it worked out pretty well.

SM: These are civilian British corporations?

RE: Yes, in fact one of them I subsequently ended up working for a couple of times in support of the oil industry.

SM: What did your family think about you going right back into the fire, so to speak; get out of the Army, come home, and then get hired to go right back into the combat?

RE: You know, I don't know what they really thought. They didn't say anything negative, but nobody tried to dissuade me. What their innermost thoughts were, I don't

know. I suppose a parent would be concerned, but nobody tried to talk me out of it. They always knew I kind of did my own thing anyway, so I guess it wasn't a big surprise.

SM: Once you got the telegram and confirmed that you did want to work with Air America, what kind of training did you go through here in the US before going overseas? Anything at all?

RE: No, there was no training. There was some testing. We took what was called the Stanine Exam, which I understand at that time was a fairly standard test that was given that the airlines used and we had to take that.

SM: What did it test?

RE: It was a whole range of things. It was an all day affair. There was a lot of psychological stuff in it. There was also as I recall some stuff with a little electric box where you push buttons and make lights come on in various sequences and so forth I suppose to test your reflexes or something of how fast your brain was talking to your hand or whatever. That's about all I remember about it. It was almost like going to take an SAT or something only there was a lot more psychological stuff. I do remember that the woman that was administering the test, I sort of asked her, "How did we do?" and she said, "It's hard to say." She said, "The test is a fairly standardized test but it's graded in such a way that whoever is paying for the test, the employer, can specify what kind of profile they're looking for." So, the same test could have been used by people searching for an entirely different type of employee. It would just be a matter of interpreting the results and picking out which guy you wanted.

SM: Were polygraphs a part of the battery at that point?

RE: No.

SM: How about interview process to work with Air America?

RE: Actually, the interview was not so much about me as it was about them telling me what the company was about and where I would be living and what I'd be doing and that kind of thing. There were some…I got the feeling that I'd been pretty well vetted before I ever went in to actually talk to them because he had asked for recommendations and he knew my background on the phone before I ever went out there, and had told me he'd talked to my former commanders and so forth and so on. Then I

knew they'd been snooping around the neighborhood asking questions, too, because I got that from neighbors that somebody had been coming around asking.

SM: This will end interview number one with Mr. Bob Eaton.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bob Eaton on the 18th of December, 2001 at approximately 11:10. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Eaton is in…I forgot.

RE: In Brazil, Indiana.

SM: That's right, Brazil, Indiana. Okay sir, let's go ahead and pick up with the discussion of your entry into Air America. We ended our last interview discussing the battery of exams and whatnot that you had to take. If you would, just describe what happened after you finished all that, when you heard that you were accepted, and where you went from there?

RE: I don't actually recall the sequence of exactly when I found that I had the exams and so forth, but the woman that had the exams indicated to us that the results looked favorable at her quick glance. We probably ended up going back to the office in DC and hearing some more about where we might be going if we were hired and so forth. The interview actually was not so much an interview as it was an explanation of what they were doing and what we could expect, scrapbooks and all that kind of thing. We were scheduled originally for Thailand. I don't remember when I took the exams. I think the total elapsed time from the first telegram indicating I should come and take the exams, that probably happened about March and I ultimately arrived in the Far East in early June or late May. I think my official date of hire or my seniority date was the 2nd of June I believe of 1971. I don't recall exactly how I was informed - I guess it was a phone call probably – that I was hired and had to get a passport and sent all that stuff to DC for visas and so forth. Then I was sent tickets from Indianapolis via LA I believe to Taipei, not knowing that there was anybody else hired at the same time. Interestingly enough, I met a fellow that I had briefly known in the Army in the airport in LA and it turned out he was going for the same job, so we rode over together and upon arrival in Taipei found out that there were actually a total of five of us that had hired on at the same time. We were picked up by a local in Taipei and in the car on the way to the hotel we were informed that we were not going to Thailand, that everything had changed and we were

going to Saigon which caused a little consternation, particularly among the one fellow that was married and concerned about that. It didn't matter to the rest of us really where we went. So, we checked into the hotel there, did maybe three or four days processing in Taipei which included a physical, and filled out a bunch of paperwork, heard more indoctrination or introduction I should say, not indoctrination as to where we'd be going, what we'd be doing, and who we were working with and so forth. Then we got on the plane and went actually to Bangkok for some more processing there, and from there to Vientiane for ground school. I spent maybe a week in Vientiane, I don't recall, and then flew from Vientiane direct to Saigon. At Saigon then we began another in processing deal there to check through all the various personnel security and all that sort of thing, operations and so forth, and began flying in early June.

SM: Now as you were going through this process, especially when you started arriving in Southeast Asia at Bangkok, Vientiane, and then Saigon, what was the content of the briefings you were receiving that you remember?

RE: You know, I don't really remember a whole lot because they weren't really telling us much that we didn't already know. It was basically just telling us what our accommodations would be, everyday living sort of things. We didn't get into the operational aspects very much. That was sort of a learn as you go kind of thing.

SM: How about rules regarding your activities, your personal activities?

RE: We must have heard some. I don't remember a lot about that. I'm sure that somewhere along the line it was mentioned probably an eight hour cutoff between drinking and flying. Perhaps it was 12, I don't even remember now. It probably was 12 hours actually, but I don't specifically remember, but that had been a problem on some occasions so I'm sure that was mentioned because it does stick in my mind as something that's kind of beat in our heads. In fact, there had been cases of somebody seen in a bar who was not drinking alcohol but was seen in a bar by a customer and it caused some problems, so we were cautioned to be careful where we were seen when we got within 12 hours of flying.

SM: Did you know any of the guys that were going over with you? Had you met them previously?

RE: Well the one fellow that I met in LA, I really knew him more…I think I'd met him once at a party when I was in the Army and I knew him more by call sign than I did by his face because when I was flying Dustoff in Lai Khe with Americans, he was in one of the outfits that used to support us quite frequently. So, I had talked with him on the radio any number of times and I knew who he was. I think I'd met him once before. The other three, I didn't know.

SM: And when you did arrive in Saigon…correction, excuse me, you just mentioned customers and the example a customer saw a pilot in a bar and that caused some problems. Did you know or was it explained to you who the customers were?

RE: No, we were never told who the customers were.

SM: Did you know, though?

RE: Yes. In actual fact, customers weren't always agency people. There was any number of folks we worked for. We had one contract while I was in Saigon that was a Navy contract, but the people we were actually carrying around were employees of RMK, Morison Knutson and that consortium, doing construction work for the Navy, and in fact that was quite a nice job. We did a lot of work for them, and then we worked for various others, USAID and the Embassy and so forth and so on, and you never really knew who somebody really was, and you didn't ask. It didn't matter.

SM: Well, what was it like when you arrived in Southeast Asia?

RE: Well I'd only been gone six months, so it certainly wasn't…I knew what to expect. So, it was almost like coming home in a sense except it was better living there as a civilian than it was as a military guy. In fact, I had gone down to my old unit which was now down in the Delta, on a day off I hitched a ride on a C-47 or something and got down there and spent the day and saw some of the guys that were still there that I had worked with only six months before. It was sort of like coming home in a sense.

SM: Now could you explain to them who you were working for?

RE: Yes, I told them that I was with Air America and they would see our helicopters around because we had an operation based in Can Tho which is were the unit was a couple of miles from there so they saw us, and it was no secret who we were, really.

SM: When you got there, that was June of what year, again?

RE: June of ’71.

SM: That was ’71? When you got there, what were you explained as far as what your personal mission as a pilot would be?

RE: Generally speaking, to fly at customer direction. The way it would work, you’d go in in the morning and you’d find out sort of what contract you were on which defined who the customer was, and usually what it was, nine times out of ten, was fly out to such and so place and work at customer direction. So, you just fly to wherever you were told to begin your work, pick somebody up, and then they would tell you what they wanted you to do for the rest of the day.

SM: Were you briefed about…well, something that’s come up in previous interviews is sometimes what you’re asked to do as pilots was quite dangerous and quite threatening. What kind of instructions did you receive regarding safety and maintenance of your aircraft in terms of mission parameters?

RE: Well I know that it was pointed out that, “Look, you guys are civilians. You don’t have to do anything crazy. You’re not in the Army and this guy’s not a general. He can’t force you to do anything.” Only once do I remember that ever becoming an issue, and I kind of took issue with the position at that time. You know, most all of us were in a get-the-job-done mode, and helicopter people especially, and I can’t speak for the fixed wing type, but I suspect in that environment a very similar mentality, are kind of independent sorts. There are times when we don’t take direction very well if we have our own idea of what should happen. So, that really never was much of a factor. That was pretty much those kinds of decisions were made on an individual basis according to what things looked like and what you thought about the deal on site. Keep in mind, the whole operation in Vietnam was much less threatening than it was in Laos. We weren't as directly involved in hostilities as were our counterparts in Laos. The real show was up there. Saigon was for the most part what the military used to call ash and trash, just haul this load there, pick these guys up, move them from here to there, but we weren't as directly involved in the hostilities as the guys in Laos were, at least when I arrived.

SM: Can you describe the circumstances that led you to question that particular mission?

RE: That was later on. I sort of fast-forwarded ahead a little bit.

SM: That's okay, because it's in the context of what we're talking about.

RE: There was an Easter Offensive in '72 and it just so happened in fact, a little anecdote, this is kind of interesting, because I was flying up there with one of the old timers, flying out of Quang Tri which is the northernmost province and we were working for MACV that day, again, going to customers. Sometimes customers would be military people. So, we were flying for MACV that day and doing the same thing we would do, just say, "Take this load here, take this load there," and everything was normal. In fact, that morning about 11 o'clock in the morning we'd been up to this place called…the Americans would say Gia Linh, I don't know how the Vietnamese would pronounce it. If any Vietnamese listen to this tape they'll think I'm slaughtering their language. But, Americans would know it as Gia Linh which is just a couple of clicks below the DMZ, sort of our northernmost outpost at that point, Vietnamese outpost. We'd been up there that morning shut down for maybe a half hour while whoever we were carrying conferred with whoever he was talking with, and then we left, came back, and worked more to the west of Quang Tri up into the mountains a little bit to some fire bases, and about one o'clock that afternoon we got a call from MACV on the radio telling us, "If anybody wants to go North of the Cua Viet River, don't take them." "Why is that?" and they said, "Because we don't own it anymore." In the space of just a couple of hours, the bad guys had essentially moved the DMZ down one river. The Cua Viet River is the one that goes by Cam Lo and Dong Ha as I recall. So, I mean, this thing just happened terribly fast and when it happened they captured friendly fire bases in tact and were turning the guns around and shooting our own stuff back at us. Later on that afternoon we took the MACV American major out to a place called Mai Loc. He was going to look at a hospital. I think he was a doctor or something. As we were landing in there, we started taking incoming in that area and as he was getting off that helicopter the original arrangement had been to leave him there for three or four hours and go back and pick him up later in the day. As he was leaving we summoned him back to the helicopter and explained to him that, "This really doesn't look good and all hell's breaking loose and nobody knows what's going on, and we can't guarantee that we can get back in here to pick you up." He was a little upset about the whole deal, "What the hell," so he cancelled his program, got back on the helicopter, left with us, and as far as I know we were the last

helicopter that was ever in Mai Loc until the end of the war. So, had he decided to stay, it would have been a bad decision. I don't think he would have gotten out. In any event, getting to what you were talking about, as the offensive progressed there was any number of Air Force people getting shot down. The whole thing had just become pandemonium. At some point along the line, I think the SA-7 appeared and nobody knew what the heck that was. Anyway, it was getting to be the bigger thing that anybody had been through since Tet of '68 probably, and chief pilot came up from Saigon and was cautioning us to…the old thing, "You guys are not in the military. You're not armed," and all the rest, "So be careful about…they're not paying you enough to do some of these things," and my response to that was, "Well, they're not paying that guy that got shot down a damn thing to be sitting on the ground waiting for somebody to pick him up." That kind of irritated me at the time because I didn't…I was still in the mode that if somebody's shot down, you go pick them up. Don't leave it for the Jolly Greens or somebody else if you're right there. But, that seemed to be sort of the attitude. Of course as one grows older you look at things a little differently. Perhaps there was some logic to what he was saying because these guys were going down in very bad areas. Oftentimes one helicopter really wouldn't have had the assets to pull it off I don't suppose. It's no good if a crew of three goes in to pick up one guy and then all of a sudden you end up with four guys on the ground looking for a ride out.

SM: How much do you think that was the actual justification?

RE: Well I wouldn't presume to get into somebody else's mind. I can only say that I did not necessarily agree with that position but I wouldn't say that it was wrong, either. This was somebody who'd been kicking around that part of the world for the last probably 30 years. He certainly had some background from which to say what he was saying. I wouldn't debate that from this perspective now, although it kind of irritated me when I heard it.

SM: Okay, were there ever any missions before the Easter Offensive where you guys would get shot at, or was it routine that you would get shot at?

RE: No, in Saigon it really wasn't routine to get shot at. It happened, certainly, on occasion, usually unexpectedly. We were shot at on occasion. We were hit on occasion. But, it wasn't…I was coming from a situation in the Army where we got shot

at all the time. It was the nature of the work that I was doing. So really, what we were doing in Air America in Saigon I thought was a piece of cake compared to what I had done in the military.

SM: Well, I guess we should go ahead and step back then and go back to your early experiences, and if you would, do you remember some of the first missions you went on, what they were like, what was different about flying for Air America versus the Army, that kind of stuff?

RE: What I was doing in the Army was medical evacuation. Now a number of those people would just be sick. We'd get calls for a fever of unknown origin or a malaria case, something like that, just routine stuff. But you know when you get a call that they have four Americans with gunshot wounds, somebody shot them, and whoever shot them is probably going to shoot at you, too. It was not unusual at all to take fire on a Medevac, and it was not that unusual to be hit. We got shot up on a fairly regular basis, I guess, oftentimes not seriously; in fact, most times not seriously. I had I think in the 18 months I flew that sort of stuff, I only had one or two guys on the aircraft actually hit. The rest of them were things that caused no serious damage. I never had an aircraft disabled to where I couldn't get it home, anyway.

SM: What was the heaviest thing that you were hit with?

RE: You mean the heaviest armament?

SM: Heaviest weapon, yes, sir.

RE: Just small arms.

SM: Just small arms?

RE: Never got a hit with anything as big as a 50, just probably AK stuff. I've been shot at with stuff, but they weren't successful, RPGs and mortars, but their aim was not that good and we were pretty quick.

SM: What were you flying for Air America?

RE: Bell 204 Bs, which is a Huey essentially.

SM: How did you like it compared to the Huey's you were flying in the Army?

RE: They were wonderful aircraft. They were very well maintained. I always thought that of that whole series, and that's a series that's been in production for God knows how many years in innumerable versions, I thought the 204 actually flew about as

well as any of them because I've always speculated it was the closest to the original design and maybe that's why it worked as well as it did. Our aircraft were also pretty light. Although we had a smaller engine than the Army did in their H Models, our airframes were lighter so we could actually haul a bigger load or at least be competitive with it. I remember on occasion working side by side with the Army for MACV sort of alternating loads with them and we were getting off the ground with bigger loads than they were because we had a lighter airframe.

SM: Did that translate into less protection?

RE: Well, yes, because we didn't have all the armament they had. We did have armored seats, but we didn't have the sliding panels and some of the other things that had come along later, and of course we didn't have guns so that's a lot of weight that you save there. And, we only carried three crewmembers; they carried four.

SM: Who were you paired up with? Was it on a regular basis that you would fly with the same person or did you switch around?

RE: No, you fly with anybody, just however it shook out. Crew scheduling handled all that stuff, and that was a major task in itself scheduling crew members because part of our pay, I'm sure you've heard this, but part of our pay was based upon flight hours so there was always an attempt to keep everyone's flight hours equal because it meant money. When crew scheduling had a problem doing that, they heard about it.

SM: Who handled the crew scheduling principally?

RE: That was done by…I don't know who was in charge of that ultimately, but it was done by a little office full of Vietnamese people that ran that.

SM: Who comprised your crew consistently? Did you fly with some of the same people quite a lot?

RE: Yeah, because there weren't that many of us in Saigon, so yeah, you got to know everybody very well, interestingly enough. And of course at that time I was a copilot. I got there in June of '71 and I was a copilot until early '73. I learned a lot in that role because there is truly an art to being an effective copilot. You have to tailor the way you approach the job according to who you're flying with, so you get to know the various individuals you're flying with and you do it the way they want it done, and they

all want it done slightly differently and they all had different personalities, so you have to become somewhat skilled at interpersonal relationships, too.

SM: Yes, sir. Who do you remember flying with?

RE: Who?

SM: Yes, sir.

RE: Probably the most memorable was a guy named Bill Mauser. This was in Saigon, now. I don't know if you've heard of him. He was a retired colonel and a fellow that a lot of people had a lot of difficulty getting along with. I never had a problem with Bill at all because I figured out how to get along with him. So, we had some relatively enjoyable times. I remember all the people. Larry Stadulis was one of the check pilots, I remember him. Jeez, you know all of them really, if I went down through a list I would know them all, and of course some of them that I flew with earlier in Saigon then transferred to Thailand and were gone and replaced by someone else. Izzy Friedman was another one that I flew with in Saigon. He'd come down from Thailand to help out for some reason and flew with us for a couple of months there and I really, really enjoyed flying with Izzy.

SM: Anybody else stick out in your mind?

RE: Brian Johnson, whom you know. I got the initial check out in Saigon from Brian and then later on he went to Thailand shortly after I got there so I didn't fly with him operationally that much until I got to Thailand and then I was in the same program he was in in Thailand so I flew with him up there, too, and quite enjoyed that.

SM: And how about did you ever get to know any of the customers?

RE: I knew some of the customers in Saigon. I didn't know that many. You would know them by their call sign or you just worked for them, but I didn't have the sort of personal relationship with the customers in Thailand that a lot of the guys that had been up there longer did. I was only there for six months, and while I was there…

SM: In Thailand?

RE: Well, in Thailand, Laos. The base was Thailand but all the operations were in Laos. I was just a copilot so I kept my mouth shut and stayed out of the way and did my job. So, I didn't have that much first hand interaction with the customers in Laos.

SM: Do you remember any customers from Saigon?

RE: I'd be reluctant to say names.

SM: How about their call signs?

RE: The one that sticks in my mind was call sign Hotel.

SM: Now do you recall the nature of some of the operations you supported flying in Saigon, because of course by the time you got there the US had been heavily winding down the war and with strong American forces, Vietnam-izing the war, as Nixon called it. So, US conventional forces were minimizing rather significantly. What was it like for the agency side of the war that you supported, flying customers outside or around Saigon?

RE: It was really pretty routine. It really wasn't all that exciting quite frankly. There would be occasions of course. Somebody might decide to pop a round at you or something, but most of what we did, it was either resupply or it was liaison type of stuff where you just carry somebody in somewhere and they would have a meeting and you don't know what they're doing. You'd just drop and you'd wait until they came back to the helicopter and you don't ask questions because it's none of your business. All you're doing is furnishing transportation. On the one that I did mention with the Navy, that was a construction project and we were just carrying the boss around so he could stay up with how the project was going, and we'd carry food. We carried a lot of supplies, mainly food really, to places that were remote. It really wasn't direct military stuff. It was support efforts.

SM: Was it very consistent work in terms of if you were pretty much always busy?

RE: Yeah, you could go out and a good day was a ten-hour day. Often you wouldn't get that much, but of course the more the better because you're getting paid somewhat by the hour. It was a rather complex pay system, but your flight hours did matter so the more you got, the happier you were, and especially if you could get nice, long days because by the end of the month crew scheduling was trying to get everyone equal. If you could get your 100 hours in by banging out ten ten-hour days, which of course which wouldn't happen, but theoretically you'd have a ten day month where another guy would fly five hours a day and have a 20 day month.

SM: You said the ten-hour days were good, but not very common? What was a typical day, more like eight?

RE: Jeez, that's a real tough one because it would range anywhere from a couple of hours up to ten. Maybe an average day was six. Boy, that's just a wild guess.

SM: Now was there a ceiling or a limit on how much you could fly per day?

RE: I'm sure there was. I don't remember what it was. 100 hours a month sticks in my mind as a maximum month, but again, a lot of these things, there were all kinds of rules and then there were always attempts to bend rules. In an environment like that, in the end by and large you just do what you have to do to get the job done. That was the way I looked at it and I think most other people did, too. I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to rules. That was one of the things that I think a lot of us liked about a job like that was that you didn't have a lot of rules, or if you had them you could ignore them.

SM: Do you remember what rules you tended to ignore?

RE: Just about anything I wanted to. I do remember one occasion where the chief pilot had been very adamant, and of course this was later on. This was after I was a captain and we had some operations in Saigon that were single pilot crewed and some that were two pilot crewed. There had been a very adamant directive that had come down saying that the copilot seat; if it had…of course they always had controls because they were configured for two pilots, that we were not supposed to put customers up there. That was the kind of thing that was sometimes ignored. The way it was handled was pilot discretion basically, but I chose to adhere to that rule because it had been sort of not a threatening letter but the chief pilot had been very adamant that customers were not supposed to sit in a pilot seat with controls. A customer walked out one day and started to fly in the front seat and I told him, "I'm sorry, you can't sit there," and that got to be a little bit of a problem. He was not happy but he did get in the back, and the guy who was running that base came out and said, "What's the problem," and I explained to him what the problem was. I said, "Look," I told him, "It's okay, I don't have a problem with it, but you're putting me between a rock and a hard place here. The chief pilot's telling me 'Absolutely do not do that' and you're telling me to do it, so somebody tell me it's okay,

because it's my job we're talking about," and nobody would say it was okay so he got in the backseat and away we went.

SM: Were there many special missions flown out of Saigon while you were there?

RE: No. In terms of like special projects?

SM: Yes, special project missions.

RE: I don't know of any, not while I was doing the helicopter program.

SM: You never flew one out of Saigon?

RE: No, and I don't know of any that were flown out of Saigon. There had…no. There may have been, but if it happened it happened very, very quietly and I would think I would have known about it.

SM: There were some pretty interesting projects going on in Vietnam throughout this period. One of them involved a group called the PRUs, the provincial reconnaissance units. Do you know if you ever provided support for them?

RE: Oh I think we probably did, yeah.

SM: Do you know what I'm talking about?

RE: Oh yeah, yeah.

SM: What did you hear about them while you were there?

RE: Well, my understanding of the PRUs, if I'm getting my initials right, was that they were, oh, pretty hard core sort of mercenary type troops that worked for the agency and I believe they were the ones…mercenary may not be the right word because I don't know exactly who they were. I might be getting them mixed up with the CIDGs, too. But, my understanding of the PRU was that they were basically the people that were implementing the Phoenix Program; am I right on that?

SM: Yes, sir, I think so.

RE: Yeah, and of course the Phoenix Program became somewhat notorious and sort of got out of hand from my understanding of it. But yes, we would carry them occasionally or would carry people that would be going to coordinate with them. But as far as like making an assault into somewhere or that kind of thing, it was nothing that I ever did.

SM: Right. In terms of either providing transportation, support, in terms of supplies, resupply ammunition, things like that?

RE: Yeah, it think we did. Certainly that term is familiar with me, or familiar to me. I'm sure that we did carry people in support of them.

SM: Did you fly many non-Americans?

RE: Oh yeah. We flew whoever the customer told us to put on, so yeah, oftentimes we would have Vietnamese as I recall. We used to do payrolls for example, take people around base to base paying folks. In fact, there were a couple of jobs that were routine payroll runs. Every Tuesday you'd hit all these little bases, and that would probably be…you know, I really can't recall specifically but I'm sure we carried Vietnamese; I mean hell, it was their country!

SM: Right. Well how about the prisoners, did you ever transport prisoners in the field back to headquarters?

RE: Jeez, I don't have any specific recollection of that. I certainly may have. In fact, now that you mention it, I sort of remember making a trip to Phu Quoc Island on some sort of a prisoner thing because there was a big POW camp out there. We went out there having something to do with the POW camp but I don't remember the specifics on that flight now. I did carry any number of prisoners when I was in the Army.

SM: When you carried them for the Army, were they principally wounded prisoners or were these guys that needed to be carried back for processing?

RE: Yeah, we were carrying them because they were wounded.

SM: Okay, so just as Dustoff pilots, you were carrying the wounded?

RE: Right. Interestingly enough, I remember picking a guy up one time. He was a youngster. He was maybe 15-16 years old, and it was called in as a wounded VC with gunshot wounds or whatever, so we picked him up at a firebase and on the way to the hospital…the kid spoke English, and he asked the medic if we were the 57th Med Detachment and he says, "Yeah," and he says, "Well where are you taking me, to Delta Med in Lai Khe?" "Well yeah, as a matter of fact we are. How'd you know all this?"

SM: Yeah, really!

RE: He knew what was going on. Another one we picked up in the U Minh Forest down in the Delta was kind of funny because the medic had said, "Hey, turn

around and look at this guy!" I turned around and looked at him and again he was another kid about 16-17 years old wearing a University of Colorado T-shirt, which we thought was kind of funny.

SM: Yeah! Okay, well anything memorable like that when you were flying for Air America, weird passengers that stick out in your mind or interesting passengers?

RE: Nothing that really jumps out at me. One of the things that I would interject here that might be a point of interest, at least it always was to me, was that we had a Flight Information Center in Saigon and every day before you went out on your flight, if you were based in Saigon you'd go in every day. If you were going up country of course you'd check in there before you went up to do your six days up country. There you'd get a briefing as to what the latest deal was on what was going on in that area. I always felt like we had probably the best intelligence of anybody in the country because we got our information from…well, part of the deal was when you got back at night or back from an RON, then you would also go into FIC and tell them what you knew to update them on what you'd found out in the last few days. As a result, we got our information from virtually everybody that was working in Vietnam. There was a problem over there, and it perhaps still exists, of the various groups hording information. MACV doesn't tell the Navy and the Navy doesn't tell the embassy and the embassy doesn't tell somebody else on down the line. I've seen it oftentimes. You'd go out and work for somebody and they tell you, "Okay, we want to go from here to here," and we say, "Do you know there's been a reported .50 caliber machine gun at this location where you want us to fly right by?" "Where'd you hear that?" "Well we got that last week from somebody else in your area," somebody wearing a different hat. It was obvious that these folks didn't trade information but we got it from all sources so we generally knew what was going on about as well as anybody.

SM: In compared to the Army, your Army experience, this was a vast improvement?

RE: In terms of total intelligence, yeah. We had a better big picture probably than anyone, again, because we got it from all the various groups.

SM: Now when you said you'd go up country for six days, where would you typically go? Where did you go when you went on those six day up country?

RE: We had bases starting from the South: Can Tho, Saigon…

SM: You want to take a minute and get a drink?

RE: No, let me clear my throat here. Pleiku, Nha Trang, and Danang.

SM: Okay, was there any place in particular you enjoyed more?

RE: Can Tho was fun. Nha Trang was great because it was a wonderful beach resort town. Danang I didn't…I'm not talking about the work, I'm talking about just the city, Danang was not particularly attractive and Pleiku was horrible.

SM: How about the work? Did it change or differ from place to place at all?

RE: Well it would at any given time depending on where the hot spots were. Danang could tend to be more active shall we say. Pleiku was later on. That was after the cease-fire when we established the base up there and our operations at Pleiku were essentially for the ICCS function, which was the peacekeeping group, and that was a whole different ball of wax. That was a whole different deal. Can Tho was a nice place to be as far as the way you lived when you got off work. Nha Trang was the same thing. Nha Trang was interesting because you covered a pretty big area and the country was absolutely beautiful up there. So, I enjoyed flying up there just for the scenery.

SM: Were all these places equally manned as far as the number of personnel working and supporting them?

RE: Well we usually had two helicopters at Can Tho. I think generally about two helicopters each, I couldn't say that for certain though. I would say that the staffing was essentially the same, very close anyway.

SM: How about compared to Saigon?

RE: Well Saigon of course was the main base.

SM: Right, so you had significantly more there?

RE: All the major support was from Saigon. When the aircraft would go to an outstation, it would stay there until it was approaching some sort of more significant maintenance requirement and then it would be ferried back to Saigon for the maintenance and replaced with something else.

SM: Now who was doing the routine maintenance on this aircraft? This was the one person that you were carrying? You said you had a crew of three; you, the copilot, and I guess a crew chief?

RE: The crew chief, yeah. The nightly maintenance would be done by a crew chief (flight mechanic).

SM: Was this an American, a Vietnamese, or some other nationality or combination?

RE: Most of them were Filipinos. They came from different places. We had a number of Filipinos. I think we had one Chinese fellow and sometimes we had Americans and sometimes we had no Americans. There had been a lot more Americans there and then they sort of phased them out and moved the Americans up to Thailand, and then as things wore down in Thailand we ended up with more Americans down in Saigon and of course after the cease fire we got 30 something additional aircraft I think from the Army, so there was a big buildup at that point and we had more American crew chiefs [flight mechanics] then.

SM: Now could you give me the date span that you were in South Vietnam? That would have been from June of '71 until…

RE: With Air America it was June of '71 until October or November of '72. Then I went to Thailand/Laos until I think about April of '73 and then came back to Saigon and stayed in Saigon until April of '75.

SM: Who did you work for? This was still Air America, right?

RE: That whole thing was Air America.

SM: Yeah, the whole thing was Air America. During the first period from June '71 until late '72, you were flying all over the country in South Vietnam? Did you ever fly into Cambodia or Laos while you were in South Vietnam?

RE: Cambodia, not Laos.

SM: What was going on there?

RE: I'm trying to remember the timing on that. There was a mission that was started there in Cambodia that was in support of the Cambodian…

SM: Was this part of the Cambodia incursion?

RE: Well it would have been after that because I was in the Army when the incursion happened.

SM: That's right.

RE: I don't know whether this happened…this must have happened…jeez, it's hard for me to reconstruct the dates now. I know we were going in there in '73. I can't recall whether we were going in there before I went to Laos in late '72 or not. But, when I came back, we certainly were going in there routinely.

SM: Well continuing with your time in South Vietnam, you've already discussed one of the major things that occurred during the Easter Offensive of '72. I was wondering if you would describe what you remember the most about that whole time period when the Easter Offensive kicked off in late March of '72, and as it continued and progressed what were you guys doing as far as support in terms of specific operations you might remember or specific flights, things like that?

RE: Mainly what we were doing was the same sorts of things we had always done. The real activity was happening essentially from Hue north and mainly what we were doing up there was flying embassy customers – the ones that I remember, anyway, I'm sure we were doing MACV and all the rest – but the ones that I found the most interesting was flying this one particular embassy customer. There were actually a couple of them, and they were trying to get a handle on what the hell was going on. We'd go up there in the morning from Danang and fly into Hue and stop in Hue and the customer would talk to his people in Hue and find out how were things up to the next sort of outpost North on Highway 1. So, he'd get back on and say, "Okay, let's go up to the next place," so we'd go up there and he'd confer with somebody and they'd get an on the spot report of how are things this morning and then we go up and until we hit the point where we couldn't go any further because we no longer owned that territory. But it was changing so rapidly; that whole thing, nobody knew what the hell was going on. This embassy customer we were flying up there had a better handle on it than just about anybody I would think because he had any number of people that worked for him and he knew them all by name. He had better intelligence about what was happening on the ground probably than just about anyone, and it was very, very confusing situation and changing hourly. The whole thing sort of changed. I remember this particular customer telling me at one point that they had come down so fast, and Hue had always been sort of a choice target. The other side had always wanted to take Hue. That was what was a big deal in '68. They had advanced very rapidly to within easy striking distance of Hue and

then just sat still and didn't do anything, and then the weather changed. During that period, one of the things that had helped them was the weather was bad which limited our air capabilities as far as the Air Force and bombing and that kind of thing. They could have had Hue really but they didn't take it and we kind of wondered why and this customer ultimately told me that they had found a Vietnamese lieutenant I believe, a North Vietnamese lieutenant dead and had gone through what he had on him and discovered that the apparent reason they hadn't gone ahead and taken Hue, and this was because of written documents the fellow had on him, that they had been told to advance to certain locations and await further orders. They were very, very disciplined and apparently their system didn't allow for initiative at the local level as much as Americans would have allowed that. So, these guys got to where they were going way ahead of where the Vietnamese command thought they would be in terms of time, and they just sat down and waited for orders, which never came until it was too late. That was the explanation I was given for why they never took Hue when they had the chance originally. But, I thought it was a sort of interesting anecdote regarding the different approach militarily, and again, this goes back to this one particular customer who definitely knew what was going on.

SM: Yes, sir. Of course there were three major prongs to the Easter Offensive; they hit not just North but in the center, and then also in the South, North of Saigon. Do you remember any of the operations that you supported in those other areas or were you at all active in those other areas?

RE: Well I'm sure I was. I don't remember so much going on down around Saigon. There was always threats of somebody coming over from the Angel's Wing area was it, or the Parrot's Beak?

SM: Parrot's Beak.

RE: Yeah, Parrot's Beak, coming over from that direction and that kind of thing. But, I don't have any specific recollection of that. Maybe that was because I was spending an awful lot of time in Danang. It seemed like I was living up there for a while and I suppose that's why I remember that most because that's where I was during that period of time. But, it was very active up there and even south of Danang also. I do remember one customer telling us, this was in an area sort of in a valley going back into

the mountains South of Danang, they'd had reports of tanks back there, and upon investigation it turned out there were cardboard silhouettes of tanks mounted on bicycles and tape recorded tank sounds and it had just really spooked the local Vietnamese because they saw these cardboard cutouts from a distance and heard these tape noises being broadcast by tape, and they just packed up and ran.

SM: Interesting psychological operation.

RE: They were pretty clever. I'll have to say our enemy knew what they were doing.

SM: Did you or any other Air America pilots that you know participate in American psy-ops, leaf drops and stuff like that?

RE: I remember doing leaflet drops. That was in III Corps that I specifically remember doing that. Yes, we did get involved in that sort of thing. I never knew how productive it was, but it was flight time!

SM: That's what mattered! What about after the Easter Offensive until you left? Anything stand out in your mind?

RE: Not particularly. I do remember that - again, you sort of fast forwarded – Quang Tri was, as I recall, the third largest city in the country and the way they ultimately sort of broke the back of the Easter Offensive was the weather cleared and they just bombed the hell out of Quang Tri because the bad guys had taken Quang Tri and we retook it by bombing them out of there. Subsequent to that, I don't remember getting that far north. It's hard for me to reconstruct the timing. But, after returning to Saigon from six months in Laos I did have occasion to go up to Quang Tri and was just amazed at the devastation. There was not one structure left standing intact in that entire city. It was level. There was the occasional one wall still up, but they just completely obliterated that city. That really made an impression.

SM: Yes, sir. During this time that you're back in Saigon working for Air America, how much are you interacting with the Vietnamese civilian population?

RE: Quite a lot, we lived on the economy. My landlord was a Vietnamese; I had a Vietnamese girlfriend who subsequently became my wife. We were around Vietnamese all the time; that's where we lived.

SM: Were there any rules about your interaction with the Vietnamese?

RE: Not that I recall. Obviously we were encouraged to treat people with respect and that sort of thing.

SM: Of course.

RE: I don't remember any specific rules. I do remember when I first arrived in Laos for the initial ground school being at one of the local watering holes one night and being introduced as a new guy and one of the old timers was going to offer some advice about how to stay out of trouble and his advice was, "Don't talk in public about what you do, don't talk politics, and don't give the locals a hard time." That was his three pieces of advice, and I thought it was pretty good advice.

SM: Yes, sir. You tried to follow it?

RE: I did follow it, yes. It's still pretty good advice.

SM: Yes, sir, it is. As far as not talking politics, did he mean the context of the politics of the war, or local politics?

RE: I think both, and the inference was of course in a public setting. Don't sit around a bar and talk politics, in other words. If you're at home talking to one of your buddies, you could talk about whatever you want to, but publicly avoid those things.

SM: I would imagine that you were in the company of people, mostly men, who shared a rather conservative philosophy very much in support of what the United States was trying to do in Southeast Asia?

RE: Oh yes, I would say generally speaking that's true. There are always some exceptions. Yeah, we all by and large believed in what we were doing. We thought we were doing the right thing. Everybody had pretty good motives. Even the people that were over there, and there were some that had short term goals, largely financial in mind, still believed in what they were doing. I don't think there was anybody over there that thought we shouldn't be there. They might have thought we were mishandling it in some ways or as it drug on I suppose some people might have been saying, "What the hell are we doing here?" but you didn't hear that much. If there was any questioning, it had more to do with how we were handling it rather than the fact that we were there.

SM: What do you remember as far as some of the criticisms of how we were conducting the war during your time with Air America?

RE: Oh, I think it would have run the gamut. There are always people that want to bomb them to the Stone Age and there are people who want to win the hearts and minds, and I would say the whole spectrum. You have to remember that we all come ultimately from the same society, so you're going to have a wide range of views although we would be on the conservative end of that range I would think, generally speaking, the so called more right wing. But, I mean when I say right wing of course you have to be more specific in terms of what area were you talking about. There were people that were very liberal in some areas of their thinking who still thought that we were trying to do a good thing. It was a range of views. There really wasn't a whole lot of talk about it, quite frankly. We were a bunch of young fellows largely, especially the helicopter people. When the day's work was done, we were ready to socialize.

SM: Right, and that meant going and enjoying yourselves?

RE: Having a few drinks or hanging out in a bar or looking for ladies or whatever it might be. At that stage, the war would be…you just go do your job in the daytime and then you come back and pick up your life.

SM: Yes, sir. When you were in Saigon or in South Vietnam were there any specific watering holes you remember? Were there any consistently…

RE: Jeez, by name I can't…there was a bar across the street, which was very handy to me because I could stay there past curfew and just dash across the street. There were a couple of other places that were open all night long. I never had any trouble being out after curfew. I walked home from…of course you wouldn't…if you stayed past curfew, you're not going to get a ride home because there aren't any taxis or anybody out and I didn't have my own vehicle, so I'd end up walking home and I remember walking home and curfew was at midnight I think and I remember coming home at two or three in the morning and being stopped by MPs but more often than not, they'd just give me a ride home in exchange for I'd give them all the beer when we got home, and they were happy with that. Nobody ever really gave me a hard time.

SM: As Air America personnel, you were still supposed to abide by the curfew?

RE: Oh, technically. We didn't have a pass or anything that allowed us to ignore it, so yeah, we were supposed to, but we didn't. Americans could get away with things over there that others couldn't.

SM: Now did you have…what was the recourse if someone did try to give you too hard of a time, especially if it was someone military? Was there a number you would tell them, "Please call this number," and they would tell them to leave you alone so you could get on with your business?

RE: No. I was never aware of any free pass of that nature. I know we had…I don't know personally but I know of cases of people getting picked up for one thing or another and ending up in jail. Ultimately we were subject to their laws. But, their laws could be bent if you had a little money in your pocket. I guess that was ultimately a way out but I never did sort of like that approach so I would usually, if I had a confrontation with the local police, usually his whole effort was aimed at getting a bribe, and I would just stall and stall until they'd finally say, "Oh get out of here," because I've been threatened that, "I'm going to have to haul you in for what you did," and I said, "I didn't do what you said I did," and it would go back and forth. They usually played the good cop/bad cop deal. One of them would say, "Pay my buddy 500 P and that ought to calm him down, or else we're going to have to take you to the station." I said, "Well take me to the station." Well, they know if they take you to the station they're not going to get the money and then the sergeant's going to get the money, and that'll take them off their corner where they might be hitting someone else up for a bribe. Ultimately they'd just tell you to get the hell out of there. I usually was successful in wearing them down.

SM: Now was that a piece of advice you got from someone else or did you just figure that one out?

RE: I just was hard headed enough I wasn't going to pay a bribe.

SM: Let's take a break for a moment sir. We're back from our break. I just wanted to also ask you about American military personnel and how much you had interaction with them during your first tour with Air America in Saigon and South Vietnam?

RE: Well of course we worked for them a lot because one of the normal tasks we would have would be to go to work for MACV, and MACV was the military. We worked a lot with MACV, perhaps more than anyone and at least as much as anyone. So, we had a lot of interaction that way and then socially we would run into them as well. Yeah, there was a fair amount of interaction there.

SM: You mentioned earlier that you'd get really good intelligence from your own information center. Were there any rules about not sharing that information, or was it pretty much okay…like you mentioned you'd be talking with people and you'd say, "Well, there's a .50 cal there or some other hazard that might exist." Was it okay for you guys to do that openly frequently?

RE: Generally speaking, yes. There may have been occasions where we were told that something was not to have been mentioned but it would have been pretty rare and if it was something of a nature like that that could have impacted someone else in a negative sense, I don't recall ever being told, "Don't share that information." In fact, I do seem to have specific recollections of visiting…we would get these congressional visits occasionally or other dignitaries or important people of some sort coming over from the states, and I do remember them sometimes going by FIC for a briefing.

SM: Would you also ferry them around at all?

RE: On occasion, yes.

SM: Well, was there anything else you wanted to discuss with regard to your first tour with Air America in Saigon?

RE: No, sir, I think we pretty well covered it.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and discuss the events that led up to moving to Thailand and Laos, and what was different about flying there?

RE: Well that had come about because at that time there was still a pilot's union so things were done on a seniority basis if an opening came available. A lot of us wanted to go to Thailand anyway. That was where the action was, and the money was better up there as well, but it was really more about being where the action was than it was about the money, and a chance to fly different aircraft. So, an opening came up in Udorn and I bid for it and got it based on seniority, and some of my buddies had left earlier in a similar deal. So, I got up there and had actually bid a job in the H-34, the old round motor H-34 and when I arrived I went in to talk to the local head of the pilot's union or association as some people call it, FEPA and he told me that there was also an opening in the 58-T program which was a somewhat modernized version of that same aircraft. He said, "This is really a better deal. Are you sure you want to do the H-34 or you want to swap over to this other one?" and I said, "Oh yeah, it's a better deal. I'll do the other

one," so that's what I did. So, I went through the checkout in that. I went through the ground school first because it was an aircraft I was not familiar with at all, so I went through several days of ground school and then did the flight training and started flying up country. I love that aircraft and was flying with wonderful people. The work was very interesting. We were working out of 20 Alternate. That was where we were basing up country but we would go up North from there on occasion. I really loved that work, it was a lot of fun, and I learned more there in six months than I had learned in the previous three years I'd been flying because mountain flying is a whole different thing. It was very educational.

SM: Now what was this aircraft again?

RE: The 58-T, which was a twin turbine engine version of the old H-34.

SM: The H-34? Quite powerful, wasn't it?

RE: Yeah, in that day, and in context yes, it was a good aircraft. We had some teething problems, but you always have problems.

SM: I want to get into some of the specifics of some of the operations you conducted there but you mentioned that the pilot's unions still existed. Now when you first went to work for Air America, were you approached to join a union? Did you join the union?

RE: Yes, and I think there was a probationary period. I think you had to be there six months or a year or something like that before you could really…you were still subject to being fired or other kind of action that the union couldn't intercede for you up until when your probationary period was over, but you were encouraged to join the union anyway knowing that it was sort of probational based, and then after your probation period was over then you were in the union if you chose to be. There were those that chose not to be. I don't even remember such thing as union dues or whether we even had them, I don't know.

SM: Did you choose to join?

RE: Yes.

SM: Okay. What did you think about the idea of a pilot's union when you first heard about it?

RE: I just thought that was the way it was done. This is my first civilian job so I really didn't have much basis to make a decision one way or another. I was brand new. I'd never flown civilian before and they had a union and 99% of the people were in it, so I just sort of joined without thinking about it, really.

SM: Did you ever talk with anyone who decided not to join the union and find out why?

RE: I know one individual who did not join the union. I never had an in depth discussion as to why. He just didn't want to, and he didn't. But, I don't know what his reasoning was. I always respected that choice.

SM: When you went to fly the 58-T, you learned how to fly it. What were the biggest challenges to flying that versus the other aircraft you'd flown previously?

RE: It was a bigger, heavier airplane and it had some anomalies at the time because of being a twin engine. It was a sort of a hybrid, two engines driving through one gearbox and there were some sort of weird things that it would do if one engine was acting up. It was a torque control unit that was supposed to take care of power sharing and match the torques, one engine versus the other, and so forth, and that would tend to act up sometimes and if it did act up you had to know what to do. It was also subject somewhat to compressor stall, so you had to be able to recognize those and take corrective action. But, it was generally a pretty nice aircraft to fly. I quite enjoyed it. I still love that aircraft.

SM: Do you? And this is what you flew up at 20 Alternate?

RE: Yes.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe the nature of the operations you conducted there?

RE: Well at 20 Alternate, again that was largely resupply. There would be occasions when you would take troops into an area for example on some sort of a mission, whatever they were doing, an assault or whatever it might be. But, 90% of it, during the period that I was there…and I was there during kind of a lull period around the alternate anyway. There wasn't a whole lot going on at that time. It was largely resupply and mostly external load work. You might go out and haul 120 sling loads in a day or something. It was real good work because you got a lot of takeoffs and landings. It was

at altitude; real short trips, but just really working. It was a lot of fun. The big thing that was going on when I was there in that area was up at Site 32 which was you couldn't get directly to Site 32 because we didn't own the PDJ at that time and it was on the other side of the PDJ from the alternate, so you had to take quite a circuitous route to get there. But, we'd go up there and work all day long and come home. They had a bit of a siege going on during that period there which lasted essentially the whole time I was there. They had just lifted before I left, but that went on for I say essentially the whole time. It went on for two or three months I guess and that was kind of interesting because there was a lot of shooting going on during that deal.

SM: What was the nature of that fire? Was it larger caliber fire? Was it still small arms?

RE: They had .50s up there and then there was a lot of incoming mortar I guess it was probably, that sort of thing. .50s and mortars I guess primarily, and then small arms of course. But, we generally knew where the .50s were. That was the one that worried us the most. They did have anti-aircraft stuff in Laos. I never personally saw one. I never took fire from one. But, they were known to be around and of course as you know we had aircraft hit with anti-aircraft fire.

SM: Now while you were flying these missions in Laos, when you would go out on your mission you would do the same thing I assume that you did in Saigon? The first thing you'd do is you'd go to the Flight Information Center, get your briefing, and head out. Was the intelligence that you were getting there as good or better than what you were getting in Saigon?

RE: It was pretty good. As I recall, we'd go to FIC in Udorn before you'd go up country so you'd get a general overview there. Then when you got to the alternate every morning you'd get a briefing before you'd start to fly, and we'd usually update you as to what had happened through the night because a lot of positions, it was very fluid. So, you'd get another briefing virtually every morning at the alternate telling you, "This is the latest deal, and this is what's going on at this location and that location." There was, oh jeez, a vast number of little spots dotted all around the mountains there that we supported. They would say, "Well we had bad guys down in this valley last night," or whatever, so you had pretty good intelligence. You knew what was going on by and

large, right in the local alternate area anyway. In the larger country I really couldn't say. My exposure to Laos was very limited, it was just alternate and Site 32 really was the only two, and some other sites but those were the two main places that I worked.

SM: What had you heard about 20 Alternate before going to Laos? Anything?

RE: I was aware that it was supposed to be the CIAs secret base in Laos, their major operation or at least in the northern part of the country, and that was all I knew about it.

SM: How much enemy activity was going on there while you were servicing there?

RE: It was relatively quiet. My timing was such that I sort of missed some of the big moves that had happened before and after. It was relatively quiet. I mean, there was activity but it really wasn't all that hot when I was there. You'd get shot at occasionally but it was…it just was not that difficult from an enemy viewpoint right around the alternate during that period. 32 was where the action was, where I was working at the time.

SM: Because it was so close to the PDJ?

RE: I don't know if that was why, but the bad guys had decided they were going to take it and they mounted a siege that lasted quite a long time. That was it; basically they were after it and there was an awful lot of stuff they dumped on it over an extended period.

SM: You were there during the rainy season, no?

RE: I was there…actually I remember the smoky season as well.

SM: Oh, the smoky season?

RE: I don't remember how the seasons fall but I definitely remember the smoky season and probably part of the rainy season as well because I remember having problems with both elements during my brief six months up there, so I must have caught both of those but I definitely remember smoky because I remember even down in Udorn the smoke from up North would be so bad in Udorn sometimes your eyes would water when you walked out of the house in the morning. Of course up when you got up into Laos it was really something. Forward visibility was nil just about.

SM: How would you navigate?

RE: You look straight down and you know where the valleys are, and you basically would fly pretty much-established routes. You knew how to get from Vientiane to the Alternate because you knew what the valleys were. We also had TACAN which was helpful, and you knew how to get from the Alternate to Site 32 and that's just about all we were doing. You could look straight down and see where you were. I mean you had some forward visibility, it wasn't zero. You had enough to find your way around.

SM: Would you explain what that is?

RE: What, forward visibility?

SM: No, the TACAN.

RE: Oh, the TACAN? It's a navigational system. I don't remember what the initials stand for, but it works similar to a VOR except it also gives you a distance reading. So, it would tell you what angle you were from the station and also at what distance.

SM: And that was used to navigate to a specific location?

RE: We didn't use it so much that way as it was just to tell you…you could look at a map and you could say, "Okay, this point is 40 miles on such and such an azimuth from the station."

SM: Okay, and that would give you your location?

RE: That would tell you where you were.

SM: Yes, and then you could figure out…

RE: Then you get a map and you see where you are and where you're going.

SM: Now had you used that before going to Laos?

RE: No, I hadn't used TACAN before because we didn't have it in Vietnam, but I was familiar with it from training in the military. I knew how it worked. It was very simple to work and very helpful, and pretty accurate. You wouldn't….I wouldn't, anyway, try to shoot an approach in the valley in the blind. It wasn't like GPS or something, but it was pretty close.

SM: You made the comment that you learned more flying in those six months than you had the three years previous. Could you relate the more important lessons you learned flying there for six months?

RE: Well flying at altitude is different than flying at sea level because as you get higher and higher, aircraft performance decreases. You end up having to fly the aircraft a bit more defensively, shall we say. You have to realize that that same machine at sea level might be torque limited in that you could pull up to the maximum that the aircraft can take structurally whereas if you get up at altitude, you may not be able to produce that much torque. So, now you're essentially engine limited or whatever parameter is going to top out first establishes your limit. At altitude you may not be able to get full torque, and even if you can get full torque because of the decreased aerodynamic efficiency you still may not be able to pick up the same amount of weight. So, you had to pay a little bit more attention to weight and fuel and all those kinds of things. Also, the winds in the mountains can get kind of treacherous at times so you have to be aware of what's going on environmentally and plan your approach accordingly, plan your operations accordingly. In an area like that where the terrain is so rugged, you have to be thinking about, "Where am I going to go if I have a problem?" What you ended up doing oftentimes on takeoff and on landing is planning your approach or your departure path such that if you have a problem you have a valley to descend into or something, somewhere to go. You don't want to roll down the side of a hill. The aircraft I was flying was much more forgiving than the old H-34s. They only had one engine and they were underpowered, so those guys really had to work hard.

SM: Well when you received your briefings, were you told whether it was Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese that you would be encountering if you went in a specific area?

RE: We probably were. I don't specifically recall. I think most of what we were dealing with…no, I can't say that. I don't know who that was we were messing with up at 32. I think around the Alternate was mostly PL. Specifically I can't recall.

SM: Well when you were doing your work around Lima Site 32, that was at the time held by Vung Pao and the H'mong?

RE: Right.

SM: The other forces that surrounded it laid siege to it? During that siege, did you help ferry men onto the PDJ to help bolster the defenses at all?

RE: No, I never have been at the PDJ. I've been at the edges. I almost went in one day on a pickup of a downed airman, but we never could locate the guy so we didn't go in.

SM: Was this a fellow Air America pilot?

RE: No, this was an Air Force guy.

SM: Did you do any pilot pickups?

RE: No, I never did.

SM: Neither in Saigon or South Vietnam nor in Laos?

RE: No.

SM: During again your time there in Thailand/Laos, obviously you mentioned already a lot of work ferry and sling loads and things like that. Did you do a lot of troop carrying, personnel carrying?

RE: Yes, not as much as some of the other guys did just by the luck of the draw or the timing or whatever. Mainly what I ended up doing was hauling sling load, but we would carry troops as well.

SM: Of course in Thailand there were a lot of Thai soldiers and also Thai police, in particular the Paru, P-A-R-U that were used to help train the Lao forces. Do you remember if you carried many of them up country to help train or continue training the Lao forces so that they could defend themselves?

RE: The Thais that I specifically recall were what we called FAGs, Forward Air Guide, and I do specifically remember them and that's the only specific recollection I have of working with the Thai. They would be the guys that would sometimes direct us when we were up country.

SM: When you were flying out of Thailand, did you ever conduct any operations into Cambodia from there?

RE: No, I didn't, because I was up North. I think some of that may have occurred for the guys that flew down in the panhandle, but it never happened where I was.

SM: Well as you were flying those missions into Laos or flying in Laos, what did you think about how that operation was being conducted?

RE: You know I just sort of walked in there. This is the way it has always been done. I didn't really have much background, and I was the new guy and learning and so it was all sort of new and amazing to me. I thought things were pretty well run. You had asked about customers before and I'm sure you've heard to people refer to a customer called Kayak, and he was very involved in the Site 32 operation. I always thought that from a customer viewpoint he was probably an excellent man to have on your team. But, from our standpoint, there was a problem in that he wasn't always honest with you and that can cause some difficulty, especially…I was relating it back to you remember how I talked about our relationship when I was in the Army with the 1st Infantry Division and how advantageous it was to have people who tell you the truth? Then I saw this individual who would tell you whatever he thought he needed to tell you to get you to come in fat, dumb, and happy and that's not a good deal. There were a lot of people that got very upset about that.

SM: So in particular you're talking about withholding information about say hot areas?

RE: Yeah, I remember specifically at Site 32 in fact on one particular occasion we'd been working up there all day long so we knew what was going on because we'd seen the incoming. We were there so we knew what the deal was. We heard these guys coming in C-46s or something, fixed-wing guys, to make a rice drop and they called Kayak and he tells them it's all quiet. So, we called them on our other radio that he couldn't hear and said, "Bullshit, it's not all quiet. Here's what's really going on," because he would have come in right over a .50 caliber machine gun.

SM: For crying out loud.

RE: So it was a problem when he would do that and I never quite understood why he would, but he did. In other respects he was a pretty good hand. Jeez, he really did care about what he was doing and he had more energy than three men, but he definitely had that one problem that upset a lot of folks.

SM: Did you encounter that anywhere else while you were flying in Laos?

RE: No, I don't. He was the only guy that I remember that really just sticks out in my mind as being somebody that you couldn't trust.

SM: As far as that information?

RE: As far as that element. Interestingly enough, he was a pretty nice guy and I thought his motives were probably okay, I just didn't like his methodology.

SM: Did you ever find out why he would tell pilots?

RE: Again, I was a copilot and I had enough sense to stay clear of things that were better handled by someone else.

SM: Yes. Now in terms of the relationship between pilots and customers, was there any difference between the experience in South Vietnam and Thailand/Laos?

RE: I witnessed more occasions of sort of contentious relationships in Laos than I did in Saigon, but that had primarily to do with the nature of the work because Saigon was pretty easy stuff, whereas in Laos sometimes we were asked to do things that were a little more dangerous. Sometimes that would occasionally cause debate upon the wisdom of this or, "How are we going to do this," and, "No, I don't like the way you want to do it," that kind of thing. I don't recall seeing that much in Vietnam but I did see it in Laos.

SM: Now in terms of the stuff that you would carry, especially sling loads, what was it typically you were carrying in those instances, or was it just all kinds of stuff?

RE: All kinds; I would say the two broad categories would be food and ammunition and water. We carried a lot of water around the alternate because these guys were often on hilltops. They owned the hill, but the bad guys owned the valley and of course the water was down in the valley so we would carry drums of water to them.

SM: You would sling load those?

RE: Yes.

SM: To make it easier to drop them off on a hill?

RE: Right. Yes, it's easier all the way around; it's easier to pick up, it's easier to load, it's faster. It's just a better way to haul stuff.

SM: What was the lift capacity for the 58-T?

RE: That's a good question in that environment. I've flown them since then. You could pick up 5,000 pounds on the hook at sea level; up in that area, with the kind of fuel loads we were carrying, maybe 3,000 pounds.

SM: Okay, so that's a significant cut?

RE: Well, when I'm saying pick up 5,000 pounds at sea level, that's if you're going to do a construction job and you're right on the site and you have just enough fuel

to do the job and you have a light aircraft and this one pilot, but you get up at altitude, you have three crew members, probably with a little heavier aircraft because it has more in it than what you would do with a construction job, and you're carrying more fuel because you have a longer run to make. So, that would account for that weight.

SM: Did you ever have to make any emergency landings on the 58-T?

RE: The only problem I had up there…I guess you would call it a precautionary landing. We had an aircraft that really started doing weird stuff. We thought actually initially we entered auto rotation because we thought, "We're going to have to go down," but we had enough altitude. We got recovered and got things working enough that we could get home on one engine, or didn't get home but got to a secure area and tried to sort it out back there and ultimately ended up going back to Vientiane that night.

SM: Did you discover what was wrong?

RE: Strangely enough, ultimately we did, but we were not able to discover it that day. I think it ended up being a governor problem of some nature. That was really a weird system because you had the two engines that were talking to each other basically through this torque control unit and sometimes what would look to be the problem for example on number one engine, actually the source of the problem might be on the number two side. But, because there was this inner connection you get some really weird indication and it was not always easy to figure out what was going on. Sometimes they just start changing stuff until they finally changed something that fixed it.

SM: Now when you were flying in Laos, did you have occasion to pick up prisoners or anything like that, kind of what we talked about with Vietnam?

RE: I have no specific recollection of that, but it could have happened. You know, a lot of times you just don't know what you're doing really. You just land somewhere and they throw a bunch of people and away you go. You don't know who they are.

SM: How many people could you fit in a 58-T?

RE: Space wise, you could put 16 down below. Weight wise, you wouldn't be able to put that many in there. Jeez, ten or 12 maybe; well, maybe you could even get 16 if they were locals. You could pack it, and it depends on where you're taking off from

and your altitude. If you're taking off from a runway, you can get a lot more off than if you take off from a small, confined area somewhere up in the mountains.

SM: Now when you were carrying really heavy loads or when you were having problems maybe taking off at altitude, could you manipulate the 58-T? I've heard Huey pilots talk about kind of like skipping along until they hit translation?

RE: If you had room to run, yeah. You had wheels on the 58-T so you could just roll.

SM: You could roll?

RE: Oh yeah.

SM: Until you hit translation, and then take off?

RE: Yeah.

SM: If you had the space for it?

RE: If you were on some sort of a runway or had an area to roll on. Most of what we were doing was on little postage stamp pads on the top of hills. One of the things you could do in a place like that is bring it up to sort of an in ground effect hover and then sort of jump off the side of the hill and then you have the valley to get going in.

SM: I'm sure that was interesting.

RE: It can actually be kind of fun.

SM: I'll take your word for it! Were there any other missions or anything that stood out in your mind? Do you remember people that you flew with, that you enjoyed flying with?

RE: I flew with some wonderful guys. My timing was probably pretty good in the program because we had a wonderful bunch of guys we were flying with. I flew with B.K. Johnson again in that program when I got up there. I always liked flying with B.K. because he would let you do most of the flying actually, and didn't…in fact, he was the only guy in four years that ever gave me a briefing before takeoff. I remember very specifically because he said, "Okay, I want you to keep all the paperwork and you be responsible for making all the radio calls, all the position reports," which had to be every 30 minutes as I recall. He said, "You'll do at least half the flying if not more." He said, "When you're flying the aircraft, it's your aircraft. If we have an emergency, it's your emergency unless I say I have it." He said, "Don't fly to please me, fly to please yourself

and if I see you doing something that I think is really stupid or unsafe, I'll mention it, but otherwise don't try to figure out what I want you to do. You just do it the way you think it ought to be done," and that's the way he operated and it was always a pleasure.

SM: Nice management style?

RE: I thought it was, I thought it was, and he was a fun guy to fly with because he'd sit over there and just let you do your job. Link Luckett, I don't know if you've heard of Link?

SM: I have.

RE: I was on a job, and in fact I think B.K. was the other…I don't know if it was B.K. or not. Anyway, Link was one of the pilots and it was a two-aircraft mission into a hilltop above Site 32 and they wanted us to take some batteries up to a navigational aid that they had for the F-111 bombers and they would use this thing I guess to help find their target, and they wanted us to take this up on this hilltop. We knew that the bad guys had this place zeroed in with the 50, so there was some question as to whether this was a good idea or not and were we going to get air support to do this, and the customer didn't want to provide the air support. I was a copilot so I'm just sort of a witness to this whole thing. So, the debate is ongoing about whether we're going to get air support or not. So, the debate is ongoing about whether we're going to get air support or not. There was a time element involved and it's mid-afternoon by now and so forth and so on. The one remark I remember…well, whoever the other captain was, Link was one and somebody else, and the other captain was really getting into a serious unpleasant debate with a customer about this thing, "Hell no we're not going to do this," and so forth and so on, and Link pulled the two copilots aside and in his unique way said, "You know, you don't really need to get in a pissing contest with these guys. Never tell them you won't, just don't. You can just tell the mechanic to open up the clamshell doors on front of that thing and start poking around. Hell, in another hour it's going to be too late to go anyway." So Link would have just stalled. Just mess around and pretty soon we'll have to go home anyhow.

SM: That's an effective technique!

RE: Well, Link has his own way of dealing with things, and it's usually effective.

SM: Anything else stand in your mind?

RE: Well, not in particular. There would be little things that would come up, but one of the problems we used to have down around Alternate would be some of the artillery batteries start firing without telling anyone, and of course you're flying along and you see these guys start shooting and you're flying right through their GT line. That would sometimes cause some problems. People get angry about that and want to shut down operations and all the rest. That would cause some consternation, but that's the only other thing that sort of sticks in my mind.

SM: Well, while you were there in Laos, a lot of interesting events occurred in Vietnam. Of course in December of '72 we had the Christmas bombing, and then in January of '73 the Paris Peace Accords. How did those events…how did they reach you? What did you think?

RE: Generally everybody applauded the Christmas bombing. In fact, I happened to finally get to see Bob Hope after all those years out there. I saw him in Thailand. While he was giving his show he was interrupted continually by F-4s taking off because he was giving a show at the airbase in Udorn so I have that sort of first hand recollection of a bombing that was going on around Hanoi. But, that was generally felt by most people to have been the right thing to do and the question was why wasn't this done years before? Then of course the Accords were signed, the union was busted up, things ran down in Laos and I ended up going to Saigon in about April I think, March or April, somewhere around in there, and when I got to Saigon of course things had changed in there dramatically because of the so-called peace and we had inherited all these additional aircraft from the Army to gear up the ICCS operation. So, we had a big influx of new people that had come in to man that operation, and that was quite a different sort of operation than anything we'd done before. The one that that did stick out in my mind during that period of time, and in fact I know I was still in Thailand, but a guy that I had shared a house with in Saigon had left Air America and gone back to the States and been in the States for maybe a year and decided he didn't like that and wanted to come back. So, he had called DC and asked if there was any chance of coming back and they said, "Well yeah, as a matter of fact we're hiring a lot of people because of this ICCS thing," so they hired him back and he'd been in country two or three weeks I guess when he got shot down up in the Northern part of South Vietnam on an ICCS mission and was shot

down and killed. His name was Chuck Osterman. I don't know if you're familiar with that case but it got a lot of press at the time because they were on a mission that was supposedly cleared. They got shot down while doing what they thought they were supposed to be doing, and of course there were a lot of questions with that because they were (as it turned out) not where they were supposed to be. My company has just arrived.

SM: Okay, well then maybe I should go ahead and let you go and we can pick this up. Why don't I send you a quick email and we'll pick this up sometime hopefully soon?

RE: Okay.

SM: Enjoy your weekend!

RE: I'll do my very best, believe me! You enjoy your holiday, Steve.

SM: Thank you very much. Same to you, sir. Thank you, bye.

RE: Thank you, Steve. Goodbye.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bob Eaton on the 9th of January, 2002 at approximately 11:30 Lubbock time. Sir, why don't we go ahead and pick up with your time, I guess it was just before you left Thailand and Laos, that the union was busted? Is that correct?

RE: Yes, I don't remember the month exactly. It was probably I would guess January.

SM: If you would, describe what happened at that point and what happened with the union?

RE: The whole thing came about because our contract was expiring, so we had been in negotiations for some time about the terms of the new contract and it kept stalling and stalling and was going nowhere. There was talk of a strike and so forth and ultimately a strike was imminent. I don't recall if it was actually down to the point of this date and time kind of thing yet, but it was imminent. Then there was a meeting called. There had been a number of meetings before which were rather non-productive, and finally a meeting was called at someone's house in Udorn, a place known as the captain's club and it was there that we were informed by the union leaders that basically our thought of striking had been squelched because Udorn and Vientiane had both thrown in

the towel. That's my memory of it, anyway, so we were sort of left hanging on our own. There were a number of management, pilots, and a handful of guys that were non-union that were going to work anyway and then I had understood also though the grapevine that even some union members had said they would go ahead and fly. So, we just threw in the towel, which I always found kind of interesting from the viewpoint of our previous contract. As I recall, it had stated that if the contract was not successfully renegotiated, it would continue in force as is. But, when the company saw that we were in disarray they basically a couple days later just presented us with the new deal and take it or leave it, which was substantially different from the existing contract and substantially less attractive to us.

SM: What was your opinion of all this union activity and the union negotiations and bargaining and things like that?

RE: I think in retrospect probably one of the tactical errors we made, and this is not to disparage any of the individuals who were involved because they certainly meant well I'm sure, but I felt like we would have been better off from the get-go to have hired professional negotiators, people who had the skills and had the background to do these kinds of things rather than just sending a couple of pilots down. Good guys, no problem with that, but they weren't professional negotiators.

SM: Was there anything else that could have been improved with the union situation?

RE: Jeez, I don't know. I think there was always an element of doubt about how strong Saigon would be, and I think it was a lesser degree of doubt about Vientiane but ultimately both of those bases ended up sort of throwing in the towel. So, we were left on our own. The most…I hate to use the word radical, but I can't think of a better word that comes to mind at the moment, the more militant elements in the union were probably in Udorn by and large.

SM: Now did the union include…was it just pilots or was it all Air America employees?

RE: It was just pilots. It was the Far East Pilot's Association.

SM: When you were there in Thailand and working out of Udorn, did you go to the maintenance facility a lot?

RE: No. I've been in it, but I didn't hang out over there.

SM: Did you notice many American Air Force aircraft being worked on when you were visiting there?

RE: I don't recall, frankly, if I saw them in there now and then. I'm sure we did work on them. It was not the kind of thing I paid a lot of attention to.

SM: Well, was there anything else you wanted to talk about with regard to Thailand and Laos before we talk about your move back to Saigon?

RE: No, nothing really except just to mention that it was, from a professional viewpoint, a very productive part of my life. I learned a great deal up there about flying.

SM: What were the more important lessons you took with you to Saigon?

RE: Things that I'd learned up there?

SM: Yes.

RE: Just basic aircraft handling things. Flying in the mountains is a completely different experience for a helicopter, and for an airplane guy too I'm sure, and those are lessons that apply in other elements but you're not exposed to them the way you are in the mountains if you're working at sea level. The lessons stay with you and they're certainly applicable anyway.

SM: What was it like transitioning from working in Thailand and Laos and going to Saigon, and if you would, please, remind me of when you left and when you arrived in Saigon when you left Thailand?

RE: I think I probably moved down there about February or March, it must have been March or even later, maybe March or April because I went down there after the cease fire was signed in Vietnam and I think that was signed in March, so it would have been subsequent to that. I had worked in Saigon before so I knew the company down there and I knew what it was like to live in Saigon and so forth so there was not a lot of adjustments for me in that regard. The biggest difference was that during the period I'd been up in Udorn, the cease fire had been signed and we had a big contract for the ICCS, the International Commission of Control and Supervision that was overseeing the peace efforts, and as part of that deal we inherited something in the neighborhood of 30 plus helicopters from the military. So, there'd been a big hiring binge to help man that

contract. That was the big change when I got back down was going from six helicopters to 30 something.

SM: So you flew for ICCS?

RE: Well just whatever you drew for the day is what you flew, so we did both.

SM: What were the other missions besides supporting ICCS?

RE: The normal Air America missions that we'd always done in Vietnam which was supporting USAID, the Embassy, various different official elements of our program over there.

SM: Of course by early 1974 the US had completely withdrawn military personnel?

RE: '73 actually.

SM: Right. So, how about support for American case officers still working with indigenous people?

RE: In terms of what support did we provide them?

SM: Yes. Were you still making hard and soft rice drops, things like that?

RE: The hard and soft rice and all that that was more of a Lao thing. Mainly what we had always done in Saigon, at least from the period I arrived in '71, was just moving personnel around. We didn't get into a lot of the rice drop stuff. In fact, we did little of that. We would haul food on occasion but by helicopter, but I don't recall any airdrops from fixed wing. It was mostly personnel transport and liaison efforts and that kind of thing. We would go out there oftentimes in support of MACV, which was the Military Assistance Command Vietnam. Mainly it was more personnel movement-oriented.

SM: To your knowledge were there any CPA personnel working on the ground with indigenous people in Vietnam like they were in Laos?

RE: Laos was largely an agency show, almost from beginning to end, whereas Vietnam was largely run by the military and the embassy. I don't think the agency ever had the overwhelming sort of control in Vietnam that they had in Laos. It really wasn't their show so much as it had been in Laos.

SM: But there was still CIA operatives?

RE: They were there until the last day I'm sure.

SM: Well when you were flying this last year and a half, actually it would have been almost exactly a year, April ’74 to April ’75…

RE: It would have been almost two years because it was April ’73.

SM: Oh I’m sorry; you left in April ’73?

RE: Right, the cease-fire was signed in March of ’73 I believe.

SM: I apologize; I had down the wrong date. So you left Laos in ’73?

RE: Right. Laos was over by spring of ’73 completely; both countries sort of capitulated about the same time, within about a month or so of each other.

SM: So you were back in Vietnam for two years?

RE: Yes.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe some of the more memorable missions you flew. What stands out most in your memory?

RE: During that second two year period…well, the big one that stands out in my mind is evacuating Hue and that was in the spring of ’75 and then going back up there the day after it had fallen, to no avail.

SM: I want to discuss the evacuation of Hue and also just the general evacuation of South Vietnam as an entity to itself. While you were flying operations in support of ICCS did you guys ever come under fire? Any specific actions?

RE: We had aircraft come under fire. I don’t frankly recall whether I personally came under fire or not; I may have. I don’t recall getting hit. That was always a real dodgy deal because it was based on promises from people you couldn’t trust, and coordination was always a problem. Oftentimes you’d be tasked to fly from point A to point B and told that it was all cleared and prearranged with the VC and so forth and you get halfway there and you get a frantic call on the radio, “Don’t go any further. There was a screw up somewhere. They’re not expecting you!” or, “What the hell are you doing there?” and all this kind of stuff. So, it was always just a little bit tense on those deals when you were going into enemy territory. A lot of the stuff we did was just logistics runs back and forth that were real easy milk runs, but occasionally we would go on these trips where we’d take the peacekeepers back to meet with the VC in their territory, and that was always a little bit tense because you never sure if Joe Blow down

on the ground didn't get the message, and if he didn't and decides to take a shot at you, that's just tough. That was always one thing that was sort of in your mind.

SM: How would they treat you when you'd drop off the peacekeepers?

RE: They'd treat us pretty well. We would be very restricted in terms of our physical movements on the ground. They'd usually have a little tent or an awning sort of thing set up for you. That's where you'd sit and wait and drink tea and banter with the locals, but you weren't allowed to just wander around. They were real careful about what you could see. Ultimately during that period we did POW exchanges and they were somewhat interesting, very, very boring because you'd go out there in the morning and sit all day long and then come back at night, but you were very much restricted as to what you could do. You couldn't just wander around on the airfield.

SM: Did you fly many of those missions, the prisoner exchange missions?

RE: I flew too many of them.

SM: Really?

RE: They were very boring. The ones that I was involved in were POW exchanges at An Loc which had been represented as the seat of the provisional government of South Vietnam. This was in III Corps. A lot of the POW exchanges took place there. This was our side-releasing prisoners we had held back to them. We'd fly up there with the ICCS people in the morning and then the prisoners as I recall would usually come in on Vietnamese Chinooks and it was all very well orchestrated. You'd hear the three cheers from the crowd and all that, but it was obvious the whole thing was well set up and well directed and orchestrated. It was interesting to me as a footnote that there was a VC there who was represented to us as being a colonel and he was nominally in charge. But, it became obvious after a while that this colonel didn't make any decisions, at least relating to our activity, without first checking with a civilian mamason who seemed to be the real power on the ground there and she was just this old lady. If we asked for permission to do something, ultimately you'd see this colonel checking with her and then he'd get back to us.

SM: Interesting.

RE: Yeah, I thought it was quite interesting. There was also one point I recall where a group of these POWs were released, the cheers from the crowd were, "Bravo!

Bravo!" I was saying, "Jeez, that doesn't sound Vietnamese," so we finally asked one of the locals there, "What is the crowd saying?" and he said, "Bravo!" and we said, "What's that mean?" and he said, "You know, it means hurray, hurray in Spanish." I was thinking, "Where in the hell did they pick that up?" I was wondering if there was perhaps a Cuban connection or something, I don't know.

SM: Were there media present at these exchanges or these prisoner releases?

RE: I have no specific recollection of that, but surely there must have been.

SM: Of course it may have been for [?]?

RE: Surely there must have been someone there because the crowd's activities were so well orchestrated it must have been for outside consumption, but I have no specific recollection of the media.

SM: You mentioned that a lot of the Vietnamese, we were releasing a lot of Vietnamese. Did we get any Americans back during these exchanges?

RE: Not any that I was involved with. I don't know how those were handled frankly.

SM: Did you ever talk to other pilots who did bring back Americans who were released by the Viet Cong?

RE: No, I never did.

SM: What were your thoughts at the time about the POW issue? Of course all the POWs in North Vietnam were supposed to have been released in early '73 as part of the Paris Peace Accords. Did you guys ever talk about that issue? What did you guys think about it?

RE: We certainly must have talked about it. I don't recall specific conversation. Unfortunately this is all 30 year old stuff so it's hazy, but I did feel for a long, long time, and I'm still uncertain about the whole issue, but I think there was a real possibility that we never got all of our people back that were alive when the cease fire was signed. That's just a gut feeling. I really don't have anything specific I could point to and say this is evidence. We've all read the same reports, I suppose, and there seems to be some credibility. Some, but then you read another side and you say, "No, it's all bogus," so I really don't know. I am aware that in many of these sorts of situations people that you

interview will tell you whatever they think you want to hear, so it's really hard to separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of the validity of the reports.

SM: Well when you say that we may have not gotten everybody back, do you think that this is North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, or both?

RE: Both perhaps.

SM: Well in terms of the briefings that you receive, and of course one of the things that we've talked about about your first time in Vietnam, your first tour with Air America in Vietnam and then your tours in Thailand and Laos is that you'd get really good intelligence briefings in the flight operations center before you'd go out on a mission. Was there much difference during your second tour in Saigon?

RE: Well our briefings were probably pretty good in terms of the intelligence that we had, but I think it's probably obvious that with the reduction in numbers of personnel that are American, our access to information would have declined somewhat. Well, I know there were some cases and I can't get too awful specific…for example, I do remember at one point we used to make a trip occasionally from Saigon to Tay Ninh which was in upper III Corps near the Cambodia area. There was a period there we were making a lot of these trips and we knew that for the most part we didn't own a lot of that territory. We found out after making a number of these trips, and I don't remember the source of the information, but it came to my attention anyway that unbeknownst to us they had been – the other side, the bad guys – had been using our aircraft making those trips as sort of dummy targets to give instruction to their people about how to operate the heat seeking missiles. They wouldn't shoot us, but they would show them, "Okay, here comes a helicopter, here's how you find the target, here's how you lock on them," and so forth. They just didn't pull the trigger. I don't know if anybody else could substantiate that or not but I recall hearing that somewhere; I can't say where the source was now. It did give us reason to pause and reconsider a bit.

SM: During this two-year period from April '73 to April '75, were any Air America pilots shot down that you know of?

RE: The one that really comes to mind, there may have been more, the one that I recall very vividly was a fellow that I had lived with on a previous time in Saigon, Chuck Osterman. I don't know who the other parties were because I think they may have been

people that had just come back or had just come with the company and I didn't know them. But, I knew Chuck and he was shot down on one of these ICCS missions and killed. That got a lot of international attention because it was supposed to have been all cleared and so forth and so on and it didn't work as programmed.

SM: To your knowledge, was he the only Air America pilot killed during this period?

RE: He's the only one I can recall. I don't know about other fatalities in his aircraft. Jeez, I don't remember quite frankly. Chuck stuck in my mind because I knew him and the whole thing never, ever made sense to me anyway because in reconstructing the whole thing, the wreckage was found considerably off course from where it should have been. But, Chuck was no dummy. He would have known where he was, and I never really understood what went wrong. I suspect that what happened was that they had made a really, really big deal out of the fact that when we do some of these flights, we would have a VC or somebody from the other side would be on board the aircraft with us with a radio, supposedly in contact with the people on the ground. I've always suspected that what went wrong was that the guy in back was telling him, "No, no, turn left, go down this road," because he didn't know what the hell things looked like from the air, and this was something we'd seen numerous times in the past but you get a guy off the ground and he's just lost. I always felt like probably this guy in the back was directing him down the wrong route, but he was sort of between a rock and a hard place. Here's this guy back there with a radio who's supposed to be in charge, and Chuck I suspect knew he was going the wrong way but on the other hand he's got this guy telling him, "No, no, you've got to go left here," and I suspect that's what he did, and he was way off course. But, it was such an obvious case of being off course. He was a sharp enough guy; he could not have missed that. That's just my feeling anyway.

SM: You may not be able to answer this, but I'm going to ask anyway; do you know if any of these ICCS flights were used as cover for black operations?

RE: No, I never heard of that. The only…and I doubt if it did, but it could. I certainly never heard that. The only thing I would say is that it wasn't set up to be this way, but of course if we learned something on one of those flights we'd go back and tell

our people in flight information so the next guy would know about it. That's just something that you would do obviously.

SM: Was there anything in particular that you remember reporting back?

RE: Well one of the things that I do remember sort of being amazed at, and I would have reported it, and it's probably something we would have known anyway from satellite imagery and all the rest, but it just really blew my mind when we were flying up to a place called Ben Het up in II Corps up above Kontum or by the Lao border I think it is. The bad guys were building a road from I guess from Laos into Vietnam. It was probably an improvement of what had been the Ho Chi Minh Trail at one point, but it looked like a darn interstate project going on. I mean, they had bulldozers and the whole thing and it was right out in the open, nothing secret at all. But, it looked like a major road construction project you'd see here in the States. The war was quote "over" and they were just doing their thing without regard to who saw it. It was sort of like thumbing their nose at you, "We're here and this is our territory and we're going to do it this way."

SM: Was there any indication, based on that particular piece of intelligence, that maybe the North Vietnamese would ignore the cease fire, would ignore the Paris Peace Accords and were in essence preparing for a massive invasion and assault on South Vietnam?

RE: I think that was pretty apparent all along. I suspect that anybody who had any knowledge knew how it was going to play out. The way that it was handled at the end was largely based on domestic political consideration and I don't think there was much question what the ultimate result would be.

SM: What were your thoughts at the time about the Peace Accords, the American response, the American withdrawal, prior to the final assault on South Vietnam in '74 and the evacuation in '75?

RE: You mean just as a citizen looking at it from a close up viewpoint, from a political point of view?

SM: Sure.

RE: I guess it made sense. We've been over there any number of years without having much measurable success. You could argue about whether we should have done

it this way or that way, but by this time that was pretty much water under the bridge and it was obvious that by ’73 or even ’71 for that matter that we’re going to give this thing up. We’ve had enough, it’s not going to work, it’s not going to work in a way that the American public will buy so we might as well fold up our tent and go home. From that viewpoint I guess I didn’t really have strong feelings about it one way or another. One could have argued that we could have done it different from the beginning and I think there was some very valid arguments and lessons to be learned there. Once we had gotten to that point, and especially after the cease-fire was signed, then it was really a question of how do we get ourselves out of this thing with the least further additional costs?

SM: What was your opinion of the South Vietnamese in your second tour there in Saigon, and especially the ARVN?

RE: About the same as it always had been. I thought they were rather inept and not terribly motivated, and that shouldn’t be surprising really. The average Vietnamese I felt all along just wanted to be left alone like most people in the world. The average Rice Paddy Joe wasn’t particularly politically oriented; all he wanted was to be left alone. I think they were at a stage where they would welcome any government so long as it brought some sort of peace. The whole history of the Vietnamese has been one of war up until 20 years ago or 25 years ago. My former wife was Vietnamese so I had a little bit of insight. You know that was their whole history, just been fighting for generations, and I think anybody would be tired of that after a while. If you consider the ARVN soldier’s viewpoint, he’s in for the duration and if it takes 20 years, he’s going to be in the Army for 20 years. Their primary motivation, they don’t have a mindset that, “If I can get through a year and get home, this is over.” They’re looking at the long haul so their incentive to accept exposure to danger was substantially less than the average American soldier; plus they weren't as well trained as we were and it’s a more corrupt society to begin with. It’s just a whole different mindset. I don’t think the American mind will ever really understand the Oriental mind, and vice-versa.

SM: Yes, sir. If you don’t mind me asking, did you meet your former wife during your second tour or previously in Vietnam?

RE: I met her right after I arrived on second tour. I met her on an Air America C-47 as a matter of fact, C-47 or C-46, I don't recall. She was an employee of the American Embassy.

SM: If you would, describe how events unfolded in 1974 and of course getting to as we're nearing the cease fire, the resumption of hostilities in very late '74. What was going on? How were your operations effected as the events unfolded?

RE: Well I think as…it's hard for me to reconstruct the timing of all these things so I don't really recall…I can't date things very well. But, there was just a general sort of deterioration it seemed in just about everything having to do with the war effort. It was obvious that we were going to be leaving and everybody knew it, regardless of what you might hear on the TV news or from the politicians or the generals, it was pretty obvious, we're on our way out. So as a result, support was dwindling. I remember actually more about what was going on in Cambodia I think than I do in Vietnam because it had become obvious that I always felt like we stirred up a hornet's nest in Cambodia and then just pulled the rug out from under those people. Of the three countries involved in Indochina, I always felt like Cambodia got…they almost made it through that whole deal until we engineered the overthrow of Sihanouk and then hung with them for a couple of years and then just decided to cut and run and left them holding the bag. We all know what happened subsequent to that. If there's any chapter in that whole sorry story that I feel really bad about, it's what happened to the Cambodians because they had almost avoided the whole thing. I know towards the end Congress had demanded a cessation of any significant operations over there to include B-52 drops and the whole thing, so that country just kept getting worse and worse and worse too, and the elements over there, the Khmer Rouge were a bunch of nuts. As an example, we had always been told in Vietnam that if you had a problem with the aircraft and you had to go down, it was pretty well understood to head to a populated area because you're probably going to find friendlies there. So, you head to a village or a little base or something and we were told to do exactly the opposite if you had a problem in Cambodia; head as far out in the middle of nowhere as you can because if you land around people they're going to have to kill you whether they want to or not.

SM: Why?

RE: If you land in the village in Cambodia, they're going to string you up.

SM: Why?

RE: Well because if they don't the Khmer Rouge are going to come in and not only do you in, they're going to do half the village in, too, for not taking care of you. That was the way it was presented to us so it made some of the flights in Cambodia just a little bit tense.

SM: When were you given those instructions, do you recall about?

RE: It would have been after I returned so it would have been '73 or '74. That would have come from a customer. There was one trip we used to make on a regular basis from Phnom Penh down to Sihanoukville. I don't remember the other name for it down there, but down on the coast. It was a fairly long trip. It was about an hour as I recall. It got to the point where we did that only with two aircraft so we would have a SAR aircraft available if the first one went down because that whole stretch from the time you left Phnom Penh to the time you arrived at destination was bad guy country, and there was really nowhere safe to go along that whole route.

SM: Did you get fired at much in Cambodia?

RE: No, I don't recall getting fired at much. I had friends who took fairly heavy fire there but I never came under fire there that I recall.

SM: What was the flight information system like for flying in Cambodia? Did you have decent intelligence?

RE: I think our intelligence was fairly good, but the country was in such a state that there really were very few places that you could go that we controlled. The whole thing was pretty dodgy and it got towards the end of the war…from Saigon direct to Phnom Penh in a helicopter was about 45 minutes as I recall, but by the end there were such large areas we had to circumnavigate because of the missile threat, it became about a two hour trip to get home at night.

SM: Wow!

RE: Yeah, we had to go down the river from Phnom Penh to Can Tho and then back up because the whole area along the straight line we didn't own anymore, or at least it was pretty threatening.

SM: What kind of missiles?

RE: SA-7, the shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile. I do recall at one point I think they shot down the China Air C-123 up around…one of our guys had seen this fellow up around 9,000 or 9,500 going back and he was going a circuitous route, one of the helicopter guys, and he saw this China Air helicopter [C-123] taking off in a straight line for Saigon and in fact called the guy on the radio and said, "You know you really shouldn't be going that way," and they blew him off and he didn't make it back; they got him with a missile.

SM: For crying out loud! And this was the '73 to '75 time period?

RE: Yeah, this would have been after the cease-fire.

SM: What kinds of missions were you flying in Cambodia, especially when you're flying the length between Phnom Penh and [?]?

RE: Mainly taking people to go meet someone and discuss whatever their business was.

SM: Was this part of the ICCS thing too?

RE: No, this was Air America. ICCS to my knowledge didn't get involved in Cambodia.

SM: So this was Air America personnel?

RE: Yes, well the passengers would have just been customers?

SM: Yeah, customers, in other words CIA personnel?

RE: Perhaps; I didn't know who they were. I didn't ask.

SM: Right. To your knowledge, were there any Air America aircraft or pilots lost in Cambodia during that period?

RE: I don't recall. I know it was a big point of contention. There was a lot of discontent about going over there. It was felt, for example, by a lot of people that we were really getting stuck in a situation without adequate resources because after the American military had pulled out, we were on our own. We didn't have the Air Force and everybody else to come and help us out if we got in a jam, and of course no gunships around and no nothing! At the same time the company's cutting our pay. There was a lot of unhappiness about that and a lot of people ended up leaving the company during that period. There was almost a mass exodus at one point. I remember going to a going away

party one night and there must have been six guys at the party that were all leaving. It must have been about six because there was a total of 13 of us and it was all couples.

SM: So almost half of the group?

RE: Maybe it wouldn't have been six leaving, maybe four or five leaving.

SM: Still, that's significant.

RE: In one group in one night! Yeah, there was quite an exodus there and most of those guys ended up in Iran in fact on the Bell Training Contract over there for the Shah.

SM: Okay. Was there much…to your knowledge, and again, this may not be something you can talk about, but was there much consternation amongst the customers, because as the risks for you guys increased they increased exponentially for those guys, too?

RE: They would have, but I would not have been party to those discussions so I really don't have any knowledge of that.

SM: Did you notice was there that much of a rotation of new personnel into Cambodia or Vietnam during this period?

RE: We didn't see the same faces in Cambodia as I recall it. It's not the kind of thing that I remember getting familiar with individuals as we had previous to that. In previous times, even in Vietnam, you kind of get to know the guys you were working for a little bit; at least it would be a familiar face and you might know his name. But, in Cambodia I don't have that sense of that. They'd restricted the number of official Americans that could be over there to a very low number. That was by congressional action and of course they found ways to evade that. A lot of these guys are coming out of Saigon in the morning and work all day and go back at night so they weren't Cambodia based, but they were working in Cambodia every day.

SM: Were there any emergency evacuations of American personnel out of Cambodia before the massive evacuation out of Saigon in '74-'75?

RE: I don't recall any until everything just fell down until the end of it and I wasn't involved in any of those evacuations so I can't really speak to that.

SM: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to discuss about that second tour in Saigon before we talk about the evacuation period?

RE: No, sir, that pretty much covers it. Of course the evacuation period took place over some months because the country fell, although it was rather quick. It didn't all happen on the same day.

SM: No, the cease-fire ended in late' 74 and then things deteriorated over that four or five month period, correct?

RE: Yeah. The cease-fire never really held. It never was functional from day one, just about. We kept hoping and so forth and so on. It was pretty obvious. It was a matter of timing and I remember when it…well, when Danang was under threat, in fact when it fell, I had been in Danang the week before it fell and of course by this time I was in the process of getting married which was quite a lengthy process in Vietnam because you had to pay a lot of bribes and go through a lot of bureaucracy and I was dragging my feet on that because I was reluctant to pay bribes and I'm thinking, "I'll just wear you guys down. I have as much time as you do," and that had always worked for me in the past. Then a friend of mine came back, I believe on a Sunday night as I recall, a Sunday or Monday. He had been involved in the evacuation when Danang fell which was a real messy affair, and he came to see me that night when he got back in town and he told me the whole story which lasted about an hour. He said, "I'll tell you one thing," he said, "This is going to happen a whole lot faster than anybody thinks. My advice to you is pay the money, get her the damn passport, and get her out of here." So, I gave her $100 dollars the next morning and sent her down and said, "Get a passport." We had it in a couple of days, then.

SM: This is CD number three of the interview with Mr. Bob Eaton continuing the interview on January 9th, year 2002 at approximately 12:30. Why don't we go ahead and pick up with what you remember about…the Danang evacuation occurred before the Hue evacuation, is that correct?

RE: No.

SM: Okay, so your evacuation, when you said you mentioned earlier that you helped with the Hue evacuation?

RE: Yes.

SM: That happened first. Why don't we go ahead and talk about that? What happened? When did it happen? What do you remember most?

RE: Okay that would have been maybe March? I'm not sure. It all happened pretty quickly those last couple of months, so it was probably around March I'm guessing, but that was early '75 anyway. The final day of the evacuation of Hue is the one that's most memorable. I suppose it had probably started piece meal. It had probably started a couple of days before. I suppose the whole thing probably lasted two or three days, four days, but my clearest memories are of the final day and it was the damndest thing I've ever seen. It was just a mass movement of people, all by road, sea, air; any way they could get out of the area, they were leaving, and it was steady just bumper to bumper from Hue to Danang which is quite a long ways and just a mass, mass movement of people. It was mind-boggling. From the helicopter ops, most of the people that we were taking out were going from the province pad in Hue which was directly opposite the Citadel on the river in Hue and I know that when we'd land there of course it was not a question of manifesting people and all that stuff. You'd open the door and by the time you could close it again you'd have more than you should have had. They'd sort of self-load and you'd be mobbed by people. We were taking incoming mortar fire (I guess it was) for most of that day so it was on the pad and off as quickly as possible because as soon as you landed, they'd start shooting at you. It was a very tense day all day long. That's my clearest memory of that. We never actually got hit, but it was a question of getting out before they had a chance. It was just total pandemonium.

SM: Now had there been prior to the actual attack on Hue and the evacuation, had there been any kind of evacuation, any kind of plans placed in motion in the event that it happened?

RE: If there was any preplanning, I have no recollection of it. That's not to say that somebody hadn't given it some thought, but I don't recall being briefed or told ahead of time, "This is how we'll handle it." It all seemed to take on a life of its own, at least from my viewpoint. I don't know what others may have been doing or planning, but it didn't…I don't recall being briefed on anything other than just go up there and just do it. It really did seem to be…as the country was falling, it just seemed to be very chaotic and that's the way that whole day played out. I don't know how many trips we made up there but we worked there all day long. I don't recall now. Probably we were hauling people…I don't think we were taking them from Hue to Danang for the most part. We

were probably back hauling them to another place where they'd get on something else, although I don't have specific recollection of that. I just remember it was very tense. It was a very busy day.

SM: You didn't lose any aircraft or any pilots?

RE: I don't remember losing any, no.

SM: How many aircraft were involved with the evacuation? Do you remember?

RE: I don't remember that. I would guess maybe three or four helicopters now. I'm sure there must have been airplanes involved as well, probably everything we had in Danang at that point; well, maybe not everything because there still would have been work in other areas that we would support out of Danang but that would have been the focus. It just all came crashing down.

SM: What were you flying at this point? Were you still in the 58-T?

RE: No, the 58-Ts never were operated in Vietnam.

SM: Oh they didn't?

RE: No, they were in Laos. We were in Bells, 204Bs and UH-1s, 205, which are all basically the same aircraft.

SM: About how many people could you load in in the evacuation?

RE: The 204Bs had seating for eight. Let's see if I got that right, nine, but with the flight mechanic there was eight passengers because it didn't have the well seats like the Army machines did. But, you could easily end up with more than that on. The Vietnamese are fairly light, fortunately. I suppose if you didn't have a whole lot of fuel on you could probably get off with 12 to 15 people, passengers. I don't recall. It was just kind of one of those things where you'd open the doors and try to shut them again as quickly as you could, and having only one guy in back it was particularly difficult for him because it was hard for him to watch two doors. So, it was like on the ground, give it a couple of seconds, and beat feet.

SM: Where did you take them when you departed Hue?

RE: That's what I was trying to remember. I know in some places we were taking them to some place that was on the beach just east of Hue, which wouldn't have been that far, maybe a ten or 15 minute flight because there was a lot of people being loaded on vessels there and going out by sea. I'm sure that we did some of that. I recall

landing out there a few times. It gets hard to sort out which day you did what and all that kind of thing, so I can't be real specific about it, unfortunately.

SM: No, I understand. Well, of course when things fell apart in Saigon and you think of the images and photographs and things of that nature that are shown, showing the evacuation of Saigon, it's not just chaotic but there's literally physical violence between people as aircraft are overloaded. They're having to unload a certain number of people so they can get the aircraft off the ground, things like that. Was it that bad yet in Hue?

RE: I don't think it was as bad as it got later in Danang and then subsequently in Saigon, and in places in the highlands, but it certainly was chaotic, a lot of pushing and shoving and that kind of thing. It required a certain amount of force from the guy in back to maintain control. But, in fact there had always been a certain…when it came to transportation under duress, there was always a certain indiscipline among the Vietnamese, so that was nothing we hadn't seen before.

SM: Were there many customers on the ground helping to direct these efforts in Hue?

RE: The last day, I don't recall much contact with customers. I won't say they weren't there, but the whole thing is kind of a blur. I just remember landing there and just people everywhere. We can't spend any time on the ground because we're going to start taking incoming. It was just…that whole thing is somewhat of a blur to me.

SM: Did you receive any word from your supervisors, chief pilot or whoever, that given the fact that the Vietnamese had broken the cease fire and were in direct violation of the Paris Peace Accords, that they would try to bring in, the United States would try to bring in some additional aircraft and some additional personnel to help with the situation? Did you hear anything about that?

RE: I don't have a recollection of that.

SM: Was there anything else that you remember about evacuating Hue?

RE: No, that's pretty much it for the evacuation. One of my most memorable experience that whole four years I was there was the day following the evacuation.

SM: Okay, why don't you go ahead and talk about that.

RE: I was flying with the same guy I had flown with on the previous day during the evacuation.

SM: Who's that?

RE: Izzy Friedman.

SM: Okay.

RE: That's the guy I loved to fly with, by the way; excellent pilot and a real good friend and a good guy. But, we had flown together all that day of the evacuation and our efforts were complete that day. By nightfall there were no more friendlies in terms of Americans or people who worked directly for us that were left in Hue, at least that we had contact with, and it was a chaotic situation so I'm not sure how complete the accounting was. But, from our viewpoint, the job in Hue was done. So, the next day Izzy and I were again flying together and we were tasked to go down to Quang Ngai which is South of Danang to work for the customer down there. So, we flew down there that morning and there was lots of stuff going on around. It was obvious that Quang Ngai was in trouble. It was a rainy day, miserable weather, and we had aircraft problems. We were taking a guy from Danang into Quang Ngai as I recall it, and in approach to Quang Ngai we explained to this guy that, "Maybe this is not a real good idea for you to go in there because this doesn't look very good and you may have a problem getting out," because by that time I don't remember the exact sequence but we had developed aircraft problems before we delivered him that were going to require some attention. There was a question of would we be able to get back in to pick him up if we dropped him off, because if there was going to be much delay we didn't know how much longer Quang Ngai was going to stand. He said, "Well, no, no," leave him. So, we left him and I don't recall whether we went back in a few minutes later and picked him up. I don't know about that. But anyway, we got back to Danang and they decided to replace us with a different aircraft and they must have given us something else, I don't remember that, but our next job, our next assignment which was sort of out of the blue was to take these guys back up to Hue because there was a big communications tower there of some kind that they wanted to disable. The task was to take these guys up there and rendezvous with a Vietnamese Chinook in Hue and drop these fellows off. They were to have disassembled and loaded onto the Chinook some equipment that was there that they wanted to retrieve and then they were going to blow the tower up. They were going to ride back home on the Chinook, so our job was simply to drop them and then they would be on their own

and come back on the Chinook. We were told, under no uncertain terms, "Do not land if the Chinook is not on site. If he doesn't make the rendezvous, don't put them in." Well of course we got up there and as one might expect, there was no Chinook. The whole thing was quite tense because by this time we had no contact with anyone in Hue. No one had been there since we left the night before and it was assumed that the bad guys now owned Hue. So, it was as tense as anything I'd embarked on in four years, to the point of discussing with Izzy what route we were going to use to walk home if it ended up being that kind of a situation and so forth. So, we shoved off all by ourselves. We got up to Hue and had plenty of fuel on the aircraft because I think we had the large tank aircraft, so we had plenty of time to work with. We got up there, there's no Vietnamese Chinook. But everything's quiet as a Sunday afternoon walk in the park, unbelievable. The day before, total turmoil; incoming everywhere, just pandemonium, and now it's quiet as can be. It's like the war is over. The guys are out in the rice paddies doing their normal thing and we're flying around at low altitudes, nobody's taking a pot shot at us. It's just quiet as can be. But, no Chinook. We're not supposed to put these guys in without Chinooks. So, we asked them, the guys in back, what did they want to do? They said, "Just put us in there and we'll blow everything. Never mind the Chinook, we'll just destroy it all. At least they won't get it that way." So, we thought, "Well, that's a pretty good idea. How long will it take you to do that?" and they said, "Oh, about 30 minutes." "Oh, that's no problem. We have the fuel." We thought our best option was to drop them, let them do their thing while we orbited out over the water somewhere and come back in 30 minutes later and pick them up. But, we'd been told not to do that, very strenuously told not to do that, so we called back to Danang for instructions and we explained the situation to them, and they said, "Well stand by." They came back just a few minutes later and tell us, "The highest authority in Washington DC says negative; do not put those people in." So we brought them back and accomplished zero. I always thought that was sort of an anecdotal story that almost encapsulates the whole way that war was run. Somebody 9,000 miles away making a decision and here we are on the site. We have all the first hand information. We're looking at the deal, and somebody 9,000 miles away is telling us no, and that seemed to me to sum up the whole deal. An interesting footnote to that story is I saw Izzy three or four or five years ago for the first

time in many years and we were recalling that story and of course the key element to the whole thing is did we land or did we not land. I remember that we did not land. Izzy remembers that we did land, although we didn't let anybody out. That just goes to show you what 35 years could do to your memory. I know Izzy's not lying and neither am I; we just remember it differently and I've often used that story to point out to people that memories are not infallible.

SM: No, they're not.

RE: I don't know what the truth to that is, whether we landed or not. In any event, we never let them off the helicopter.

SM: Who was giving you the instructions not to drop them off if the Chinook wasn't there and then later when you called back and got the official word from Washington, absolutely no way you could do it. Who is relaying this to you?

RE: The radio traffic probably was our station manager in Danang.

SM: Do you recall who that was?

RE: It probably would have been perhaps Marius Burke. I don't recall exactly. Likely it was Marius, but I couldn't say that for sure. I would imagine in the initial discussions before we left Danang was probably whoever our station manager was and the customer, they probably both told us. These guys were obviously American soldiers, although they weren't dressed as such. I don't know who they were, I would guess Special Forces people, probably.

SM: What kind of grumblings were there from them?

RE: Well we were all pretty damn unhappy because we'd gone through a whole lot of stress, really. We were all pumped up and we didn't know what all we were getting into. It was the only time in my life where I ever took my survival radio out of the vest and taped it to my leg because I'd always heard that you're only going to get out of this aircraft with what's on your body. We were pretty stressed out. We had our little plastic survival maps in our pocket and the whole thing and had discussed what route we would take if we had to end up walking out because we really thought we only had about a 50/50 chance of pulling it off without a hitch somewhere. Then to get up there and see that everything was so quiet and we could have done this thing but somebody nixed it from DC was rather frustrating, and that included the guys in back as well. Of course

they really wanted to do their thing. The whole exercise was for nothing; we accomplished zero.

SM: Well when you flew back, was it equally uneventful?

RE: Yeah. Flying back would not have been a problem because the normal way you come back anyway, especially if anything was questionable, is just get a few miles offshore and you're quite safe out there so there's nobody going to shoot at you. You're out of range of everything. Really once you hit the beach, you're home free.

SM: What happened after that?

RE: I don't remember what day that was, but then nothing noteworthy happened. That was the last time I was ever operating out of Danang because Danang fell before I ever got back up there again. Within a few days I guess Danang fell.

SM: Now you said that…was it your roommate that told you about the fall of Danang?

RE: It was a very good friend. We never lived together but he was a guy I'm very close with.

SM: What do you remember about that story that he told you?

RE: Just that it was, again, utter chaos. The thing that he did tell me was that…and this was becoming obvious anyway, but it was much more apparent in Danang, was that the so-called friendlies were no longer friendly. You were subject to be taking fire from anyone and you had all these guys…there was no more organization to their military. The discipline had broken down completely so anyone who had a gun was subject to be somebody that would shoot at you, and it didn't matter which uniform. So, they were taking fire from virtually everybody. There was no…control had just completely broken down to the point where I remember this guy telling me a story about trying to get fuel at Danang and being approached by a group of Vietnamese that wanted a way out that he couldn't take and it required this guy pointing a gun to the head of this guy's pregnant wife and telling him to get off the damn aircraft. That was the only way that he could get his job done. This friend of mine did evacuate some people from the French embassy or consulate compound that day. He said that was kind of memorable because he was flying around…I guess they were hauling them to an island offshore and they were making repeated trips back and forth and they had gone back over time. They

would just sort of fly around and see if they saw anybody that looked like somebody they should pick up that they knew or recognized. He saw this guy waiving the tri-color from the French Consulate so they popped into there. They could only come to a hover, there was no place to land, but they managed to lift one guy. The mechanic reached out and grabbed the guy's arm. Anyway, they pulled this fellow in and his purpose really was basically they wanted to get somebody out who spoke English and could communicate to let the rest of the world know there was a group of them trapped there, and they said that all night the night before it had just been terrifying because it was just total lawlessness in the streets and gunfire all night long apparently. It was quite a harrowing story.

SM: Who was that that told you that story?

RE: That was Terry Olson.

SM: Did you do much of your flying with Izzy Friedman or did you fly with other pilots as well during the evacuation period?

RE: Well those two days I related with Izzy, and that's what sticks in my mind. Other days I rode by myself.

SM: Now when did you leave Vietnam yourself?

RE: I left Vietnam about a week before Saigon fell.

SM: What happened between the time Danang fell and the time you left, and what do you remember?

RE: Again, I'm trying to get the sequences together and I was trying to remember when the highlands fell, Pleiku and Ban Me Thout and all of that, and I don't remember the sequence, whether I Corps was first and then it was II Corps, or whether II Corps preceded I Corps. I'm thinking maybe II Corps happened first. They were like almost cutting the country in half, but I'm unclear about the sequence really. Our area of ops is just shrinking steadily. We still had Saigon South. We had the whole Delta still; basically it was unchanged, or at least hadn't collapsed like it had up North. But, after that deal in Hue it was essentially up to normal I guess from my personal viewpoint, with the understanding of course that the area of ops was shrinking and shrinking and shrinking. As I say, the Delta was still going pretty much as it always had.

SM: Now did you help with the evacuation of the highlands?

RE: No, I didn't get involved in that. I guess it was just timing. I was somewhere else when that happened. I wasn't involved in that, either.

SM: After the rapid fall of Hue and then Danang, at that point was there at least some planning of evacuating other areas in case the need arose?

RE: As I think I mentioned to you earlier in an email, there was some planning that was going on regarding Saigon which I was aware of, landing areas being selected ahead of time, rooftops identified and marked, and that kind of thing. That was being done in the case of Saigon, but it was being done pretty quietly because they didn't want to stir up the locals and make it obvious that we were preparing to leave, and there was also resistance from the embassy to those efforts because they didn't want them to see that information. I had the understanding that the embassy was dragging their feet on it, but Nikki Fillippi whom you've spoken with was very much involved in that and certainly deserves immense credit for the efforts he made. I always felt like Nikki probably had more to do with the success of that operation than anybody I can think of.

SM: What about your wife? You mentioned that after you heard about the fall of Danang, I think it was the fall of Danang you said you went ahead and gave your wife the money and she went and got a passport. Did she come to the States immediately thereafter?

RE: No. She went to Bangkok. She was seven months pregnant at the time so I wanted to get her out of there. As it turns out, Nikki had a Thai wife so I got my wife on a plane to Thailand and Nikki's wife was able to help her quite a lot because of course she'd never been out of the country so of course the whole thing was brand new to her, but Nikki's wife was very, very helpful in getting her settled in and helping her find her way around and take care of whatever items she had to take care of. She was very, very helpful that way, and of course Nikki, he's the one that set it all up for me so he was an immense help.

SM: What changed in terms of your personal activities, when you weren't flying?

RE: Things started to get a little bit spooky. It was a weird feeling, and I don't know whether you've heard this from others or not, but it was like the whole city knew what was coming, it was only a question of when. You began to get this…at least I had this sense that you don't know who's your enemy and who's your friend anymore

because there was this feeling that a whole lot of people were probably going to be tempted to change sides at the last minute, or maybe it had been on the other side all along, who knows. I know of one case as an example one of the guy's local girlfriends had always been, oh, rather western in her dress and her appearance and so forth to the point of bleaching her hair and that kind of thing, miniskirts, and obviously not your typical Vietnamese. But the last time anybody saw her before the fall she was wearing black pajamas and had black hair again, so she had decided she had better make her switch ahead of time. I'm sure there were a number of people doing that. Long about that time they moved all or most if not all of us out of our own personal accommodation into a building that had essentially been abandoned by the embassy or some official US group because there had been an ongoing sort of quiet evacuation of nonessential personnel, at least nonessential government personnel. The contractors they really couldn't control and a lot of those guys hung around that had no business being there. But, a lot of the nonessential embassy people had been evacuated already so there was this big, huge apartment building that was vacant and it was basically given to Air America and we were told to move our people in there. I don't know if they said move them in, maybe that's not the right way to put it, but I was told to move by the Air America management so we all ended up in this big building, the purpose of which was to have us all assembled basically in an area where transportation to the airport would not be a problem because they put a helipad on the roof. So, at nighttime a helicopter was parked up there. The idea of being that if the roads became impassable, we still had a way to get to the airport and conduct operations. It's no good having all the airplanes in one place and all the pilots in the other with no way to connect. But of course this helicopter sitting on the rooftop was obvious to anybody that drove by, so the Vietnamese all knew what the deal was. They could figure that out. As such there was a waiting line of new aspiring friends, shall we say, that were there every night when they came home. Of course they're all trying to get their ticket out and lined up in advance. It was a bit different from what it had been previously that last month or so.

SM: Were you approached ever by anyone to say, "Help them get out of the country," surreptitiously?

RE: I don't think it was so surreptitious. When you come home at night, there'd be a line of people at the gate wanting to do you all kinds of favors, and of course the unspoken deal was, "You're going to look out for me when the crunch comes." At that point, of course, you didn't want to get involved with anybody because you don't know what's going to come down. You don't want to owe anybody any favors. At least that was the way I played it. Nobody ever came and tried to say, "Here's a couple hundred dollars. Would you try to look out for me?" That didn't happen to me personally but I suspect it probably happened to somebody. That's the way things work over there. I just sort of avoided it all the best I could.

SM: The evacuation of Hue, I forgot to ask you, when you went in to pull these people out were there any Americans involved in that evacuation that you were going and picking up and bringing out?

RE: The people that were mainly getting on our helicopter were just Vietnamese locals. I'm sure we probably did pull some Americans out but the overwhelming majority of the people that we were actually evacuating were just unknown Vietnamese civilians, people trying to get out of Dodge; at least that's the way I remember. Again, this is a 35-year-old memory, 25…however. See, I can't even add now!

RE: Was there any change in the briefings you received or any special instructions after the fall of Danang before the fall of Saigon that you remember?

RE: Not that I remember. There very well may have been, but I don't recall

SM: Is there anything else you remember about this period that you want to talk about?

RE: Not really other than that last few weeks, it just got a little spooky. There was just a feeling in the air that boy, this whole thing is over. I do remember a substantial amount of frustration with the number of people that should have gotten on an airplane and left that wanted to hang around to see what it was going to be like the last day. It was almost like a carnival deal in a sense and I remember thinking, "What are you guys doing here?" because there was a lot of contractors, American civilians, who had worked in areas that we no longer owned. A guy had been working at Pleiku and we're not in Pleiku anymore, there's nothing for him to do. So, these guys were all sitting around in Saigon now spending their days carousing around, doing whatever they were

doing, certainly not working, and I'm thinking, "Man, you guys are going to be a real problem when the crunch comes. You ought to get on a damn airplane and get out, because not only are you putting yourself at risk, somebody else is going to be at risk trying to save you at the last minute," and I thought it was pretty irresponsible for them to hang around and make the job even tougher. I was a little concerned about that because I felt like it was a bunch of people hanging around for a 4th of July show that should have been at home in the States watching it on TV.

SM: You said you left a week before the fall of Saigon? Is that right?

RE: Yes, sir, approximately.

SM: Where did you go?

RE: To Bangkok because that's where my wife was.

SM: How long did you stay there?

RE: I was there…it must have been just about a week because we were in Hong Kong on our way back to the States when Saigon fell because I remember running into Air America guys in Hong Kong that had just come in that day, fixed wing people that had landed. Of course the helicopter guys all ended up on ships.

SM: Do you remember anything that was told to you by those pilots you ran into in Hong Kong?

RE: No, nothing specific other than it was just the expected pandemonium, but I don't recall any specific stories.

SM: I'm sorry, I forgot to ask one last question about your time, especially the whole time you were there from '73 to '75 but especially the last few months, of course there was a regulation that Air America pilots were not supposed to carry personal weapons. Did that change? Did you guys carry them?

RE: We always had. That regulation comment sort of caught me off guard. We had always carried survival weapons on the aircraft. You would go in in the morning and part of your morning routine was to go check out survival weapons. You didn't walk around the streets with a gun, but while you were flying, you were armed. We never took them out of the case unless of course you had a need to.

SM: I'm sorry, not the survival weapon. You're talking about a revolver or…

RE: I'm talking about usually an M-2 carbine; well, that's what we had in Saigon. In Udorn we carried Uzi's.

SM: Yeah, but those weren't accessible to you when you were in the aircraft?

RE: Well they'd be hanging on your seat. I mean, it was the kind of thing that in theory if you'd go down, you'd grab the gun and run. That was always an available to us and continued to be available. There may have been some people who carried a personal pistol, I don't know. I remember one guy carried a CAR-15, you know the short M-16. Some people had their own survival weapons that they carried, yes, but we didn't normally walk around the streets with them. That was just left at work.

SM: That remained the same throughout your time with Air America?

RE: I'm not aware of any change along the line in that deal. There were a couple of guys incidentally who did carry guns who had permits to carry guns issued by the Vietnamese authorities, at least one person I knew that did.

SM: Do you know why?

RE: Why he carried it?

SM: Why was he specifically authorized to carry it?

RE: That individual was pretty clever with guns. He did gunsmithing in his apartment and so forth and he was pretty clever, and one of the things he had done for years was to give instructional training to the Vietnamese police in Saigon. So, as a result, he had good connection and that's how he had the permit.

SM: When you say gunsmithing, you mean just making alterations to weapons?

RE: Yeah, not creating weapons from scratch but playing around with them and modifying them and so forth. He was very clever with that.

SM: What were your plans when you left, when you left in April before the fall?

RE: The plans were just to round up my wife and come back to the States because it was over. I had left the company. When I left Saigon, I left the company.

SM: Okay, so you were no longer employed when you were in Hong Kong?

RE: That's correct.

SM: What did you have in the back of your head as far as your plans when you got back to the States?

RE: I of course was going to try to find a job. I was going to come back; I had a baby due in a couple of months, so that was the immediate concern. I was just going to come back to Indiana where my folks lived and establish myself here for the short term while I looked for a job. That's kind of the way it played out, although it took a little longer to find a job than I hoped.

SM: Really?

RE: I was out of work about a year.

SM: Were you really?

RE: Yeah, and that was a matter of timing and being…I got a job, I had interviews immediately upon return and was promised a job, and that job was supposed to have commenced in July. My son was due in early July; in fact, he was born on the 2nd and about a week before I was supposed to report to duty I was called and told, "Our plans have changed; we don't need you anymore." Well, in those days a lot of helicopter work was seasonal and so the big hiring usually took place in the spring and by now it's the middle of the summer and all the jobs were gone. So, it took until early the next year before I found something. I got myself reacquainted with farming in the meantime.

SM: Now what did you think when you heard Saigon had fallen? That would have been in Hong Kong. What went through your mind?

RE: Just that I knew it was going to happen; it was only a question of which day. Really, I don't recall my feelings at the time. It was no surprise at all. I had always had mixed emotions about the timing of my departure because I would have liked to have been there at the last. The other side of the coin was that I was not happy with the way the company had been treating us, for one thing, and I felt like it would have been the ultimate sort of irresponsible act to get myself killed on the last day in Saigon and leave a wife and unborn child behind to fend for themselves. So, that's why I made the choice I did, and in retrospect I think it was the right choice, but I still would have liked to have been there.

SM: Did you maintain contact with many of the pilots you flew with when you got back?

RE: Yes, I've continued to stay in contact with a number of people.

SM: What did you take away from your experience? What were the important things? How was your experience in Southeast Asia important to you personally?

RE: Oh jeez, for one thing just what you mentioned. I made a lot of very dear friends and people that I remain close to to this day, both from the military and from the Air America periods. That's probably the biggest thing. I mean, friendships are very important to me. Professionally it was a period of great development that way, both in terms of skills and in terms of contacts, because the helicopter world was pretty small and I keep running into people all over the world. Every time I go on a new job I meet people either that I knew before or that have mutual friends. So, it's always paid dividends that way. The whole thing was a very, very intense experience in both the military and Air America. It was a wonderful time of life; of course I was young and had a lot of money in my pocket and no responsibilities, but it was a pretty nice period. I'm often asked by people who have no background over there or who have different experiences there how is it that I can say that I enjoyed six years in Vietnam? My answer to that is, and it took me a long time to really figure out the essence of the answer to that question, but I think what it boils down to is that it was the only time in my life that I ever really lived truly and totally in the moment. There was never much concern about yesterday or tomorrow, and that's kind of a neat way to live, from my perspective anyway. I understand that if you're going to be a responsible, successful person, you do have to think about the future a little bit and plan for it. But, at that time in my life that didn't matter.

SM: Yes, sir. What did you think about the US normalizing relations with Vietnam?

RE: Oh, I never had a problem with that. I think it was appropriate. What's to be served by doing otherwise? You can't affect things anymore if you're not even going to talk to them, and no, I'm in favor of that. It was time. I don't see any reason, at least from our perspective, why we couldn't have productive relations with them going forward from this point. It depends a lot on how they view things, what their political positions are, but just looking at it from our perspective I think it's desirable that we can have positive relations. It's a part of the world that still is important to us, I think. In fact most of the world is. I can't think of a part of the world that we shouldn't pay attention to.

SM: Yes, sir. Have you been back to Southeast Asia?

RE: I was back there I guess it was three years ago, Christmas. I don't remember the year now, but I have been back since, yeah.

SM: What countries did you visit?

RE: That was back to Saigon.

SM: Oh you went back to Saigon?

RE: I've been back to the Far East many times since then. I've been to Laos a number of times; in fact, I used to try to get to Laos at least once a year since '96. So, I've been to Laos five or six times I guess since '96. I quite enjoy it up there, and of course Bangkok because you always stop in Bangkok to get visas, but just the one trip to Saigon.

SM: What drew you back, especially the strong pull back to Laos?

RE: Well I liked the Far East generally because I have a lot of friends over there. I sort of like the lifestyle and the people, food, the whole thing. Laos was particularly attractive to me because it's so quiet and peaceful and sort of small-townish and Bangkok is just a big, overwhelming city and it's much different than I recall back in the '70s in terms of just more of everything to excess and it really…Bangkok is a bit overwhelming for me now in terms of traffic and just everything. It's just too much of everything is the way I put it. But, Laos is essentially unchanged in terms of the population is still relatively small, the streets are quiet. I've never had a hassle, people are still very friendly, still a very pretty country although they do continue to wipe out the forests alarmingly. That's rather sad to see, but it's still a fun country to fly over if you can screw up the courage to fly out in the old beat up airplanes they're operating now.

SM: Speaking of flying, you continued to fly when you got back here, correct?

RE: Yes.

SM: Was it all commercial, or what kind of flying?

RE: It was all legitimate commercial.

SM: Never went back to work for any agencies or anything like that?

RE: No, I never did.

SM: Were you able to incorporate some of the lessons you learned?

RE: Oh of course, yeah. A lot of those lessons are universal. They're just part of developing your professional skills I guess, and once you have them, you have them. You do get to a point where they deteriorate. Obviously your reactions and all that kind of thing deteriorate with time, but you hope that your knowledge sort of compensates and so far it hasn't crashed yet.

SM: Knock on wood!

RE: Yes, exactly!

SM: Has it helped out of any binds, emergency techniques or anything like that?

RE: I suppose it almost becomes unconscious and you don't think, "Where did I learn this little trick that got me out of this jam?" But, it's just an overall enhancement to your skills and of course you have that, it's yours to keep as long as you maintain yourself somewhat. So, I'm sure it's paid continuing dividends for years and years and years, and of course I've learned things since then. My learning didn't stop at that point.

SM: No, of course not. But have you been flying fixed wing or rotary wing or both?

RE: No, strictly rotary wing.

SM: Oh, strictly rotor?

RE: Yes.

SM: What do you think we as a nation should take away from our collective experience in Southeast Asia?

RE: I think that there are a number of lessons. I feel like since then that before we embark on any sort of foreign adventure that the powers that make these decisions should ask some fundamental questions; number one, "Is there any national purpose for us in getting involved in this?" Of course the way I see it is it would be a number of questions you could ask and every question has to be answered yes or you stop right there. Number one, is there any reason for us to be there? If the answer is yes, then you go on to another question which is "Can we affect the situation in a positive way?" Even though we care, is there something we can do about it? If the answer is yes, okay, then the next question is "Can we get this done in a way that we can sell to the American people and sustain their support for long enough to accomplish the goal?" Again, you need a yes answer, and a series of questions sort of of that nature before you ever jump in

with both feet. If you get to any of these questions and the answer is no, stop right there; end of story. We never asked those questions in Vietnam, I don't think. But, that could apply to Somalia, Kosovo, you name it, and another thing I think is very important to draw from that is when we get involved in these foreign situations I think that all too often we fail to consult with people who have some first hand real life experience in these countries, and I don't mean necessarily embassy people. I'm not sure that their experience really acquaints them in the proper way with the mentalities of the locals. I'd rather almost see them discuss some of these things with people who lived there as civilians in business or in some non-official capacity because its very important to understand the mentality of the people that we're dealing with, and I think time and time again we continued to get in situations where we don't understand the other side, and that's essential. There's no other way to understand. You'll never totally understand it, but at least you could get a good feel for people if you live and work there as a civilian unofficially because people who go over there in an official capacity I don't think see the country the same way other people do. They're not required to interact with locals in the same way. They're chauffeured to and from point A to point B, the contact that they had with locals are not really representative of the rank and file average man. But in the end, the average guy is going to have a big impact on what happened. There definitely are some lessons I think to be learned; I don't know whether we've learned them.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to discuss today?

RE: No, sir, not unless you have anything else.

SM: I can't think of anything at the moment. Let me go ahead and put an official end to this. This will end the interview with Mr. Bob Eaton. Thank you very much, sir.

RE: Well you're certainly welcome.