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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Ben Van Etten
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
January 9, 15, 22, 30, 2003
Transcribed by Jennifer McIntyre**

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

1 Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Ben
2 Van Etten on the 9th of January 2003 at approximately three o'clock Lubbock time. I am
3 in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Van Etten is in Madison, Alabama. Sir, thanks for consenting
4 to this interview, and why don't we start with a brief discussion of your early life. If you
5 would tell me when and where you were born, and where you grew up.

6 Ben Van Etten: Okay, I grew up in Washington state, in the Seattle area of a town
7 called Bellevue, and I actually went all the way through school in one town. Small town
8 at the time, it's gotten to be a large town now. I go back to visit my relatives, but I went
9 to school, high school there and then to college at the University of Washington in Seattle
10 and then really, I worked most of my, starting out really young I did paper routes and
11 worked in grocery stores and pretty well paid my own way. I always had a car and
12 supported that. I liked sports, but I actually, because of working I didn't get to participate
13 too much in organized sports. I did, of course I liked to fish and all that, and camp and
14 things like you could do up in the northwest back in those days and still can in fact, and
15 water sports. We lived on Lake Washington so I spent a lot of time on the water during
16 the summer time. I was the oldest of four children. My parents divorced, both remarried,
17 both stayed in that area so we divided time between them. My dad in fact is still living;
18 he's eighty-five years old, now. He lives up in Washington State. My mother passed on
19 quite a few years ago from cancer. My two sisters and one brother are still, and their
20 families are still with us. My one sister and brother live in Seattle and my other sister
21 lives in Montana, with her husband and other than that, of course I went to school and

1 then. This was before Vietnam so there was a draft at the time but there really wasn't
2 anything much about Vietnam, even in the news, and I was taking ROTC in college and
3 was interested in the military. In fact during my younger school years I did spend a
4 couple years at a military school up there too. So I kind of liked the military style of life,
5 and I went ahead and after I finished college in the winter of '61, I went ahead and joined
6 the Army as an enlisted, just to go to, have a chance to go through aviation training, I
7 hoped. At that time it wasn't that easy to get to flight school, which I didn't realize when
8 I enlisted. After Vietnam cranked up then there was, you know they needed a lot of
9 bodies there. But when I went it was prior to Vietnam and there was not that much of a
10 need for that many pilots back then and so they were very selective who they picked to
11 go flight training. Anyway, that's kind of that background.

12 SM: Were there any subjects in particular, in either middle school or high school
13 that you enjoyed?

14 BV: Oh, I enjoyed geography type courses. I liked contemporary problems,
15 world problems. I liked, in college I took, I was a business major and economics and
16 statistics and those were probably the most. I did not particularly like sciences, although
17 I do now, but I didn't back then. I was also; I played several instruments. I was in band,
18 in fact in high school years, we had, I had my own combo. We played for dances and
19 things. As I got older and into college I was either coming to the point if you're going to
20 be professional you're going to have to join the union or forget it. So a couple of my
21 associates went on to become, and making records and one of the became a senior band
22 instructor at one of the high schools there, for years, but I kind of dropped it at that point
23 and went on. I was interested in learning to fly. During my years growing up, my father
24 was a land developer and owned a hunting and fishing lodge up in British Columbia,
25 Canada. We used to go up there often. Every summer fishing for sure back in those
26 days. A lot of times we'd have a Cessna-180 on floats go up with us to go back on some
27 of the lakes fishing, so I got really interested in flying. That's one reason I went on I
28 think to become a pilot.

29 SM: In what year did you graduate from high school?

30 BV: 1958, Belview High School.

31 SM: Okay, so you were born in probably 1940?

1 BV: Yes, that's right.

2 SM: Now, did your father or any of your other close relatives, did they serve in
3 the military during World War II?

4 BV: No, my dad didn't. I had two uncles, his brothers that did, one was in the
5 Navy and one was in the Marines during World War II. But my father didn't, he had an
6 injury and wasn't able to go in.

7 SM: Okay, did your uncles talk with you very much about their experiences in the
8 war?

9 BV: Just a little, they were both in the Pacific Area and one was on submarines,
10 which was probably pretty interesting back then, and the other one was a Marine which
11 was involved in the South Pacific, but not much detail really, other than they were there.

12 SM: Well, in terms of when you left college, that was in 1961?

13 BV: Yes, '58 through '61 and finished in '61.

14 SM: That's really good time, three years for your degree.

15 BV: Yes.

16 SM: I guess this was not a land grant school so you weren't required to take
17 ROTC or anything like that.

18 BV: I wasn't required but I took it anyway. **It was, of course** watching the news, I
19 don't know if it's a land grant school or not, it could be actually as a matter of fact.

20 SM: Okay, so you probably took the first two years of ROTC?

21 BV: **Yes.** Actually I was going into advanced but then I kind of skipped over **that**
22 and ended up going to Alaska, working instead of summer camp and that kind of got me
23 messed up there.

24 SM: What kind of work did you do in Alaska?

25 BV: I was a fish buyer with the salmon industry for the summer up there. It was a
26 good way to earn some money and it was interesting work, a lot of fun up there,
27 interesting area.

28 SM: You said a fish fryer?

29 BV: No, a fish buyer.

30 SM: A fish buyer. I was going to say.

1 BV: Yes, you can do that down here. No, I went up there with a company of out
2 Seattle that bought fresh salmon from the fisherman up there and halibut, and my job was
3 to take the fish, weigh them, ice them down, pay the people in cash, had a little grocery
4 store I ran on a barge actually that they tied up to at night and re-supply them and they'd
5 all go to bed and I'd be up most of the night icing fish and then after that ended, of course
6 they would be gone early in the morning on their fishing and I'd just sleep the morning
7 and then meet them when they came back in. I also had fuel there and water for their
8 boats too. It was kind of fun, I was supposed to go up like the assistant because I didn't
9 have any experience [in that](#), but the guy that I worked with or for, got ill and the season
10 was kind of slow so they just left me on by myself after that. [And then](#) once a week this
11 other bigger boat would come by and pick up all the fish that I purchased and take them
12 on to. Yes, it was kind of fun. I'll tell you the interesting part, Alaska, that's another
13 story but the characters that I met up there, the locals, [that you know](#), they trap all winter
14 and fish all summer [back in those days](#), really some individuals.

15 SM: [Yes sir](#). [Well](#), what led you to that work, was it your initial experiences
16 going to British Columbia, to your fishing, hunting?

17 BV: Well, it was just a friend that had a friend that I was looking, kind of, that
18 was one of the things for college kids to do in the summer was get a job in Alaska,
19 especially Seattle because you could earn pretty good money up there and I got, through a
20 connection I got the job that way.

21 SM: Now the people that you came into contact with, were they mostly
22 Americans that had migrated from the southern states, that is the main?

23 BV: The lower forty-eight?

24 SM: The lower forty-eight as opposed to Alaskan, migrated up, where you dealing
25 with natives as well?

26 BV: A little of both. We were in what they call southeastern Alaska which is the,
27 you can picture, catch a camera on the first village, off of Karen up to the west coast and
28 you kind of head westerly out to those islands and areas that are, but still south of Juneau
29 and south of Anchorage, but out in the wilds out there and that's where the good salmon
30 fishing is and that's where I went. That's inhabited by a lot of Indians, [Tlingits](#) and
31 [Haidars](#), are the main tribes [up there](#), which I met a lot of them. A lot of them are

1 fisherman and then of course a lot of other people that had fishing boats would actually
2 come up from the coast, from Seattle, for the fishing season, or that area from the west
3 coast and that's who I got acquainted with. And then of course other people were the
4 locals up there, **that** they'd grown up and lived up there or had migrated. **I mean, you**
5 **know** there was quite a mix in Alaska. **But it** takes a particular rugged individual I think
6 to survive up there, at least back then it did.

7 SM: Yes, sir. Well, when you graduated in 1961 at what point did you know that
8 you were going to go into the military?

9 BV: Well, I had been considering it. I just figured about that time, about that
10 same time, **I figured**. I was thinking about it before that, I was thinking, I wanted to be a
11 helicopter pilot, and my plan was just to go in and become one, but not necessarily make
12 it a career, just get that experience and then move one.

13 SM: And when you went to the recruiter, what made you decide the Army as
14 opposed to either the Navy, the Marine Corps, or even the Air Force?

15 BV: Well, because the Army did have the most helicopter school, the biggest
16 school, and the Navy and Air Force, I looked at but I, the Army I figured that was the
17 more sure thing for a helicopter because I wanted to become a pilot. I could add a
18 sidelight there, now in later years, like when Vietnam came up, you could take the test,
19 the aptitude test to be a pilot and also the physical prior to joining. Now, when I joined **I**
20 **couldn't** take those tests until after I was in. **So in** other words in case from some reason
21 I was not physically qualified or didn't pass the aptitude test to be a pilot, I was stuck for
22 three years if I enlisted. So I took that chance, of course **it was only at that point, it was**
23 the only way you could do that.

24 SM: Okay, well so you went in, asked for and received flight mechanic, or I guess
25 it was crew chief?

26 BV: Yes, I went through of course basic training like everybody does **the first**
27 **time**. **At** that time **it was down** at Fort Ord, California. And then since I'd had ROTC
28 they made me like the acting platoon Sergeant, and as it turned out I was the platoon
29 sergeant because our **main, our** real Army platoon sergeant was a drunk, and every
30 afternoon, he was down at what they called the Beer Garden with his head on the table
31 and I'd go to him for instructions but then I would go back to our group, which was a

1 platoon of about sixty or seventy people. Each platoon had a squad, and the squad
2 leaders that I helped pick were all like my assistant leaders and quite a few of them were
3 from. I knew several of them from my old high school days and college days so I knew,
4 anyway I was the guy, and from there you go to advanced, what they call AIT now but it
5 was your specialized training and of course mine was to Fort Rucker was to become, for
6 basic aviation maintenance training. I was, I kind of lucked out there because I didn't
7 realize that I couldn't even apply for flight school or OCS or any of that until I was at my
8 permanent base. In other words until I'm through with all my schools and made it
9 through all those and then get settled wherever the Army is going to assign me, then I can
10 start the application. Well, back in those days to go to helicopter school it was taking
11 most people around three years to get through that darn application procedure, which I
12 didn't realize that either, going up front. As I lucked out, when I was at Fort Rucker, the
13 military district Washington, which is up at Washington DC area, **has, at that time** the
14 Army had the presidential flight detachment and part of that fleet of aircraft that they
15 flew the president or flew even the people out of the Pentagon were the old flying
16 banana, H-21, I don't know if you can picture that one.

17 SM: Yes, sir.

18 BV: Okay, it's an old aircraft but anyway, **then** they also had the S-61 Sikorsky
19 that actually the president flew in, but the rest of the people flew in, and that's when I
20 went up there. What they did, Vietnam was just starting, and the very first aircraft that
21 we sent to Vietnam were H-21s, so out of the various areas of the U.S. Well, they
22 grabbed crew chiefs from all over to send them over there, and pilots to support those
23 aircraft and that particular unit **got**, they pulled out most of their experience, so they were
24 short on crew chiefs. So they sent a note to Fort Rucker, saying we need the top fifteen
25 or top ten **people** that are going through maintenance school down there to come **on** up
26 here and **become**, we'll finish their training up here, because we need to have them learn
27 to be crew chiefs in this aircraft. I was one of the **higher**, better grades down there. So
28 they went ahead and I went up there, which was good for me because it gave me the
29 access to the military District in Washington, which I was able to hand carry my
30 application right into the Pentagon and save **a whole**, maybe several years of time. And I
31 had my first sergeant when I got up there, he'd already tried to go to flight school, he

1 hadn't made it but he knew the ropes though, how to get the right packets in, which I was
2 able to do, so I was able to get in fairly quickly that way.

3 SM: Now, when you went into the Army, what was the, from the very beginning,
4 when you first left you went to basic training at Fort Ord, California, what were your first
5 impressions?

6 BV: Oh, that there was a bunch of yahoos and it was quite a cross-section, of
7 course the draft was back in those days too so we had a lot of draftees that didn't want to
8 be there and we had a lot of other guys, **and then we had. You know,** it was a pretty good
9 cross section, but particularly I was not impressed with the NCO Corps at the time. I
10 didn't think they were, which they weren't, not very educated and quite frankly the same
11 with a lot of the officer corps. It became a different army in later years, but back then,
12 **you know** they still had the concept of re-fighting World War II was the mythology and
13 even our training, which is fine, you've got to have something to start with. In later years
14 looking back you can see really that they were going down the wrong track. And even
15 today **you know** there's **that** argument **that** what kind of an Army, what should the Army
16 look like to fight the wars that we need to fight? But of course you've always got the
17 mentality **that** what they did before. You always plan the next war the way they fought
18 the last one, well that's not necessarily the best way to do it as we found out many times.
19 Anyway, that was my impression; it was easy. It was easy for me because I had been to
20 school and studied and all that and got down that was a snap. They give you a battery of
21 tests when you first get in, a whole bunch of things, what they call a GT, which really is
22 an IQ test and all that. The average score is around one hundred for each of these
23 different batteries and **there's like a,** it takes you like two days to get through them. I did
24 real well; mine were all 140s, which was the highest in our group. In fact even when I
25 got to be permanent station up there at Fort Belvoir, which is where, military, **you know**
26 where I was stationed for the Presidential Flight Detachment. They noted that hey, how
27 did you do all that? Well, I just concentrated and did them, but they weren't that hard. **I**
28 **mean** when you take these batteries of tests that they give you, even Morse code. They
29 give you so many codes; you've got to repeat it back to them. I was able to get right on
30 through that. Then they try to figure out an MOS for you based on that, sometimes
31 whether you ought to be in military intelligence or be a cook or driver, what your

1 different aptitudes. Of course then, later I had to take the exam for what they call the AF,
2 it's an aviation test and it's just kind of a, the airlines have one they call a Steinen test. I
3 don't know if you've ever heard that expression, but it's very similar. All pilots: Air
4 Force and military, all military, Army, take a very similar battery of tests, which is, a lot
5 of it has to do with logic. You know you turn a steering wheel to the right, which way is
6 the car or the airplane going to go if you turn the controls, that type of thing. But they
7 even questioned like what kind of wine do you drink with fish or with chicken. So you
8 know, and I really don't know what it. Somehow they put in all that computer and come
9 out with a norm because I was interviewed, part of my flight school physical exam was,
10 and that's another thing, you've got to be able to pass a class-one physical, of course all
11 military pilots do. Now once you pass that one time to go to flight training, then you're
12 okay with an annual, what they call class-two, but a class-one is, especially then was very
13 stringent, you know twenty/twenty uncorrected on your eyes, or better, everything had to
14 be, because before they spent all that money on you, especially prior to Vietnam they
15 didn't need that many pilots anyway. They were very careful that you were physically
16 able. But anyway, part of that was interview with a psychiatrist, and of course he's got
17 the results of your test and they're sitting there on a graph and of course he's looking at
18 you like your, talking to you like he thinks you're nuts anyway.

19 SM: Well, when you left your basic training, went to?

20 BV: Fort Rucker.

21 SM: Fort Rucker, Alabama to go through your crew chief training, what were the
22 most challenging aspects of this training for you, or most challenging in basic training
23 and then the most challenging in crew chief training?

24 BV: Really, even in basic training there wasn't. Stamina would have been
25 probably one of the more challenging things for a lot. You know we did those forced
26 marches like they do now and you know you'd be amazed how many young kids drop out
27 of those. Even after a couple of miles, which was nothing or running, jogging and now.
28 Back then the Army didn't run like the do now. Now its just part of the Army routine,
29 you run two miles at a time, all the time, but back then you didn't and there were guys
30 dropping out. But yet we had our platoon sergeant, or our main sergeant, the drill
31 instructor, the senior drill instructor for the whole company, he led and he was an old

1 Korean vet with scars, you could tell he was a tough guy, but anyway. That was, there
2 really weren't any challenges, it was just **you know** adapting to that type of life, making
3 sure everything was in order. But then getting to Fort Rucker, the maintenance aviation
4 training was, it started out pretty simple and the main problem you have there is just
5 staying awake during **some** of the classes. **Anyway** there wasn't, it was generally the
6 caliber of instruction once you hit that area I thought was pretty good. **Everybody**, all the
7 teachers were former crew chiefs or former mechanics themselves **you know** so they'd
8 been there and done that.

9 SM: At the time were they mostly military or civilian instructors?

10 JV: Oh, about half and half, we had some of both. I do recall some civilians that
11 were very good and they were probably retired military guys in their former lives.

12 SM: What aircraft were you exposed to at Fort Rucker during the crew chief
13 training?

14 JV: Well, back then I was, of course the basic was like fixed wing aircraft to start
15 with, and we just went through a typical, **you know** back then it was before the turbine
16 engines. They weren't around that much so we had a recip engines you're working on
17 and that's with magneto. Of course they still had all those modern civil aircraft, so we
18 learned about recip engines, we learned about air frames, we learned about the propellers,
19 helicopter on the, not a whole **lot** on helicopters. **It** was kind of basic aviation period, **it**
20 **was** which could have fit either one of them at the point, and that's really you start out as
21 kind of a joint MOS then you specialize either into fixed wing or into helicopters, as your
22 advanced training goes on. But you know we got a change to go **in and** work sheet metal.
23 We got a chance to go **in** and work on engines and help watch them being taken apart and
24 put together or participate. Run them up on a test stand. Not really much flight line work
25 at that point. It was mainly classroom and like the labs **you know** where you got a
26 breakdown of a magneto or **a** break down of a starter assembly or **you know** a propeller
27 or whatever, different components. Not much into avionics at that point, avionics would
28 have come later, **but** of course I learned a lot of that once I was up on the job. And really
29 I learned more about that after I became a pilot then I did when I was studying to be a
30 mechanic, mainly because I didn't have a whole lot of time as a mechanic. That's
31 another thing, **you know** when I finally got up to Fort Belvoir they needed mechanics and

1 they needed crew chiefs and that was my MOS. But that MOS was really kind of given
2 to me because I didn't do enough OJT on the flight line to really get it because they put
3 me to work in the maintenance office. At that time the Army was converting their forms
4 and records and they needed some help in there, so I worked in there with the
5 maintenance officer and the NCO-IC that helped convert the records. That gave me a,
6 then I got to be pretty friendly with them, and that gave me a change to go to graduate
7 school for a while at George Washington, took a few courses in the afternoon. They just
8 let me off early to go to school, so I had a pretty good deal there too. So, I really didn't
9 work on the aircraft that much at that point, even though they did award me because I
10 was the one who typed out a lot of the award paperwork. I just typed one up for me and
11 gave it to the officer and he signed it, and I was a, and I was one but I didn't. Anyway--

12 SM: Oh that's funny. Well, what kind of graduate work did you work on?

13 BV: I took a course in public administration and another course in investments
14 and real estate and let's see I don't remember what the. Really I can't remember that
15 third one was. I took three courses, it was all the time had, but over at George
16 Washington which was real close to Fort Belvoir, just in Washington DC

17 SM: How long were you at Fort Belvoir?

18 BV: About a year. Let me see I got there in, I'm trying to think. I got there,
19 about a year. I got there I think in the spring and went through the summer and through
20 the winter and then I was, yes less than a year because I was assigned to flight school by
21 the, reporting in February the next year down to Camp Walters, Texas.

22 SM: That was in 1960?

23 BV: '63.

24 SM: '3 that you were?

25 BV: Yes, '62 and I was there for '62 and then I started my flight training in
26 February of '63.

27 SM: Okay, at Fort Walters, here in Texas?

28 BV: Yes, Fort Walters. Camp Walters really back then, but that was in Mineral
29 Wells, Texas, west of Fort Worth there.

30 SM: Now, at what point did you meet your wife?

31 BV: I met her there.

1 SM: You met her at Fort Walters?

2 BV: Yes, I met her at Walters and she's still here with me. She followed me
3 around the world, we've moved forty times in thirty-nine years. We were counting it up
4 the other day.

5 SM: That's quite an average.

6 BV: Yes, it's something else, **and then** plus **you** raise five kids and they were with
7 us most of the time too.

8 SM: Well, what was it like starting your flight training?

9 BV: That was hard. That's when I had to buckle down again, that was the flight
10 training. First of all what they do is they put you through a month of what they call pre-
11 flight which is like OCS, and that's nothing to do with aircraft, that's strictly harassment.
12 It's spit shine this and spit shine and everything's double time, but it was, I enjoyed that,
13 to me that fun and games. Of course the whole idea of that **is to**, especially for some of
14 the older **guys** was to get their goat. **You know** say, well I don't want to put up with this
15 crap and then quit. But the point is, if that's going to bother you, then what are you going
16 to do when you're flying in combat, you know what I mean? I could easily see why that
17 was, how that was related, but it was a game and when I became an upperclassmen
18 finally I turned right around and gave it to the junior candidates just as bad as I got it
19 **[laughs]**.

20 SM: What were the most challenging aspects of the flight training, and how long
21 did this last?

22 BV: Well, we were at Camp Walters for what they call primary **and then we**.
23 **Let's see**, I was there between, actually I didn't start flying until March. I was there in
24 February but in February was going through the pre-flight. March I started flying and I
25 left there in, I think the **end** of June for Fort Rucker in between, but had got married there
26 in June of that year too, went after and she went with me to Fort Rucker.

27 SM: What did you train in?

28 BV: That helicopter was the H-23, the Raven they call it, and it was a little bubble
29 looking aircraft, **and a** recip engine of course and it's a hard aircraft to fly. In later years
30 I've flown it again and I've trained people in it in fact and one of my civilian jobs, we
31 had a couple of them to. **They're called**, the civilian version is the Hiller 12E, but **it's the**

1 same, we were using the same aircraft, made by Hiller Aviation out in California back in
2 those days and it was hard, but it was, that was what I first started to fly.

3 SM: What was the most difficult aspect of your initial flight training?

4 BV: Probably learning to, just to hover and fly and just to learn to fly that
5 helicopter and control it. It had a lot to do with your instructors I guess I can easily see
6 looking back. Of course I was an instructor myself for twenty years after that, but it's a.
7 There were good ones and not good ones and the first instructor I had was, it's really he
8 was really kind of funny. In fact I'll include him sometime in one of my stories, but on
9 the ground he was a real holy guy, he quoted the Bible, he even carried a Bible and
10 everything was proper and everything. He'd get in the aircraft he turned into a raving
11 mania, screaming and hollering and cussing you know [laughter]. He was an ex-Marine
12 pilot back, flew Corsairs during World War II, but he was a character looking back but I
13 didn't learn a whole lot from him. I can see that now. My next instructor I did. We
14 changed instructors and then I, everything. The light went on because he had a different
15 method and he was quite frankly a much better instructor.

16 SM: What made him a better instructor, that you remember?

17 BV: He was much calmer, cooler. I think he was even a better pilot too, as far as
18 even handling the aircraft and demonstrate the maneuvers. Of course I went back there in
19 later years myself, as an instructor there at Camp Walter, Fort Walters with Southern
20 Airways, but anyway he was a retired Army guy. He'd been there in the Army as their
21 standards, that's one of the check pilots you know, and then when he retired he went to
22 work as a regular instructor with Southern Airways, was the contractor at that time for
23 most of the students that went through there for the primary school. And I felt like it
24 again, because I can tell. He just, he had a lot better way of presenting things and
25 wouldn't grab the controls and all that from me like the other guy did.

26 SM: Now what was your first cross-country like in an H-23?

27 BV: Oh, it was fun. You didn't too far but it was still neat, because you had to
28 navigate. You know there's no navigation aids in that aircraft, so you learned to read a
29 mp and of course down in west Texas, as you're aware, everything pretty well looks the
30 same, or even in central Texas there. But every little town had a water tower and on the
31 water tower there's probably the name of the town, so that kind of helps you and then

1 I've done that. Of course even in later years after I had thousands of hours of flight time
2 sometimes and I'd be flying along, fat dumb and happy and then want to make sure
3 exactly where I was on a VFR flight, and swoop on down and read a road sign [laughter].
4 But anyway, yes cross-country, we did night cross countries too there while we were
5 doing that. Usually out to Abilene and back or up to I can't remember Stephenville,
6 down south of Stephenville and back, you know those different towns around there. Of
7 course that's, as you know, that part of Palo Pinto County and Parker County is pretty
8 wide open ranch country, so there's lots of areas to fly without bother anybody.

9 SM: Right, now did you, on the night flight, did you use celestial navigation for
10 that?

11 BV: No, no, just really just time and distance and.

12 SM: Time, distance and direction?

13 BV: Yes, direction you try and find, you've been flying fifteen minutes; you
14 should be over this particular checkpoint, an intersection or something, which you could
15 make out, but just strictly VFR flying and trying to judge where you are by the lights on
16 the ground.

17 SM: What was the attrition rate in your class?

18 BV: About half, I think around fifty percent finally graduated.

19 SM: And when you graduate that was in March?

20 BV: No, I started in March and went though, well graduated, see it was two areas;
21 the primary was down there.

22 SM: At Fort Walters and then you went to Fort Rucker?

23 BV: Then went to Fort Rucker for the advanced training and actually graduated
24 on 19th November. So it was about nine months and it was a course.

25 SM: When you left Fort Walters and went to Fort Rucker, that was the transition
26 to the Huey, is that correct?

27 BV: No, there I did get a Huey checkout but I actually I went into H-34s there.

28 SM: H-34, okay.

29 BV: And then flew that for my, what they called my basic or advanced training,
30 and then I went into the Huey for some, for instrument training, but you didn't get
31 instrument ticket back then, just some basic instruments and then a very slight exposure

1 to gun. They had B model Huey, which was one of the very first ones with two thirty-
2 caliber machine guns on the side. So you went out and got to shoot those at the range just
3 for a day or so and then that was it. And then of course a little simulator time back then,
4 during the Fort Rucker phase. But there we could live off post and we were kind of
5 treated like human beings. See, what they did, the Army had just started their fixed wing
6 warrant officer course, and they went through their pre-flight at Rucker, everything for
7 them was at Rucker. So they, all the cadre were pretty well tied up with these, the new
8 students and us upperclassmen when we got there anyway, we were what they call senior
9 candidates could live at home live off base if what you wanted, so Linda was with me and
10 we lived there and I committed to work.

11 SM: Okay. Now, so for those, let's see, March to November of 1963 was all
12 flight training, right?

13 BV: All flight training, that's right.

14 SM: Advanced flight training there at Fort Rucker. How many, was there a
15 minimum number of hours that you had to acquire?

16 BV: Yes, it was around two hundred hours total time and it, yes you have to
17 follow a syllabus. You know you have so much solo time, so much dual time, so much
18 nighttime, et cetera, et cetera.

19 SM: Okay, and what were the biggest challenges transitioning from the 23 to the
20 34?

21 BV: Just getting into a real big airplane, 34 is a pretty heavy, it's over 13,000
22 pounds gross, so it's a big one and it's just the immensity of being so high up in the air
23 and learning you know to handle it. It's also an aircraft that take quite a long time to
24 learn to fly right and as it turned out, most at the time you need to have about five
25 hundred hours in that aircraft before you feel like you're pretty comfortable with it. And
26 so there were only four of us in our class that went to 34s, the rest went to H-19s. But as
27 luck would have it, which was an older aircraft and not really as good as the 34 was, but
28 as luck would have it when I got my orders for a permanent assignment after flight
29 school, it was to an H-34 unit in Germany. So I'd already, which was good you know
30 that way I'd already flown the aircraft and it wasn't as, didn't take me as long to get
31 checked out when I got over to Germany.

1 SM: Now, what, when I asked for the attrition rate, that was from the beginning of
2 pre-flight at Walters through Rucker?

3 BV: Affirmative. Most people had dropped or lost in the first phase at Walters,
4 now once they make it to Rucker, very few, actually my roommate quit. He just decided
5 he didn't want it, but he wasn't washed out, he just quit on his own. But actually I don't
6 think, I don't recall that we lost anybody once we went to Rucker, the class was already
7 down to about half size.

8 SM: Describe for me your first auto-rotation.

9 BV: Well, the first one dual was no big deal, that was kind of fun, but the first
10 one I did solo, that was kind of, thing is during the Walters phase they solo you in auto-
11 rotations, back in those days it was touch down auto-rotations. Now, the Army doesn't
12 even do those any more now, except for your annual check ride. They just don't do
13 touchdowns because its -- you know they figure you can do it to a power recovery and
14 you know then that way its just about the training is not quite as good but it saves the
15 aircraft. So the first time that I was solo, there's a certain lane, one of those stage fields
16 you line up, you're five hundred feet in the air and you're coming down over the lane and
17 then to cut your power, you're felling like you're going to cut your throat. So, it was a
18 thrill. Of course over the years I've done thousands of them, but back at those first ones I
19 can vividly remember those, the first few I did. They were, you barely, obviously I
20 walked away from them but I never crashed one or bent on up but it was probably pretty
21 close to that sometimes.

22 SM: Now, was that a washout offense if you, if on your sole auto-rotation in
23 training, if you banged up the aircraft?

24 BV: Not necessarily. No. In fact I don't know anybody that was eliminated for
25 having an accident. Usually they didn't get that far, if the instructor didn't feel they were
26 ready for an auto-rotation, if they couldn't pass that phase, well that's where they would
27 have what they call a prog ride and to see if maybe, either they needed a change of
28 instructors like I did as a matter of fact or maybe they are, they're just not cut out to be a
29 pilot is the bottom line. But I don't know of anybody that was actually washed out
30 because they dented one or crashed one. We had a few crashes, especially in auto-
31 rotation training.

1 SM: Yes, any major accidents in training at all?

2 BV: Not in my class when I was there. Now, there were other ones. Of course
3 going on a little bit when I came back and we can get to that, but in 1966, after the Army
4 I came back there as a flight instructor with Southern Airways and that was during the
5 Vietnam buildup, when we had six, eight hundred aircraft in the air at the same time.
6 There were some midairs back then and there were some great stories about, I can
7 probably relate several to you about dumb things that student pilots. When I was going
8 through I was pretty serious about not breaking any laws or **breaking** any rules because I
9 didn't want to get eliminated. Of course that would be, if you break rules too you **sign** all
10 these things that if you do that you can be eliminated right now, so are you familiar with
11 Possum Kingdom Lake is?

12 SM: No, sir.

13 BV: Okay, well that's, you knew where Mineral Wells is though, right?

14 SM: Oh yes, I do.

15 BV: Okay, well then you've got the Brazos River that comes just through that
16 area, well kind of like the headwaters up there is a very big, pretty good lake called
17 Possum Kingdom where the Brazos runs out of. Well, that was a no-fly area for a solo
18 student. In other words any time you go solo, your instructor gives you specific
19 instructions on where you can fly, what maneuvers you can do and on and on, **and you've**
20 got to follow that and oh by the way, do not go up to Possum Lake. So, this one guy
21 immediately takes off solo for the Possum Kingdom Lake and at one end of that lake was
22 a big dam. That dam has a power plant there and there's big power lines coming off the
23 dam. Well he's flying along there solo and he runs right into the darn, one of the high
24 tension wires. Well, it didn't, as luck would have it, the wire didn't, the blades were still
25 going around the wire is kind of stuck on his rotor mast, if you can picture between the
26 fuselage and the rotor blades and according to eye witnesses, he's just kind of sitting
27 there. He's kind of going left and right, trying to get off of there, but he couldn't get off
28 and finally he backs it off and flies back, but when he hit the wires to begin with it broke
29 his bubble, the windshield of the aircraft, the bubble of the aircraft. So he flies back to
30 Fort Walters knowing now he's in serious trouble because obviously the plane is
31 damaged and that was a no-no to go up there. **And luckily**, the other thing is luckily he's

1 even alive because it could have killed him. Wire strikes are a common fatality causer
2 for helicopters. Anyway, the procedure was when you fly back to Fort Walters after your
3 flight you go over what they call an entry point, an IP and as you call over the IP for
4 landing, you say okay, this is aircraft 456, IP up, and up meant your maintenance
5 condition was good, so they could go ahead and then you land the aircraft approximately
6 where you picked it up in that area of the apron and they'll assign it a new student the
7 next class. Well, or if say IP down, well that means you can land it and maintenance will
8 come out to check your aircraft because there's something wrong with it. Well. He didn't
9 want to admit that he'd done anything, so he just said 456 IP up, and he landed and shut
10 the aircraft down and went on, that was in the morning class, went on for his afternoon
11 training that was his classroom training. Well, meanwhile I was a flight instructor there,
12 and one of my students that afternoon was assigned that aircraft, and I'm out pre-flying
13 another aircraft with one of my other students, I was going to fly dual with and one of my
14 solo students had that one. He went over to pre-flight and he comes back to me and he
15 says. "Mr. Van Ett, there's something wrong with my airplane." So I said, "Well, let me
16 go over and look at it with you." And went over there and sure enough, yes the bubble's
17 broken on it. And course from there it didn't take long to figure out; [you know](#) they
18 would check the records who flew it and humma, humma, and then finally got the story.
19 I don't know, I didn't know who that student was. He probably was eliminated although
20 they probably should have kept him because he had some pretty good skills there.

21 SM: I was [just](#) going to say, that's quite a recovery.

22 BV: Yes, that was he. I bet his pants are probably a little stained but it's a. There
23 was another guy that fell out of a helicopter at five hundred feet and killed himself
24 obviously. He was flying solo and trying to change seats up there, he figures what are
25 you trying to do. He always had told his other students that he wanted to fly in the left
26 seat like the instructors fly. Normally the student flies in the right side and the instructors
27 in the left seat. So rather than land someplace in the boonies and change seats if you
28 want to try that, apparently he tried to switch seats up in the air and this was the little TH-
29 55, which is a, I don't know if that one, that's another Army trainer. They don't use them
30 any more, but it's this little Hughes aircraft, little Hughes 269, but very light little aircraft
31 and apparently he must have hit the controls or something as he was changing seats and it

1 bounced him right out. It was summertime so the doors were off and he went right on
2 out.

3 SM: Anyway, these were accidents while you were an instructor.

4 BV: Yes, we can back up now.

5 SM: Those are pretty fascinating stories.

6 BV: Yes, I got a lot of those stories, but anyway. I don't know where we were
7 left off we were at.

8 SM: Well, we were talking about your time at Rucker and that you really didn't
9 have many accidents there.

10 BV: No, we didn't in training, there wasn't. Training was pretty cut and dry and
11 straightforward and all students if they follow the rules and did what they were supposed
12 to do, there shouldn't be accidents. Once in awhile, yes for auto-rotations you might
13 have one, but normally you're well enough trained before you're released to do that that
14 you know you're going to be able to survive it.

15 SM: Now, how did you get selected for the H-34 at Fort Rucker do you know?

16 BV: I don't know, that's funny. It was just one of these things. They just called
17 out the names, said everybody's going to H-19, they said oh by the way, Van Etten and
18 three other guys are going to get o H-34s, which was great. I have no idea though why.

19 SM: Why they selected you?

20 BV: Yes.

21 SM: You mentioned that they, I guess you went on a specific test, must have been
22 a test ride with another instructor pilot when you transitioned from what you described as
23 the bad instructor, to your good instructor?

24 BV: Yes, I went for a flight evaluation. One of the supervisors would fly with
25 me.

26 SM: Now, what that something that would occur because it would appear that you
27 weren't making a certain amount of progress and so they wanted to find out what it was
28 that was causing that problem?

29 BV: That's right. What I did, I failed a check ride and I did the auto-rotation
30 wrong. In fact it was auto-rotations and I was doing them wrong, but I didn't know any
31 better that's how I was taught. Because it just happened that the other two students with

1 the same instructor, we all failed it for the same reason, so they gave us prog rides, what
2 they call prog rides to see what the problem is, and sure enough they gave me a change of
3 instructor and from that time on the light went on, because I was struggling at that point.
4 It was, I thought it was me, **I didn't realize**, and it probably might have been partly but he
5 just didn't relate to me, that's all, all **of his** yelling and screaming probably part of it.

6 SM: Yes, okay. When you were nearing graduation in Fort Rucker, you had
7 already received your orders going to Germany?

8 BV: Yes, well prior, I think it was probably the last month prior to graduation I'd
9 received orders that when I graduated I'd be going to Germany, but **you know** the way
10 the school was I didn't count on, I was hoping so, but I didn't know I was going to
11 graduate maybe a week prior to then. Then finally you get your officer's stripes sewed on
12 your greens, **you know you have them** converted to officer's uniform and go.

13 SM: But you were in the warrant officer?

14 BV: Yes, I was a warrant officer.

15 SM: Of course. You didn't have to go through any special training, or different
16 training to become a warrant officer?

17 BV: No, only the, of course the pre-flight training that I went through back, we all
18 went through is like OCS and then you go through that and that's a certain amount of
19 drill and ceremonies and other things you needed to know, like Lieutenants do the same
20 thing. But then once you start your flight training, well then you're, of course I'm
21 considered a technician and a pilot and that was my, **you know** there wasn't really much
22 other officer type training. **You know you** received all that once you finally got to a unit,
23 and they gave you additional duties and mentoring and whatever else you might need.

24 SM: Was this, the training you went through at both Camp Walters and then at
25 Fort Rucker, were there officers there as well?

26 BV: Yes, they were. Actually I was with officers, mixed class at Rucker, at
27 Walters we were at separate classes.

28 SM: Okay, separate at Walters and mixed class at Rucker?

29 BV: Yes.

30 SM: Was there any kind of, what was the relationship like between warrant
31 officers and commissioned officers?

1 BV: Oh, it was great. They were just Lieutenants, like we were young. I mean
2 they were all the same age and that was good, no big deal.

3 SM: There was a good rapport?

4 BV: Yes.

5 SM: Well, when you left Fort Rucker, I guess you probably took about a month or
6 so to get over to Germany?

7 BV: About a month, we went back to Texas for a visit, then up to Seattle for a
8 visit to my folks, then they could meet my bride and then from there, she went back to
9 Texas, we shipped our car from up there and I went, I flew from there to the East Coast
10 and then from there over to Germany.

11 SM: Now this was an unaccompanied tour for you? Was this unaccompanied?
12 Did your wife stay in Texas or did she?

13 BV: It started unaccompanied. She didn't go initially with me. She joined me
14 after about two to three. I guess I was there a couple months.

15 SM: And you already said that you were assigned there in Germany to an H-34
16 unit?

17 BV: Yes.

18 SM: And what unit was that?

19 BV: That was A Company of the 504th aviation battalion. They were stationed in
20 Munich, which was a neat area. Back in those days the Army used to have what they
21 called TC companies, transportation. I was also a transportation officer. They didn't
22 have the aviation branch back then. So most of your pilots were either transportation or
23 they could have been infantry or artillery, but aviation was not a branch. Aviation branch
24 came into being in later years. But anyway, a TC had helicopters, they had fixed wing
25 aircraft, we had. Actually the battalion had all kinds of different types of helicopters, H-
26 34s, H-13s, Hueys. They had several kinds of fixed wing, Mohawks, L-19, which was a
27 little spotter plane.

28 SM: O-1 bird dog?

29 BV: Yes, the bird dog, they had those. It was kind of any, but I was in the H-34
30 company, which was a, and we were, like I said we all started out in Munich but actually
31 before my wife even got over there, they had moved the company up to Ansbach, which

1 was kind of a neat area. This was all, I don't know if you're familiar with Germany but
2 this was in the Bavaria part of Germany, which is the southern part of Germany which is
3 **you know** mountainous and really, really a pretty area.

4 SM: Now, you said you did get some experience in the Huey, when did that
5 occur?

6 BV: I got some experience at flight school in the Huey, probably twenty-five to
7 thirty hours of flight time was all.

8 SM: How did you like the Huey compared to the 34?

9 BV: Oh, it was neat. It was like a cad. We called it the Cadillac back then. **You**
10 **know**, the turbine engine and the governor, which means, the recip engines you've got to
11 correlate with the throttle as you increase or decrease power to get a steady RPM and
12 now the turbine engines, you've got a governor that does that pretty much automatically
13 for you.

14 SM: And did you, you never did, did you ever get a chance to actually fly them
15 for the unit or in Germany or did you just stay with the 34s?

16 BV: I stayed with the 34. Now, we had a Huey that I got a couple hours in, one of
17 **the other, in fact one of** my classmates was flying from **the** flight school days. **So** I got a
18 little time with him. Now, see that unit there, I was there for just about two years and we
19 did a lot of flying and I volunteered to fly weekends, I flew the band, I flew the
20 skydivers, just to build up my flight time. I wanted to get as much experience as I could.
21 So I did, **and** we were flying back then around five hundred hours a year, which is a lot of
22 time, which was great for me. So, that gave me real good air sense and **you know** it's real
23 important for a pilot to get all of his flight time, or a lot of flight time as quickly as he
24 can, because that gives you what you call a flight base. If you just nickel and dime it and
25 get fifty hours one year and one hundred hours the next year, you're never going to
26 become a good pilot. You've got to get that, and I was luck at that and then I got. And
27 then I was, and our unit did a lot of flying and like I said I especially did **with the unit**.

28 SM: Now, when you were flying the H-34s in Germany, what was the primary
29 mission of your unit?

30 BV: We, our company that used to be like a transportation company like I told
31 you to begin with, which supports everybody in Usemir, became attached, or part of the

1 4th Armor Division, which was one of the divisions over there and the 4th Armor Division
2 literally was scattered all over Germany. So what we did, we supported units all over
3 Germany, *all over, you know* where the U.S. was in Germany; mainly the southern part
4 of Germany and all the way over to the Czech border and all the way over to France the
5 other directions. It gave us a chance, by support for example, H-34s, we had one service
6 called TBA, Trans-Bavarian Airlines, and we actually had a scheduled route that we flew
7 clear across Germany picking up passengers and dropping people off in these various
8 brigades or units from the 4th Armor Division, so that was a chance, those were like eight
9 or nine flight hour days which I used to get on it all the time, but *anyway* we did that and
10 we supported them in the field sometimes. But we didn't go to the field as a unit, we
11 went as usually the individual aircraft attached to say an artillery outfit or something and
12 we were there for whatever aviation support they needed, mainly it was ash and trash and
13 hauling them back and around. Back in those days in Germany especially flying was fun,
14 and when you're flying around at lunchtime for example and you see a nice little raster
15 restaurant, you just landed behind it and *go in and* eat. *You know* it wasn't any big deal
16 like it is now. *Yes*, and a lot of other things that you did back then that were. *You know*
17 *the way you flew in Germany now*, there's a lot of restrictions about making noise and
18 flying at night and all this, but back then we were really even in the early '60s we were
19 still kind of like an occupation force, and we just flew how we wanted to flew and
20 nobody was going to say anything about it, so that was good. And I got to fly a lot so, the
21 good thing for me was by the time I finally got to Vietnam I had just about *two thousand*
22 *hours of flight, or I mean a thousand hours of flight time*. I pretty well could handle the
23 aircraft, *handle these 34s*.

24 SM: *When*, in Germany, in addition to supporting the, well while you were
25 supporting the 4th Armored Division, how much, what kind of field training exercise
26 support did you provide, especially for *you know* maneuvers that were attempts to
27 prepare for a war with Russia, things of that nature?

28 BV: Well *yes*. *We*, actually we did a couple things. During that tour over there,
29 we had, I went to Norway for NATO maneuvers *and* that was in the wintertime. So there
30 was like ten feet of snow, where we were up, part of Norway, way up in the northern part
31 of Norway, which was really a neat *time*. *But* good flying and actually we got to stay in

1 town because the aircraft at night had to be put in a hangar because the snow was so deep
2 you just couldn't leave them out in the snow, but the troops were out in it. So we did a
3 lot of troop shuttling. They had war games going on and we would support them by
4 moving troops around and moving people around as they needed to be, but backing up
5 into Germany, some of the training we did with the infantry down there to get them ready
6 for what we call a combat assault mission. We would set up a scenario of okay, we're
7 going to have the troops at Point A and we're going to move them to Point B as a
8 blocking force or as an assault force and we would literally fly them in a formation and
9 land them, with smoke going and with simulated explosions and everything, which was
10 kind of fun because the Germans used to come out and watch that. This was out in the
11 country, in Bavaria and when they knew we were having missions like that they'd. It was
12 kind of big show for them, because it was flying low level and flying around. Now, quite
13 frankly the flying in Vietnam turned out a little bit different than that, but at that point
14 that's how we trained, and there weren't really any textbook ways to do it. It was just
15 kind of whatever we wanted to do. You learn by experience, and obviously once we got
16 to Vietnam you learned how to fly in combat without, you know trying not to get yourself
17 shot down. But back in those, prior to that it was mainly just giving the troops rides I
18 think and flying formation flying, and then of course improving the pilot proficiency,
19 being able to fly that way. As far as tactics, probably non-existent.

20 SM: What about maintenance issues?

21 BV: Maintenance was pretty, we did our own maintenance at, you know we had
22 like a platoon, maintenance platoon within our company. The company was a pretty
23 large company, there was probably oh I don't know, two hundred or so people in the
24 company and we had, I think around twenty aircraft in the company so it was quite a lot
25 to handle. We had our maintenance platoon and the maintenance test pilot, and of course
26 the crew chiefs would help work on the aircraft when they weren't flying. They would
27 do maintenance on them but it was just, back in the, maintenance to me wasn't real
28 concern. Now, of course in later years if you notice on my resume I became a
29 maintenance officer and a maintenance test pilot, but those early years I was just trying to
30 learn how to fly, so I didn't, I really wasn't that involved with maintenance myself.

31 SM: Well, were there any particular maintenance issues with the aircraft?

1 BV: Well, the old recip engines of course, and then of course Germany was pretty
2 cold in the wintertime back then. I think in later years its warmed up a little bit because
3 you know we spent a lot of years in German later, but in those early days you know you
4 had to learn how to start an aircraft. In the cold a recip engine, actually they used 115,
5 145 octane aviation fuel on those things. It was an old big radial, R-1820 radial engines
6 on those. The same engine that was used in the B-17, so it was a very efficient but old
7 and what they call right engines. Anyway, you had to learn how to, maintenance wise
8 you had to learn how to, of course magnetos because you know they need spark plugs
9 and everything in those, and how to start them in the cold weather because if you messed
10 up the starting procedure, that engine, spark plugs could freeze up with just fuel on them.

11 SM: Oh, wow.

12 BV: Yes, and once you did that, that was a mess so you had to learn how to prime
13 it a whole lot before the put the juice, before you put the ignition on the you know
14 magnetos and get that started. And then when they start a bunch of smoke and fires
15 comes bellowing out the exhaust, and of course that's just all part of that. But actually
16 maintenance wise, I felt it was pretty good, generally good.

17 SM: What did you like about the H-34, what did you dislike?

18 BV: Well, it made a lot of noise. It was a big aircraft it flew pretty good once you
19 learned to fly it. Like I said I didn't feel like I could really handle it real well until I had
20 about five hundred hours, then I could handle it real well. Of course in the later years
21 with Air America I handled it very well. I, you know, it was, other than being noisy I
22 didn't mind flying it, it was a pleasure to fly it. You had to learn to fly it, it's kind of, it's
23 a Sikorsky aircraft. You know what they call the Sikorsky shuffle, which means that
24 you're always going left and going right, unless you know how to fly it better then you
25 don't. It doesn't happen but if you sit there, let the aircraft fly you, that's what's going to
26 happen.

27 SM: What was the total crew for that aircraft?

28 BV: Just two pilots and a crew chief now, but you didn't have to have two pilots.
29 We normally, I flew it solo a few times for, like if I was going to go to a static display or
30 something on the weekend and the other pilot didn't want to go, I'd just fly it by myself.
31 But normally you'd have a crew chief with you because the pilot on an H-34 sits up high

1 above the ground up in front and you've got a passenger, you've got have somebody to
2 help get in and out of the cargo door and so on because the pilot's not down in a position
3 to help them. Like in a Huey it's easy to point the seat and the seat belt for somebody
4 because you're right on the same level with them. The normal crew was three anyway.

5 SM: And any interesting events take place while you were in Germany those two
6 years that you remember?

7 BV: Well, yes we, several things. We had two children. Linda had our first one
8 **when she**, right after she arrived, and she was premature by a couple months. So she
9 ended up staying in the hospital there **for**, until she got to be five **pounds**, which took six
10 weeks I think. Luckily for us the hospital was very well equipped, German hospital **that**
11 the Army used down in Nuremberg is where she was born. Then just about exactly a
12 year later we had our son, so we had maximum production in minimum time **as they used**
13 **to say**. And **you know** the Norway maneuvers was kind of a neat time. When I got back
14 from Norway we had a drawing of the battalion that somebody could go to the Pairs Air
15 Show down there and **transport**, ferry an aircraft **from**. And this would have been a Huey
16 to ferry, which I was qualified in **the** Huey anyway and I won the drawing so I went to
17 the Paris Air Show in '65, which was really neat and as soon as I got there, my job was
18 going to be, the Paris Air Show, have you been to Paris, I don't know if you've been
19 there?

20 SM: No, sir never been.

21 BV: Okay, well **Le Bourget** is the airport that the air show is at. I think they have
22 it every two years or every three years, but anyway that was the year and a big dog and
23 pony show for the world's aviation. But Elbert, in those days the Army and the Air Force
24 had bases in France, of course France jumped out of, became not part of NATO in later
25 years **and** they kicked us out of there. **But in** those years we were there, so I was going to
26 go to **Evereux**, which was an air base, and then everyday fly a Huey over to **Le Bourget**
27 in Paris and just park it there as a static display and then at night take it home. Well, my
28 first day there, this Major meets me and says, "Hey, I live in Paris. I'm a pilot and I'm an
29 Army aviator" and he said, "If you want," he said "you can stay in my apartment in Paris
30 and I will go to **Evereux and stay** with a buddy of mine in the Air Force and transport that
31 Huey over there every day." And I said. "Well sure you got it." I went down so I was

1 able to just relax and go to the air show everyday and do the sights **down there** in Paris.
2 That was another kind of a highlight and then when I got back we had orders for
3 Vietnam, so paid for it then.

4 SM: Well, what was the morale like in your unit there in Germany?

5 BV: High, good morale. We had, in fact we had quite a few of our pilots married
6 local girls, and they had **weddings**, big weddings and we all went to, and it was a fun
7 time. **In fact**, one of them we still are very friendly with after all these years, talk with
8 them all the time and see them often. That was, and then the area we were in, in Bavaria
9 which was kind of a country **in** Germany, it was nice, good food and fun times, **and** lots
10 of neat things, castles and things to go visit. I played golf and just about every airfield
11 had a small golf course, at least nine holes with it, so I would always try to fly, we'd try
12 to put our crews together with other guys that played golf. So we'd throw our clubs in
13 the back of the aircraft, because we always had some down time **in between**, **you know a**
14 lot of times at different air fields, so we'd just played gold, **and then** finish the day out. It
15 was a pretty good time. The big thing was I was learning a lot about flying.

16 SM: And, **let's see**. What was the relationship like between you as an American
17 soldier and the other soldiers you served with and the German civilian population?

18 BV: It was very positive back then as my recall. We had a lot of the Germans that
19 we met with. Now, the other good things that the Army does, when we first arrived in
20 Germany and Linda got to go with me too, we went to German language school **for** a
21 couple of weeks and down in **Allmand where** eight hours **a day** you do nothing but speak
22 German, back and forth, back and forth. So literally you dream in German. When you
23 get out of there, you're kind of like you're brainwashed, and **basic, you know** its pretty
24 basic but anyway. That helped I think, and that helped kind of getting around the villages
25 and back then. Of course nowadays, of course we had a total of eight years in Germany
26 in later years and a lot of, most of the people speak English now, but back then they
27 didn't so you learned to speak enough German to get around. But anyway, I think it was
28 a very good relationship back then.

29 SM: Did they respond positively when you tried to speak German?

1 BV: Yes, they would, well my wife kind of looks German. She's blonde and they
2 would always look at her and say, if I would mis-pronounce words, which I always did,
3 they'd always look at her and say, well tell him what's the right way to say it.

4 SM: What were you hearing while you were there in Germany, what are you
5 hearing about Vietnam, the Vietnam War?

6 BV: Not much at all. That was again in '65 and '64, '63-'64 and of course '65.
7 **And** really very little, in fact they used to call it, in fact even our orders when they came
8 down said "For a Classified Reassignment Somewhere in the World." Well, we already
9 knew where it was classified. That was during the Johnson build up and we pretty much
10 went as a unit in fact which was interesting, which was great for us because we'd already
11 been flying together for years, and some of them for a long time. So we had a very high
12 experienced unit when we finally got to Vietnam. They issued us Hueys, we got rid of
13 the H-34s there, but got Hueys over there, **but brand new ones**, but it was a. I would say
14 out of the unit, probably twenty or twenty-five of us got orders for Vietnam at one time
15 and ended going pretty much together, and went from Germany to Fort Campbell,
16 Kentucky to reorganize, and get the Hueys issued. **At least get** the training aircraft
17 issued, we'd get some Huey time. Every pilot that went had to be Huey rated on the first
18 group. I think that was all **of us** about twenty-five.

19 SM: So when you went from Germany to Fort Campbell, you brought your family
20 with you obviously. You set them up for your tour in Vietnam?

21 BV: Yes. They, we Linda stayed in Mineral Wells during my Vietnam time. In
22 fact we were able to get quarters on at Camp Walters. She stayed in and during the
23 training period, which is like a month or six weeks she was with me at Fort Campbell, for
24 part of that time anyway. Then finally we deployed out of Oakland, actually some of the
25 guys were on the carrier with the aircraft, and I got on a troop ship, which was a pretty
26 good deal. The Barrett, S.S. Barrett, which is, one of it, there's a whole brigade for the
27 First Infantry Division was on their way and they were all down below, which I never got
28 down. The officers was a pretty good deal, we stayed up on the like six man state rooms
29 up on the main deck, which was air conditioned and all that, so it was nice, twenty-one
30 day cruise. We stopped in Guam for a picnic en route. I didn't, because my name started
31 with a V, I never got to pull duty officer because they never got to me. So I didn't have

1 to go down, because they guy's were saying it was kind of grim down below where the
2 troops were. But anyway, so we got to Vietnam and then met up with the rest of our unit
3 at Vung Tao and got our aircraft together and took them in the air.

4 SM: When you went to Fort Campbell, this was with what unit?

5 BV: Well, we were just unassigned, and once we got to Campbell it was funny
6 because our commander in the, there were a lot of guys from Germany that went there, I
7 mean just, they're going to form like three or four companies out of there, pilots. So you
8 didn't for sure which company you were even going to get into. And there were people
9 from Alaska and people from all over; mainly Europe though was there. So we got there
10 and they had an announcement, they said okay, everybody, we're out in a great big
11 formation, they said "Okay," over a loudspeaker, "The following people are in, are going
12 to be in the 128th," which I went to the Tomahawks and they named off a bunch of guys,
13 which I knew some of them and then they said "And the commander," and this was the
14 funny part, in Germany we had a guy, a commander Major Reed, this guy was nuts. I
15 mean he was, he had a, he was kind of short and I think he had a Napoleon complex. He
16 wanted to prove to everybody he was better than everybody. He hadn't finished college,
17 he went to Texas A & M, but most of the officers had finished college and he used to
18 always tell all of us that he was still smarter than the guys with college and all that. Of
19 course he'd been to Korea, he was a little older, and anyway he used to just do we
20 considered kind of dumb things. Well anyway, we used to joke, say how would you like
21 to have a guy like that in combat leading you, and we used to laugh about it. Well, I'll be
22 darned, he ended up my commander out there "And the commander of the 128th is Gene
23 Reed," and he's looking right down at me because I was the ammo officer for one of my
24 additional duties and I knew right away he was going to saddle me with that job, which
25 was a big job at Campbell to get all the ammunition together to go with us over there, all
26 the rockets and machine guns, ammo and stuff that we need for the unit.

27 SM: Well, but for how long, certainly you would only be able to take with you a
28 certain amount, to last for a certain amount of time?

29 BV: We took; it was a bunch. It was enough to supply us for probably a month of
30 combat flying, and then once I was over there, I made. That was my additional duty so I
31 would, some of the times if it wasn't fun. I would take a convoy of a couple trucks and

1 some Jeeps and I'd carry the shotgun with me and had a machine gun guys in the other
2 one and we'd go down to [the](#), it's about twenty miles [away](#) at the ammo dump pick up a
3 load of ammo to bring it on up to the airfield, oh about every six or eight weeks or so.

4 SM: Okay, and how was that gentleman as a commander in combat?

5 BV: Pretty bad. In spite of him, we had a very good unit and a lot of good other
6 leaders but he was not good.

7 SM: I didn't know if the combat situation changed your perspective at all.

8 BV: No, he, just to relate some funny stories about him. On the way over, on the
9 ship, of course he was on the, most of us were all on that, and he would hold, which was
10 fine we'd have classes during the day on different things, about [where](#) we were going and
11 what we're going to be doing, [and so on](#). Of course since he was a combat vet from, so
12 he said, from Korea, he used to always talk about baptism by fire, he says, "You're not
13 going to do anything until you get baptized by fire," and on and on and what a big hero
14 he used to be and everything. He had us like in a circle out there on the deck of the ship,
15 and I'm talking about our flight surgeon and all the other pilots and everything and he's
16 telling us to be sure when you're in Southeast Asia to wash under your foreskins. That
17 was his big class for the day, how to wash your dick. And I'll tell [you, yeah](#), really. [I](#)
18 [mean](#) we're looking at each other, [and you know](#), where's this guy coming from, but
19 anyway, that was Gene C. Reed.

20 SM: Well, let's see. Your time at Fort Campbell, you said that was only about a
21 month and a half, about eight weeks?

22 BV: Yes, about that much time at Campbell to get some training, and I got a
23 couple cross country, I had to go down to, with [another](#) pilot to go down to Fort Hood,
24 Texas to pick up an aircraft to bring up there for us, for our training. So I got that trip
25 because that came a chance to stop by Mineral Wells. In fact I stopped by Camp Walters
26 with a Huey on the way back and landed out there where the candidates were flying their
27 H-23s and TH-55s and let them see a real Huey, [\[laughs\]](#) get them excited about some
28 day they're going to get one.

29 SM: [That's right](#). Well, when you got your orders for Vietnam and when you
30 were at Fort Campbell, what kind of additional either training or preparation did you
31 undertake in terms of trying to familiarize yourself with what the United States was doing

1 in Vietnam, what was happening in Vietnam, what was that war all about, that kind of
2 stuff?

3 BV: Well, excuse me I just took a drink of Coke. Really, very little, quite frankly
4 at that stage, everybody that I was with was pretty much in the same boat. In other words
5 we were all out of Europe or out of someplace else, had not been to Vietnam prior to that
6 and didn't really have anybody there to brief us on what was coming up. The only
7 training we did was just; of course we did flight training in the aircraft, which of course
8 was probably the only really prior, only kind of training. We didn't have any gunnery
9 training; we didn't have any weapons. Of course we were qualified in your personal
10 weapons, which back in those days was a .45 pistol and really not much. You see,
11 you've got to remember, this is '65, this is the.

12 SM: Very beginning.

13 BV: Very, yes first U.S. big buildup. Prior to that was just the advisors over
14 there.

15 SM: Well, what did you think the United States was trying to accomplish at the
16 time?

17 BV: Yes, I was familiar with what politically was being said, you know the
18 domino theory and et cetera, and of course I would find out. You know there's a whole
19 lot of, I can go on for, I've already gone a long time, but I can go on a long time about
20 what I, what we should and shouldn't have done, and should done and how we did it and
21 why we were there, but we were there to stop communism. That's, from the North to the
22 South in Vietnam, and quite frankly, for what it's worth, I know you're real familiar with
23 what the domino theory was, but that quite frankly was pretty accurate, and if we would
24 have just stood back and let it happen, it would have continued. Everybody said, how we
25 lost the war there, but quite frankly that stopped the dominos right there. They didn't go
26 any further than that. They didn't go to Thailand, didn't go to Indonesia, didn't go to
27 Singapore, whatever, whatever they felt might be next, it didn't go any further. It
28 probably stopped it from going to Thailand, because of the war. Even though, yes they
29 survived, the communists survived and they're there now but through attrition but they
30 really couldn't go much further after that was over. That's just a little aside.

31 SM: But you agreed with the reason for getting the stage it was at?

1 BV: Yes. Well I was a soldier and I was following orders. As another sidelight
2 once we got there and flying missions, and we flew a lot. Our unit was one of the first
3 major, one of the helicopter units [there](#), and we supported everybody. Every day was a
4 different. It was the first infantry division [we supported](#). We supported the 25th Infantry
5 Division. We supported the 173rd Airborne, who at that point did not have their own
6 aviation. We supported the ARVNs which are the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese Army
7 and Australians and New Zealanders, well we were over there. Every day, wherever the
8 action was, that's where we were. With, battalion sized lifts [really](#) going in and out of
9 areas and re-supply for those areas, moving them and so on. [And, you know](#) on your
10 questionnaire there was a lot of questions about. [And I mean](#) I'll let you ask the
11 questions, but just looking ahead there was a lot of questions about drugs and about
12 attitude and about this and that. Well, at that point in the game we were there to win the
13 war, and everybody that I was with, felt that way. Yes, we had a little drinking, at night
14 we would loosen up with our gin or our whiskey or beer but there was no dope that I was
15 aware of it at all at that point. Even the grunts that we would haul around, the infantry
16 guys, I didn't notice that. There was some racial things, the Black Power business was
17 starting to come into thing with their movements and there was a little bit of problem
18 there, but not much, just kind of on the fringe. I saw more of that later with Air America,
19 with the Air Force, but back in those days. Seriously we would land a, let's just say
20 we're flying the 173rd Airborne guys, these are airborne tough guys and we would land
21 into an LZ with them, let's say a rice paddy area that probably had [two](#) feet of water in it,
22 well they would just jump right out of the helicopter with their forty pounds of pack on
23 and chug on through it like they loved it. They also were there to win the war, and that
24 was the attitude at that point. Now, [you know](#) needless to say, [if I had](#) gone back as a
25 commander, another tour or a third tour and tried to re-take the same ground that we took
26 when I was there the first time and lost four or five guys and to do it all over again, then I
27 would kind of question what the heck was going on. But at that point in time and we
28 could see the other pilots especially and me could see some things that didn't make sense.
29 However our discussion at the time was well, somebody above us with the big picture
30 knows what's going on. Well, come to find out they really didn't, but anyway at that
31 point in time that was our rationalization. [To say, "Hey, you know obviously](#) this is

1 screwed up, but somebody way up there know what's going on better than we do.”

2 We're just pilots here so.

3 SM: And yes sir, the questions about especially drug use and certain morale
4 issues, absolutely as far as the interviews that we've conducted here, bear out what you're
5 saying, its time dependent. The earlier part of the war, those were not as prominent a
6 problem; it really weren't much of a problem.

7 BV: *Absolutely*. We were there, in fact most of the pilots, the attitude was,
8 especially the older guys that this was the only war we've got, let's make the most of it,
9 let's get all of over medals. They're there to get medals and get recognition for doing
10 their part in the war and flying the missions and doing all the hero things. That was, no
11 second thoughts about it. *It was just, but then you know* after dragging on for years and
12 years *and years*, of course and we'll get into more later. But *I mean* how much better
13 organized Air America area was than the Vietnam area, but *we'll* get that *later, when we*
14 *get* there.

15 SM: Right, when we get to Air America, *your* time with Air America; the
16 differences between the Army operations, early experience.

17 BV: Yes, it was like night and day. *I mean* they had it together over there but
18 that's another story.

19 SM: Well, when you, on the trip over, this is a three week trip, what other
20 activities did you engage in? You mentioned some of the classes, what did you do?

21 BV: Had classes, played a lot of gin rummy with a couple guys. We were
22 keeping score by a penny-a-point type stuff, and then at the end of the trip, after twenty-
23 one days I think we were even, believe it or not after all the time. We also, at night we
24 would go to a movie, usually there was like a theater on board. We did some PT up on
25 the deck, *you know* calisthenics and things to keep in shape that way and push-ups *and so*
26 *on*. Other than that it was, and read, and then *like I said*, we had some classes, a few
27 hours, probably every day, and other than that it was just kind of cool it, write letters and
28 relax until we got there.

29 SM: Was there, did that activity extend to the soldiers below deck as well?

30 BV: I don't know. That was the, like I said, some of the other guys that did pull
31 duty officer said, hey, you're lucky it's not going to get to you on the roster, because it's

1 grim. Guys are sick down there, and they didn't let them up on deck very much. I don't
2 know what the mentality was in that, of course there are infantry guys and I don't know
3 what else. For us we were kind of a, there were three companies of officers on top,
4 which was a lot of officers took care of the upper deck area. So we never really got with
5 the. Now, with the senior enlisted guys were up there too, the aviation guys, *you know*
6 *all* our E-7s and E-8s and E-6s, were with us too, just the key people, just like the platoon
7 sergeants and the first sergeant and those people. The rest of our enlisted people, our
8 crew chiefs and our door gunners, we picked up once we were in Vietnam. They were
9 not, *you know they were not* members of the unit in Germany for example. It was only
10 the officers and the pilots that came out of Germany, and at that point none of the enlisted
11 folks that were there went, they all joined us from other assignments.

12 SM: But there were soldiers that were also on that transport, or no?

13 BV: *No*. The ones on the transport were strictly the First Brigade of the First
14 Infantry Division, Big Red One, and they were being deployed for the first time over
15 there. And as it turned out we ended up supporting those guys. In fact that was one
16 brigade, there was another ship that came over with another brigade. They had at least
17 two brigades over there, and then the divisional artillery, the divardian and the Cav too,
18 so they were a pretty full division.

19 SM: What were your first impressions when you guys steamed in there to
20 Vietnam, where did you arrive?

21 BV: We arrived in Vung Tao, which is south *of* Saigon, the old Cape St. Jacques,
22 if you look at an old map, and it was a neat area, pretty, it stunk. Of course I didn't know
23 it; that was my first experience with that part of the world. *You know*, kind of dirty, it
24 was dusty and we convoyed on up, well actually we convoyed up to a place where we
25 could get our helicopters. The carrier had just arrived with our helicopters on it too. So
26 we ferried the helicopters off the carrier, first to a holding area near Saigon, but then from
27 there the very next day we went up to a place called Phu Loi, which is, if you're familiar
28 with the Corps areas of Vietnam, it was with the III Corps area, which was just north of
29 Saigon. We landed at Phu Loi with our helicopters and there was like, *there was* two
30 companies. There was us and another company, and each company had *let's see*, I think
31 three flight platoons and one gun platoon. So there was probably between the two

1 companies, probably a hundred aircraft or maybe more, there were a lot of aircraft. We
2 all landed in there and it was just a bare field, it was called the Tu De Mo airstrip and the
3 little town was called Phu Loi and there was an ARVN compound on one edge of the
4 airfield that's round. The typical round fortified place where the local soldiers lived,
5 stayed and then us. And they put barbed wire around the outside perimeter to begin with
6 and we started building some bunkers, and there was a few APCs for *you know*
7 protection, but other than that, we just landed bare, bare bones and that probably
8 surprised the Vietnamese and particularly the Viet Cong, the enemy that suddenly we
9 showed up there *because* they didn't bother us either. They weren't ready for us *you*
10 *know* at that point. We immediately put up our own tents and then little by little put
11 floors in the tents and then as time went on we actually went and bought supplies and
12 hired some local guys, we built our own hooches. *You know* laid the concrete on the
13 floor, put up some frames and roofing, and then used like *a, like* mats for the walls and
14 we had like two man rooms. *Me* and this other pilot that I flew with a lot, a guy named
15 Ed Silva, young Captain, in fact we were in flight school together, was my roommate, we
16 flew together most of the time. And that was it. We *just, we* didn't really get mortared or
17 even probed until we had been there for probably six weeks or longer. I think we
18 surprised the enemy just as much as, just suddenly showing up. Of course Phu Loi
19 became a regular big old base, but at that point we were there, and our sister company,
20 we were the 128th and the 116th. The Hornets was the other unit, and then we had a
21 maintenance unit that was there with us, and then we had the First Aviation Brigade came
22 in with the, their division aircraft, they came in with their battalion at the other end of the
23 field and then the Cav had an area there, and there were some fixed wing there too, also
24 belonged to the First Infantry Division, but that was about it. We built our own club, we
25 built our own mess hall, everything we just built from the ground up.

26 SM: Okay. Now in what month in 1965 did you arrive in Vietnam?

27 BV: I would think that was around July probably, it was hot.

28 SM: And what were your first impressions of the people that you came into
29 contact with, the Vietnamese people?

30 BV: Well, we really, of course, we, soldiers we would haul but we were in the
31 compound, now we did have like house girls that would come in during the day and do

1 the laundry and clean up in our hooches every day. Of course they didn't stay there at
2 night, so we really didn't much contact with Vietnamese, other than the soldiers that we
3 hauled, which the impression was to most of us that they were pretty lazy, and were not
4 real happy with having a war going on, which I can understand why but they were
5 probably happy to have us being able to haul them, but they didn't impress me as
6 fighters, quite frankly, the ones that we. The American troops, like I said the 173rd, the
7 First Infantry Guys, now they were gung ho troopers. I worked with the Special Forces a
8 little bit too up at, a little bit further north, a place called Song May, and we used to go up
9 and fly missions for them too, and they were, to me had it altogether, pretty good together
10 too. Another thing, when we first got there, see then, what they did they farmed us all out
11 to other units that were already in Vietnam. We went over and flew with them for a week
12 or so, just to kind of get the feel of, the lay of the land and flew their missions with them
13 as a copilot to try to see you know how they operated with the door gunners and
14 everything else. Then we finally came back and I was what you call, I was a W-2 by
15 then, a chief warrant officer and I was an aircraft commander, AC they called them back
16 there, pilot command, PIC, and so I was. Well Ed and I, we would trade, Ed Silva, the
17 other guy that I flew with a lot over Vietnam. One day he'd be the PIC and the next day
18 I'd be the PIC and then we'd just. Normally we'd go out on a mission staging area
19 usually, early you know before daylight, darn near. We'd get up at oh dark thirty, go on
20 out and fly to an area where the infantry would meet us and then we would probably shut
21 down for a quick briefing, or maybe we'd brief back in our unit where we're going and
22 everything, but a briefing on how the mission was being conducted. And normally it was
23 a battalion sized lift of troops into an area, either blocking or going into, around a village,
24 and then they would march through the village, or march through the area, not always the
25 village. Sometimes it was just a jungle area and then we would support them during their
26 mission, which their mission probably would last a week in there and we would every
27 day fly either food, fly casualties, fly replacements and also certain amount of airborne
28 reconnaissance and radio relay type missions for them too. We'd fly, but anyway, it
29 would be an all day deal. We'd fly out early in the morning; usually carry your lunch
30 with you. We'd haul them, sometimes we'd sit there a long time and wait for things to
31 get going. We'd haul them into the LZ, if it was the first lifts in, they would prep it first

1 with artillery or the Air Force would bomb it and then we would go in with our, of course
2 we had a door gunner one **each** side of the aircraft. We had our own gun ships that would
3 fly with us, our, they didn't have Cobras back then, they had B-models. Cobras came in
4 later. They weren't there when I was there. Then we would fly in, I was flying on what
5 they call a Slick, **which** had a door gunner and a crew chief and both of them manned a
6 gun and then me and the other pilot up front. All the seats pulled out so we could put all
7 the troops on the floor. We could carry about eight to ten at a time usually. The aircraft
8 were underpowered, and it was always a good trick to get them off the ground with a big
9 load. **You kind** of bounce them along and do a running takeoff and lift off and fly
10 formation into the area and, using a trail formation, and as you're coming in, like I said, if
11 you were on the first landing, your door gunners would be firing all the way down, they
12 just keep firing at the perimeter to make sure nobody was down there, they would poke
13 their heads out until we got in, discharged the troops. Of course the troops would take off
14 towards the perimeters and then from that time on of course we didn't fire any more, the
15 next lift and you continue to, shuttling in there until you got their whole unit in there.
16 And of course normally **did we see**, a lot of times you received fire going in, you received
17 fire going out.

18 SM: Now, did, would you describe for me your first experience taking fire, under
19 fire?

20 BV: Well, it's exciting [laughs]. If you're flying sometimes single ship on
21 missions and sometimes it's a whole flight. Usually when anybody received fire, let's
22 say a ship's in front of you, your flying along, well first of all the way that you operated
23 in Vietnam in those days was, you would take off and climb as fast as you can,
24 sometimes even spiral climbing to about three thousand feet, because once you're at three
25 thousand feet, you're above small arms range. A twelve, seven or fifty caliber could get
26 you but those were reported locations normally, but the guy with the AK down there
27 couldn't get you. He wouldn't shoot at you at three thousand feet. So, you'd fly at three
28 thousand feet until you got to the landing zone and then you would either spiral down or
29 quickly go down into it. So you weren't really exposed en route much, but you were
30 definitely exposed during landings and takeoffs. So the first time, and I don't really
31 remember the first time I received fire. A lot of times over there, and took hits too, but

1 you know it would get, it made a lot of noise and bullets came in to the aircraft, but what
2 you did, as quick as you figured out where it was coming from, your door gunners would
3 get right on it, and as soon as they started returning fire normally it would stop because
4 you got a lot better vantage with an M-60 machine gun than they do at shooting up at you
5 with an AK. And that was the whole trick is to train your door gunner, and the way the
6 door gunners worked there too, especially at the beginning. One of them was the crew
7 chief, he was assigned to the aircraft, he was an aviation guy, but the other guy was an
8 infantry guy that volunteered to come and fly with us to get some air medals. Usually
9 every twenty-five hours or so of combat flying, you'd get an air medal. So they, he'd
10 come in, and you know then some of those guys liked it so much that they became like
11 assistant crew chiefs and they stayed with the unit, and was a door gunner but also a crew
12 chief and then I think some of them finally you know actually became crew chiefs by the
13 time they had a tour over there and stayed with aviation. But, anyway you've got to
14 teach those guys that there's no hiding, you would wear a flak vest. I usually put a flak
15 vest in the bubble, the chin bubble of my aircraft right in front of me in case anything
16 came up through that that the Plexiglas wouldn't cut me and come up to me, plus it would
17 stop the bullets too probably. Sometimes the pilots would wear a steel chest protector,
18 weighed about forty, fifty pounds, it was Velcro around it and we just kind of, it was just
19 like a catcher would wear, you know a baseball catcher but this was made out of steel,
20 pretty heavy. Of course later times they made them out of Kevlar and they were better but
21 back in those days they were pretty heavy. Sometimes you'd wear those but I didn't like
22 to wear them, they were just too heavy to try to fly and hold. I had the attitude that you
23 know I was going to make it okay, even more so in the Air America years. My attitude
24 was I was a better pilot than they were shots. Anyway, you've got to kind of think that
25 way. You don't want to have to worry about you know getting shot. Now, we didn't
26 have any fatalities in our unit for a long time and we had, and the reason it was because
27 we had a lot of good flying skill there, skills with our unit. Like I said, we were a very
28 experienced unit coming over there. Like I said, I had a thousand hours of flight time.
29 Now most guys when they started arriving out of flight school, they would join us. Then
30 they would team up with one of us who was an old pilot and that way it was, the aircraft
31 was still well under control. Most of your fatalities, quite frankly in Vietnam are because

1 of accidents, well your helicopter fatalities, especially [you know](#) if they crashed back in
2 those days it was probably a fire and because they didn't have. In later years we came up
3 with [a](#) crash resistant fuel tanks that would self-seal and [then](#) there's not nearly as, and a
4 lot of quick disconnect connections. [If](#) you had a crash they would disconnect and
5 immediately a valve would close off the fuel flow so you wouldn't have raw fuel going
6 out. So there were, in later years there were very few fires but in those days, any bad
7 crash you could just about count on a fire. [Well](#), it's very grim of course to land after one
8 and see the charred bodies of the crew and folks still there. Anyway, we didn't have that
9 in our unit. We had a few guys shot, in fact I got shot, but not in the air. I got shot on the
10 ground, right in the butt, got my Purple Heart in the butt. It wasn't that bad, it was a
11 ricochet when it finally got me. It felt like about a ten pound sledge hammer [hit me](#),
12 knocking me ass over tea kettle, but it really wasn't that bad. I was flying the next day,
13 just taped it up and went on. In fact the gamma globulin shots we had back in those days,
14 which [is really thick stuff, that you know](#), they give you for, [you know](#) to counter
15 hepatitis, [hurt](#) really quite frankly, hurt more than that one did, the bullet did because it
16 didn't go in. It just, it put a pretty good welt and a big mark on me but it didn't go in me.
17 We found the round in fact, [it was](#) an old thirty-odd six round, probably [someone had](#)
18 given them years ago. But anyway, we didn't have anything bad happen to our own
19 group, simply because I still feel because we had enough air sense and the pilot skills to
20 avoid these, not only avoid accident, but avoid flying right over the bad guys too.
21 You've got to figure out how to avoid them.

22 SM: Now, when you arrived, what kind of briefings did you get about enemy
23 compositions in the area, things like that?

24 BV: Oh, we would have a general brief but quite frankly we were normally just
25 briefed on what our mission was going to be. In other words you are going to take troops
26 from Point A to Point B. Now what their big battle plan was, we really quite frankly
27 didn't get real involved with. We knew they were going to sweep an area; we were going
28 to support them. We knew all their call signs and their codes and all their code books
29 that we would use to talk to different people [you know](#) through authentications and so on
30 and all their frequencies and points of contact and then usually after the big assault with
31 all the battalion size assault. Well then you would re-supply with just one or [two](#) aircraft

1 missions, maybe just single aircraft for all day long, and you'd usually work with maybe
2 a company then and work with their people and do whatever they needed you to do. But
3 as far as the big picture we didn't get, really got very little involved with that, because
4 see, everyday was like I said, was probably something different. I might be working with
5 the First Infantry Division on one day, the next day I'm going to work with 25th, and the
6 next day I'm working with 173rd, next day with the ARVN and finally maybe the fifth
7 day I'll get back again to the original guys, and of course they've already moved a few
8 miles and set up a camp someplace. And then finally when we exfil them and bring them
9 all out and they go back to their garrison for a week or so to clean up and rest, we'd haul
10 them all out of there. But, in between we really didn't get real involved in their tactics,
11 whatever else they were doing, other than they were to clear out bad guys and find them.

12 SM: What was the estimated largest enemy unit you encountered on a hot LZ?

13 BV: Well, I don't know, probably battalion size units now. Quite frankly, you
14 know if there were a lot of guys like that in a hot LZ, you wouldn't fly into that LZ. You
15 would pepper it so much with our artillery and our force that it would get them scattered,
16 moving out, then you'd move in. Our infantry guys would commence to take territory
17 and kind of chase them. Now whether they just went underground or whether they hid
18 who knows, like the area Cu Chi that we worked at a lot, which was the 25th Infantry
19 Division. They never did clear that airfield. You could get shot going downwind at the
20 airfield any time you're going to land because they were underground there and they
21 never did get them out. That's the area of the famous tunnel rats that you hear about, and
22 that was a bad area. I didn't like working over there at all because you always figured
23 you're going to get shot at, as soon as you got low enough. And there were a lot of dumb
24 mistakes that the infantry did that was obvious to us in the air. For example, there was
25 one company in the First Infantry Division, Charlie Company of the Second Brigade, I
26 can't remember which battalion, but it got wiped out to the man twice, right down to, out
27 of two hundred and some troops and everybody was killed except two or three and this
28 happened twice to the same unit and both times it kind of was a similar circumstance.
29 We had dropped them in for a sweeping operation, and it was a very thickly forested or
30 jungle area where the helicopters could only get, land get to the open areas and if they're
31 fighting under the trees some place you really can't even get to them because there's just,

1 like sometimes pretty thick foliage there. Well, a famous trick for the enemy at that time,
2 the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong and they wouldn't do it as. They never did meet
3 us [you know](#) like you picture in the Maginot Line type thing. They were strictly guerilla
4 tactics, the way they fought us. They would send out snipers and head guy to snipe, snipe
5 and snip at our young grunts and actually get them pissed off. [You know, they'd get](#) shot
6 and all this but they could never find the enemy. [So](#) finally when one guy would show
7 himself kind of, or a few guys and start running, of the enemy, the [guys, the](#) soldiers
8 would break ranks and go after them, trying to get them with the company commander
9 screaming at them over the radio to charge, and [you know, a](#) young twenty-two year old
10 Lieutenant or young, twenty-five year old Captain, and they would run into an ambush.
11 The enemy were always up in the trees with fifty calibers, they were all well concealed
12 until our friendlies got under them and they would just open up on them, usually this
13 happened just about dusk, where it's getting dark, and there's even if we could see them
14 we don't know where they are. Of course the radio operators are dead, a lot of times
15 you've heard, of course we have an command and control [aircraft](#), trying [to, with](#) their
16 own people [that](#) are trying to talk to them and can't raise them, so you wait until the next
17 morning until finally you can get down in there, [and](#) find the bodies. The only guys that
18 survived those were guys that managed to bury themselves [in the mud](#) and play like they
19 were dead. It was pretty grim and that happened twice to one unit. That was [a, but you](#)
20 [know that was](#) individual mistakes of being too eager.

21 SM: Do you remember what unit that was?

22 BV: It was the second brigade of the first infantry. Charlie Company, second
23 brigade of the first infantry division but I don't remember the battalion. Where it
24 happened was in War Zone D they called it, or War Zone C, I'm trying to think. It was
25 an area became known as Bearcat later, but in those days it was just a jungle area, but
26 they designated, in fact they had a base there later called Bearcat. So if you wanted to try
27 to find that, that's in the III Corps area. It's north of Bien Hoa and probably [east of Phu](#)
28 [Loi, or](#) northeast of Phu Loi, where we were, up in that area. It was up, there was an area
29 up there that we fought, had a lot of battles then called the Michelin plantation which was
30 a, you've probably heard of that one. It was a very neat rubber plantation by Michelin
31 rubber, you know the French out there, when the French were there. It was still a neat

1 area. There were swimming pools, tennis courts, a big colonial looking type mansion
2 place where the caretaker or the owners would live and even the areas where the workers
3 lived was really neat. It was spic and span, and the trees were all, the rubber trees were
4 all at dress right dress, and rows and rows and rows of them. But we had quite a few
5 battles right in those areas. Even when I was first there in '65, the VC would allow the
6 convoys of the rubber to go down the. Route 13 was one of the main routes north and
7 south, out of these areas back down towards Saigon, and they would allow them to sue
8 the road because you know a lot of the VC or VC sympathizers were working the rubber
9 plantations back in the early days. There were locals there, so they allowed that to go.
10 Now there was a, a while later after the buildups and after we got there so big, then the
11 North Vietnamese started coming in with more organization than the Viet Cong were,
12 that was of course it was shut down then.

13 SM: But while you were there in '65, '66, you're going up against, almost
14 exclusively Viet Cong, correct?

15 BV: At first Viet Cong; now, the first big Vietnam, North, NVA with, wearing
16 uniforms, see VC of course were just wearing black pajamas, but the North Vietnamese
17 had the actually tan uniforms with, actual uniforms. The first big battle we had was the
18 first infantry division up north of, along a road, up north of Phu Loi about maybe ten
19 miles up there, that we had supported them and we had a real good success in that battle.
20 I'm not sure if it was a brigade, a division, what the size of the enemy was but we had
21 about a two hundred body count from them on that one and at that point in the game, you
22 know fresh in the war, our infantry troops were really excited about doing this and then
23 what they did, they just spread the bad word to the other Vietnamese that were there. The
24 Ace Spades is a bad omen for them. It's a death card and they literally had Ace of Spade
25 cards printed up their unit name on it for, whatever their unit was, I don't remember, it
26 was first infantry division and we dropped them airborne all along the jungle there so
27 they would find them. Then we took the bodies, we didn't. They took the bodies and
28 they just stretched them out along this route, open area Route 13 for probably a mile
29 along the road there and just left them there, put these cards all over them. So that, if and
30 when the enemy would come to recover them, they would see how bad, what they faced.

1 We had a lot of propaganda leaflet drops too, things like back in Hanoi your wife is,
2 oops, let me try, we'll just let it ring there. I don't know if you heard that or not.

3 SM: Actually you broke up in the middle of.

4 BV: Yes, there's this darn caller ID thing comes on, let me look and see if it, I'll
5 just let it, it will stop in a minute. Anyway, if they need anything there's a message on
6 there, there's an answering machine that answers.

7 SM: It broke you off when you said the leaflet would say something about your
8 wife is back.

9 BV: Yes, your wife's back being, Jody's back with her, the deserters and so on,
10 and you're going to get killed down here and your body's never going to get buried right,
11 and you're never going to get, on and on, which is typical propaganda to use in a war [you](#)
12 [know](#). I think it was probably at that point in the game [it](#) was pretty effective, really and
13 so [anyway](#) that particular battle, what happened a lot of their troops got caught in the
14 open and our Air Force was there and they strafed them really good and we had a very
15 big body count. Well, they took those and laid them out and the local battalion, the
16 colonel and his people were really proud of their success [in](#) that battle and General
17 Westmoreland was a commander at that time in Vietnam, and he came up there with his
18 entourage of strap hangers with his spit-shined aircraft and his spit shined boots and his
19 swagger stick and wearing his scarf and all the other baloney out of [sight](#), [out of](#) the air
20 conditioned hooches in Saigon [you know](#) to check it out. He's marching up an down like
21 some pompous general, like he thought he was, and I was standing there when he was, I
22 happened to overhear him talking to the commander of the infantry who was, at first
23 really proud of what they did, but Westmoreland proceeded to really chew him up about,
24 "You bury these people, this is not the way we do it. This is not by rules," and this and
25 that and so on, and quite frankly I didn't not agree at all with Westmoreland's view and I
26 well, what a piece of crap this is because war is hell and the enemy. They were catching
27 us and skinning us alive and things like that back then. I don't know if you heard any of
28 those stories, but that's true. And they would go into a village to get the attention and
29 literally kill every elder in [that](#) village. The school people, the mayor, all this, just to get
30 the attention of the rest of the folks, but obviously if they didn't work the right skills or
31 whatever they needed them for, needed them for recruits, obviously they would come

1 across but they did it strictly by intimidation. And we were just playing the game back,
2 to think we're going to have some kind of rules of combat that he learned back in West
3 Point or something, **you know** Westmoreland was ridiculous. That was one of the first
4 hints I had that this war is not being run right. Anyway, you probably heard
5 Scwarzkopf's stories **about**, very similar stories about why he did it different in Desert
6 Storm because he went through the same thing with all these air-conditioned guys out of
7 Saigon. They had carpets on their floors, and even their aircraft kind of like laying out a
8 carpet like you would for the president or something, that kind of stuff; it's baloney.
9 Anyway, that's the way it was back then.

10 SM: Yes, sir. Well, what did you think about the initial strategy and really it was
11 the strategy throughout most of the American involvement, of attrition?

12 BV: Yes, well at first I thought that was probably the way to do it. I figured they
13 would get disillusioned because **you know** here they're coming down and we are pretty
14 well, and even though the body counts were inflated, because what would happen, they
15 would get counted more than once. But that was the big thing when I was first there was
16 body count. Okay, how many confirmed kills you got? **Then** you start doing the math,
17 say well I got, **if they** have a hundred thousand people in their Army and we've already
18 killed sixty thousand of them, well then we've pretty well got their Army, don't we?
19 That was kind of the mentality which the obvious thing, what anybody could see because
20 I saw that **even** when **I was** with Air American was, you cut them off when they start.
21 You cut them off at Hai Phong. You cut them off at Hanoi. You cut them off before they
22 even get started down. Well we didn't do that. We didn't want to offend anybody by
23 bombing **the** Hai Phong harbor because there were Brits there, there were French there,
24 Russians were there, the Chinese were there, and we didn't want to get anybody. Just
25 like shooting into Cambodia **you know**. **We were** working right along the Cambodian
26 border but we ordered not to shoot into Cambodia. I'll guarantee wherever I received fire
27 from, I shot back at, I don't care if it was Saigon, Cambodia, or wherever, but I **just I**
28 wanted to return fire. **But anyway**, that was the **rule**. **The** official rule was, you don't,
29 even though that's where the enemy was, they just went right across the border and the
30 Cu Chi area was **right on**, practically on that Cambodian border there, which is one of the
31 worst areas that we said we fought in. But you know there are a lot of ways they should

1 have done it, but the attrition business was the thinking at the time and it kind of made
2 sense. Now what I didn't agree with was, and this is the difference between the Army
3 and Air America, quite frankly *is*. The mentality of the Army when I was there, and I'm
4 sure it stayed that way for a while was, okay, we're going to go in with one hundred
5 aircraft, we're going to lose twenty-five, but we're going to take the hill. That was kind
6 of the mentality. We're just going to go in with our masses and our firepower and we'll
7 take our own hits and so what. Now, with Air America, we're going to go over there
8 with ten aircraft, we're not going to lose anybody. If we can't do it today, we'll do it
9 tomorrow and that's exactly the way we fought and that's why we had such relatively
10 few casualties. We'll get into that discussion later, but really for the battle, that was the
11 best money the U.S. government ever spent was for that area in Laos, but anyway.

12 SM: Well, when you were in, in the operations you were conducting in Vietnam
13 in '65 and '66, how would you, what was the intelligence like and when you went in,
14 how accurate typically was the intelligence?

15 BV: It really wasn't that great, not like it was in later years, like I said when I get
16 into that it was like night and day our far as our intellect and all that. But it was simply
17 that, that I think that the Army felt that unless you were a general or something, you
18 didn't need to know. You know, you're just a pilot, yes, the bad guys are over here, the
19 good guys are over and try to avoid getting shot in between, but that was about it. There
20 was not the big picture, *it was not, you know*. I wasn't, even our pre-mission briefings
21 which we would have, usually it was the evening before we were going on a big mission,
22 and they would sit down with a map and point out what we're doing, where we're going,
23 what the objectives is for the infantry, but our mission of course was to get them there
24 and support them and avoid the bad guys. Of course there were certain areas even in
25 Vietnam that they were reported anti-aircraft or reported 12-7, which your fifty caliber
26 type weapons could certainly bring down helicopters, even at three *thousand* feet or
27 above. So you avoided those areas, but basically we just fought against, or the only thing
28 fired against was small arms, thirty-caliber stuff. As I mentioned before, you get above
29 three thousand feet, you're out of their range. Or if you were lower *then* you'd fly just as
30 fast *as you could right along* the treetops, which they didn't have time to shoot at you
31 because you were gone before they could even see you if it was jungle area. But as far

1 as, I don't know political objectives or anything like that, it really wasn't discussed much
2 and that was a, and whenever we'd do a mission that we thought was kind of messed up, I
3 can remember my comment was well, somebody obviously has a big picture, way above
4 us, with a need to know type thing and I'm sure they've got it figured out, which looking
5 back they really didn't, but anyway, that's another story.

6 SM: What did you think about the idea of fighting the war but not holding ground,
7 not taking territory, holding it.

8 BV: Well, the thing was there was an awful lot of jungle and ground to cover,
9 even though we had, upwards at the end there, three to four hundred thousand over there,
10 but I'm not sure, at the most when we had the most over there, but anyway all these
11 divisions that we took over there, we still didn't have enough troops to cover all the
12 ground. So when they would move through an area and really it wasn't as much taking it
13 as it was cleaning it out. Hopefully either finding the enemy's caches or killing the
14 enemy and driving them out of there and then we would move out. But of course as soon
15 as we would, the enemy would fade into the jungle and as quick as we were out of there,
16 they were back again. We really couldn't hold it because we didn't have enough troops
17 to hold it. Now, I think we relied on a lot of times, on the ARVN, on the Vietnamese
18 soldiers, once we got it for them to hold it, but they were not what you would call
19 warriors in my estimation anyway.

20 SM: Sir, can I ask you to hold for one second? Thanks.