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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Lee Komich
Conducted by Dr. Ron Milam
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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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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.

Jay Weston David Whitescaber: Jay Weston David Whitescaber recording Dr. Ron Milam interviewing Leland Komich.

Dr. Ron Milam: My name is Dr. Ron Milam with Texas Tech University Vietnam Center. Today we are talking to Lee Komich. Lee, I'd first like to get an idea on your MOS (Military Occupation Code) and your involvement in LZ (Landing Zone) X-Ray and LZ Albany effort.

Lee Komich: Okay, my MOS, I believe, it was a one 100 B or 671 C, I don't recall when they changed the MOS structure, but it's a helicopter pilot and instructor. My role was of course helicopter pilot and I acted as the company instructor pilot. Company standardization officer.

RM: And that was with the 11th Air Assault?

LK: Well, I was with the 11th Air Assault for eighteen months and then of course deployed with the 1st Cav and finally arrived in An Khe.

RM: Let's start with your training. You were a warrant officer?

LK: I was.

RM: Did you take your helicopter training at Rucker? Or Walters?

1 LK: I started helicopter training in June of 1963, at Fort Walters. After about five
2 and a half months, we were transferred to Fort Rucker for completion. At Fort Walters
3 we flew a two place helicopters called Raven and H23 made by Hiller. At Rucker we
4 moved onto the bigger helicopters, I flew H19s and finally an A-model Huey. Upon
5 graduation, headed straight up to the 11th Air Assault at Fort Benning.

6 RM: When did you arrive at the 11th Air Assault at Benning? What month, what
7 year?

8 LK: February of '64.

9 RM: February of '64. So you were there February of '64 until the deployment in
10 July-August of '65.

11 LK: July, yeah.

12 RM: Okay, let's talk little bit about that time at Benning. I'd like to know a little
13 bit about the training exercises that not only you as a pilot went through, but also in
14 conjunction with the infantry troops.

15 LK: Well let me start out by saying that it was unquestionably the best training
16 that I received in the twenty-three years that I had in the army. It was the most intense, it
17 was the most difficult, and perhaps the most dangerous. Every effort was made to make it
18 realistic. There were no punches pulled, so to speak. We worked at the edge of the
19 envelope on a regular basis, daily. My gosh, the sling loads that we did, people today
20 would just cringe at, I think. Given the equipment that we're flying, we were flying the
21 older Hueys with the smaller engines. We were in the field, as an example, we were in
22 the field in South Carolina and a hurricane came, and I thought, "Wow this is great. We
23 get to go home." Wrong answer. We learned how to experience a hurricane by burying
24 logs and tying the helicopters down to those logs. I think we dug them in, if memory
25 serves, six feet. You know, the way these stories go over the years it may have been three
26 feet. Every year, you gain a few inches. At any rate, we buried the logs, referred them as
27 "dead men" and tied ropes to the logs, tied the helicopter down, lashed the rotor blades
28 and what have you pretty well. Tied the tents down, and we weathered the hurricane.
29 Came out unscathed I might add. A little wet, a little tired, but other than that, just fine.

30 RM: America had some experience with putting troops into combat by air, mostly
31 through the advisory efforts with the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). This

1 was really such a new concept though for American troops. Who developed the training
2 programs that you used in Benning? I assumed it was you in conjunction with the
3 infantry people. Tell me a little bit about that training process.

4 LK: Let's back up just a little bit. Use of helicopters with the ARVNs was
5 nowhere near like what we did. I'm trying to think of an analogy, I can't do it right at the
6 moment. You know the "It's not your father's Oldsmobile" ad or what have you? This
7 wasn't the air assault as we did with the ARVNs. It was far advanced, far more
8 aggressive, and quite frankly far better implemented because of our training. The division
9 was run by a General Harry W. Kinnard, who was well, just quite a guy. And if you don't
10 mind a sidebar, something a lot of people don't know is—if you recall the General
11 McAuliffe's "Nuts" reply to the Germans at Bastogne? General Kinnard actually coined
12 that phrase or gave him that phrase. So he's an old soldier with a lot of history. One of
13 my favorite people in the world, I just idolize the guy. The division was run under his
14 firm guidance and the training scenarios and what have you, were developed in his
15 direction. He will humbly say, "Oh, he didn't do, he didn't do it, he had other people do
16 it." But you know what? He's responsible for it and so I would say he is responsible for
17 all the scenarios. I think everybody within the division contributed mightily. He has
18 recently told me in the last couple of years, that he had the ability to turn down every
19 commander and I guess every soldier that was assigned to that division, so the division
20 was as close to hand-picked as you were going to get. Again, his responsibility and the
21 success, the obvious success, was the outcome of his efforts.

22 RM: And the 1st Air Cav, the 11th Air Assault, that was the first?

23 LK: Well, there was a Howze Board, which I don't know as much as I should.
24 I'm a little embarrassed, I don't know as much as I should know. They used H-34
25 helicopters, the old Sikorsky, I'm not sure if you're familiar with them. Good helicopter
26 for stay, matter of fact, wonderful helicopter given the year they produced them. But
27 nowhere near the Huey. Nowhere near the Huey, it just did not have the capability or the
28 capacity of a UH-1. It was a far, far smaller scale than the division, the 11th Air Assault.
29 So we moved from that, I guess the result of that was, actually I was in Germany waiting
30 to go to flight school and I read an article on the *Stars and Stripes*, that said the results of

1 the Howze Board, if I remember correctly, its been a lot of years, that the success of the
2 Howze Board was what allowed the division, the 11th Air Assault to form.

3 RM: I see.

4 LK: It was sort of a follow-on, as I understand it. Somebody may come in here
5 and say, “Yeah, he’s crazy.” And that may be, I don’t know.

6 RM: So you developed these training exercises, can you tell me a little bit about
7 those, as far that is delivery of troops into combat. Were you looking at it as a—I mean
8 I’m sure things went wrong, you had to develop other ideas, can you kind of explain to
9 me how the program worked as far as using the infantry and getting them into combat.

10 LK: Before we did an awful lot of with the infantry, although the infantry and
11 aviation training has always been combined to the max, we did an awful lot of flying with
12 empty helicopters, learning to fly the formations. We fly formations at night, my gosh if
13 somebody had told me I was going to do that in-flight school, I would’ve told them
14 they’re crazy. No was in the world can we do this. We flew so close that one of the better
15 ways, one of the ways I used to determine the angle that I was flying on the lead
16 helicopter was to be able to look at their dashboard lights. If you could see their
17 dashboard lights, you were pretty much in the pocket, in position. We did a lot of training
18 with the helicopters because obviously you don’t want load them up with a bunch of
19 people before the pilots had their act together. Then we moved in to training with the
20 infantry and we had a lot of things go right, we had a lot of things go wrong. We tested a
21 lot of equipment that may or may not work, there was a device that could allow you to fly
22 in clouds, if you used it properly. Although I never flew it and I was not involved in the
23 test, what I heard in the club, the device was so big once you put it in the helicopter, you
24 couldn’t carry anybody so what was the point? Number two, its value was questionable.
25 The range of the Huey, well let’s say you get up in the clouds, what are you going to do?
26 Where are you going to go? We had no way of letdown. We did an experiment with a
27 method to move troops in bad weather, it was called “Project Red Dog”. I remember well
28 because it was my first experience with instrument flying and essentially the army put up
29 a low-freq radio beacon and we would sit at the park-your-point loader infantry and a kid
30 would come around with cards and hand you the cards, it was three cards. The cards had
31 the altitude you had to climb to, the first guy went to the lowest altitude, the second guy

1 went a thousand feet above, and the third went a thousand feet above that. (Interviewee
2 silenced his cellphone) You flew to the beacon, and the first person, if I remember
3 correctly, turned forty-five degrees left to start the descent hoping to see the trees before
4 he get in them. The second person, I believe turned right—forty-five degrees right and
5 started the descent and the third person would go straight ahead and ascend. The idea was
6 you can keep pumping aircraft across without using air traffic controls, as the FAA
7 (Federal Aviation Administration) does to control national airports and what have you. I
8 think the project might have worked, the problem was you couldn't count on the weather
9 on the destination and we had a lot of problems with those radio beacons, they just did
10 not hold up well. So the program was tried and eventually abandoned. We didn't follow
11 onto it. I must tell you how the army later on adopted what they called a "Tactical
12 Instrument Ticket", which they issued kids in school. The ticket would not allowed them
13 to fly the federal airways here in the United States, but it did allow them to do things in
14 combat and in my second tour in Chinooks, they were actually using them in the 1st Cav
15 to get into Ia Drang valley, as an example. Let's see, there was another device that had a
16 "Rogallo Wing", it was sort of a platform with a "Rogallo Wing", it was towed by a
17 helicopter. It had a large explosive, I don't recall the size, but it was a huge explosive on
18 the cart. The idea was that the Huey would precede an assault and when they get to the
19 area of the assault, he would punch this thing off, it would go down and crash in the trees
20 and blowup, and blow holes for us to land in. Gee whiz, I can think of other things we
21 used, we used some devices to mask our lights, so we can fly in formation at night, and
22 the lights wouldn't be visible from the ground. We found you're better off to leave the
23 lights on, dim, or even turned off.

24 RM: So you're doing this all without troops and then there's a point at which you
25 feel comfortable, as a unit, that you can now start training with the infantry. What—I
26 think you said you went there in February of '64 to Benning?

27 LK: Correct.

28 RM: You were going to deploy in July of '65, so that's eighteen months or so-
29 sixteen months that you are there. Where in there does the infantry start to training with
30 copters?

31 LK: You know what doctor, I don't remember. It was sort of insidious. Suddenly

1 we would carry some troops and we do some things, and more and more and more and
2 we worked our way into it. There was no one day where someone stood up and said,
3 “Okay, today’s the day we’re going to carry the infantry.” That I recall.

4 RM: Okay, but was it closer to the deployment period? I’m trying to get a handle
5 on how many months of troop training and copters the 1st Cav get?

6 LK: Oh, easily a year.

7 RM: A year? Okay, alright that helps me. Was there or is there anything that
8 sticks out in your mind in the training process, that whereas instructors you said, “We got
9 to fix this,” or “We’ve got to improve on this.” Was it pretty smooth all the way to
10 deployment?

11 LK: I felt like it went pretty smooth all the way to deployment. I think people—
12 one of the major benefits of this sort of training is you learn your own limitations. I think
13 we had problems with navigation, although our people probably could read maps better
14 than anybody else in the army. I think even that, maps aren’t always that accurate.
15 Partially in places where there’s no relief, no hills, it’s very difficult to get within a
16 hundred meters of the desired spot and that’s critical in combat. Probably, learning our
17 limitations, scaring the heck out of ourselves occasionally, was one of the big advantages
18 to this, you really knew how far you could go before you quit and do something else.

19 RM: In your training, at Fort Benning, did you use gunship escorts? Because I’ll
20 tell you where I’m going with this, I know that the Cobra gunship was in development
21 stage at this time and it is not deployed with you, it doesn’t come in until late ’66, I
22 believe. But the Huey is at the B model, was going to be converted or there were
23 gunships—there were Huey gunships.

24 LK: Correct.

25 RM: Did you train with gunships at Benning?

26 LK: We did, but not to a large extent. Not to a great extent, that I remember and
27 please remember it’s been forty-one years now.

28 RM: I understand.

29 LK: But I do not remember doing an awful lot of integrated training with the
30 guns.

1 RM: The reason I'm asking you is because there is a point in which somebody
2 realizes that gunship escort is critical to many missions that would follow in the next four
3 or five years of combat and the Huey, as it was armed as a gunship, was not the best that
4 we had, we came up with something better. But I just was wondering if you were
5 involved in any of that thinking at the time, recognition that that escort was going to be
6 important.

7 LK: Well, as a warrant officer, I was not a decision maker. Let's be honest about
8 that (Chuckles). However, I watched what was going on and certainly made my voice
9 heard when I thought of something, they may or may not have paid attention to it. It
10 seems to me that the importance of the gunship and the artillery support, was recognized
11 until after we got to Vietnam. That may not be correct at all. I recognized it in Vietnam. I
12 felt that we established some pretty darn solid rules about what we needed to make an
13 assault. We recognized that getting outside of artillery range, and not having gunships
14 was really hanging it out. It was not a very smart approach to it. The gunships not only
15 could help us during the assault, but then if the infantry got in trouble. I said the gunships,
16 the gunships and artillery, and those two really worked hand-in-hand. If the infantry got
17 in trouble once the Hueys were out of there, I'm sure every infantry command here would
18 tell you that was just invaluable. I'm positive that they will. Before I left Vietnam, we got
19 outside to artillery support on one assault. Gee, they got beat up badly. Again, validating
20 the thought that you really need to have that stuff on station.

21 RM: So you deployed with the 1st Air Cav assault in July of 1965. Copters are
22 loaded onto the carriers, you went over on the ship, is that correct?

23 LK: Yes, I did.

24 RM: You come into Vietnam, at Phong Nha I believe, and you're ultimately taken
25 to An Khe and that's your first base?

26 LK: Yeah, we got off the ships, went ashore and get on a Caribou CV2 and they
27 ferry us to an airfield at An Khe. Some people flew, I was ferried by the Chinook. Some
28 people flew the aircraft over.

29 RM: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the in-country training. How much? How
30 long? How extensive compared to what you already done in Benning?

1 LK: Well, compared to Benning—let me choose my words carefully because I
2 don't want to make sound like we were cavalier, and we didn't need any more training.
3 We did train some, but compared to Fort Benning, it was nothing. Fort Benning darn well
4 prepared us. I don't know that there will ever again be an air mobile division moving into
5 a combat zone as well trained as the 11th Air Assault. I don't know that we can afford it,
6 when I say afford it, congress would allow the money. So when we got there, we were
7 pretty darn well off.

8 RM: So it was a matter of getting used to flying in the jungle, the humidity
9 difference, I suppose?

10 LK: Well, you know the altitude was a little higher than what we experienced in
11 Georgia and South Carolina, but the hot and humid conditions were prevalent, present I
12 should say, in both places. That wasn't much of a problem. But we did know—we did
13 need to learn our way around geographically. We had problems with maps. For some
14 reason, we didn't have sufficient maps. So an awful lot of it was done by, you went there
15 once and remember what it looked like.

16 RM: About the monsoons, you get there in July, it was a little monsoon season in
17 the central highlands. Was that a problem?

18 LK: Well, yeah it was and it would hamper assaults, not only in when you have
19 one planned, you may not have the weather to conduct it, but once you get the guys on
20 the ground, you got to remember that they may need support, they may need supplies,
21 medevac and extraction. If you can't get the helicopters over there, they're really not an
22 air mobile outfit any longer.

23 RM: While you were at An Khe then and the word comes down that you're going
24 to have an operation. A very large operation and you moved to Pleiku, is that right? As a
25 staging area?

26 LK: Mm-hmm.

27 RM: You had about a week there, as I understand, some period of time?

28 LK: We had a period of time. I can't tell you—

29 RM: Yes, some period of time. At what point do you realize that this is the real
30 deal? I mean, you've been in An Khe and know there is an enemy out there, and I assume

1 there is mortars and things flying around, but there really hadn't been any operations as
2 such, as I understand.

3 LK: Well, we had minor operations. The marines had gotten in trouble over near
4 Qui Nhon, we had gone over and worked on that. The training at Fort Benning was
5 phenomenal, and I wish that I was sufficiently articulate to tell you how beneficial that
6 was. One of the things that we did at Benning, which at the time I didn't pay a lot of
7 attention to, so we used a lot of blanks and we would shoot at each other with blanks, and
8 we didn't have the miles gear, the electronic gear and what have you. It adds a little
9 realism. But you know, when you get into combat, it doesn't sound any different until
10 you start seeing bullet holes. It had a calming effect I suspect or at least an anti-panic
11 effect. Back to your question, you're talking about LZ X-Ray and then Albany I'm sure.

12 RM: Yes.

13 LK: The deal was, my personal deal was, that I'd been flying every day and I was
14 supposed to have a day off, and they got me in the morning up and said, "Well, why
15 don't you—", a fella by the name of Dallas Harper, I don't know if you got him
16 scheduled or not. We were going to go to Pleiku for the first time, see the big city. They
17 said, "Well, you need to help out A Company today." They kept me for a little while, go
18 down and do some stuff, I don't think we expected to get into it too deeply. At least I
19 didn't. When you get done, you come back and get the rest of the day off, and that was
20 fine. So we went down, and the *Reader's Digest* version is that it didn't take very long
21 before I realized that we weren't going to get to Pleiku today. This thing was heating up
22 fast and by lunchtime it was—

23 RM: So what was your assignment on LZ X-Ray?

24 LK: Well, I think I made nine trips in total. I think that I made five trips, although
25 it was either five trips in or six trips attempted and five trips in. I didn't say that very
26 well. One trip in, we aborted. We made a big circle, and I can remember vividly seeing
27 an A1E getting shot down as we were making that circle. Which I think was—you asked
28 when reality was set in, I think that was when it set in. It looked like a War World II
29 movie, there was flames coming out and the guy was passing, I believe, behind X-Ray
30 from my point. I couldn't really tell and went into the trees. And I said to the guy with

1 me, I think it was Chuck May, “Geez, did you see that?” And he said, “Yeah.” That was
2 about all the conversation we had, wow. It kind of took my breath away.

3 RM: It was shot down by a...? What did you think took it down?

4 LK: I don’t know. They had heavy weapons and aircraft weapons in the area, I’m
5 guessing they got hit with one of those, I don’t know. But at any rate, that was when
6 realism really came home. That one instance. We made the circle and aborted the assault.
7 I think General Moore, Colonel Moore at the time, had called it off. So we get back and
8 landed at Falcon and I was told to go back to Pleiku with Dallas Harper, who was flying
9 on my wing, and get a load of ammunition and we did, we came back. Paul Winkel was
10 the flight leader, and he came over and I said, “Where do you want me to take it?” He
11 said, “Take it to X-Ray.” I said, “I don’t have a map, where’s X-Ray?” He—

12 RM: So that was your first time at X-Ray?

13 LK: No, no I’d already been in X-Ray. But I’d been to a lot of LZs that day. One
14 LZ to the next, it didn’t matter what the name was, if I knew it I didn’t pay attention or if
15 I heard it I didn’t pay attention. So he wasn’t sure what to do, and I said, “Either you go
16 get me the map.” He said, “Well, I don’t want to give up my map, so I’ll go with you.” I
17 believe we were the first ones in after the LZ was closed.

18 RM: You were taking in 5.56 mm M16 ammo?

19 LK: It was predominantly M16 ammo, I can’t tell you there wasn’t anything else
20 on board.

21 RM: So let me understand that day. The first of, I guess November 14th, the day
22 that this all begins. What was your first trip it?

23 LK: An assault.

24 RM: It was? So you had tubes onboard. Was the—were you in the first lift in?

25 LK: Yeah.

26 RM: Okay and was it hot immediately?

27 LK: No.

28 RM: Okay, so you received no fire when the first troops were deplaned?

29 LK: Well, I can’t say that for certain. I do know that Roger Bean, who later I
30 believe returned as Lieutenant General, and I want to say it was the third lift but please
31 don’t hold me to that, but the Roger Bean factor was one that you can certainly talk to

1 others about. Roger took a bullet inside his helmet and I understand that to this day he has
2 a white strip of hair where that bullet passed, between his skull and his helmet. I think
3 that was the first time we realized it was heating up. But a few rounds doesn't make a
4 battle. You run into a small squad some place or a couple of snipers or something like
5 that, that's not a battle. So at that point, I don't think we thought it was a battle.

6 RM: But in terms of offloading the troops, they were not getting fired at and your
7 chopper was not getting fired at extensively the first time through.

8 LK: The first couple of times, I think.

9 RM: So you hadn't seen anything at that point to indicate what was to come?

10 LK: No, I still thought I was going to go to Pleiku later on that day.

11 RM: You still had that idea. At what point do you realize, you said you saw this
12 A1E go down, but at what point do you, as an individual pilot recognize what's going on
13 and the extent of it?

14 LK: About the time we saw the A1E and then we were aborted. Thinking back
15 doctor, I cannot recall ever aborting—well, we hadn't had that many assaults, but I think
16 we never ever aborted an assault because the LZ was too hot. So I think at that point,
17 things were getting pretty serious.

18 RM: How many trips did you think you made into X-Ray.

19 LK: I think I made a total of about nine.

20 RM: Nine trips. Those were a combination of resupply and bringing in fresh
21 troops?

22 LK: No, as I remember, I did not bring any fresh troops, it was resupply and
23 taking out medevac. I believe it was first trip in but it may have been the second, I carried
24 out, I think it was three POWs. Dallas was carrying medevac and he got shot down on the
25 way out.

26 RM: I see. You carried out you said you had three POWs.

27 LK: I think it was three.

28 RM: Now, tell me how that works? You have POWs on board, you have—were
29 your door gunners responsible for them? How did you—

30 LK: Well, you know this was my first—we were playing it by ear at this point. I
31 hadn't really thought about it. I think you're going to interview later today, I think I saw

1 his name and in fact I'd like to see him, I haven't seen him since battle, by the name of
2 Rozanski. He was in the back of the helicopter and took charge of the POWs. There was
3 no communication, I guess it was an intuitive act. It was the obvious thing to do. He took
4 charge of the POWs. The real problem was, when Dallas got shot down, we were well
5 outside the perimeter. Now I was sitting out there with more than what we can carry, and
6 some POWs. What do you do? I can't tell you how happy I was to see the bushes part and
7 some grunts come out and retrieve the POWs for us and took that burden off our backs. I
8 guess General Moore, someone heard us going down and knew we had them onboard and
9 sent these guys out through no man's land to retrieve them. Boy, I was happy to see that.

10 RM: So you made nine trips into X-Ray. Several of those trips were medevac,
11 correct?

12 LK: Four. I believe four were medevac.

13 RM: Were they described to you as medevac? You knew you were going in to
14 take the wounded out?

15 LK: Boy, that's a chicken-egg question that I'd never thought of before. That's a
16 good question. I felt that my reason for going in was to take the ammunition in. I
17 understood they were getting critically low. General Moore I'm sure can put a sharper
18 point on that comment. Once you're in there, not taking medevacs out would be criminal.

19 RM: Did they ask you to—so if you're coming in, you've got a slip full of M16
20 ammo and grenades and everything else as a resupply, and then were you getting—was
21 Colonel Moore or someone communicating with you to stay on the ground or to hover or
22 to as your being offloaded so we can get these wounded out of there? Or do you see it
23 happening on the ground?

24 LK: No, they told us that they had medevacs and if there was any conversation
25 and this is was one of those, at the time it wasn't significant enough to remember, if there
26 was any conversation, we agreed to take them back out. They may have just said, "We
27 got medevacs," and we said, "Okay." We had we had worked with the infantry for that
28 period at Fort Benning and we pretty much knew what they had in mind and what they
29 were going to do. Although, at Fort Benning, we didn't do that much of medevacs. Some
30 of the commanders simulated having them, but you can't really simulate having this
31 situation.

1 RM: Was there any, what I would call formal, not really a good military term, but
2 organized medevac that was just that. Medevac copters with medics on board, flying the
3 red cross, that sort of thing. Was that also you coming in, or were you doing this medevac
4 basically an empty copter with the ammo off and therefore that's your role in that
5 moment.

6 LK: Let me qualify my answer, I'm speaking third hand. I didn't see this, I didn't
7 hear it, and I can't tell you what really happened. If you saw the movie, they refused to
8 go in and I'm told that was the case. I think that the movie made a little bit more of a deal
9 of that then they should've. I don't think you should treat your fellow soldiers that way. If
10 they didn't go in, they had a reason for not going in. They did that best, I'm sure. But I do
11 know that they would not go in or that they were not going in.

12 RM: This is the medevacs you're talking about?

13 LK: Right. For whatever reason.

14 RM: So you guys, as essentially resupplied troop carriers everything else, preform
15 that function.

16 LK: When you think about it, it makes an awful lot of sense, we weren't equipped
17 for medevac, we had no medics onboard, we had no litters, we had no—we had the
18 aircraft first aid kits (Chuckles), for whatever that's worth. We weren't really equipped
19 to—on the other hand, we had the helicopters in the LZ. I don't think it takes a GED to
20 figure out that if you got a helicopter in the LZ, let it leave empty and let's bring another
21 in, yeah that wouldn't make any sense at all.

22 RM: Sure. What about the KIAs (Killed in Action)? Were they being put on the
23 choppers at that time or did that come later?

24 LK: No, that came later.

25 RM: That came later. So your mission, at that moment, was resupply and go out
26 full of the wounded.

27 LK: And the POWs I mentioned earlier.

28 RM: And POWs. You made about nine trips in, that you recall.

29 LK: If memory serves, we've done a lot of head scratching and looking at
30 whatever, I made a total of nine trips. Four trips after the LZ was closed.

31 RM: I see.

1 LK: Four of the nine.

2 RM: Were you involved in Albany?

3 LK: Yes, I was.

4 RM: Tell me a little bit about Albany.

5 LK: I believe I went into Albany four times. The first two were, I certainly
6 wouldn't say uneventful, but they were not that far out of ordinary. We were reinforcing
7 and what have you, there was enemy fire there's no question about it, but it was not that
8 bad. But then I did two at night and I'll tell you what, somebody has called X-Ray the
9 hottest LZ in Vietnam, they weren't in Albany. That was just awful. Apparently, there
10 had been some clearing of the LZ. I don't know how the LZ got formed, but the darn
11 stumps were sticking up like this and because we were coming up without lights, we
12 couldn't see them and I almost—if it wasn't for Richard Smith the crew chief, I guess
13 this story would have quite a different ending. I almost sat down on top of one right
14 through the fuel tank. Smithy started screaming to pull forward, pull forward. I did and he
15 was one of our older crew chiefs and I knew very well that if he said to pull forward, you
16 better pull forward. We did and we dodged the bullet they say on that one. It looked to
17 me like firefights were going within the LZ, I mean it was just incredible.

18 RM: This was night?

19 LK: This was at night. We were brought in by a fellow by the name of Spires,
20 Captain at the time, I think he retired as a Colonel. He crawled out into the middle of the
21 LZ with a flashlight and that held it up for us. That helped with finding the LZ, there
22 were traces everywhere. Got us in, bless his heart.

23 RM: With a red flashlight?

24 LK: No, I think he used a white one.

25 RM: He used a white one. So, Albany. Your mission at Albany was, the same
26 thing? Resupply, medevac?

27 LK: Resupply, medevac, yeah.

28 RM: As you were flying, you'd just made nine trips into X-Ray and you're called
29 in to go into Albany?

30 LK: Well, there is a separation of a day or so.

1 RM: Okay, and you know what had happened at X-Ray at this time? You had a
2 handle on KIAs, on the extent of the battle and everything else with that one-day
3 window. Albany is worse in the sense of, if not the duration of the battle, it's worse in
4 terms of the casualties and the intensity of the fire and everything. How are you feeling
5 about going into Albany then after seeing what happened at X-Ray?

6 LK: I don't think my throat has ever been that dry before. I was scared to death. I
7 don't know how else to say it. They could hear us, I had my lights out and I'm quite sure
8 that when I went into the first time, Stinnett had his lights out as well. He was my—
9 Captain Stinnett who was the flight leader. They could hear us and were shooting in our
10 general direction, there were traces going everywhere. But you know, as Americans on
11 the ground, these were the guys you had trained with at Fort Benning. I don't mean to
12 sound dramatic or anything, but these were the guys we had trained with at Fort Benning.
13 I guess if they were not Americans, I can't tell you if I would've gone in or not.

14 RM: The PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) have also had three days of
15 experiences. Firing at helicopters for the first time.

16 LK: Well, this was a different crowd, as I understand it than the first one.

17 RM: Different regiment? Yeah, but there's a learning curve certainly that they
18 would be climbing. You went in at night, you went in on medevac, resupply and you did
19 that four times is that right?

20 LK: No, actually twice. Four times total into the LZ, twice in the really bad
21 periods.

22 RM: Okay, and it was worse than X-Ray for you? That was the worst?

23 LK: Yeah, it was for me. You know, how do you measure such a thing? But it
24 was for me, I thought, "Man, I'd give anything to be back in X-Ray at this point." I
25 thought X-Ray was going to be about as bad as it got.

26 RM: After LZ X-Ray, after Albany, you completed your—you came over in July,
27 so did you go home the following July? You had a year tour?

28 LK: No, I got extended.

29 RM: In Vietnam?

30 LK: Yeah.

31 RM: For how many?

1 LK: Well it worked out to be close to a month, although we had a new CO
2 (Commander Officer) came in, I think his name was Major Brandt. Super guy, I just
3 really liked him. Once I checked out another instructor pilot, he said, “You’ve had
4 enough, go back to An Khe and find a ride home.” So I really spent two, two and a half
5 weeks additional in the combat area. The rest was at An Khe and then down at Saigon,
6 trying to get a ride home.

7 RM: Then you had another tour, I believe.

8 LK: I did, yeah.

9 RM: So you had a year back in the States?

10 LK: Eighteen months.

11 RM: Eighteen months and then you went back to Vietnam on a second tour? How
12 did your second tour compare to your first tour, in terms of combat experiences?

13 LK: Well, the second tour was in Chinooks.

14 RM: You were in Chinooks, CH-47s?

15 LK: C-47—CH-47s and they didn’t expose the Chinooks to the same danger, as I
16 saw nothing like X-Ray and Albany, nothing, as with the Huey. I’m not sure what your
17 question is, so I’ll ramble and then you can correct me.

18 RM: I’m just trying to see if you had—I know that as the entire war, we really
19 never experienced anything like the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley.

20 LK: Which was a good thing

21 RM: As in individuals, certain people did experience other kinds of things. Did
22 you, on your second tour, experience anything like you had in that first period?

23 LK: No. No. The answer is very simple, I had one really bad experience on my
24 second tour, I got shot down in a Chinook and went down in fire. But it was turned into
25 an extraction. Once you’re on fire, you’re on fire, but I didn’t know that was going to
26 happen. With X-Ray and Albany, you get to think about it all the way down there. All the
27 way to the LZ. So no, nothing at all like that. I did find that the level of experience and
28 skill on my second tour had dropped unbelievably, I just couldn’t believe it.

29 RM: In terms of American soldiers?

30 LK: American pilots. Certainly, no reflection on them, boy they did a wonderful
31 job given the training that they had. But they didn’t spend fourteen months at Fort

1 Benning prior to going over and it really showed it. Please, in any of this, I'm not
2 criticizing or belittling or degrading any of them. They bellied up to the bar so to speak,
3 rolled their sleeves up. They did a heck of a job. They were going to the Ia Drang Valley,
4 as I mentioned earlier this tactical instrument ticket. They were taking sling loads into the
5 clouds and flying over the mountains and then dropping down without any nave into this
6 valley, flying the compass and the clock. That's pretty impressive.

7 RM: Where were you on your second tour?

8 LK: 1st Cav.

9 RM: You served with 1st Cav also out of An Khe that time, or had they moved?

10 LK: No, they moved up north to Camp Evans, however mine continued north of
11 Evans at—Oh, Lordy.

12 RM: So you were up in Quang Tri?

13 LK: Quang Tri.

14 RM: Quang Tri. Okay, so you're up in I4, okay.

15 LK: And then about thanksgiving, the Cav picked up lock, sock, and barrel and
16 moved down near Saigon. My company went to Bearcat.

17 RM: What year are we in now? I lost track.

18 LK: That would be '68.

19 RM: What month in '68?

20 LK: November, '68, we moved down south.

21 RM: Okay, so we've gone through—were you there during Tet?

22 LK: No, I was on my way over as Tet wound down.

23 RM: As Tet wound down, so you go over in March, April, May period?

24 LK: June.

25 RM: Okay, June, alright. How about, you mentioned the training that the pilots
26 didn't seem to be as trained. Did you have any experience at that time with American
27 infantry troops? How did you see them as being different, compared to the 1st Air Cav in
28 '65?

29 LK: I don't think I can really comment on that doctor because again, we are the
30 grunts of our infantry. Where the infantry really shined was when they were working on
31 the Hueys and that situation. During the first tour, when the LZ was hot, they were

1 getting out of that thing six feet above the ground before you landed. Many times, you
2 might not even hit the ground with your skids, and you were back out of there. I always
3 thought they were doing us a favor. I mentioned it to one of them on time, “I really
4 appreciate that.” He said, “God you guys draw fire, getting out of there.” I’m not too sure
5 about that. I did not have an opportunity to compare the infantry in these situations
6 between tours.

7 RM: Did you have an opportunity to compare the infantry in Garrison situations,
8 the second time compared to the first? Could you see a difference?

9 LK: No, not really. Not really. Again, until things are going on, how do you
10 evaluate?

11 RM: Then you spent—you had two tours in Vietnam and then you had a rest of a
12 long career in the army. How long did you stay in?

13 LK: Twenty-three years.

14 RM: And you retired as a CW4 (Chief Warrant Officer)?

15 LK: CW4.

16 RM: Well, I have enjoyed this interview. It’s short and it’s too short. I always like
17 to tell people that we have a fulltime program at the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech
18 University where we do oral history, we have over a thousand now.

19 LK: Wow.

20 RM: We would invite you, if you’re ever out there to come out, or we do
21 telephone interviews also to get everything on record because this is not just the Ia Drang
22 Valley, but of anyone that served in Vietnam. We really do appreciate you coming into
23 today to tell us these experiences.

24 LK: It’s my pleasure and I’m happy to do it. Thank you very much, thank you for
25 the opportunity.

26 RM: I appreciate it.