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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Edward Charles Robinson
Conducted by Dr. John Ron Milam
Date 10 November 2005
Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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

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5 Endowment for the Humanities.

6
7 (Editor's note: Audio cuts in)

8 Edward Robinson: 9th Assault Helicopter Battalion, I was assigned with a group
9 of aircraft that were to support the mission and to—what became known as LZ (Landing
10 Zone) X-Ray. I was a UH-1D helicopter pilot, flight section leader.

11 Dr. John Ron Milam: So you're chopper pilot was scheduled to go into X-Ray,
12 let's back up a bit then. Tell me, first of all what was your commissioning source?

13 ER: My commissioning source was the United States Military Academy at West
14 Point, in June of 1959.

15 JM: Class of '59?

16 ER: Class of '59.

17 JM: Between 1959 and 1965, six years in the military, when did you arrive at
18 Benning?

19 ER: I arrived at Benning about the middle of 1964, which wasn't the assault unit
20 at that time in training. I'd come back not long before from Germany, from a tour in
21 Germany where I was a fixed wing aviator and an artillery battery commander. I went to
22 school en route and wound up being assigned to 11th Air Assault, to the 10th Air
23 Transport Brigade, which primarily consisted of the CB-2 Caribous and CH-47, the
24 heavy lift aircraft at that time.

1 JM: So you were fixed wing qualified, and then you went to rotary school after
2 Germany, on your way to Benning?

3 ER: No, I was fixed wing qualified and then while I was part of the 10th Air
4 Transport Brigade, I went to rotary wing qualification course at Fort Wolters, to get
5 qualify in the H-23 and ultimately the UH-1D, shortly before the unit deployed as the 1st
6 Cav.

7 JM: So you came to Benning, in mid-summer, August or so of '64.

8 ER: That's correct.

9 JM: That's about the time that—the 1st Air Cav had formed earlier than that but
10 you were one year away from deployment with the cav. Were you involved in the
11 training exercises for that next year, until July of '65?

12 ER: No, I was in the 270th Aircraft Maintenance Battalion, which was supporting
13 the CB-2 Caribous and I was in charge at one point putting the reverse pitch props on the
14 Caribous aircraft, and I was not part of the UH-1 assault training that was going on at the
15 time. That went on until about mid '65, and I went home on leave for a couple of weeks
16 and mid '65 while I was at home, I got a call that President Johnson had converted the
17 11th Air Assault to the 1st Air Cavalry Division and that we would be deploying to
18 Vietnam. They asked me if I was UH-1D qualified, and I said "Yes, I was." I had, just
19 before that, been qualified in the UH-1D. So it wasn't an urgent matter for me to come
20 right back. So I finished my leave, I went back to Fort Benning with my family and then I
21 deployed with the division when they shipped out, I think it was in August of '65, if I
22 remember correctly. We deployed in the middle of the night in combat gear, loaded onto
23 buses. My family was there ready to part—my family did not stay because they'd
24 anticipated possibly some things that were going on in the area. There were a lot of
25 casualties being reported in the Fort Benning area, even before the 1st Cav deployed,
26 including neighbors around. One of our neighbors had lost a husband with special forces
27 over there. My family decided that they wanted to go back to New York State, where my
28 wife's parents and my parents were located. So they decided they wanted to go home, so
29 we sold our house and—we shipped out in the middle of the night, and they shortly left
30 after, to go to New York State. We took the bus to Charleston, South Carolina, with the
31 division—pretty much what was depicted in the movie, leaving in the middle of the night.

1 We arrived at Charleston, we got on board the ship, I was on the *Darby*. We left on the
2 *Darby*, went down the East Coast, through the Panama Canal, up the West Coast to Long
3 Beach, where we docked and provisioned for a few days. Then, we sailed across the
4 Pacific. I was with the—on the *Darby* at that time was the 1st of the 9th Cavalry,
5 primarily. There was a few of us aviators mixed in with them. So I deployed basically
6 with the 1st of the 9th. When we landed in the Qui Nhon Harbor, ultimately—it was a
7 thirty-day voyage as I can recall, we did a lot of training on board the *Darby*.

8 JM: What kind?

9 ER: Firing off of the fan tail, that type of thing. Not training such as an air cav,
10 but there was some training and classes, and things going on board. We landed in Qui
11 Nhon Harbor. Deployed onto the landing craft where—the landing craft then landed on
12 the beach at Qui Nhon. Standing on the beach was General Westmoreland, to greet us as
13 we came on shore. Then, some other people from the battalion deployed with the aircraft,
14 in aircraft carriers, but we did not so we were picked up by helicopters and we landed far
15 from Qui Nhon, inland through the central highlands and landed in An Khe, what became
16 our basecamp. At that time it was pretty much—

17 JM: You had to build it, you had to build it.

18 ER: You had to build it, yes. We landed at what was an old French PSP runway,
19 as a matter of fact. There was no basecamp as such, so we did a lot of cutting down trees,
20 digging out terminate mounds and doing the trenching around the areas where we would
21 put up tents. We actually slept in “pup” tents there, for—I think it was one or two
22 months, whatever it was. It was a short period of time. Then we got general purpose tents,
23 GP tents, and we moved into those. We had—then we were offered the opportunity for
24 those who wanted to build their own structure, to put up a more substantially space,
25 which I did with a couple of others as we had some free time from flying, or when we
26 weren’t assigned to a mission, we would work on a Hooch, as we called it and a more
27 substantial place to sleep.

28 JM: You had not trained in the United States with these 1st Air Cav troops, that
29 you were going to be expected to take into combat, going before you left. How much
30 training, once you got into Vietnam, did you have with troops before you went into
31 combat?

1 ER: (Chuckles) Very little, I would say. We went out onto operational combat
2 missions almost immediately, around the Happy Valley area. I learned very quickly over
3 the first couple of weeks the procedures. I had quite a bit of fixed wing time, I probably
4 had about fifteen-hundred hours of fixed wing time. Not specifically operating with
5 rotary wing, but the people that were flying and had been with the 11th Air Assault were
6 very well trained and qualified, and then they transferred that very quickly.

7 JM: You were captain at this time?

8 ER: I was captain, yeah.

9 JM: What would you say was the biggest challenge from, not so much because of
10 combat, but what was the biggest challenge to go from what you had been doing prior to
11 being deployed, to what you were expected to do? Was it mechanical with the aircraft?
12 Was it procedural? Or was it flying in formation? What were—

13 ER: I think it was something of all of those. The formation, we learned quickly
14 that the formation was changing from one to the other. Some of the terminology that they
15 used, but I found it came very quickly, it wasn't really a problem. I would say within the
16 three or four weeks, I felt very comfortable. Of course, we hadn't really been in any big
17 combat at that time.

18 JM: What about night flying? Had you done any training in night flying, as far as
19 with troops?

20 ER: No—well, we did do some night lifts in Happy Valley, over in Mang Yang
21 Pass area, up around. We flew up around Phu Cat, which became a major air force base.
22 At that time, it was a special forces camp, we did a lot of operations up around Highway
23 1. Let's see, it was August, September, October, we had probably two or three months
24 before the big operation, over in the Ia Drang Valley.

25 JM: So, you've come into this country where America has not really experienced
26 any large battles, even though the 173rd has been there for a while, the marines had been
27 there for a while. We hadn't experienced—as a nation we hadn't experienced a very large
28 operation, at least speaking—doesn't mean we weren't suffering casualties and those
29 kinds of things. What was your anticipation about operations? Did you anticipate that you
30 would have the kind of operations the Ia Drang becomes? Or were you believing war
31 would be the kind of things we'd seen so far, which was smaller?

1 ER: Having come from studying military tactics and strategy and that type of
2 thing, with a military background, I really kind of expected that we ultimately, would be
3 what we got into although—so I guess I wasn't really surprised that that happened
4 because it happened in every other war, why wouldn't it happen there? So I wouldn't say
5 that I was comfortable with going in there. Nobody really knows until you've flown into
6 combat, what your reactions are going to be. But I wouldn't say I was surprised by what
7 happened, other than what I learned later on to the extent of the commitment of the North
8 Vietnamese and the type of attitude that they brought into the Ia Drang, that was probably
9 stronger than what I expected that we would encounter. I think that was brought out in
10 the book too. I think everybody was kind of surprised by that.

11 JM: Well, I think, you kind of hit on it with your background at the academy, you
12 would've known some military history. So, we come into this war. We have this new
13 delivery system placing men into combat from the air. So I was wondering if maybe you
14 saw it differently because of your being at the academy background versus someone that
15 would say, "A warrant officer was flying an aircraft."

16 ER: I would suspect, I thought it was a very powerful tool, the air cavalry
17 concept. I thought it was a very formable force. Certainly, it has certain vulnerabilities
18 which I came to be known and associate later on in the aircraft survivability program
19 manager later in my career, the vulnerabilities of the aircraft. We were picking up bullet
20 heads rounds and bullet heads in the aircraft. Matter of fact, I think I got the first one in
21 our company. Through my tail rotor drive shaft, when we were over by the Phu Cat area,
22 right shortly after we got there. But it didn't seem to be anything that caused you have to
23 go down. It didn't destroy the aircraft. It was small rounds, AK-47 type of rounds.

24 JM: So the experience at Phu Cat that you had, was one of the first times that
25 American helicopters had come into smaller fire and was affected by it, but not shot
26 down?

27 ER: I think I was the first aircraft in B Company two-two-nine (Editor's note:
28 229th) that suffered a bullet wound, certain milestone our first bullet wound. We removed
29 it, later on removed the drive shaft, replaced the drive shaft. But while we were operating
30 up and down on Highway 1, we would go through a pass in highway one and typically
31 every time we went through that pass, there were clouds. So you kind of low through the

1 path. But you'd come out of there with two or three out of the four aircraft in the fight,
2 with some kind of bullet wound in them. So there was somebody operating them
3 obviously. But it didn't affect the operation.

4 JM: Yeah, it could've been just a VC (Viet Cong) out in a rice patty with an AK,
5 takes a couple shots at you. But it wasn't .50 cal and it wasn't heavy aircraft. It wasn't the
6 kinds of things you experienced.

7 ER: Later on in my second tour of Vietnam, I was an aircraft maintenance
8 commander over there. We would fix those things overnight very quickly. We often put
9 temporary patches on things, even with three-hundred mile an hour, five-hundred miles
10 an hour, we would put tape on it. You could fix proxy bullet holes or fix bullet holes in
11 rotor blades, heat them up overnight and you would have a lot of your aircraft reported
12 down for damage and the next morning we'd have them all back up again. So we worked
13 at night fixing them. That was my second experience.

14 JM: Your second term. So you're in-country now. You got a base that you had to
15 build in An Khe. For a couple of months, you had an operation going on in Happy
16 Valley. No battalion sized operations I don't believe.

17 ER: I really can't recall the size of the operations were but they were involved
18 probably a couple platoons from each company. They would mix up. We had A, B, C lift
19 Companies and 229th and D Company was the gunship company. Gunship company
20 always had a few aircraft out there, four aircraft. They put two on each side of a platoon
21 basically. We had a couple of platoons out there, maybe a company sized one once in a
22 while.

23 JM: Sure. Enemy contact wise, nothing big? Anything you can recall?

24 ER: No, not before LZ X-Ray, after LZ X-Ray.

25 JM: Understanding that any contact for the person involved is a big contact, but at
26 least as far as looking at the size of the ends and everything, there was nothing that came
27 along until X-Ray and your units that would—what about, did you get any—what was
28 going on in Vietnam, as far as other units were concerned. Did you start to get through
29 the *Stars and Stripes* or through any other kinds of intelligence to know what was going
30 on in the rest of the country?

1 ER: Well, the marines had some units operating over there and they had been
2 there flying CH-34s, and of course there were some units over there as part of navigation
3 units, part of special forces that were flying the old CH-41 bananas, before that. Shortly
4 before we arrived, the 101st had an element. I think a brigade over there and they helped
5 protect the area to some extent that we were going into there. One of the first things that
6 happened when we arrived there was the 101st had gotten all their aircrafts shot down and
7 they landed in an NVA, North Vietnamese basecamp area, so it was said. They had all of
8 their aircraft shot down. The 1st Cav was asked to send the unit down there to help get
9 them out of there, which they did. That was shortly after we arrived there. It was one of
10 the first times. That went off of the PSP landing at the ol' French strip there, where they
11 formed up a pickup force to go down there and help relive that 101st, before the 1st Cav
12 got to even operating. So it was said to be of North Vietnamese, where the 101st was
13 operating.

14 JM: So let's talk about November 13th and 14th. I want to know about November
15 13th first, with the assumption that November 14th kicks off. What was your day like on
16 13th? Had you already moved to Pleiku? Moved your chopper to, I guess, Holloway?

17 ER: As I recall, we had deployed to Holloway. Certain elements of the company
18 that were—some units and crews of A, B, C, D were operating off the runway at
19 Holloway there. They had a runway that could carry large fixed wing aircraft and we
20 were often sleeping in the aircraft and we would kick the doors off of the aircraft and use
21 them as shelters to sleep on the ground in the aircraft, right there in Holloway. We were
22 operating down around, in the Plei Me area, as I recall. I've got pictures of it; I took in
23 black and white that could have been taken on the 13th or at least the 14th. I remember one
24 incident going into LZ X-Ray, I know we were at Plei Me because I remember taking off
25 out of there and out of Plei Me, and landing nap-of-the-earth, into this small LZ they had
26 set up and that was recounted in the book, I think, where they structured a small LZ
27 where it could handle two aircraft. I know we went out of Plei Me and went nap-of-the-
28 earth, wall to wall. Two aircraft at a time were landing into some trips in LZ X-Ray. I
29 remember that specifically on the 14th.

30 JM: I see. Okay, what word do you get about the extent of this operation on the
31 14th?

1 ER: It was a hot LZ, I know that. They had run into some big trouble, none of the
2 details I didn't know at the time. I know that there was no feedback coming, it was a hot
3 LZ. We were waiting for permissions from assignments to go in there. But I didn't really
4 know much about what was going on in the ground initially there. Although I did become
5 aware of it because we started flying around, and I have another photo I took from the air
6 while we were flying around in LZ X-Ray. We were heading toward LZ X-Ray and there
7 must been at least two platoons because I have a silhouette against smoke on the ground
8 in LZ X-Ray of four helicopters, and in the background on the Chu Prong Mountain, I
9 can see a stick of smoke, from a stick bomb is being dropped from a B-52 Arc Light
10 strike, which I think it may have been the first Arc Light strike they ever conducted in
11 Vietnam. I can see both the smoke and the Chu Prong Mountain in my photo. Which I
12 provided, and four helicopters silhouetted against the smoke in the LZ, which the fire was
13 coming out of the LZ Falcon. Two of my classmates, by the way, were in charge of the
14 artillery there. Captain Don Davis, the battery commander, was classmate of mine.
15 Captain Holly Langford was the fire direction officer I found out later on, he also was a
16 classmate. Another classmate, Captain Buse Tully, was later killed in Vietnam in his
17 second tour, was also part of the elements that came to relieve them at X-Ray and
18 Albany.

19 JM: Just as a side, you were class of '59. How many helicopter pilots were there
20 in the class of '59?

21 ER: I don't know—well I know we had fixed wing and rotary wing. We all went
22 to rotary wing first because commissioner officers went to fixed-wing. They didn't go
23 into rotary wing. Warrant officers went to rotary wing, very few went to fixed wing.
24 Then, you would transition later on to the other one. While I was in Germany, we had
25 about fifteen classmates flying fixed wing over there in aviation unit. How many
26 ultimately ended up in rotary wing, I don't know. Some of them were flying Caribous in
27 the 10th Air Transport Brigade and ultimately transitioned for their second tour. I know
28 several did that.

29 JM: Well certainly in 1959, United States involvement in Vietnam was virtually
30 non-existent, a handful of advisors. But when you went to fixed wing aircraft school in

1 1959, or shortly thereafter, there was probably not an anticipation on your part that you'd
2 become a helicopter pilot.

3 ER: Well, I think there was. Although I didn't give it much thought, I wasn't—
4 when I first went there, I wasn't too familiar with what aviator's career patterns
5 ultimately became. Most of the fixed-wing pilots converted, were transitioned to rotary
6 wing at some point in time.

7 JM: So back to X-Ray. The morning, the first—I think there were four lifts that
8 go out in the morning and what I know about the operation, there was little enemy
9 contact for the first couple of lifts and about lifts three and four there they started getting
10 shot at, and then all hell breaks loose. Where did your involvement start with that
11 operation?

12 ER: Well, I don't know exactly. But I know that—because we did so many of
13 these things, so many different units and they were all very similar. I mean as far as what
14 we did to support the ground units. I never kept track of a timeline or anything like that
15 on these specific units. Supporting one unit was pretty much like supporting any other
16 unit. We changed all the time, we changed crews, we change crew chiefs, we changed
17 aircrafts. It's hard to keep track unless you were really focusing on that. But I know at
18 one point during the day there, while we were loitering with the other aircraft and I have
19 some photos of the group there, couple of the aircraft anyway, we were called on to go
20 into the LZ into the two ship landing zone, which became a particular issue for me
21 because there was a citation written later on that causes me to remember that. As I said,
22 we went onto treetop level because it was a hot LZ, and as we approached the LZ, in two
23 ship increments, there were two aircrafts in front of me, I started receiving groundfire
24 vertically right in front of the aircraft, I can see the tracers going up right in front of the
25 feet to the extent that it caused me to jerk my feet off at one point in time. Anyways, we
26 went high speed through that. They got a quick shot at you vertically through the trees,
27 because it was all trees there. We landed in the LZ, dropped off the troops and I looked
28 over to my co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Jimmy Johnson noticed an aircraft down in
29 the trees, to my right. So I picked up to hover and hovered over there, sat down and told
30 my wingman, who was behind me, to clear the LZ to take off, so he did. I noticed in the
31 aircraft that the crew was still there in the aircraft. So I sent my crew chief gunner, that

1 day was Sergeant Pavlovich, told him to get the crew out of the aircraft and help them get
2 over. So he went over and the crew got out of the aircraft, they took the guns and radios
3 and loaded them on my aircraft, and then the infantry brought over some wounded and
4 loaded them on my aircraft. I took off, climbed out and at some point, I think it was right
5 after coming out of the LZ, I heard a voice from an A1-E pilot calling for help, begging
6 someone to come help his wingman who had gone down and was burning down on the
7 ground, not too far from the LZ. I could see the smoke for it. Then I heard a voice, who I
8 think was warrant officer Bob Kies, who was the man behind me I believe, also at that
9 point in time, my wingman. He said he was going over there and landing by the A1-E. I
10 kind of over flew the area and heard, I think it was Kies, saying it was on fire and rounds
11 were popping off. I overflew the area and he was going to the aircraft. So I had wounded
12 on board and the crew and took them up to Pleiku and I brought them up into the MASH
13 (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) station, the wounded into the station in Pleiku. Every
14 time we would go in there, the flight crews while we were on final, I think he called on
15 the radio he was coming in there. They come out running of their MASH program and
16 meet the aircraft, and they'd always bring a big bucket of water because they had to wash
17 the blood out of the aircraft. At that time there didn't seem to be anybody bags. They
18 brought in KIA (Killed in Action), they were often wrapped in ponchos and you would
19 get a lot of blood in the aircraft, and they would come out running with water and take
20 the wounded off and everything. I dropped the crew off there at the MASH station also,
21 because it was not too far off from the air facility there where we were operating out of.

22 JM: So this timing was—did you think it was the 14th? Or was it the next day?

23 ER: It seems to me that it was that time when I was coming out of LZ X-Ray,
24 after having picked up that crew. I couldn't swear to that, but that's the recollection I had.
25 Voice that I had heard, associated with Kies. I read later on or saw something that he did
26 land near the A1-E.

27 JM: The A1-E that went down, was the only fixed wing that was shot down in
28 this?

29 ER: That's all I know of. I think what happened, what I heard later on, was that
30 the pilot—they dropped bombs with devices on them and got underneath him and I think
31 he went down with his own bomb. They blew up because they would come in low and

1 drop, and if you got close to an explosion or if it was over when it exploded, I think that's
2 what happened but I can't say that from any personal knowledge.

3 JM: So you came in, either later that day or next day, how many trips did you
4 make back into it?

5 ER: Actually, I don't know. I can't say.

6 JM: A bunch?

7 ER: I really don't know.

8 JM: Now, there was a—let me talk a little about this. You did a lot of medevac, I
9 assume. Not official medevac, but you were bringing in supplies and they were putting
10 troops on that were wounded.

11 ER: Not only that, but we would get calls to go in often, to go pick up people
12 because the medevac people often would not go in. They had a policy that if it was a hot
13 LZ and they didn't have guns, which they didn't, they wouldn't go in. I think Bruce
14 Crandall mentioned this in the book and I remember that very vividly too, we had to do
15 medevacs because the medevacs wouldn't go in. At least in that stage of the operation
16 over there. They were probably as new to this as we were, you know?

17 JM: Were the medevacs, at that time they were not armed, I assumed.

18 ER: No.

19 JM: They weren't supposed to be armed. They had a big red cross on the front.
20 The army did not have Cobra gunships, but it had the Huey B model?

21 ER: B models and some C models. The B models had a little bit more vertical lift,
22 they were designed to hover, while the C models were designed with a little bit different
23 rotor system, for a little bit different speed and they didn't have as good hover
24 capabilities. But the B and C models which were still the short cockpit, not the longer
25 cockpit, the UH-1D and later the UH-NH had an extended cockpit to carry more troops.
26 The A, B, and C models were short cockpits and Bs and Cs essentially were the gunships.
27 They mounted guns, rockets, and machine guns. Ultimately miniguns.

28 JM: They did put miniguns on those?

29 ER: I can't remember if there were miniguns at first, when we were starting off
30 over there, later on they got miniguns, I believe. Nor did we, as lift ships going into LZ.
31 For example, when we went into X-Ray, we did not have the X23 thirty caliber machine

1 guns, on the outside doors. We had some aircrafts that had the thirty caliber machine
2 guns, the M30 machine guns extended from bungie cords. Some just had M16s on the
3 doors. We did not have the guns yet. Those were added as mod-kits a few months later,
4 the mod-kits came out and they had to be mounted on hardpoints on the side of the
5 aircraft.

6 JM: So, you're saying that at LZ X-Ray and Albany and this operation begun, the
7 Hueys did not have M16s. Was there an MOS (Military Occupational Specialty Code)
8 door-gunner at that time?

9 ER: I don't know. There was a door-gunner, assigned usually from an infantry
10 unit. He was tasked from an infantry unit. I guess they were tasked to provide so many
11 people for door gunners, so these guys come over from the infantry units and served as
12 door-gunners.

13 JM: So, it came later that there was an actual crew of door-gunners on your Huey?

14 ER: We didn't have the XO23 gun-mounted machine guns mounted on the doors.
15 Most people did not have breast plates at the time. We didn't have a lot of breast plates at
16 the time. We didn't have a lot of breast plates for the pilots or the crew chiefs. Those did
17 not come in quantities until later on. At least, first two or three months there were very
18 few of them. Matter of fact, we had a shipment of machine guns over at Happy Valley,
19 before LZ X-Ray. A shipment of machine guns and load of breast plates that were going
20 to be carted out onto a field at Happy Valley and an aircraft took off out of An Khe, went
21 through the Mang Yang Pass. When they arrived, we were out in the field. They took off
22 before dawn and there was clouds down in the pass, and they couldn't get through the
23 pass. They were bringing out coffee, breakfast, machine guns, and breast plates. They
24 took off and they had to go climb up into the clouds, and nothing was ever heard from
25 that aircraft ever again. One of the sisters of one of the crew chiefs from that mission
26 comes regularly to the calvary reunions. I've met with her several times. I can't think of
27 her name right off hand, but she has never heard anything from her brother. The aircraft
28 went down somewhere in the trees, well I don't know where it went down. What the
29 practice was at that point of time, since there weren't really any navigation facilities, was
30 you had to go to IFR (Instrument Flight Rules), instrument rules. You climbed up into the
31 clouds and you headed for the coast, normally the clouds clear over the coast and you

1 would come back in underneath it. They never had any radio calls either, so it seems it
2 wasn't the situation with them. It must've gone down somewhere, in that deep jungle
3 over there, a lot of it was triple canopy. As matter of fact, after that aircraft didn't arrive
4 and they couldn't find the aircraft for about two or three weeks after that, every time we
5 didn't have a mission to fly or we were loitering around, we were out flying around,
6 hovering, looking at any holes in the trees in the area, trying to find this aircraft and that
7 went on for two, three weeks maybe a month and they never found it. To the best of my
8 knowledge, it never was found. The sister of the crew member still doesn't know what
9 happened to her—

10 JM: Is he still listed as missing?

11 ER: He is still listed as missing.

12 JM: Hopefully, someday well do some—you mentioned doors. Did you take the
13 doors off for this operation?

14 ER: The doors were slid back and pinned with a safety wire on, it was put in and
15 the doors were back. Never used the doors because of the urgency of getting people in
16 and out. The procedure was—and they saw procedure was, they climbed in, they took the
17 seats out too. They sat on the floor and when we touched down, they were out the door as
18 soon as we touched, they we were gone, normally. It was a very quick precision type of
19 operation normally, you're in and out to minimize exposure to the aircraft and the crews
20 on the ground as much as possible. It didn't seem to affect the dynamics of the aircraft at
21 all.

22 JM: Yeah, we have a Huey out on display out in the Angel Fire, New Mexico,
23 memorial out there and we had a big celebration. We had put it there and we had several
24 thousand Vietnam veterans and so many of them were looking at it and saying, "Geez, I
25 didn't know they had doors!" Because it came with the doors shut.

26 ER: At some point, I think the doors may have been removed, I can't recall.

27 JM: Well, as an infantry soldier you wouldn't even noticed it was back. You
28 would know that wasn't there when you went on the aircraft. So did you go into Albany?
29 Were you involved in that operation?

30 ER: I remember going into Albany, I don't remember the extent of the operation
31 there. I remember, one night going out in operation, in the pitch-black night. Landing to a

1 flashlight or beanbag light on the ground over unknown trees and dropping off troops and
2 picking up wounded and flying out of there, I think that was Albany, in a night operation.
3 It was so pitch-black; you couldn't really see anything except occasionally an aircraft
4 would drop flares, which would just mess up your night vision out there. It was the
5 scariest night I'd ever flown. We were flying formation with just those lights three lights
6 on top of the aircraft, with no light at all outside. I mean, we had formation lights on top
7 of the aircraft and they were masked off so you could only see them above, so the ground
8 couldn't see them. That was one of the early night missions that I flew and it was—I was
9 flying co-pilot at the time; I wasn't flying pilot. I can't remember who I was flying with
10 but I think it was one of the platoon leaders, I remember going in there and landing in the
11 middle of the night and I think that was Albany.

12 JM: Now, you served out your tour. You had gone there in essentially August, so
13 your twelve months would've been up August '66 or so. Did you spend that whole twelve
14 months attached to the 1st Air Cav?

15 ER: I was with—I flew the whole time I was there. I flew as a pilot section leader.
16 Later on, flight section leader.

17 JM: And out of An Khe for that whole time?

18 ER: We went down—later on, most of the time we were operating out of An Khe
19 under General Kinnard. We were building the base camps, securing the base camps,
20 securing the area around there and trying to clean out that area around An Khe. Later on,
21 when the new division commander came in, and he came in a couple of months before I
22 left, General Kinnard, I think, must've gone left about June, July—maybe June or July.
23 General Norton he started—we moved out, and went down to Tan Son Nhut—no, not
24 Tan Son Nhut, along the coast, I can't remember the name of the town.

25 JM: Tuy Hoa?

26 ER: I think it was Tuy Hoa. We flew operations down there. Let's talk about Tuy
27 Hoa, I think that was the one I was thinking about. There was a big episode there, where
28 we lost a couple of people and out of the battalion. One of them my hoochmate, Captain
29 Larry Woods, who came in at the sixth-month point after we had been there, he was one
30 of the new guys. Very fine fellow, he had won a writing contest, a contest on patriotism
31 for the Valley Forge something or other. Just a real fine fellow and he had the bunk next

1 to mine in the hooch, and he was flying the same position behind me in my platoon. We
2 made multiple landings into an LZ. He was in—I flew number three in the 1st platoon, he
3 was flying number three in the 2nd platoon, I remember that because I always flew
4 number three, which is the guy who is supposed to take over if the platoon leader goes
5 down—second section leader or the company commander who was leading the flight. It
6 was announced by the co-pilot and I’m trying to remember who it was at the time but I
7 don’t remember if it was Captain Woods that his pilot had been hit. We went back and
8 dropped off the first lift and came back and dropped off another lift the second time he—
9 the co-pilot announced that his pilot was dead. That was Larry Woods. Larry was hit and
10 apparently opted to go on and finish the lift and essentially died. I think he was struck
11 right above the breast plate. He had a wife and some children. At the same time I think it
12 was another aircraft, from Company C, and I can’t remember the warrant officer’s name,
13 was screaming that he was going down and he went down in a ball of flames and
14 burned—everybody on the aircraft must’ve been killed. This was a couple of weeks
15 before I left over there. So I never really did find out too much after that and my time
16 came to rotate—we did operate and we span out after being there, and I think General
17 Kinnard secured the barrier around An Khe and as much as possible in Pleiku and fought
18 after—we were kind of spread out, advanced out along the coast.

19 JM: So you came home around August or so, after your tour. What was your duty
20 station when you first came back?

21 ER: I came back, I went to—I changed to transportation court, I was artillery
22 battery commander. There was no aviation unit at that time, there was no aviation branch.
23 Also, I was interested in going to graduate school. Having been an artillery battery
24 commander and on ground duty and then a navigator, navigators were on short supply,
25 the artillery was not interested in sending me to graduate school because I was already
26 kind of loaned out to the navigation folk as it was. Whereas within the transportation
27 branch, aviation was a part of your core functions or what could be a career path within
28 transportation. So I came back and went to the transportation advance course, I came
29 back from Germany, I was headed to the artillery advance course. I went through the
30 advanced course and then I became an instructor in the air mobility branch there as well.
31 I stayed there until my next tour, which—I went back shortly after the new year, right

1 during the Tet Offensive, I went back for my second tour. I went to Phu Loi, 11th Combat
2 Aviation Battalion. I was detailed as the commander of the 393rd Transportation Aircraft
3 Maintenance detachment, which was assigned to the 128th Assault Helicopter Company,
4 part of the 11th Combat Aviation Battalion at Phu Loi. Then I commanded the 393rd to a
5 unit for about six months and then I went battalion headquarters as a battalion S4. While I
6 was in both of those jobs, I would go out and fly initiates with the UH-1, with the 128th
7 and also with the black cats. I'm trying to think of the black cats, they were a Chinook
8 unit, because I had gone to a Chinook transition just before I went over to my second
9 tour, I had gone down to Fort Rucker and gone through the CH-47 transition. I expected
10 the pilot will be flying the CH-47 in my second tour. So I would go and fly out missions
11 with black cats and the Chinooks. They had big CH-47 C models, which were the most
12 advanced lift Chinook at the time. I enjoyed flying with them.

13 JM: So, your second tour is, when did you go? You said—Tet is 30th of January
14 '68. Right before that? Or when did you go?

15 ER: I went to transition shortly before Christmas, because I remember finishing it
16 right before Christmas. I came back from Christmas and I was going to deploy the first
17 part of January, right after New Year's. The Tet Offensive, as I recall was—because we
18 kept getting rocketed in Phu Loi, in the base camp area. The Tet Offensive had been
19 going on and was very hot item at the time. It was very well—everybody knows I think.
20 So I was over there and it must have been from January '68 through January '69 I think,
21 or December of '69.

22 JM: Did you have another tour?

23 ER: No, I had two tours in Vietnam.

24 JM: Now you had three, almost three years between your first tour and your
25 second tour.

26 ER: No, I had about a year and a half. Less than a year and a half.

27 JM: '66—year and a half. Did you see—just thinking of it in from your own
28 operations standpoint, your own helicopter business that you were in. Did you see much
29 difference in the troops you were now commanding versus you were there before?

30 ER: Yes, yes, yes. When we went over there, everyone that you knew were
31 dedicated, gung-ho, committed to the mission in the 1st Cav. The second time, at least in

1 the base camp area where I was there, that was the 1st Infantry Division Area, they mostly
2 operated around the Vietnamese troops around there. You can tell there was a lot of
3 marijuana. There was a lot of—there may have been a drug culture for all I know, but at
4 that time guys were going off to R&R (Rest and Recuperation), to Thailand and
5 wherever, and getting influenced there or whatever. But in a year and a half between, I
6 noticed a big difference in the attitude and moral of the troops.

7 JM: Of essentially the infantry troops?

8 ER: Yeah. The infantry troops that I dealt with there—there was not an infantry
9 unit at Phu Loi. There were out of Di An, there were out of Cu Chi, and other areas
10 around there. I didn't have a lot of contact with the infantry troops, but we did have some
11 infantry assigned, I think as part of the elements there, a lot of door gunners and that kind
12 of thing. But going around and placing the barracks, I had people that were—It was a
13 totally different thing. They did not have permeant barracks that were built. They had
14 permeant mess halls and the conditions were much better. We were in the jungle
15 essentially on our own, the first time, the second time they had PAE (Pacific Architects
16 and Engineers) that was brought in, under contract to build all of these facilities, put up
17 electrical wiring and that type of thing. The base camp was totally different. They had a
18 more or less a permeant base camp. The aircraft were revetted so that it wasn't sitting out
19 in the middle of where we were, they put up a PSP (Steel Planlink). It was much more
20 stable and it wasn't that far from Saigon either. You could drive down to Saigon, in a
21 Jeep down there if you wanted to take the chance. So the troops had access to a lot of
22 things of which we didn't know about, but the disciplinary problems were much different
23 the second time.

24 JM: Would you say at An Khe, when the 1st Air Cav arrived, you set up kind of a
25 mini base camp, you had to do it yourself, were there—what would you think would be
26 the ratio between infantry troops? That is ground, whatever you want to call them, and
27 the support group at An Khe. Where am I going with this is, generally speaking in
28 Vietnam for the whole time that we're there, we think of ratios of about nine to one and
29 that includes all of the people in Saigon that never got out of Saigon and stuff like that.
30 But in the base camps even, a lot of times in '68, '69, and '70 the numbers were much

1 higher. They were in maybe the six to seven. I'm assuming that An Khe it wasn't
2 anything like that, that most of the people that came in there were grunts.

3 ER: That's right, yeah. They had a, what was it? A maintenance battalion, 270th? I
4 can't remember. A maintenance battalion. Must have had a logistics battalion and then
5 they had several infantry battalions. The ratio was very high on the infantry side, I don't
6 know specifically.

7 JM: It wasn't necessarily like that in '68, '69 as I understand it at least, in place
8 like Cu Chi, where the 25th was, the 1st Division. The numbers had grown in support
9 troops and it was to support the infrastructure. You have to have perimeter defenses and
10 you have to do all of that. It was much different than when you were there the first time.

11 ER: Yeah, I would suspect. I don't really know from firsthand what the situation
12 was there but—

13 JM: When you look back on that time—you then stayed in the military for
14 another—

15 ER: I retired in '83. I went on and ultimately I became the project engineer for the
16 Cobra attack helicopter.

17 JM: Really?

18 ER: And I was the project engineer for the H-1S. I went to graduate school to
19 aerospace engineering, after my second tour.

20 JM: Where did you go?

21 ER: I went to the University of Missouri Rolla, which is the old Missouri School
22 of Aerospace Engineering.

23 JM: Then my assignment out of there was aviation systems command at St. Louis.
24 I was assigned to the Cobra helicopter project office and I was the project engineer for
25 what became the H-1S. We took the H-1Gs which had been put together basically by Bell
26 helicopter, by reconstructing the fuel lodge of the old UH-1D or H, and we built a new
27 program. At that time they were getting penetration of North Vietnamese tanks down at
28 Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were also getting some SA7s that they were shooting at the
29 aircraft and that type of thing. The objective was to build an aircraft with a tow-missile
30 system that could engage these North Vietnamese tanks. We took the H-1G, which had
31 been out there, which was basically a gunship and fired some rockets. We mounted—we

1 built a fire control system for the aircraft before the AH-1 that could guide the tow
2 missiles by the cockpit, by integrating the system into it. Also, a fire-control system that
3 would enable you to accurately fire the two launch missiles or the rockets—the rocket
4 systems. Also, to be able to guide the cannon. So we put a 20 millimeter cannon on the
5 Cobra, the tow missile systems, fire control system for the rockets, and we designed a
6 new rotor, which is an asymmetrical rotor designed to hover over the ground effect,
7 carrying these missiles because it was basically hovering at a ground effect. So different
8 rotor system. We built a new engine, took the T53 out 13 and upgraded it to a T53-L703
9 which had greater horsepower. I think the other one was 1300 horsepower and this one
10 was upgraded to 1800 thermodynamic horsepower, which allowed it to operate at higher
11 altitudes although it was flatline by engine transmission rating, at 1500 horsepower. Then
12 we upgraded the transmission so you can again use more power through the transmission,
13 we put on a bigger tail rotor system, a bigger drive shaft, bigger tail rotor gear
14 mechanism. So we upgraded basically the whole aircraft. That became the H-1S, that was
15 my program.

16 JM: I see. Now, you mentioned that the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) were
17 bringing tanks down. Was there any one thing though, that made the army say, “Hey we
18 may need a Cobra? We need these.”? Was it for escort of Hueys into battle?

19 ER: It must have been. The Hueys, those old B and C models would often have to
20 hop like the devil to keep up with the UH-1Ds and Hs. They were loaded down with
21 external drag from the rockets and the machine guns out there. It didn’t have as big as
22 engine, they didn’t have as big as rotor, they didn’t have the power. So you would often
23 have to direct your flight path so that those people can come up and intercept you and not
24 have to—because they really couldn’t catch you.

25 JM: There was also, my memory of being an infantry platoon leader was that you
26 had—the Cobra gunship also gave you the close in tactical air support for troops on the
27 ground. Did the Hueys do that early on?

28 ER: The Hueys, the aerial rocket version of the ARA (Aerial Rocket Artillery),
29 they mounted forty-eight rockets, which was the equivalent of firing a battalion of
30 artillery. Instead of carrying machine guns, we had separate gunship units which were
31 always the D companies of the lift battalions. Then they had the ARA, the aerial rocket

1 artillery battalion, which was our airborne artillery battalion. They would often prep the
2 battle area before we went in, before the gunships. The infantry platoons went in, the
3 gunships, we would slow down if the gunships would spread out as best as they could
4 and fire on the flanks. The aerial rocket artillery, which were forty-eight rockets as I
5 recall, would fire the equivalent of a battalion of artillery in the fire zone and the
6 gunships would prep the flanks or fire at the flanks, guard the flanks if you will. Then
7 they would fly a racetrack pattern so that—they usually the racetrack patterns were such
8 a—you had one going forward and one of them coming backwards, so that they could
9 protect their own flags. That was part of the tactics designed in the old 11th Air Assault
10 and in the 1st Cav. Tactically, so the airborne aircraft attack ships could protect
11 themselves. You see them now for example, getting shot down over in Iraq over there.
12 You get hit from behind usually, you can't see them. The gunships like the Apache, they
13 can't see behind them, they can't see the ground. So often they get shot down from the
14 rear. The tactics that we used in Vietnam was always somebody going forward,
15 somebody was going backwards. One was covering the other one, when they're flying
16 racetrack patterns. Those gunships and the old soviet environment were designed to
17 hover behind a revetted area or behind a mask and fire rockets or missiles. Tow missiles
18 and later on hellfire missiles behind a mask, so that there was some protection for them.
19 Later on, they added the mask mounted sights, where they could put a mask up above the
20 aircraft and you could hover behind a mask, but the mask mounted sight would be up
21 there and using a radar in the front or visual beams, they could engage the target and fire
22 on the hill. Well in Iraq or Afghanistan, that situation is not what they're faced with. So
23 the tactics, I'm not sure what they're using, but it's often they have two ships operating so
24 that one can protect the other. Later on I was the program manager for aircraft
25 survivability, also where I was building the systems that were designed to protect the
26 aircraft radar jam, radar infrared, electro-optical type of counter measure systems. But,
27 hardening of the aircraft to the extent that you could, we learn to harden an aircraft to
28 such that the critical components, were armor-protected and the others that could take a
29 round best could be left unprotected. When these infrared guided missiles came on the
30 scene and the sophisticated seekers that later came on the scene, we had a device that was
31 made to reduce the signatures on the aircraft of the hot engine, for example on the back

1 the infrared suppressor were added initially as a means to reducing the threat for all of
2 those infrared seekers and then we came up with jammers, infrared jammers and flares
3 that could be deployed to decoy the missiles, which we did not fool later on, some of the
4 more advanced systems and we were even looking at laser. Of course, the biggest threat
5 is the optical threat where they can look at you through a naked eye or a lens. Even those
6 we had some counter measures systems.

7 JM: Well, I enjoyed visiting with you and we appreciated you very much for
8 coming in. As I like to tell people, these are sort of what we call abbreviated quick
9 interviews and we welcome you if you ever see fit or if you're ever out in Lubbock,
10 Texas, or if you want to do telephonic interviews, we have over a thousand we have done
11 now and we have a full oral history project that we are doing at the Vietnam center out
12 there. So we encourage you to participate in one of those, if you ever see fit to do that or
13 you're out our way. I really appreciate you being out here today and participating in this
14 project.

15 ER: Thank you very much, I've enjoyed it.

16 JM: Thank you.

17 (End of interview)