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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Robert Bowen
Conducted by Dr. Philip F. Napoli
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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.

- 1 Dr. Philip F. Napoli: Today is November 11th, 2005. I'm Philip Napoli with Mr.
2 Bob Bowen. We are at Crystal Hilton City and we are going to talk a little bit about some
3 days in November forty years ago. Mr. Bowen, would you tell us a little bit about
4 yourself? Can you introduce yourself for us? How old are you and where you live today?
- 5 Bob Bowen: Yes, I'm now 64. Most of the people I've seen here in the last day
6 are a lot older than the last time saw them. I live in Holly Springs, Mississippi now and at
7 the time of the Ia Drang-Pleiku campaign, I was a 1st lieutenant in the 17th Aviation
8 Company. Really, the story starts at Fort Benning. During the 11th Air Assault, and I was
9 a part of that after completing flight school at Fort Rucker, I accomplished the CB2B
10 Caribou transition, which was a twin-engine transport that the army used basically for
11 five years only from about '60 to the end of '66. That period in there, the army flew it at
12 the end of that period, and we turned those assets over to the Air Force and they became
13 Air Force operations thereafter. The 11th Air Assault Division had five Caribou
14 companies assigned to it at Fort Benning. But when we converted from the 11th Air
15 Assault and combined that unit with the 2nd Infantry Division to become the 1st Cavalry
16 Division, the Caribou companies basically were pulled out of the Cav and only one
17 company, the 17th Aviation Company that I belonged to, was attached to the Cav for
18 intro-theater tactical transport. In the Summer of 1965, we began preparation for
19 deployment, even before President Johnson announced on television that "I have today

1 deployed the Airmobile Division to Vietnam.” That only confirmed what we already
2 believe to be the case. The Cav quickly began transferring their men and materials to
3 ships for transship across the Pacific. Helicopters were flown to Mobile and you were in
4 ports for deployment where they were disassembled and loaded onto ships. In our case
5 however, we had already trained for and were prepared to fly aircraft across the Pacific.
6 So we were the first company size unit of Caribou to deploy across the mid-Pacific route.
7 We left Fort Benning on September 6th, flying from there non-stop to San Francisco,
8 overnighing in San Francisco and then deploying across basically everywhere there was
9 land. We flew first to Honolulu, Hickam Air Force Base, about a seventeen-hour flight.
10 From there to Midway Island to Wake Island to Guam to Clark Airbase and finally into
11 Vung Tau, Vietnam. We took eighteen aircraft across the Pacific; we had a thousand
12 gallons of internal fuel in the fuselage strapped down and eight hundred plus gallons in
13 the wings. So we had a total capacity of slightly better than eighteen-hundred gallons to
14 make that long leg to Hawaii. In Vung Tau, we immediately began preparing the
15 airplanes for use in-country. Took the fuel tanks out, put the seats back in. Drained the
16 oxygen tanks, so if anyone of those tanks got hit, it wouldn’t explode. We had already
17 installed self-sealing fuel tanks in the wings of the airplane, so we were basically ready to
18 go when we got in-country. My company was originally scheduled to be deployed to An
19 Khe along with the rest of the Cav, but as they started preparing the space, because this
20 was a twin-engine transport with a ninety-five foot wing span and required a lot of ramp
21 space for the airplanes—as they began doing the initial sight work to for a place to park
22 the Caribous, they discovered that area in the An Khe Air Field was a former French
23 minefield. They had to find a place quickly to put us somewhere else and that place was
24 Camp Holloway, Pleiku. It was originally prepared for a company of Chinook
25 helicopters, but they were sent elsewhere. So we took their space at Camp Holloway and
26 were there during the entire Pleiku campaign, the Bong Son campaign and up until six
27 weeks before I deployed back to the States. When they finally cleared the French
28 minefield, leveled it, put down PSP and we were able to get the airplanes over to An Khe.
29 We began flying in-country about the 18th of September. I was a part of the advance party
30 because I was the 17th Aviation Company Administrative Officer and so I had some
31 administrative responsibilities, in addition to my flying responsibilities. I was part of the

1 advanced party to go to Camp Holloway and get the spaces ready for our people to bring
2 the rest of the airplanes in there. I got my in-country aircraft checkout and the terrain
3 checkout on the 21st of September and began flying very shortly thereafter. The Ia Drang
4 operation for me really began on October 22nd. That's about when things really heated up
5 at Plei Me. The special forces camp came under attack shortly after that and we started
6 moving men and materials forward from An Khe to support that operation and ultimately
7 the launch into LZ (Landing Zone) X-Ray and Albany. The 17th had six primary missions
8 that it performed for the Cav. First, the Cav used us to move men and material forward
9 from An Khe to the most forward fix wing strip. The reason they did that is all of the Cav
10 had four hundred plus helicopters, the Hueys could only carry about eight plus people at
11 one lift and they burned lots of gas and they were relatively slow. To try to deploy the
12 men forward by helicopter made no sense. The Chinooks burned even more fuel, carried
13 more people obviously, but they were needed to move artillery and some fuel but mainly
14 they wanted to hold them in reserve for the artillery movements. One of the lessons
15 learned at Ia Drang was to be sure that we didn't use the Chinooks for things other than
16 that because when it came time to move the artillery, there was nothing else that could lift
17 it and carry it where it needed to go and it had to be carried by air. Second primary
18 mission we flew was once we had moved the troops forward; we then began immediately
19 resupplying the helicopters with jet fuel. The same two five-hundred-pound bladder
20 containers that we used coming across the Pacific, were the same type bladders we would
21 put inside the fuselage. You can fill them with JP4, roll them inside, lash them down and
22 fly a thousand gallons of jet fuel forward to the helicopters. We did a ton of that. We also,
23 as the troops began being engaged, we would fly forward ammunition, water, food, any
24 other supplies needed and back haul wounded. So we continuously did that. The Cav
25 would typically try not to have a ground unit engage for more than five to seven days so
26 we would—once we had brought in one regimen or battalion, whatever size operation
27 was needed, we would, within a week we would begin bringing in fresh troops and back
28 hauling the ones that had been engaged out. That happened throughout the year, they got
29 into that pattern. The fourth primary mission that we flew was one of resupply for
30 artillery. When the helicopters were not available, or it was too hot to air supply it by
31 helicopter, we would air drop to the artillery units by parachute. We developed a system

1 using a parachute we would drop from nine-hundred feet in two-thousand-pound
2 packages, artillery basically right behind the trails of the guns so that they would have
3 ammunition to continue firing. Medevac mission was a very important role we played.
4 Fundamentally what would happen is that the men that on the ground that were wounded
5 would be evac'd to a MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital), a field hospital. There
6 was one step up during the Ia Drang-Pleiku campaign at Camp Holloway, where we were
7 based. Typically, Hueys, sometimes Chinooks would fly them out to Camp Holloway.
8 The doctors in this mobile hospital would try to stabilize the men and then we would load
9 them in the carried litters on the Caribou and fly them to either Qui Nhon or Nha Trang,
10 where there was a significant field hospital where they could be treated further. The final
11 mission we flew throughout the war, when we were there, was a radio relay. During Air
12 Assault II in South Carolina, where the 11th Air Assault Division was testing these air
13 mobility concepts, one of the things they discovered they needed was some way to
14 efficiently permit communications between the units on the ground with An Khe, while
15 we were in Vietnam, but—command and control from the ground forces to where the
16 commanders were that were not in the battlefield. They discovered that one of the most
17 efficient ways to do that was with the Caribou. They installed in the fuselage of the
18 airplane a huge rack of radios that would retransmit—and a bay of antennas looked like
19 quills stuck out of the back of airplane on the big board, where we could handle up to a
20 dozen frequencies at one time. The ground units would be using hand-held radios or
21 backpack radios and they would be talking and they wouldn't know what was happening,
22 but that message, the signal was being transmitted up to us at ten-thousand feet over the
23 battlefield. Then, those radios on the airplane would retransmit it down with a stronger
24 signal automatically to An Khe and the other commanders that need to understand what
25 was happening on the ground. That was a twenty-four-hour day mission and we had two
26 airplanes assigned to it in six hour shifts. As you can imagine, we typically would fly
27 from noon to 6 p.m., 6 p.m. to midnight, midnight to 6 a.m., etcetera. So the second
28 airplane would come up about thirty-minutes early to accomplish the transfer of the
29 frequencies over to the new airplane and once that was accomplished, the one that had
30 been on station was released to go back down. It was refueled, serviced, crews were
31 changed, and it was made ready to go again at the next shift change. As things warmed

1 up in late October, and as I look back at my flight records to refresh my memory as to
2 what exactly happened, I think it's interesting to note that we, like the folks on the ground
3 did not have much perspective on what was going on around us. We were assigned a
4 mission, we would say, "Lieutenant Bowen, you're to fly, go to An Khe, pick up a load,
5 take it to the tea plantation, take it to Camp Holloway." And we would do that all day.
6 We would know that there was a significant action on the way because we could see the
7 smoke from the bombs, we could see the fighter aircraft stacked up particularly over X-
8 Ray when we were down there. We got heavily involved in that period, so basically from
9 the 22nd of October to the 20th of November, I flew a hundred and twenty assault
10 missions, and a hundred and seventeen hours of flight time. That month, we flew
11 everything we had around the clock. We had two flight platoons in the 17th Aviation
12 Company. One flight platoon would handle the mission requirements from midnight to
13 noon, the other flight platoon pilots would be ready to go, and the planes would come
14 back in, crew change, refuel and they would go back out. So the airplanes were
15 fundamentally—until something broke, they were flown around the clock, every day for
16 the month. If you were not flying, you were in the sack because by the time you were
17 ready to go for a twelve hour shift, you obviously had to be in operations at least an hour
18 ahead of that to get your mission sheets and understand what you were going to be doing.
19 You took about an hour after that to debrief and to be released to go to bed and get
20 something to eat as you could. Typically carried C-rations on the airplane so that we
21 never stopped to eat. We would have rations so that we could—whichever was the non-
22 flying pilot would eat, next landing we would change seats and the other guy would get a
23 bite to eat and the crew chief could as well. Depending on the mission requirement,
24 typically it was a three-person crew. Two pilots and a crew chief. If we were flying a lot
25 of cargo, we'd carry two crew chiefs because it required that the loads be tied down
26 before you left and untied when you arrived so you could push it out. The fuel bladders
27 we could roll out the back of the airplanes. Ammunition pallets had to be lifted out with a
28 forklift or in some cases when it was really hot and there wasn't a forklift there, we had a
29 roller system inside the airplane, we could land, turn around, lower the back gate, roll
30 them to the edge and push them off as the plane slowly taxied forward, so the crews on
31 the ground could get them. We flew—I have no idea how many thousand hours during

1 that period. But as I said, we learned very quickly that flying from An Khe to Pleiku,
2 where the 7th regiment and the 5th regiment were initially deployed in X-Ray, was far too
3 far. It is a miracle to this day that the North Vietnamese did not respond faster than they
4 did because when Hal Moore and his regiment was first deployed in there, there was only
5 a handful of people on the group. Had they responded faster, they could've wiped them
6 out easily because it took so long for the helicopters to fly from Pleiku with a fresh load
7 to LZ X-Ray and dropped them in and come back again. That they were really vulnerable
8 early on. One of the lessons the Cav learned was you got to have fixed wing stripped very
9 well forward so that transit time was short. After the Pleiku campaign was completed, the
10 Cav began building, scattering around different places fixed wing strips out of the forest,
11 so that we could fly into it on a much closer basis. After the initial insertion of the 7th Cav
12 Regiment, we began flying—they realized that first of all, we could barely carry enough
13 fuel to the helicopters to keep them resupplied, the flying time was so long. We moved all
14 the operations forward to a French tea plantation called Catecka, which was southwest of
15 An Khe, if my memory serves me, ten or twelve miles. All operations were conducted out
16 of there. It was a composite of what we did with the Caribou and supplemented with Air
17 Force C-130, C-123. It was kind of an all hands-on deck operation to keep the Cav going
18 at that time because we basically had every unit engaged, not much in reserve when they
19 were on the ground. As that operation began whining down, I had more time to spend
20 back at An Khe, back at Pleiku, at Camp Holloway, to take care some of my
21 administrative responsibilities and the wounded and dead began being evacuated in a
22 significant fashion. One day, I can remember coming in, going out for a flight and the
23 Chinooks were coming in with the dead, they were brought in in the fuselage of the
24 Chinook. They were just piled in there like cordwood. Still in their web gear, just as
25 they'd been removed from the battle ground. There was a grave registration unit set up
26 right across the street from where our company headquarters was. The dead were laid out
27 there, many of which were unidentified originally because it—in my discussions with the
28 people over there was that the dog tags had been removed by the NVA (North
29 Vietnamese Army), particularly from LZ Albany where they were intermingled with our
30 troops. It was an effort to get the survivors from those two battles to come in and identify
31 the people that were dead. They were there—the dead were there a couple of days at

1 least, maybe a little longer than that in two different areas, laid out typically on stretchers,
2 sometimes on the ground while they went in there and identified the dead. Once that was
3 done, the grave registration could start processing. I remember there were huge piles of
4 boots, large piles of web-gear, and the uniforms, once they were put in body bags, the
5 uniforms were taken and burned in fifty-five gallons drums with JP4 on the bottom. Once
6 they collected the personally effects, that was it. They typically—the Air Force flew a lot
7 of them out of Camp Holloway down to Saigon for transshipment to the US. Very
8 unpleasant period of time. My hat's off to the surgeons in the hospital, they were—I
9 mean, it was magnificent what they did. The dead and the wounded—dead of course
10 were sent to grave registration, but the wounded were brought into Holloway by
11 helicopter typically. When the helicopter would hover land, the dust would blow into the
12 tent and the surgeons when they're trying to operate on these guys, and it was
13 unbelievably unsanitary in the conditions they operated in. They too worked around the
14 clock until they could get everybody processed and shipped out. But I know I counted
15 over a hundred-fifty dead on the ground and that was not all of them that were brought
16 into Camp Holloway. So I've heard it was the greatest single-day loss of American life in
17 the Vietnam war, at Albany. There were a lot of lessons learned there, as I'm sure the
18 veterans who were on the ground can articulate more clearly than I. But the lessons
19 learned, there were numerous ones. Like I mentioned earlier, you have to have a shorter
20 transit time for the helicopters. You cannot use the Chinook helicopters for miscellaneous
21 rules of moving troops, you got to do that in some other fashion. Don't march troops on
22 the ground, move them by helicopter. Many, many lessons were learned during that effort
23 that translated into safer missions later on into the war. Kind of an interesting side-bar to
24 this, as the Cav was still at Camp Holloway, because after the 7th Regiment was moved
25 out they came back to Camp Holloway to refit and finally take a shower, get fresh
26 uniforms, they used the shower right as far of me to the other wall, away from where I
27 was billeted. Unfortunately, they did not have hot water, but they were delighted to have
28 water period, to clean up in. As we began moving them back to An Khe, I was going out
29 to fly that day, their rifles were stacked, and the web-gear was lined up. I guess they were
30 maybe at lunch or something, but on one of those stacks of web-gears, one person had a
31 brass bugle. I remember thinking at the time, "God, what a wonderful souvenir that's

1 going to make for somebody.” Because there were a variety of SKS rifles and helmets
2 and miscellaneous stuff that they had recovered off the battleground. Army got a little
3 more sophisticated in its rules about what you could take off the battleground after this
4 one, so much stuff got removed. But it was only about a year ago, less than a year ago
5 that I was trading emails with Joe Galloway and he explained the history of that bugle
6 and that it’s still being used here today. So it was significant to me to have seen that at the
7 time, that somebody recouped that thing off of the battleground and carried it out. He
8 explained to me who had that bugle and what happened to him subsequently, so that
9 made it even more meaningful. So that’s the typically mission we flew. Very, very
10 intense period in late October to late November period. The most intense period of us of
11 the entire year that I was over there. There were a few other times that we flew a lot but
12 never again we fly around the clock twenty-four hours a day. During the month of
13 December, we flew some, but not much because most of the airplanes were down for
14 maintenance. Our ground crews did a magnificent job. As I mentioned, the airplanes were
15 typically—during that first half of November, they were typically on the ground only a
16 matter of maybe a half hour while we did a crew change and a refuel, so if there was
17 anything wrong with the airplanes—they go out there with engines stands, uncalled or
18 changed spark plugs, whatever needed to be done to it to make it air-worthy again for the
19 next trip. We were mounting out of our eighteen airplanes about fourteen of those at a
20 time during that period, so we had about four that were on the ground being worked on
21 more extensively. Sometimes we would bring an engine—an airplane would come in
22 with an engine out, that plane would be down for a while and put another one in service
23 there. But the planes were unbelievably reliable during that period of time. The ground
24 crews did a fabulous job in keeping them going and I think that just like any other
25 operation where you have the guys that are actually out doing the work, there’s a huge
26 force of people behind them on the ground supporting that effort that nothing would
27 happen if they didn’t get their job done correctly. So I would be happy to fill in any other
28 blank spots there that you may have.

29 PN: One thing that occurs to me is the question of, what operational lessons did
30 you learn as a pilot during this period?

1 BB: There were a number of those. We learned you don't fly above fifty feet or
2 below fifteen hundred feet. If the weather was good and in late October, November
3 period the country was coming out of the monsoon period, so the weather was pretty
4 good then. So you had a lot of latitude as to what you wanted to fly but if you flew
5 between fifty hundred feet above the ground and fifteen hundred feet, everybody out
6 there is shooting at you and had a pretty good chance of hitting you. Above fifteen
7 hundred feet, their accuracy dropped off significantly. So we learned that in the monsoon
8 season—the other lesson we learn was learn the road nets, learn the road marks, the road
9 signs, the visual things. Learn where the field strips were because come monsoon time,
10 you won't have the luxury of being high enough to see them. So we all memorized the
11 routes so when the monsoon season came later on, we were down in the trees and
12 typically flew as low as we could. What I discovered was that, and you can see this very
13 accurately, some of the Vietnamese civilians were working in the rice fields, we would
14 come across there typically, have to pull up slightly to make sure the props didn't hit one
15 of them on the ground. But we were down right as low as we could get it. We used our
16 memory of the roads and the turns in the roads to help us navigate to where we were
17 going because you were down so low, you couldn't see much down there. As illustrated
18 by—one time we were on our way from Camp Holloway up to Kontum, to the north.
19 We're down right in the tress and the road turned to the right and down, so I slip the
20 plane out to the left a little bit and turned right and the wing tip went down in the
21 roadbed. Just as I made that turn to follow the road, a Vietnamese truck was coming the
22 other way and I can still see the white of his eyes as he turned hard right off the road and
23 I rolled the wings level and pulled up slightly to clear him. As we continued the route, the
24 crew chief who was sitting in the back said, "Sir, do you know that you just ran a truck
25 off the road?" So we were down pretty low over there. But that was the safe—I never
26 took a hit when I was down low, I never took a hit above fifteen hundred feet. But the
27 transition typically—they'd learned that if you get somewhere around where the fixed
28 wing operations were going on, you could catch airplanes in the pattern, and it was pretty
29 risky there. We developed a strategy to do 360 overhead approaches, so that you could
30 stay very close to the field. We had typically Air Force support that we could call in when
31 we started getting ground fire, to suppress that fire around airports that we were using. So

1 those were important lessons to us there. Some of the others we learned was try to stage
2 the loads by aircraft. By that I mean, if you had an eight aircraft lift going on and you
3 were flying a combination of troops and Jeeps and fuel, try to have airplanes dedicated to
4 one of those missions. So that you weren't putting seats down for troops and lifting them
5 up the next time for fuel and installing rollers for ammunition palettes. So we got much
6 more efficient in how we used the airplanes after the Ia Drang operation took place. I
7 think that those were important lessons from the way we operated. The other thing we did
8 was we learned to have alert crews. We had two crews on call twenty-four hours a day,
9 even if nothing was going on because several times early on in our tour, we'd get an
10 emergency call from the Cav headquarters saying, "We've got to have two airplanes here,
11 now!" Sometimes we would have crews that were off somewhere or asleep or whatever
12 the case was. So we kept two airplanes with the doors open, the crew chiefs had already
13 preflight them all, the switches were turned on, so you just had to throw the master switch
14 on and put the crews in there and you were ready to go.

15 PN: As an administrator, is it your job to make sure these kinds of changes take
16 place?

17 BB: It was really an operations role more than that. I was really responsible, and
18 my primary responsibility of course was a fixed-wing aviator, but my administrative role
19 really ran to making sure the morning reports got done, we kept up to where people were,
20 who was sick or wounded and where they were and that sort of thing. Get to keep the
21 paperwork flow going there. Again, we had wonderful specialists that were on the ground
22 all the time doing it, so often times I just had to fix my signature to the paperwork. The
23 operations guys were really responsible for the assignment of the crews. We had some
24 spectacular platoon leaders and section leaders who paired up the pilots for the missions
25 and matched the experience levels with the difficulty of the missions. We flew into some
26 terrible weather over there. The flights in a combat environment- you will take risks that
27 you don't in the States. For example, in moving artillery ammunition in the States, we
28 would have to have two aircraft assigned to every mission where there was a movement
29 of artillery or rocket ammunition because they wouldn't let us fly the fuses with the
30 projectiles. In Vietnam, we flew not just them together, the fuses were already screwed
31 into the warhead, they were put back into the fiber-cube and we airdropped them to the

1 artillery. So there were shortcuts taken in the interest of combat expediency. We flew a
2 lot of ground control approaches, that was the typical way of getting in during bad
3 weather. We had some highly experienced ground crews that were doing a radar guidance
4 that could tell you, “Left off course, right off course, turn left, turn right, on course, on
5 glide slope.” They would take us down to—the typical minimums were three-hundred-
6 foot ceiling and 1-mile visibility, and those approaches were being run into twelve
7 hundred foot strips. So we learned early on that you fly that approach down until you
8 broke out power off, full flaps. Let the plane sink low to use every foot of the runway,
9 little power at the bottom to catch it on the round out and to reverse the props and roll in.
10 So we got—it sounded as I’ve explained it to others, it sounds a little spooky in particular
11 to other pilots, but when you do it every day, you get really, really good at it.

12 PN: Is this anything you would’ve practiced in the United States ever?

13 BB: Yes, yes. We practiced that during Air Assault II. It’s one of the things that
14 we would find—part of the techniques, there were a lot of helicopter techniques were
15 found during those test exercises in South Carolina. One of the things we learned was
16 how to make short field approaches in the very short and unapproved strips using these
17 radar guidance techniques.

18 PN: What about losses in your unit?

19 BB: You know, we went over sea with the highest average time pilots of any
20 Caribou company. I think the reason we went with the Cav was we were the only one of
21 the five Caribou companies that were assigned to strike-com, which was the highest level
22 of readiness of aviation companies. So from a readiness standpoint, we were more able to
23 go quicker than the other companies were. When it came time to make the deployment,
24 we actually had the newest airplanes, the lowest time airframe hours, so we had to—
25 knowing that others were coming behind us, we had to take half of our new airplanes and
26 trade them with other units and take some of their older ones in and prep those to go. We
27 didn’t take anything overseas that had less than half life remaining engines, tires,
28 propellers. Anything that was less than half live remaining got changed at Fort Benning
29 before we went. So it would minimize the maintenance requirements in-country. We
30 practiced the overseas deployment by long non-stop flight to Puerto Rico over-water, so
31 we practiced that. We learned how to operate the airplanes the most fuel-efficient way.

1 So we prepped as best as we could. We made a long over land flight, preceding that
2 Puerto Rico over-water flight. We went from Fort Benning to Kansas City, to Fort
3 Meade, Maryland. The air traffic controllers never did understand exactly what we were
4 doing going west when we intended to land at an airport well to the east. But we had
5 measured the distance to make sure that was at least the length of the leg from San
6 Francisco to Hawaii, which was a risky mission. We had about an hour's worth of fuel
7 remaining when we got to Hawaii on that leg, after seventeen hours in the air. We had a
8 big fifty-five-gallon drum of oil inside the fuselage that when we get our level lights—
9 because these engines burn about an gallon an hour of oil. They had a control panel
10 inside the crew chief could turn these valves. It was real Rube Goldberg rig, but it
11 worked. They could turn the valve and had a crank inside to pump oil into the oil tank to
12 the lower engine that measured how many gallons had been pumped back in because they
13 knew what level the old light came on. But it worked, it was very rudimentary, had
14 rudimentary navigation equipment on board. The air force guys at Hickam Field, of
15 course they'd never seen any airplanes like that. They couldn't believe we were foolhardy
16 enough to be flying across the Pacific, but we got over there with no losses. One aircraft
17 had an engine failure halfway to Midway. It descended from ten thousand feet down to
18 fifteen hundred feet before the other engine had enough power to catch the flight, so they
19 were four-five hours behind the rest of us getting into Midway, but again we had a C-130
20 flying with us it was full spares. Spare engines, spare gears, spare props and that airplane
21 taxied directly into the maintenance hangar about the four o'clock in the afternoon. The
22 engine was changed overnight, it was test flown at seven o'clock in the morning, at eight
23 o'clock it was on the line, ready to go for the next leg. So we didn't miss a lick the whole
24 way. Had we not had the benefit of the training that we got at Fort Benning, and the
25 lessons that we learned there, we and the Cav would've been in a lot worse trouble than
26 we were. Lot of the kinks had been worked out during those air assault exercises over
27 there. There were, as I said lots more lessons learned in-country when the shooting
28 started.

29 PN: Two questions. I'm actually, first very interested in your personal reaction, if
30 you can recall it to taking anti-aircraft fire or fire from the ground the first time.

1 BB: The bullets made a snapping noise when they went by the cockpit. Most of
2 the hits that we took were in the half of the airplane. We did take some in the cockpit.
3 Not a lot, but it was sporadic. We might fly two months and not take a single hit. Then
4 we'd come in and we—after every landing we would, if we were not in the field, if we
5 were at An Khe or Pleiku, we'd always get out and walk around to look at the airplane,
6 see if it had any damage. You know, we would not irregularly get some small arms fire in
7 there. I remember one of the cases a crew chief had toolbox sitting back there that he
8 would use in case if something happened. A round came up to the belly, went into the
9 toolbox and it made the biggest clanging noise and rattling it sounded like somebody
10 dumped a box of rocks in the back. We all had thought a wing had fallen off or
11 something, we weren't sure what happened back there. Overall, it was a safe year for us.
12 As I said, we had an extremely well-trained pilots, had high time guys in the aircraft. We
13 flew fifteen thousand hours, and we didn't tear up a single airplane. If you think about the
14 small margin of error that we were flying over there, the shortest strip we flew into was
15 nine hundred feet at Plei Me Special Forces camp. The typical strip length was twelve
16 hundred to fourteen hundred feet. We got a freebie like in An Khe, which is probably
17 twenty-five hundred feet or three thousand, maybe longer than that, you could almost go
18 to sleep going into a place like that. We were lucky we had reverse pitch propellers and
19 we used those going in. In the monsoon season, it was particularly risky because you
20 didn't get much traction on the ground, the ground was always wet and muddy and you
21 had to be careful when you reversed the engines, to make sure they were both reversed
22 before you applied or else the plane would turn sideways on the ground. Sometimes when
23 it would start sliding, you could apply more reverse on one engine to the other to
24 straighten it back out. The strips that we flew into were really short, a lot of them we
25 were flying into at night with extremely poor lighting. One I remember, sort of south,
26 southeast of An Khe in the mountains. We flew into that rascal all night long. It was
27 about twelve hundred feet long, it was lit by 105 shell casings with JP4 in it that they
28 would have to go and relight each time because when we reversed props, they'll blow the
29 fire out. They finally put a jeep on each end of the runway so it would at least illuminate
30 the lead end and the far end. It was grass. There was a village at one end and a mountain
31 on the other, so you could only go in one way and come out that same direction. So we

1 were fortunate that we had well trained crews and we were fortunate that wasn't about
2 nine months after we were in country, so we had a lot of experience going in there. Those
3 kinds of missions, it took all the skill that you had to pull it off successfully.

4 PN: That is actually the major thing that I'm hearing, the professionalism of the
5 unit that you flew with. These are really experienced, well trained professionals doing—

6 BB: Right. We would kill, rape, or plunder to accomplish the mission. When the
7 Cav called, we were going to be there, and they knew it. I don't care how bad the weather
8 was, how far it was, how short the strip, or how dark at night it was. We never turned
9 down a single mission all day. As I said, we were supplemented by the Air Force
10 frequently on the big lifts and you could count on it. When the sun went down, the Air
11 Force left, and they might come back the next morning, maybe if they didn't get, in my
12 view, a higher priority mission. That was one of the advantages of having aircraft intro-
13 theater tactically transport assigned to the Cav, so that the commanders—we worked for
14 those commanders, we didn't have to go through the 8th Air Force, or 7th Air Force
15 whatever it was down in Saigon and sort out the missions and say, "Oh well, maybe we'll
16 see you in the morning, maybe we won't." You know, when the Cav was in the field, we
17 felt like those were the guys that were really at risk, not us. The guys that were on the
18 ground were the ones in great jeopardy. So there was no way were going to be in bed
19 when those guys needed ammunition or food or water.

20 PN: Tell me about your leaders. Your leadership.

21 BB: The company, as I said, the company was organized. Had a company
22 commander, of course. Two platoon leaders, then two section leaders in each of those
23 two flight platoons. The platoon leaders and the section leaders were peerless. They were
24 out there flying with us. If they weren't flying with us, they were meeting the planes with
25 coffee, whatever it took to kind of help us keep us going. But fundamentally, they flew as
26 much as we did. The section leaders, the platoon leaders would typically receive the
27 orders for the next day, or depending on what the missions and say, "Okay, we got these
28 kind of missions." The two platoon leaders would get together and sort of split up those
29 missions between them. They'd say, "Okay, I got"—the maintenance division would tell
30 us, "We can fly thirteen airplanes tomorrow." We had a twelve plane lift requirement. I'd
31 say, "Okay, we'll keep one in spare. Wile you take six, Larry you take six and here are

1 the mission sheets that go with these.” Each one would have a mission sheet with an
2 airplane assigned and then they would pass those down to the two sections and the
3 section leaders were then responsible for pairing up the pilots that were to fly those
4 missions. You knew—normally you knew what was going on the next day. We would
5 typically get up at five in morning, take a shower, get a quick bite to eat, be down in
6 operations at 6 or 6:30 on a normal day, not when the Cav was in the field and would
7 leave at 7, come back usually about nine o’clock at night after flying all day. If things
8 were hot, it took longer and would fly longer. My high time single day over there was
9 twenty-seven takeoffs and landings in one day. I flew a little over nine hundred hours in
10 combat time over there and six hundred and thirty-three combat missions during that
11 year. So we flew a lot. Not every day because we couldn’t sustain the pace. You couldn’t
12 get up at five in the morning and fly to eleven o’clock at night and be ready to go at five
13 o’clock the next morning. Fortunately, the Cav normally would not have so many
14 missions that we would have to fly around the clock. We could do it—typically one flight
15 platoon would manage the missions for one day, the second of the flight platoon would
16 do it the next day, so it kind of rotated on and off. That didn’t hold true when the Cav was
17 in the field. When the Cav was in the field, we always had a radio relay shift going on.
18 We always had more than one flight platoon engaged. So it was a little bit of this and if
19 you talk to the troopers on the ground, they’ll say it was long periods of boredom and lots
20 of periods of sheer terror. As we brought the Cav guys out of the field, and we did this a
21 lot of times, I mean frankly, you couldn’t tell the blacks from the whites. It was so filthy
22 and so dirty with that red clay mud all over them and they were so exhausted, there was
23 never a word said. We loaded them onboard, they sat down and went immediately to
24 sleep. They were just delighted to be out of there.

25 PN: Your Vietnam experience ended in Fall of ’66.

26 BB: ’66 that’s right. I completed my tour in ’66. I got out of the service in ’66, I
27 was on my initial tour as an obligated volunteer, they called them at the time. I went to
28 Emory University, where I went to graduate school. Got an MBA there and then went to
29 work at Arthur Andersen, and I finished my career as a partner there, retired from
30 Andersen in 1999.

31 PN: Very good. What kind of community service do you do? If any.

1 BB: You know, during my time in Andersen, I worked heavily with the United
2 Way. I was a chairman of the board for a four-year art college in Memphis. Did some
3 work for senior citizens. I'm now the chair of Audubon society Mississippi. Still actively
4 involved in chairs of different community boards. I'm also on three corporate boards now,
5 using my financial background under the surveying acts era we are actually in now
6 serving several committees today. I stay about the right level of busyness if I were doing
7 it again because I could work a few hours in the morning, get that done and in the
8 afternoon I could go work around the farm, or play, or go fly, I still actively fly. It works
9 out, I'm just busy enough. People have asked me several times, "If you had to do it again,
10 would you have gotten out of the army?" And I said, "Well, you know at the time, I felt
11 I'd used up about seven of my nine lives" The army aviators at that time were on a year
12 on, year off rotation out of country. They were so short of army aviators and they were
13 ramping up so quickly that most of the guys that I flew with in 17th that were career
14 officers, served two or three tours in Vietnam. But you know, if I had to do it again, I'd
15 probably—I think I would've liked to have gone back to helicopter school and gone to a
16 dust-off unit. I had a lot of respect for the missions those guys flew. We worked with
17 them a good bit at night on radio relay, when they were down in the bushes. They were
18 trying to locate a unit and the unit was trying to see them. Sometimes that turned over in
19 that rotating beacon and we can see them down there and the unit could be trying—they
20 couldn't talk to each other because they were so low. Often times we would relay to the
21 ground unit, ground unit would relay back to us and I would say, "Turn left fifteen
22 degrees, you're two miles out." And help them get into where they need to pick up the
23 wounded. There were a lot of people over there that really went way beyond what you
24 would expect. I think that's—you know, that's really a testimony to the professionalism
25 that everybody had over there. From the lowest PFC (Private First Class) to the colonels
26 on the ground.

27 PN: To the flyers in the air.

28 BB: To the flyers in the air. Like everybody—you know, we didn't do anything
29 special. We didn't do anything more than everybody else was doing. Everybody was at
30 maximum effort, all the time. Nobody whined, nobody complained and just put your head
31 down and go.

1 PN: Tell me about being here.

2 BB: This is the first reunion I've been to. It's the first time the aircrews have
3 invited. I view this as—this is all about the ground crews. I think it's an honor and a
4 privilege to be back with these guys. I didn't know many of them. You'd pick them up,
5 they were all in green.

6 PN: All dirty.

7 BB: All dirty, at least when they came out. They didn't say much going in, and
8 they said even less coming out. We would typically—we didn't know what unit they
9 were from; we only knew they were Cav troopers. If you'd asked me, was the 7th Cav
10 Regiment engaged at X-Ray or the 5th at Albany or anywhere else, I would have said, "I
11 have no clue." We're just flying troops into the field. Armed troops and their machine
12 guns, they would put all their gear between their feet because they sat down on the sides
13 and strapped in and put all their stuff in the middle. Typically, the non-flying pilot would
14 give the brief, tell them the procedure, the emergency procedures and the emergency
15 exits. Give them some insights, where we were going, about how long the flight would
16 be. We'd strap up front and away we'd go. They were very accommodating, even the
17 guys that were wounded coming out didn't whine much. We evac'd several helicopter
18 pilots that had spinal injuries from being shot down low to the ground and the impact had
19 spinal compression. They were under great pain; those guys were in stretchers. Tried to
20 be as gentle with them as we could and tried to put a cargo strap across the top of them,
21 so they could use their arms to stabilize themselves with.

22 PN: Do you remember one in particular?

23 BB: I remember one warrant officer in particular. I don't know his name, who had
24 spinal compression that we put back in the back and he was in tremendous pain, we took
25 him over to Qui Nhon. We took the cargo straps, strapped the stretcher handles down and
26 them gave him a strap across top to make sure he didn't slide around if there was any
27 turbulence or landing jolts. So we tried to be as gentle as we could with those guys. I
28 remember one guy we evac'd, one of the ground guys—he was a mess. He had unusual
29 sized pair of boots and they had brought his boots out with him on the stretcher and the
30 only thing he said to us when we were putting him on the airplane was, "Don't forget my
31 boots." So he didn't want to lose those boots, I remember. We put them on the stretcher

1 between his feet. Last time I saw him he was going to the hospital in Nha Trang with—he
2 and his boots. Lot of kind of interesting stories like that. The only secret message we got
3 during the whole war during the time I was there, was for the Bob Hope Christmas
4 Concert at An Khe, when he came to entertain the troops. That was a big deal, I did not
5 get to attend, I flew—we took three Caribous over there, flying people from An Khe over
6 there that were Cav troops and we were not permitted to go to the concert out of fear if
7 we got mortared they wanted the crews with the airplanes to fly them out of there. Lots of
8 fun things like that, there were moments of really funny things happening. I think
9 anybody that was honest will say they experienced every human emotion while you were
10 over there. It was a period of really funny things that cracked you up, sad things, scary
11 things, boredom. Everything like that happened while you were over there. So I can't
12 think of any time in my life that had such a range of human emotion over there.
13 Certainly, there's never been a time where I worked as much as I did and as consistently
14 as I did over there. But we were all in our twenties, bulletproof and had high energy level.

15 PN: Long term, what's it meant to you?

16 BB: You know, that's an interesting question. I made some great friends over
17 there. Probably a period of highest single level of activity of my life and I worked a lot of
18 hours over the years. Lots of life lessons learned about how much can you do. I really felt
19 like over there, I got lucky and got to sleep between sheets most of the time. Those guys
20 were out there with ponchos around them or in the dirty, so you were never going to find
21 me complaining. Those guys on the ground were the ones that were paying the toll. When
22 I got out of there, I felt good about my experience. I volunteered for as many medevac
23 missions as I could. So when I left there, I said, "By my actions alone, I know I've saved
24 a lot of American lives." So I don't have any regrets. That's why I said if I were to go
25 back, I would've gone back as a dust-off pilot.

26 PN: We can stop there.

27 BB: Okay. Thanks very much. I guess it's important to capture the what the
28 Caribous did over there.

29 PN: Yes, sure.

1 BB: They were in the army for such a short period of time that you ask the active
2 guys today about the Caribou, they don't know anything about it. You know, the army—
3 one thing I didn't mention to you was—

4 PN: (Speaks to third-party)

5 BB: I think it's important to understand why the Army got out of the Caribou
6 business. At the time of the '65, '66 era, that's when the armed helicopter came along. If
7 you talked to the air crew, Bruce Crandall and others, they had door gunners. We didn't
8 have any significant armed helicopters at that point in the war. The army needed them
9 badly. That's a close ground support role.

10 PN: Yes, sir.

11 BB: That is an Air Force role. Intro-theater tactical transport is an Air Force role,
12 and they were rankled at us flying those transport in-country. So a deal was worked out
13 that the Army would transfer to the Air Force all of the caribous and the Air Force would
14 concede the armed helicopter close ground support role. Probably in the long term, that
15 was the right answer. I remember General Kinnard came over to Pleiku and met with the
16 17th crews and told them how disappointed he was about that and how he disagreed with
17 the conclusion to give up the Caribous. But you know, at the end of the day, that may
18 have been the right answer. It would've been nice if we kept them both, it was
19 unfortunate that we had these inter-service rivalries like that because I think the Caribous,
20 although they carried a smaller load than the bigger Air Force planes did, the army knew
21 they could count on us to carry the water farm when it needed to be. They were less sure
22 of the Air Force. First thing when the Caribou was transferred to the Air Force, they tore
23 up a number of them. A lot of people were killed, including one plane at An Khe that
24 flew into a mountain with some medevacs. They were not experienced pilots in the first
25 six months they had them, they tore up. In our airplanes they tore up four of them with
26 fatal accidents. Couple of them were shot down later in the war. I think they paid the
27 price of not having well trained pilots. I did some of the transition training for the Air
28 Force guys when they came in. They were guys coming out of B-52s. They'd gone
29 through Caribou transition, they had thirty or so hours in the airplane. They had gone on
30 leave; they'd gone to the Philippines for survival trainings. A lot of them hadn't been on
31 an airplane in two months. One of them climbed in there one day, got in the right seat, he

1 got on the left. He sat there for a minute and I said, "Well, let's light him up!" He said,
2 "I've forgotten where the master switch is." I knew it was going to be a long day when he
3 said that. So you had to be careful, they were used to airplanes with anti-skid brakes on
4 them, you could get on the brakes as hard as you wanted on the strip, and ours didn't
5 have that. They blew a lot of tires out, had a lot of damaged airplanes from that had to be
6 repaired. They really paid the price for inexperience. All of the guys had flying time, they
7 didn't have flying time in airplanes that were short take offs and land, low airspeed
8 approach airplanes. It could scare you sometimes those short approaches. If you didn't
9 time it right, you had to carry a little power at the bottom to make it round out. I've
10 landed it once or twice with full throttle and airplane just barley landed because if you
11 land it too slowly and you ran out, it just falls like a sack of potatoes. You learn that at
12 Fort Benning and in-country. In fact, the flying at Air Assault II in South Carolina was
13 more treacherous frankly, than flying in Vietnam. We could add—the strip was fourteen
14 hundred feet; you could add five knots for the family and be a little safer in the process.
15 It's a great airplane, the army was testing the Buffalo, which was the follow up to the
16 Caribou as a twin-engine turbo prop. Had a fuselage size the same size as a Chinook, so
17 you could take a load directly out of a Caribou, put it in your Chinook. Caribou fuselage
18 was a little smaller so you couldn't carry quite the same load. They fixed a lot of those
19 problem and the Army bought three or four of those Buffalos for testing and they were
20 in-country getting testing but that was about the time when the decision was made to
21 transfer them into the Air Force. So that was the end of that.

22 PN: So you still fly?

23 BB: Still fly. I have a private airplane; actually, have an open cockpit biplane I fly
24 as well, just for fun. So it's kind of fun to keep my medical license. I was one of the
25 younger guys in the unit at the time. I was one of the lower time pilots because we had so
26 many experienced captains in the unit and CWOs (Chief Warrant Officers) in the unit. So
27 we had great pilots, great friends and all-in-all a positive experience.

28 PN: Okay. Mr. Bowen, it's been fabulous. Thank you.

29 BB: Thank you. Glad to tell this side of the war.

30 PN: Yes, sir.

31 (End of interview.)