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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Michael Smith
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
November 29, 2006; December 5, 2006; January 24, 25, 2007
Transcribed by Rebekah Horelica & Jessica Fontenot**

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm conducting an oral history
2 interview for the Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project. I am speaking today with Mr.
3 Michael O. Smith. Today is November 29th, 2006. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the
4 campus of Texas Tech University in the Vietnam Archive's interview room and Mike is
5 in Phoenix, Arizona. Mike, before we begin the actual interview, we talked before we
6 actually began the recording, about our legal disclosure and interview agreement. I
7 wanted to basically get your, "yes," or, "no," if you understand and agree to what we
8 discussed. That is that, by doing this interview this morning and going forward, that you
9 agree to donate the interview to the archive and so that we can make it accessible to the
10 public, that you are aware that it will be made public, including being put up on the
11 internet, and also that you are doing this of your free will and you're very willing to
12 participate. Is that correct or is this a go or a no-go?

13 Michael Smith: Yes, that's correct

14 RV: Very good, very good. Well, Mike, let's begin with some background
15 information on yourself. Tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you were born,
16 your birth date, and growing up.

17 MS: I was a depression baby, born April 21st, 1938, in Los Angeles, California. I
18 started my life there for seven years during World War II and at the end of the war, we
19 moved to Phoenix. So, about the time I was in the second grade I began my education
20 here in Phoenix. Progressed through elementary school, high school, and two years at
21 Arizona State before I went into the Naval Academy in 1958.

1 RV: So, you really don't have a whole heck of a lot of memories of World War
2 II, I guess?

3 MS: I have some good memories of World War II.

4 RV: Really? Tell me about that.

5 MS: All right. Let's see, as a little baby, I don't remember a whole lot of
6 anything. But I do remember that we had a nice family. I have, had an older brother, he is
7 a year and a half older than me. I have a younger sister, a year and a half younger. The
8 first recollection I have is living in Estrada Courts, in Los Angeles, the east side of town,
9 I think. That was a housing project that was built, I guess, during the war or just prior to it
10 in anticipation. But it was apartments and I can remember they were two-story
11 apartments and we had some friends there. One had been, had become a sailor, I'm sorry,
12 an officer in the submarine service. I remember him going off and I remember that he
13 never came back.

14 RV: Wow. So, that must've weighed heavily a bit on you, I can imagine.

15 MS: Well, I still remember it.

16 RV: Yeah, obviously. Before we do more memories of that war, let's definitely
17 talk about your family make up and your brother, sister, and parents and just a little about
18 who they were and their personalities.

19 MS: All right. My dad had grown up in, he was born in Phoenix, but he grew up
20 in Chicago and Kenosha, Wisconsin. After he finished high school he went in to the CCC
21 (Civilian Conservation Corps), one of the Depression programs that President Roosevelt
22 started.

23 RV: Right, the Civilian Conservation Corps.

24 MS: That's right. He worked in that for a while. He was a drummer. In fact, a
25 nice story is that he, that I learned later, is that he had been in a state drum contest in
26 Illinois and placed third behind Gene Krupa and Dave Tough.

27 RV: Wow.

28 MS: I never really was able to confirm that, but one day, not long ago, I got a CD
29 done by Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich and in the bios that they put on, they mentioned
30 that drum contest, but they only mentioned the first two that played. So I don't know
31 whether he was third or not, never confirmed it, but he was that caliber of a person. His

1 family had divorced and she, my grandmother, remarried to a Danish brewer in Kenosha,
2 who was the grandfather of Orson Welles, so my dad had some influence from Orson
3 Welles during those years, too.

4 RV: Interesting

5 MS: But he got into the Tri-Cs and went off to the woods and worked for a while.
6 Then he married my mom, who had started nursing school in Chicago, but I guess
7 because of the marriage, she finished that and they moved on out to California, or
8 Arizona, actually. My brother was born in 1935 here in Phoenix. His name is Larry. A
9 while later they moved over to Los Angeles when I was born in 1938, things were still
10 tough. But we had some help from the Catholic Church, two priests. Hence my name is
11 Michael O'Halloran, named after Father O'Halloran in the church over in Los Angeles.

12 RV: That's really neat.

13 MS: Then my sister was born in Santa Anna, California.

14 RV: What is her name?

15 MS: Carel.

16 RV: Okay.

17 MS: Spelled with an E. That's about the time I start remembering things. I do
18 remember my sister and my brother. As three kids, we were rather close over the years.
19 But L.A., of course, was a small town in those days. I can remember that my brother and
20 I, oh, I would've been seven and he would've been nine. We'd get on the trolley and go
21 downtown to Los Angeles to watch a movie.

22 RV: Wow.

23 MS: That's from Montebello, which is now East L.A. So that was quite a trek for
24 a couple of little kids.

25 RV: That's incredible. What a difference from today.

26 MS: It is. So, let's see. That's when we get in to the recollection there at Estrada
27 Courts. Then the next stage was when we moved into a house that we rented, and that
28 was in Montebello, California, 1046 South Simmons Avenue. As far as I know, the house
29 is still there. I have fond memories of people, kids in kindergarten that were my friends
30 and the neighborhood. It was a fun time.

1 RV: Okay. How would you classify your childhood growing up? Was it a fun
2 time? Was it something comfortable for you?

3 MS: Oh, it was a lot of fun. We were free to do things that kind of the Tom
4 Sawyer, Huck Finn type life in the big city, both in Los Angeles and L.A. We went out
5 and did what we wanted, when we wanted, doors were left unlocked. In fact, we just
6 lived in screened in houses here in Phoenix. I think the mosquitoes had easier access than
7 people would've had. It was fun living.

8 RV: Okay. So tell me what you remember about World War II. We started
9 talking about that.

10 MS: One thing I remember that influenced me was a billboard they used to have.
11 It was a picture of cartoon characters of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo, coming under the
12 big boot of a giant Uncle Sam ready to stomp them out. It must have been to buy war
13 bonds, I couldn't remember reading, being able to read them, but I definitely remember
14 that. I remember that, I must've been influenced by all the war activity because I had left
15 home and went down to the recruiting office and tried to enlist in the Army.

16 RV: How old were you?

17 MS: Seven

18 RV: (Laughs) That's great. What does your dad think about that?

19 MS: Well, he never really talked much about it. My mom would talk about it, she
20 thought it was cute.

21 RV: Yeah. Tell me, what did your parents think of the war, what was, what do
22 you remember of their viewpoint and their viewpoint on Franklin Roosevelt and those
23 times?

24 MS: They never really expressed a lot of feeling about the war, but my dad was
25 draft exempt because of the family. What he did during the war was work for California
26 Testing Lab. His job was to go all around Los Angeles and take gallon samples of
27 gasoline from the pumps at the gas station. Then he'd go back, and he'd use maybe a cup
28 of that gasoline, and do tests on it and put out a report, monthly report, for the
29 government on the quality of the gasoline. Then he had all the rest of that gasoline so that
30 rations were not a problem for us. At the time he was driving a 1932 Plymouth
31 convertible with the rumble seats. So, occasionally he'd take me and I'd get to go all

1 around L.A. with him sitting up in the front filled with these gallon cans loaded with
2 gasoline.

3 RV: What about your mother? Tell me about her?

4 MS: My mother was a *hausfrau*. She was dedicated to three kids and to the
5 family and did all she could to make life good for us. She was a high school graduate.
6 She had had some nursing training before her marriage, but then, from then on, it was just
7 at the whim of the Depression and World War II.

8 RV: Right, okay. As you grew up, Mike, how would you describe your
9 schooling? What kind of student were you? What were your favorite subjects?

10 MS: Elementary school I did pretty well. I didn't get into a lot of trouble. I
11 started in Los Angeles at Montebello Heart School. I remember the day that I left when
12 we moved to Phoenix. The teachers called me up to the front of the room and told
13 everybody that I was leaving, and it was kind of nice. I remember that little moment.
14 Then we packed up into our '32 Plymouth, with my mom, and my dad, and my sister in
15 the front seat, my brother and I all bundled up in the back seat. We started driving off all
16 night on October 10th, 1945, for Phoenix, in the rumble seats. I have a vivid memory of
17 that. That was quite an experience. When we got to Phoenix I enrolled in Adam's School,
18 in downtown Phoenix. We moved into the house that my dad had been born in, in 1912.
19 So it was just a clapboard house, but we had my great grandmother living down the street
20 from us. Occasionally my grandmother would come up from Kenosha and visit. But it
21 was a nice neighborhood in those days. The school was good, I think. I look back that
22 there were no problems. We did have a mixture of Hispanic and Anglo kids, a few Asian
23 Americans, and for the most part we got along fine, but occasionally there would be a
24 fight break out and it was not unusual that that would be between a Hispanic and an
25 Anglo. Fortunately, I didn't get into those. Now at that time I was probably a real patsy
26 for the bullies. I do remember taking a lot of guff from them. Until I finally got into the
27 eighth grade and I can relate and experience that was life changing for me, and that is that
28 I got into a fight and it was with one of the bullies of the school, Jerry. We were out at
29 recess, he was sitting, he sat down on my jacket on the ground and I said, "Get off" and
30 he said, "Make me." So we stood up and squared off, and then he made the mistake of
31 saying, "You hit me first, Mike, 'cause I don't want to get in trouble for starting a fight."

1 RV: Right.

2 MS: He went rolling backwards with that. All the kids gathered around in those
3 days and they're yelling, "Fight! Fight! Hit him! Hit him!" I remember all of that. Before
4 Jerry could get himself reorganized and come after me, Coach Rivello came over and
5 broke it up. I just thought the whole world was going to collapse on me after that, but
6 instead, Jerry came up to me later, and we became good friends. It's just one of those
7 cases where if they thought they could push you around, they would, but when you
8 fought back, they wouldn't.

9 RV: Right.

10 MS: That's why I say that was life changing for me. What else?

11 RV: Well, did that make you, I guess it might be obvious why that was life
12 changing, but clarify that. Did that make you stronger? Give you more confidence?

13 MS: It made me a whole lot more confident. It also seemed to raise me in the
14 esteem of my classmates.

15 RV: Okay. Did you get in trouble? Do you remember that?

16 MS: No. They didn't get into trouble for fighting then. I mean, that was part of
17 life.

18 RV: Yeah, yeah. Okay. Well, tell me about your academics, your ability with the
19 grades into middle school, junior high, and high school.

20 MS: Okay. Well, we right from the eighth grade elementary into high school. I
21 got started at Phoenix Union High School. My brother and sister also went there. My
22 brother preceded me by three years and he was a stellar student. He was a really bright
23 guy and a nice guy. So, life was easy for me. Whenever I would sign into a class the
24 teacher would ask if I was Larry's brother, "Yes," and right away she thought I was
25 wonderful. It helped a lot. But he also started playing the drums and was in the concert
26 band. I had taken a fancy for clarinet playing in elementary school and I got into the
27 concert band and played in that for two years. I got into a lot of classes that he had, knew
28 the teachers, Latin, English. They were all teachers that they had had. It kind of paved the
29 way for me. I did well in school. I graduated with a high B average and enjoyed the
30 schoolwork. I had an affinity for math, but of course in those days I wasn't really looking
31 at what my career was going to be. But an unfortunate thing happened and that was that

1 my sophomore year, the family broke up. Things really took a nosedive for me,
2 emotionally.

3 RV: How did you react to it? Did your grades go down? Were you just struggling
4 all around?

5 MS: I was struggling all around, but my grades didn't go down much. I just lost a
6 lot of confidence in myself and was shattered by the break-up because up until then, I
7 thought we had a very close-knit family. That of course divided us. By the time it
8 occurred, my brother had left to go to the University of Arizona. My sister and I, let's
9 see, she had just started her freshman year at Phoenix Union. My mom had gone into the
10 hospital for several months. I was home. When she finally got out of the hospital my dad
11 moved out. By the way, by that time, he was the policeman on the Phoenix Police
12 Department.

13 RV: Okay.

14 MS: Anyway, he had moved out. It was just, I was not sure what was going to
15 happen with any of us. But long about my sophomore year, my mom had moved home.
16 She and I and my brother had a big battle. So, we were kind of kicked out of the house,
17 but it was really that we weren't welcome the way we were behaving. So, I moved into
18 the YMCA and I spent my sophomore year living at the YMCA with my dad.

19 RV: Wow.

20 MS: My dad and I became very close during that time. I really worshiped him. I
21 loved my mom, but I resented her because of that. As a result, the relationship broke
22 down quite a bit for a number of years. It took years for that to make up. But my dad and
23 I got along fine. He was a major influence on my life and a lot of my decisions.

24 RV: I can imagine. That certainly sounds very traumatic. What happened
25 junior/senior year? Were you able to continue there in Phoenix?

26 MS: Yes, I stayed at Phoenix Union, although we had moved into a different
27 school district. I had gotten involved, I told you I had been on the concert band for two
28 years, and then I got on the cheerleading squad. By my senior year, I had been selected as
29 head cheerleader. So they agreed to let me continue at Phoenix Union through
30 graduation. The schools were very considerate at those times.

31 RV: Okay.

1 MS: So, I was very active in the organization. School popularity was important in
2 those days. I was very satisfied with that. I built a big ego and had a lot of fun with it.

3 RV: Did you play any sports or were you concentrated on the music and
4 cheerleading?

5 MS: From the time I was eight years old, I was involved in swimming in the City
6 Parks Department. That was my major sport. I couldn't run worth a darn, wasn't any
7 good at baseball. I was kind of a little guy and intimidated by the rough guys in football,
8 so I didn't get into that. But I loved swimming. I'd get up—we lived right across the
9 street from the big swimming pool at City Park. So my sister and my brother and I as kids
10 would be up at eight o'clock in the morning, over at the pool at eight, and helping with
11 the teaching, helping with the lifeguarding, and swimming on the swimming team. We'd
12 stay there, literally, 'til noon, go home and have a break to get out of the hot sun, and
13 then go back and stay till nine at night. We did that almost daily during our small years.
14 So, I was a strong swimmer.

15 RV: Okay. How about in high school? Did you participate in any sports besides
16 the cheerleading?

17 MS: No. The varsity lettering was in cheerleading and concert band.

18 RV: Okay. All right. What kind of expectations were there on you by yourself or
19 from yourself and from your father to go to college? Was this something that was on the
20 radar or not?

21 MS: Yes, it was on the radar. Of course, my brother had gone to college and
22 after a semester, he dropped out and joined the Air Force. But I knew that, in those days,
23 the kids were encouraged to go to college and I anticipated doing that. During that time, I
24 had become involved with evangelical churches. So I had gone from thinking toward the
25 technical aspects of education more toward liberal arts with thoughts that maybe some
26 day I'd even become an evangelist. I got to Arizona State College, at the time, now ASU
27 (Arizona State University). After a year, I realized I wasn't at all happy sitting in the
28 liberal arts. While I was at ASU/ASC, I had changed and just decided I'd go back and try
29 to get involved in mathematics and engineering. So I switched over to the engineering
30 college, which was brand new at the school, and thrived in that.

31 RV: Okay. So, what year was this that you went to Arizona State?

1 MS: I started in 1956.

2 RV: Okay. How long were you there?

3 MS: Two years.

4 RV: Okay. So it was engineering. Did that keep your interest?

5 MS: Oh, yeah. Yes, I was very fortunate. The end of my freshman year, I went
6 into summer school so that I could refresh on algebra and found that I didn't learn a lot in
7 algebra in high school after all. So I wound up taking the whole thing again as a more
8 mature student, had a great professor, and got the fundamentals of algebra down really
9 well. So that when the academic year began, I started in calculus and managed to thrive
10 in that. That helped me out a lot because during that year, I had a good friend, Bob
11 Phillips, and Bob Phillips is also there at Texas Tech University teaching in economics, I
12 think, a professor. Bob went off, he had been involved in ROTC (Reserve Officer
13 Training Corps) all through high school, and we had been best chums. He had a major
14 influence on me because of his interest in the military. But also, when he went to Sullivan
15 Prep School, we corresponded and when I told him I was going to apply for the academy,
16 he sent me a copy of one of the tests that they use to prepare for the competitive exam. I
17 was able to go through that and see what was expected of me. As a result, I took the test
18 and was offered a primary appointment to Annapolis Air Force Academy.

19 RV: Okay. Before we get there, a couple things that I want to go back to, I want
20 to ask about your employment, your jobs that you had growing up, and your work record
21 and also what your hobbies were, what you were really interested in. Because I know that
22 once you get into engineering, is it because you're good at the math skills or is it the
23 combination of the fact that that's going on plus that you had interest in these kind of
24 things, in aeronautical engineering or whatnot? So, tell me first of all, what were you
25 doing as far as work was concerned, before you got to college.

26 MS: Oh, I started pretty young below, let's see, I must've been also about eight
27 years old as a substitute paperboy. We rode around in bikes and I was delivering papers
28 in my neighborhood on occasion. Then actually got the route myself when I was nine
29 years old, that was the minimum age. Actually, I was younger because I lied about my
30 age. But I delivered papers and then I took over a route on the morning paper, *The*
31 *Arizona Republic*. I was up every morning of the year at 4:30 in the morning to get out,

1 get my papers folded and delivered. That was when I was twelve, but actually eleven
2 because I lied again. Then with all the swimming, by the time I was twelve I got my
3 Junior Life Saving and then by the time I was fifteen I had my Senior Life Saving. It's
4 kind of funny because, all the years that I had spent at the swimming team, they all knew
5 my age, but when I was fifteen I applied to get a job as a lifeguard. They gave it to me,
6 the minimum age was sixteen, but I lied and worked for a couple of years as a lifeguard
7 there in Phoenix. Then when I got to Arizona State, I tried getting through the first year
8 without working. I think that was part of my problem, was that I just didn't have a
9 challenge to keep my mind occupied. But my second year, I needed money and I got a
10 real good job as a janitor. That worked out well because I could go out, set my own
11 hours, set my own quality standards. I thrived in that job for the year before going to
12 Annapolis.

13 RV: Okay, and how about your hobbies? What were you interested in, growing
14 up?

15 MS: Model planes. I made a lot of, in the days, they had solid wood models. I
16 spent a lot of time on that. Made some nice models. I remember my best was a B-24
17 Liberator. In fact, that was part of the war time influence because with my dad working at
18 the testing lab, he had access to a lot of the government stuff. They had these black
19 models, scale models, of the various aircraft being used all around the world. He'd bring
20 some of those home. So, I had a good taste for the model aircraft business. So I did that.
21 Let's see, what else? The swimming, of course, and then playing the clarinet.

22 RV: Do you still play the clarinet?

23 MS: No, no, I don't have the wind for it.

24 RV: Okay. Let's go to Annapolis, then. Tell me about getting the appointment
25 and how that came about and why, why the Naval Academy?

26 MS: My granddad and my great granddad had the closest thing to any military
27 service in the history of my family. They were both captains of fishing tugs on Lake
28 Michigan. I always thought that was kind of neat, the stories my dad would tell me.
29 Sounded like life afloat was a good idea. At Arizona State I had two years of Air Force
30 ROTC and those were the early days of the Air Force. There were great things about it
31 and I really admired the program, but there were things that bothered me. There were a

1 lot of the people that had served in World War II and, with sixteen years of service, they
2 weren't above the rank of major, O-3. That stuck in my mind. I really wasn't even aware
3 that there was such a thing as the Naval Academy until about 1951, I think it was, when
4 Dwight Eisenhower was inaugurated president. Not, '51, but when he was elected. But at
5 his election, I actually got to see on TV the live broadcast of the inauguration parade and
6 a group of midshipmen marched by right after the West Point cadets. I thought, "Wow.
7 That looks neat. They wear nice uniforms." That sparked my interest. Up until then, I had
8 taken an interest since the eighth grade in the Coast Guard Academy and my real
9 ambition was to go to the Coast Guard Academy. But I applied to them and because I had
10 changed my language education in high school, I got one year of Latin and one year of
11 French, and only found out at graduation that they didn't accept that as qualification for
12 the pre-engineering or pre- whatever it was diploma from high school. The Coast Guard
13 rejected my application because I had insufficient credits and that's after a year and a half
14 of college. So, I didn't get into the Coast Guard Academy, but I took the test and aced
15 that. From John Rhodes, who was our congressman at the time, I got an offer for an
16 appointment to Annapolis and to the Air Force Academy. I guess, that I just had the
17 yearning by then to go to sea.

18 RV: It's quite an honor to get an appointment and to go to Annapolis. How did
19 you feel about yourself? Where was your self-esteem, your confidence at this point?

20 MS: Right about then I was on top of the world. I still had a semester to go at
21 Arizona State, but I took advantage of it. I reduced my workload down to twelve credit
22 hours from the normal sixteen and just went out and had a little bit of fun. But I
23 remember that I wasn't taking it seriously. The final exam in the chemistry class, a friend
24 of mine was getting married up in Flagstaff. So the morning of the exam I bought a ticket
25 and flew up to Flagstaff after the wedding, and flew back, walked into the exam two
26 hours after it started, had an hour to finish the exam. I did it in forty-five minutes. One of
27 my friends told me afterwards, he thought I'd never make it, that he was really worried
28 about me. I could've cared less. I got a B on the exam. But studies were going well, and
29 my ego was pumped up, and I really felt good. I know that my dad was very proud of me.
30 Everybody seemed to be. As a janitor, people that I would meet, in the offices that were
31 working at night, would, they were cordial, but there wasn't a lot of discourse going on.

1 But one place I used to take care of the porch on the bank president's apartment up above
2 the bank. His wife opened the window and said, "Hi," and I said, "Hi," and then I told her
3 about it. Right away I got to be friends with the bank president. Another one was the head
4 of the Farm Bureau. He came in, and that was also with his wife there that night and I
5 mentioned to her that I had gotten the appointment and he came rushing out from his
6 office to congratulate me. It turns out he was a colonel in the Air Force and was on the
7 team that was trying to encourage guys to go to the Air Force Academy. There was
8 genuine respect to me out of that that I had never really experienced in life. It was all
9 very positive.

10 RV: I can imagine. So tell me about getting to Annapolis and that first year.
11 Now, you were a plebe that first year, right? Although you were basically there for, what,
12 two years?

13 MS: I was there for four years.

14 RV: You were four, okay.

15 MS: In those days we had a fixed curriculum. Everybody took the same courses
16 except for a choice in language. You had to take them whether you had completed them
17 before or not. They gave no credit. So, things like math and chemistry that I had already
18 studied at Arizona State, so it was very easy for me.

19 RV: Okay, so before we get into the logistics of the training and what goes on
20 outside the classroom at the Naval Academy, tell me about the education there. What
21 kind of education did you get from the Naval Academy?

22 MS: Well, the degree was called a "naval science." They explained it that the
23 normal engineering curriculum or, I'm sorry, four-year curriculum would be about 120
24 hours of credits and we were to graduate with 150 hours of credits. We would get a full
25 engineering course, although it wouldn't be considered in name an engineering degree.
26 But we would have, in addition to that, a lot of liberal arts. So, it was a good blend of
27 technical courses, liberal arts courses, and language. They had a very heavy emphasis on
28 language in those days.

29 RV: So, it was top notch? I mean, you didn't lack going there versus going to
30 another institution?

1 MS: I look back on it now and I realize that my education from the Navy was
2 probably among the very best that you get in the country.

3 RV: Yeah, I've heard the same thing.

4 MS: For a number of reasons, not just because of the technical aspects. You take
5 the professors that we had in mathematics, for example. The quality was very impressive.
6 We had "Puff" Bland was the man who invented the log-logs scales on the slide rule. So,
7 we had major contributors toward the development of technical mathematics. Another
8 was, he came, I never had him, but he was, I think he was twenty-four and at twenty-one
9 he had a PhD from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in mathematics.

10 RV: Wow.

11 MS: That's really top notch. We didn't look at it, in those days, it wasn't that you
12 were looking for Nobel scholars. I don't know if we had any at all. We had people that
13 qualified, you see, "Puff" Bland was a consultant for Keuffel and Esser on a lot of their
14 drawing equipment and slide rules, in particular.

15 RV: Well, I'm interested to hear about the Naval Academy itself and that
16 experience. Especially for those people who are listening to this in the future who don't
17 really know what goes on behind the scenes of the Naval Academy, how the whole
18 system works. Can you elaborate?

19 MS: Yes, I can.

20 RV: Okay.

21 MS: Plebe year was an utter shock. I had no idea that there could be such trauma
22 in my life. We got there first for the summer and that was all indoctrination. There was a
23 small staff of brand new ensigns that were leading the regiments of plebes. We had a lot
24 of fun things. I really had a lot of, a great time during plebe summer. I was shocked by
25 the high temperatures and the high humidity. I thought Arizona was a wonderful place
26 after that, but that humidity in the Chesapeake Bay area is stifling. But we would do
27 things like sail boating. They had the whaleboats. We would go out in the whaleboats and
28 we'd all row together and joke together. We had the Lestrata Cup Race where we rode up
29 the Severn River for a ways. So, we were introduced to some really high-power
30 competition and learned how important that was in the Navy, that we had indoctrination
31 into all the different sporting activities and they were really good then. There was

1 fencing, boxing, your football, baseball, basketball, of course, swimming and crew. It
2 was world class. Everything they did was world class. Gymnastics, we had Olympic
3 contenders at the academy. We had three national champions on the fencing team during
4 my plebe year.

5 RV: Wow.

6 MS: So, I had already been exposed to good football because when I was at
7 Arizona State, those were the days of Dan Devine as the head coach and Frank Kush as
8 the assistant coach. Of course, Devine left to go to Missouri and ultimately Notre Dame,
9 but Kush took over and he really put the program together. During those two years, I
10 think they lost one game. That was the first time that Arizona State had been
11 acknowledged in any national polls. Got to Navy and found out that Navy or Army was
12 undoubtedly going to be among the top twenty during every preseason poll while I was
13 there. We had All-American players including Joe Bellino. So, I got to continue with the
14 inspiration of these great athletes. We had the coaches there. There were a couple of
15 them. Our fencing coach was Andy Deladrie. Andy's father had been the coach earlier.
16 He was a world champion fencer. By the way, I can remember back as a kid in Los
17 Angeles, my dad got into the Los Angeles Athletic Club and I was introduced to fencing
18 there. So I took lessons as a seven year old from Professor Harry Utenhow, who had also
19 been a world champion fencer. But getting back to Annapolis, Deladrie's father had been
20 a world champion and a Navy coach. When he raised Andy Deladrie, he went to Notre
21 Dame and became, I think, the first American to win the national championship in all
22 three weapons. In fact, he's probably the only one. He had also been a world contender.
23 So, I was influenced by fencing and squash. I really took an interest in squash racket.
24 That became my sport. During another season, I did some intramural fencing, some
25 intramural fencing and squash. I didn't get into swimming because one of the coaches
26 made me angry. I was probably one of the most powerful breaststrokers of the era
27 because when they eliminated breaststroke, or when they separated, no, I'm sorry, they
28 introduced the—what do they call it? Anyway, where the arms come out of the water.

29 RV: Freestyle?

30 MS: Not Freestyle.

31 RV: Butterfly?

1 MS: Butterfly. Okay, now you can see my memory is shot, too. Anyway, they
2 introduced the butterfly while I was a kid, and I never really got into that. I wasn't that
3 powerful, but I had a good strong frog kick. We got into the natatorium there at
4 Annapolis, and they were teaching us how to swim. This guy, Huntz Wynn, gave us the
5 lesson in breaststroke and said, "This is a good survival stroke." Then we had to jump in
6 the water and swim across the pool in at least four strokes. Well, I made it in three. He
7 said, "Your kick is all wrong. You can't do it right. So here's how you have to do it." I
8 could outswim anybody they had on the team on just the kick alone. So, I decided these
9 aren't the people I want to do the swimming with. I stayed out of the swimming and I'm
10 not sorry about that. Anyway, I played squash and was very active in the sports,
11 intramural-wise. I worked with varsity fencers quite a bit and got to be the manager of the
12 team in my first class year, senior year.

13 RV: What about military training?

14 MS: The military training began in Air Force ROTC at Arizona State, I loved it. I
15 liked marching. I had done a lot of marching in the band work, anyway.

16 RV: Right.

17 MS: So I knew what I was doing on the field. Getting in, my interest in the model
18 airplanes earlier, I had learned a lot about the airplanes. When we applied for the
19 advanced ROTC, we had to do an interview and I stood there and I identified every plane
20 that they flashed in front of me and was all ready to go into Air Force ROTC advanced
21 before I got my appointment to Annapolis. But, that gave me a good grounding for the
22 military aspects of it. When I got to Annapolis, we got the firearms weapons training and
23 boats and things. So I fell right into that pretty well. I really did like it.

24 RV: So, you did not have a problem with, really, the military lifestyle and
25 adapting to that.

26 MS: That's nonsense. When I got there and the brigade got back at the end of
27 plebe summer, they hit me square in the face with the plebe hazing. It did shock me. I
28 mean, I wasn't accustomed to anything like that. To me, life was a lot of fun and I was a
29 little rebellious. I wasn't sure that I was going to make it. But, one of my roommates at
30 Arizona State had told me after I had gotten my appointment, that he had also gotten an
31 appointment and he went back during the plebe year and dropped out because he couldn't

1 handle it. That stuck in my mind that, first of all, if I quit I was gonna have to go home
2 and face the family. I didn't want to be going up to people and saying that I had dropped
3 out because of the way it seemed to effect me when he told me that. So I had some
4 determination to stick it out. Of course, I'm very glad that I did. I did make one attempt
5 to resign. I mean, I used to go back to my room and I'd fall on my bed and start crying
6 because it was such a shock and I remember writing home to my mom one time, I
7 couldn't eat because we were all braced up at dinner and people were hollering at us and
8 you couldn't swallow the way that we were braced out. So I wrote home and I said,
9 "Send me food. Send me bread. Send me anything that I can eat in my room." But I
10 remember walking down. I decided that was it. There was no reason why I should bother
11 with that. Had it all figured out that I was going to take my clarinet, go down to New
12 Orleans, and start doing drugs, and playing jazz. But, I walked down to the assistant
13 commandant's office and I walked in and, like I say, by that time I had decided that was
14 not it for me. I told him that I was there to resign and I didn't sound off or brace up or
15 anything for him. He just looked at me and said, "Well, this isn't the office to do it in. If
16 you want to do that, you go up and see your company officer. You're dismissed." Boy,
17 here I thought I was going to get a lot of love and sympathy and it wasn't the case. So I
18 braced myself up and got back into the Bancroft Hall and started walking back to my
19 room. It was kind of a funny thing because one of the second classmen saw me coming,
20 and I guess it was written all over my face that I was about to drop out. He stopped me.
21 He started talking to me and he started talking about how things were pretty rough, but,
22 "Don't give up, you've got what it takes," and gave me a little bit of a pep talk. I got back
23 to my room, cried a little bit more, and decided, "Well, I'm going to stick with it." So, I
24 did.

25 RV: How far into your first year was this?

26 MS: Oh, that was probably a month or two.

27 RV: Okay. Obviously, that was a good decision to stay.

28 MS: Yes.

29 RV: Okay. When you get into more of your specialty areas, your engineering
30 courses, at the Naval Academy, I guess this is your junior and senior year where you start
31 to concentrate in where you want to go with your career, is that correct?

1 MS: That's right.

2 RV: Tell me about that, how you made those decisions and how much of a choice
3 you had based on what the Navy needed and what Mike Smith wanted.

4 MS: Okay. Well, as far as courses, we had no choices whatsoever.

5 RV: Right.

6 MS: As far as our destination in the Navy, we submitted a dream sheet on what
7 we wanted, and they made those decisions. But that was according to the needs of the
8 Navy.

9 RV: Okay. What did you want to do? What was your dream sheet like? Where
10 did you see yourself?

11 MS: Well, I had spent my youngster cruise aboard a destroyer and I thought that
12 was great. I loved it. I've never gotten seasick or airsick and I just thought that was the
13 world, but then I spent my first class cruise aboard a carrier and I got to do one of the cat
14 shots in an AD, a Skyraider, and strap landing. I thought that was also great. So, anybody
15 with any ambition at all really wanted to either become a battleship captain, or a pilot.
16 The more glamorous was the pilot, the more mature was the battleship, but they were
17 phasing the battleship out, or I guess it had been phased out. So, I was interested in either
18 one.

19 RV: Okay. Did you have an interest in flying? I know you did the models and
20 everything with the airplanes, but actual flying, had you done this before?

21 MS: I had only had a flight or two, one flight that I can recall in a small plane.

22 RV: Was it the one that, were you, during that exam time, you flew up and flew
23 back?

24 MS: No, I'm talking about a small civil aircraft.

25 RV: Oh, okay.

26 MS: A little Beech Bonanza when I was in high school, a friend of my dad's took
27 us up. But other than that, I had gone up in C-47s and did a few things with the Air Force
28 ROTC and got a good introduction to it but never any actual flight experience. I did get
29 one experience in high school. They had an indoctrination cruise aboard a seaplane
30 tender, *Pine Island*. We went out for a weekend in the Pacific, out of San Diego. So I got
31 to see what the Navy life was like. That had a big influence on me. But then at Annapolis,

1 we went through the second class summer which was getting to go to Pensacola and see
2 what the flight training looks like. That impressed me. I liked that a lot. Then, of course,
3 we also went through amphibious training, and I liked it a lot more than I did going into
4 the Marine Corps.

5 RV: Yeah. You said you had no problems with seasickness or, I guess,
6 airsickness, either?

7 MS: Never had a problem.

8 RV: Wow. Did you see other members of your class, when they would go on the
9 cruises with you, struggle with seasickness?

10 MS: Well, there was some of that, but I remember one of my classmates during
11 that second class summer down at Pensacola, we had several flights in the T-34 and he
12 took on the nickname of "Flash." I don't remember his last name, but he had flashed
13 fourteen times in the back seat of the T-34.

14 RV: Are you saying splash or flash?

15 MS: F-L-A-S-H

16 RV: Okay. Okay.

17 MS: He got airsick.

18 RV: Right, right.

19 MS: So, I don't think he made it. But I never saw anybody that really suffered
20 from seasickness. We were in some rough seas on that destroyer and on the carrier, first
21 class cruise, where we were up in the north Atlantic on our way up to go into the Gulf of
22 Saint Lawrence. You may have heard that the Navy had a task force that went into the
23 Great Lakes through the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and the Saint Lawrence Seaway, grand
24 opening. We all went in. They took the light cruiser, *Macon*, as our flagship. I was in
25 DESDIV (destroyer division) 222, DESRON (destroyer squadron) 22, aboard USS
26 *Waldron*. There was another destroyer division and some amphibious ships. They all
27 transited through the canals and the locks and the rivers. I remember sailing through
28 Thousand Islands, New York. I'm just thinking of what those people must've thought. It
29 was the first U.S. Navy that had been there since the War of 1812. Here we were, going
30 through with the full task force. Great summer cruise.

1 RV: That's pretty neat. Tell me about the purpose of these cruises, your two
2 summer cruises. Explain to people about what you guys do on those.

3 MS: Well, part of the objective was to introduce us to life in the fleet and part of
4 the objective was to give us experience, hands-on experience with the duties that we
5 would encounter in the Navy. So, I got aboard the destroyer and the first two weeks we
6 were operating off the Atlantic coast and I was assigned to the sonar room. So, I got to go
7 down there and operate the sonar. They taught me how to ping and locate subs. In that
8 few weeks, I got fairly proficient at it because I remember bringing darn near the whole
9 fleets to general quarters. He was putting on a training tape, and I was to track a ping that
10 he had and I tracked it. But, I wasn't doing what he thought I was. So he thought I was
11 doing it wrong, and it turns out I had picked out something that was actually on the
12 bottom. So he notified the bridge, and they started their anti-submarine activities. It
13 turned out that when they located it on the chart, there was evidently a wreck down there
14 on the bottom. But then I got into the Saint Lawrence Seaway and there was nothing to
15 do. So, the nice thing about the sonar room is that they had true high-fidelity tape
16 systems. The sonar guys had a whole collection of music and, since there were no subs to
17 look out for, I went down there, stretched out on the deck, went to sleep, and listened to
18 music. It was a fun time. But I also remember pinging, going through Denver and
19 tracking the seawalls and the piers and everything else as we went through the Detroit
20 River. But then half way through the cruise, I changed to the B Division, which was the
21 boiler. That got me my first experience in the engineering duties aboard ship. I found that
22 was very exciting, a lot of fun. These were the old Babcock and Wilcox D type boilers
23 800 PSI, steam, super-heated steam, as I recall it was eight hundred degrees, too, but I
24 don't remember whether that was Celsius or Fahrenheit. Anyway, it was high-energy
25 environment. We were operating twenty-four hours a day, down below deck,
26 claustrophobic, pretty darn good experience. But, I was doing the duties of an enlistee at
27 that time. That was what we did during the youngster cruise.

28 RV: Okay. What about the senior cruise?

29 MS: When we went our senior cruise, our first class cruise, I was aboard USS
30 *Watts* CVS-12. That was part of Task Group Bravo, which was an anti-submarine task
31 group. We crossed the Atlantic and went through a big storm there. I remember that's one

1 time I realized such a thing as fear because *Watts* had the reputation of being the world's
2 largest can opener. What happened was that during one of the maneuvers, a destroyer
3 crossed her bow and she cut it in half and it went down in a matter of minutes. They told
4 us that story and I remember one night during a heavy storm, we evidently crashed into a
5 big wave. Our quarters were up in the bow of the ship. I heard that crash and I jumped
6 out of the bunk and was all ready to shout out that we were going down, because I just
7 knew that that bow had broken off and we were on the short end of the stick. I noticed
8 nobody else seemed to be responding to anything, so I must've been having a wild
9 dream.

10 RV: Right.

11 MS: But that was a terrifying moment for me. We went over and at that time I
12 was back down in the B Division aboard a carrier. We had bigger D-type boilers and a lot
13 deeper in the bowels of a bigger ship. But I learned a lot about the engineering spaces,
14 the steam turbines, and the steam cycle and became very appreciative of that, in a coffee
15 can.

16 RV: Okay, upon your approach to graduation, were you able to get your family
17 out there?

18 MS: To get my family out there?

19 RV: Yes, to Annapolis?

20 MS: Yeah. The Christmas of my first class year, by then I had had several
21 romances and had a fiancé. My dad and my two brothers came out. By then my dad was
22 working with the government and he had finagled a trip aboard the old Santa Fe *Super*
23 *Chief*, do you remember the train?

24 RV: Yes.

25 MS: Okay. Well, he was working with the railroad industry and they got
26 clearance for him and my two young stepbrothers to go up into the locomotive and ride
27 from Flagstaff to Albuquerque.

28 RV: Okay.

29 MS: They came back and we made a Christmas trek home by train. We were
30 crossing country by train and by flights that a classmate's dad would arrange. He was in
31 the Reserve and arranged for DC-8, I'm sorry, wait a minute. I'm getting confused. C-47

1 and one time a KC-97, the big flying fuel tank. I got to ride back there and operate the
2 boom on that. But you get to graduation, then my stepmom came out. So, she came out—
3 no, I'm sorry. She came up for youngster year. The family came out for graduation, they
4 drove out.

5 RV: Okay. Tell me, if you want to, about you said you got engaged and was this
6 to a Phoenix girl or was this an Annapolis girl?

7 MS: No, she was a local girl. Her family had been in the State Department, her
8 dad was. She was a student at Mary Washington College. So she'd come up on weekends
9 and we made our plans then.

10 RV: Okay. What were your orders when you approached graduation from
11 Annapolis?

12 MS: Flight training.

13 RV: Okay. Were you happy with that?

14 MS: Oh, yeah. I had put in for flight training as the first choice and destroyers on
15 the West Coast out of San Francisco as my second choice. It turns out that they were
16 closing down Treasure Island so the destroyers in San Francisco were not available. The
17 next best was San Diego and in those days San Diego was a little border town. I had no
18 interest in going there, unfortunately, but I applied for the flight training. I failed the
19 physical exam with an eye problem. I took the test three times and couldn't get through it,
20 but then they told me how the Air Force did it and they gave me the Air Force test and
21 that showed me what the problem was. On the fourth time, when I took it for the Navy, I
22 learned how to cheat and I did and I got into flight training.

23 RV: You know that's interesting, I've heard that story before from other people
24 that had to something like that, I guess something similar to that. Was that common? Did
25 you hear about this?

26 MS: Well, the standards were intensely—what's the word? Anyway, very
27 stringent. They wouldn't waver at all on that, but a lot of these things like this test was
28 called prismatic diversion. The Air Force test calls for putting a red lens in front of one
29 eye and you'd look at a spot of light and when they move it off to the side you see when
30 it splits. You got a red light and a white light rather than a pink light. That shows them
31 when the focus diverges between the two eyes and you go cross-eyed. Well, I had one

1 little area where it diverged prematurely and in the Navy test they put the big lens
2 assembly in front of you and they move it that way and I just couldn't pass it. After I
3 found out how they did it, I just waited a little bit longer before I told them that the light
4 split and everything was fine. Got down to flight training, I never had a problem with it
5 again.

6 RV: Okay. Okay, why don't we go ahead and call it a session, then?

7 MS: Okay, yeah. Flight training will be good for a lot of talking.

8 RV: Okay.

Interview with Michael Smith
Session [2] of [4]
December 5, 2006

1 Richard Verrone: This is Doctor Richard Verrone. I'm conducting my oral
2 history interview with Mr. Mike Smith. Today is December 5th, 2006. It's around 2:15PM
3 Central Standard Time. This is session two of our interview. Mike is in Phoenix, Arizona,
4 and I'm in Lubbock, Texas, again. Mike, before we move forward with Pensacola and
5 your flight training, let's go back to your youth again. We had talked a little bit about,
6 before we began recording, some early influences that you had that you wanted to
7 elaborate on and make sure that we mention. So I'd like to open that up to you.

8 Michael Smith: Okay, well, I think that we talked about family before. One stage
9 in that I did mention that my dad was a cop. Believe me, that influenced my standards on
10 behavior because I got my rear end tanned a few times for doing things that he said were
11 not appropriate. But another big influence was my brother Larry. Larry was a couple of
12 years older than me. As I recall, we talked about how he influenced me by paving the
13 way for me to make life nice through school. All I had to do was show up and say, "I'm
14 Larry's brother," and I was already accepted by an awful lot of people. Well, after he
15 finished high school, I was, let's see, he graduated in '53 and I started high school in '52.
16 So I finished my freshman year. He went down to school at Tucson and then went into
17 the Air Force where he was selected for language training and spent a lot of time at
18 language school before going over to Berlin where he was one of the translators, but
19 mainly operate in a PPI (plan position indicator) scope tracking the East German and
20 Soviet planes as they scrambled, but he came back from that with a German wife and a
21 little boy. We renewed our brotherhood just a few months before I left for the academy.
22 He had become a bit of a renegade. You know, this was in the early or late '50s, the
23 hippie movement was beginning. He didn't become a hippie, but he was very liberal in
24 his thinking and very intellectual in his thinking. It was at that time, before I even left to
25 go to the academy, that he started complaining to me about social and military issues,
26 including a little bit about Vietnam, that we had no business being there. I ignored that. In
27 fact, do you remember that there was a day and age when ROTC was compulsory at the
28 land grant colleges?

1 RV: That's right.

2 MS: Larry was one of four students at Arizona State who protested that. It was
3 quite an interesting thing. He had brought back a stormtrooper's uniform that his brother
4 in law had worn during the war. The three of them dressed up as Fidel Castro, two as
5 stormtroopers, and the third I forget who. But they went into the Military Ball that winter
6 with signs on their backs that, "Even we don't have compulsory ROTC." The school
7 made a mistake; immediately suspended all four of them. But one of them had been the
8 editor of the school newspaper and he was influential, had a lot of support from the local
9 newspaper, *The Arizona Republic* and *Phoenix Gazette*. Now it made front page and this
10 thing expanded to where there were demonstrations, not only at Arizona State, but also at
11 the U of A (University of Arizona) in Tucson. As a result of that, it was disclosed that
12 compulsory ROTC was not the requirement that it was taught to be by the federal
13 government, it was an option. That was the end of compulsory ROTC here in Arizona.

14 RV: Wow.

15 MS: So, that's the kind of a guy that he was. But he left that and he went up to
16 Berkley and found himself just in hog heaven up there studying German, always fighting
17 the system, but always working with the system, and doing quite well. He had already
18 completed his orals in about '68, I think it was, for his PhD in German, Medieval German
19 and that's when he died of cancer.

20 RV: Oh, gosh.

21 MS: But he was a great guy, very influential on me and made me do a lot of
22 thinking. Unfortunately, I rebelled against him because he stood against the things that I
23 thought were important while I was there in the Navy. But since then I've had a chance to
24 reflect on a lot of it and he really was up to date in his thinking and very astute. But to
25 give you an idea of the kind of communication that we had while I was in the academy, I
26 got two letters from him. This is from 1957, I'm sorry, 1958 to 1962. About the only
27 thing he talked about in those two letters was how wrong our involvement was in
28 Vietnam. We hardly even knew what Vietnam was as midshipmen in those days. So, that
29 has always hovered in the back of my mind. There are times I wish I had listened to him
30 more and been able to talk to him a lot more with a whole lot more maturity than what I
31 had at that time.

1 RV: Well, at least it seems like you've done that reflecting over time, though,
2 you know. It appears that you've come to terms with some of his beliefs, your beliefs,
3 and how they coincided, maybe.

4 MS: I have. It's just that I realize that everything I did was not altogether the
5 right thing to do, but at the time it was my decision and I don't regret making the decision
6 that much.

7 RV: Right. Okay. So, tell me what else really influences you. You've mentioned
8 living across or living near an Air Force base.

9 MS: Oh, yeah. We had Luke Field. We still have Luke Field out here, which is
10 one of the advanced fighter training bases. At the time, in the mid-'50s, those were all
11 Korean War vets working out there. I had a vet right across the street who had fought in
12 Vietnam, flew F-86s, and he was teaching the students out here gunnery. So I would talk
13 to him a little bit and get a good feel for what the military was all about, or at least the Air
14 Force. I don't know whether we really considered it military then. But the Air Force
15 influence here was very powerful. At Arizona State, I started in the Air Force ROTC
16 program. I really liked that because, there again, we were influenced by instructors who
17 had the combat experience and the administrative experience that the Air Force was
18 emphasizing. They were pretty effective people in getting a good feel for the military
19 across. Part of the program is to take flights around the area and see what the different
20 Air Force bases were doing. I got to do that a few times, too. As well as in high school, I
21 got to take a weekend cruise aboard *Pine Island*, which was a seaplane tender stationed in
22 San Diego. That was an introductory tour for the high school kids. That influenced me.
23 That was one of the things that help made me decide I'm Navy.

24 RV: Okay. All right, well, if you don't want to add anything else to that, let's
25 move to your initial flight training at Pensacola. Tell me about arriving there and what
26 your assignment was going to be and how they went about training a young pilot at this
27 time.

28 MS: Okay. I got there in August of 1962. Initially it was, since I already had my
29 commission, it was the basic flight training. Ground school, where we learned the
30 aerodynamics and the principles of flight and the different systems, and then into the T-
31 34 for our primary flight training. The T-34 was a high-performance version of the

1 Bonanza that Beechcraft put out. It was two seats, tandem-seated front and back, had low
2 wings, about a, I think, a 265-horsepower engine, and retractable landing gear. So we got
3 into the real stuff right at the beginning. Initially it's how do you keep your wings level,
4 how do you make a turn and make a balance turn, and of course start making landings
5 right away, and how do you remember to go through your checklist, or how do you
6 remember not to land with your landing gear up. You go through about fifty hours of that
7 which got us through our initial aerobatics as well. We were doing loops and barrel rolls
8 and things that I don't even remember now, but it was really great training.

9 RV: How did you do? Did you take to it okay?

10 MS: I took to it just great. I found it challenging, but I found it exhilarating. The
11 joy about the T-34, we called it the "teeny bird" while we were there, the joy about the
12 teeny bird was that it was such a sturdy and stable plane for a trainer that I always felt
13 that if I got disoriented up there, all I had to do was let go of the controls and that thing
14 would fly me home and land me safely. It was really a great little plane.

15 RV: Tell me about the fear factor, Mike. Was there anything like that?

16 MS: I think that the only fear that I really experienced during all of that training
17 was that I wouldn't make it. That always played on my mind. But there was no fear of the
18 flying. I just felt like I was right where I belonged in that.

19 RV: How long did the training last?

20 MS: Let's see, that was probably about three months.

21 RV: Okay. That was so you became proficient in the air and all the aerodynamics
22 through ground school?

23 MS: That's right.

24 RV: Okay. From there, where do you go? What do you do?

25 MS: From there we went out to Whiting Field out near Milton, Florida. That's a
26 big base, actually two bases just to the north of Pensacola. At that time it was all T-28
27 training.

28 RV: Okay. Tell me about the T-28.

29 MS: The T-28 was a real monster. It had a radial engine, let's see, R-1520, I
30 think it was, Curtiss-Wright. It was made here in Phoenix. In fact I worked on the
31 assembly line of it after high school, out at Goodyear Aircraft where we put the wings

1 and the empennage together. So, I got an intimate knowledge of how the thing was made
2 and the care that went into it before it was delivered to the Navy. It was a beautiful
3 opportunity that I had there working the summer.

4 RV: Yeah, I can imagine.

5 MS: Then, let's see, it had the R-1820 engine by Curtiss-Wright. That's a big
6 radial engine, puts out about 1475 horsepower and was the engine that powered the B-17
7 and the H-34 and any number of aircraft of that era. Great engine, it was also low wing
8 made by North American, it became North American-Rockwell, and a very hot
9 performer. We took that through the introduction to it and then into the aerobatics and it
10 was just far more powerful than what that T-34 was. I mean, you really knew that you
11 strapped on a monster when you tied into that thing. But we got through all the aerobatics
12 and then we went into our instrument training and our radio navigation in the T-28. Up
13 until we got into that instrument training, we were always flying in the front seat and
14 instructor in the back. We became very proficient in it to where when we soloed we
15 weren't the least bit worried about screwing up. We just went out and had a great time.

16 RV: Wow.

17 MS: Then we got into the instrument training. That's with a hood over you so
18 that you don't see the ground, supposedly. You follow what the needles say and that's
19 where you learn to believe in those needles because we were in the early stages of the
20 real all-weather flying. That became very important to us, ultimately.

21 RV: How were you with the instruments?

22 MS: I did fairly well. Instrument flying, I found, was very tense. But I got
23 through it okay, and later I became very proficient.

24 RV: Why was it very tense?

25 MS: Partly because you always had an instructor behind you and the instructor
26 had long arms where he'd rap you on the helmet if you made a mistake. But it was just
27 like I mentioned earlier, my big fear throughout that training was that I might screw up
28 and not make it.

29 RV: Right.

30 MS: Other than that, it's just a matter that you fly normally by the seat of your
31 pants during those early flights and then suddenly you're told to believe those

1 instruments and sometimes the instruments don't agree with what the seat of the pants tell
2 you. So, you learn, you believe those instruments and you forget about being a World
3 War I pilot. You're a real all-weather pilot flying on instruments now.

4 RV: Right. How long do you think it took before you felt comfortable?

5 MS: I don't know that I could say I ever felt comfortable because I would get
6 vertigo once in a while and I experienced that even when I got out of the Navy. I got to
7 the point where when we flew in the rescue helicopters, the Seasprite, there was an awful
8 lot of instrument flying. Routine flying wasn't bad, but when you got into something,
9 which I'll describe later, a rescue at night on a stormy sea on instruments, you really have
10 the bull by the horn. There were reasons that we were frightened with the UH-2, and
11 when we get to that I'll tell you about that, because it had a very mean reputation in its
12 early days with the fleet.

13 RV: Okay. So when you finish at Whiting Field, where are you assigned then?

14 MS: Well, from Whiting we went back, I guess it was Saufley Field. I'm not
15 really sure anymore. Oh, the other thing we finished at Whiting was our formation flying.

16 RV: Okay.

17 MS: That was a big part because that was when we started really believing that
18 we were going to be naval aviators and we were going to be darn good when we made it.

19 RV: Why did that incite those feelings?

20 MS: Because you start out, first of all, flying two-plane formations and you go
21 through the different maneuvers, changing sides, bank turns in formation, or trailing
22 where you're actually following behind them at an unspecified distance. But it's very
23 close flying. This is what the Blue Angels keep emphasizing is that everything they do is
24 what is done in the fleet and that's the kind of flying that we were doing as students. We
25 didn't get all the girls that they got, but we certainly became believers in ourselves. We
26 went from the two-plane to a division which was four-plane. So you get into a four-plane
27 echelon and you not only are looking out at those airplanes staggered up in front of you,
28 but you're sitting there thinking of all those *Victory at Sea* recording where they show the
29 planes flying in these big, long echelons and then peeling in and rolling in on the enemy.
30 We realized, "That's what we're going to be doing." It was very inspirational doing that.
31 Once we left the formation flying, we knew that we could hold a formation just about as

1 well as anybody. But that's when we got over for the carrier qualifications. The carrier
2 quals really did cap it. They were the ultimate achievement, as far as I'm concerned.

3 RV: Can you walk us through that?

4 MS: Yes. We started out, it was also in the T-28. We started as just flying circles
5 around the airport and doing approaches. Only instead of a thousand-foot turn on base
6 and descending down into the airport, whatever it was at Whiting Field, these we started
7 at about three hundred feet. That's a very tight pattern. The emphasis is that when you're
8 landing on a carrier, the carrier is very vulnerable. So you want to make it just as short
9 and fast as you can. So, the landing pattern on the carrier is down at about three hundred
10 feet. You fly along the ship and as you get a bit ahead of it, you break the formation,
11 you're in an echelon formation, you make a left turn and when you do that, it's just a
12 continuous turn, there's no turning onto a base leg—I'm sorry, you do turn into a base leg
13 180 which is degrees. You just stay close to the ship, within a wing's distance looking out
14 across the wing, I won't try to explain that. Anyway, while you're in your turn you'd
15 lower your gear, you'd lower your flaps and you'd go through your final checklist on the
16 down wind, and then as you get by the ship you wait just the right time, you begin your
17 turn, reduce the power, and you begin your descent so that as you roll out of the ship's
18 heading, you're down just a little bit above the flight deck and you're almost right there
19 so that you come in and you got the meatball staring at you, you're following that.
20 You've also got a landing signal officer, the LSO, who is waving the paddles and
21 bringing you in. And you come in and, boy, it's fast. They talk about the postage stamp,
22 that postage stamp on final approach grows very rapidly and you know that it's really
23 bigger than you are and if you screw up, it's going to hurt you. But very exciting.

24 RV: Tell me about how you did and do you recall any experiences you had?

25 MS: Well, I had one interesting experience. I did all right with it, but the system
26 in the T-28 on the carrier approaches you fly with the cockpit open and that R-1820
27 engine out in front makes a lot of noise. There's a warning device if your landing gear is
28 not down and locked, you get a whistle. I was doing some approaches and I came in on
29 one, this is to the ground not to the carrier yet. We did many, many landings on the field
30 before we went out to the carrier. Anyway, I made one hard landing and it jolted the
31 system and, of course it's a touch and go, so as soon as you touch down you have power

1 and you go around to do it again. On the downwind, now mind you, I'm up three hundred
2 feet above the ground and off a half a mile or so. The instructor called me, let's see, I was
3 coming around turning my final approach and he asked me to check my landing gear. I
4 just gave a cursory glance, it had three little flags that indicated each gear down and
5 locked. I realized that I did not look at them and he said, "Well, check it again." I looked
6 again and saw that one of the gears was not down and locked anymore. So, he picked it
7 up. He heard the horn down on the ground and with me sitting right in that cockpit, I
8 didn't hear it until I was conscious that there was a horn blowing. So, you really have to
9 be careful and that's a lesson that I learned, is that you've got these visual and these
10 auditory sensors or signals that are telling you something and you've got to be tuned into
11 every one of them all the time when you're flying, otherwise, you're apt to make a silly
12 mistake like I just about did.

13 RV: How many times like that do you think that, say the average pilot has where
14 you just make some kind of a silly mistake? You know what you're doing and it's
15 something you would not usually do. What is the average would you say?

16 MS: I can only surmise that the average is right up there with me, where
17 everybody does it one time in his life.

18 RV: Yeah. Was that the only time that it happened to you? Was that the thing that
19 taught you your lesson?

20 MS: No, I've had many lessons.

21 RV: Okay. Well, I assume that you became very proficient landing on the carrier.

22 MS: We did. I got my five landings and that made me a carrier pilot. By the time
23 we got to where we were going out to the ship, we would go out as a division of four
24 aircraft. Even during our FCLPs, field, carrier, landing practice, that's what they called it,
25 where they had the runway painted like the deck of a ship. By the time we did that, we
26 always took off as a division and joined up in formation and then came and made the
27 break over the field to begin our practice. That was where we were realizing we were
28 naval aviators, didn't have our wings yet, but we could fly the tight formations and we
29 could make the carrier approaches, all we had to do was make the track.

30 RV: How did you feel?

1 MS: Excited. That's the most exhilarated thing in my whole life was when I did
2 that carrier vault.

3 RV: Okay, so when this is completed, where are you then assigned?

4 MS: Okay, from there, well, let's see, first of all, I think I was aboard *Intrepid*,
5 which is the one they're trying to haul out up in New York this week.

6 RV: That's right.

7 MS: Anyway, we did our carrier quals on that and from there we were given our
8 choice of what kind of flying we wanted to pursue. The choice was jets, multi-engine, or
9 helicopter. I chose helicopter.

10 RV: Why?

11 MS: Well, partially I because I believed that it took a little bit more skill. I wasn't
12 thrilled with the one jet experience that I had. When we went down for our indoctrination
13 training as midshipmen, we went up in the T-2J, which was a trainer. You had to put on
14 that oxygen mask and your G-suit, and then you closed that cockpit. I wasn't
15 claustrophobic at the time, but I had trouble with the oxygen mask. It's pressure demand,
16 you're always under pressure. So you have to fight to exhale and then just relax and it'll
17 fill your lungs. I could hardly talk like that. Then I made the mistake, the instructor asked
18 me while we were up there doing some fun things, he said, "Well, how do you like flying
19 jets?" I said, (speaking as if he has difficulty) "Well, sir, this is almost as exciting as
20 sailing." I'm sure that they had me written down in a hit list from then on that I was not
21 to be a jet pilot. So I decided that I'm going to go with helicopters. But that's really the
22 way I felt at the time. I liked the idea of flying helicopters. They were still in their infancy
23 in the Navy and I think it was a good decision that I made.

24 RV: Okay.

25 MS: So we went back out to Ellison Field, where they have the primary
26 helicopter training, all of the helicopter training. At Ellison they had a big fleet of the TH-
27 13Ms, which was the little Bell-47 that you used to see on *M*A*S*H* and that was our
28 trainer version, again, run by a little Franklin engine of about 265 or -85 horsepower, a
29 teetering rotor, two-bladed, anti-torque rotor on the tail, and just about as skittish as you
30 could imagine anything.

31 RV: This is what you were going to learn on?

1 MS: That was it.

2 RV: How did that proceed?

3 MS: It proceeded—there were a lot of rocks and shoals in that. I met my
4 challenge there.

5 RV: Really?

6 MS: But to begin with, to give you the timeframe of that, when we got into our
7 ground training, they introduced two of the pilots who had come in from the fleet that
8 went through the training with us, Lovell and Borman, the two astronauts. So, we had
9 them in there and, you know, that should've been pretty exciting, and it was, but I was so
10 engrossed in the training that I didn't even talk to either one of them. I had no interest in
11 talking with them. I wanted to get through that helicopter training. But we went out the
12 first day, and it's a big long flight line with, I think, three rows of these little Bell-47s or
13 H-13s lined up. We did our preflight, got in them, and the instructor demonstrated how to
14 start the engine and engage the rotor. While we're sitting there, I remember watching
15 Borman, his instructor, picked it up into a hover out in front of me and taxied it out down
16 the taxiway, between the rows of helicopters because you didn't air taxi about three feet
17 above the ground, but it was on skids so there was no rolling down the taxiway. Anyway,
18 he gave him the controls right then as they were taxiing out. They went down to the
19 takeoff point, he told him to do the paddle turn, which is to turn and check for any traffic,
20 and climbed out. I guess from then on the instructor didn't even touch the controls, these
21 guys were so good at what they were doing that they were in complete control all the
22 time of everything they did. Meanwhile, I was sitting back there watching all of this. My
23 instructor picked it up into the hover, he taxied it out into the taxiway, taxied down to the
24 take off point, he demonstrated the paddle turn, and we checked for traffic and then he
25 took off. It wasn't 'til we were up at about eight hundred feet or so, or whatever it was,
26 on the way out to the field where we did our practice that he finally let me take control of
27 one of the three controls at a time. You have the collective, the cyclic, and the throttle,
28 and the tail rotor, four controls. The first thing you did was say, "You take the cyclic."
29 You do your banks and turns and you pull it back, the nose goes up, push it forward, the
30 nose goes down. And I got to do that and I really felt like we were all over the sky it was

1 so skittish. A helicopter, you know, is very unstable. You let go of the controls and you
2 have no idea what it's going to do next.

3 RV: Yeah.

4 MS: So I did that to the point where he was comfortable and then he said, "Now
5 you take the collective and you'll be on the throttle." You want to maintain your RPM
6 (rotations per minute) by twisting the grip and don't let it get too slow or too fast. If it
7 gets too slow, you'll stall and fall out of the sky. If it gets too fast, your rotor is going to
8 fly off. So, right away, you're sitting there thinking, "Oh, my God." Anyway, I took that
9 and he said, "Now you just pull it up and you'll see that you go up a little bit, and push it
10 down and you go down. But now also noticed that when you do that, you're changing
11 your power so that you begin a yaw, you're turning on the vertical axis." So, once I got
12 the feel of that, then he told me to put my feet on the rudder and he operated the
13 collective and went up and down and I was to keep the nose pointed in the direction we
14 were going. So, each one was a stage on its own. Then, by the time we got out to the
15 field, I got to handle all of the controls myself. Then it was the case where he would
16 demonstrate an approach and down to a hover and then he'd take off and demonstrate
17 that and then I'd take the controls and I'd come around and do the same thing, go down
18 to a hover and then out. Then we got to where we did a landing, and I started doing the
19 landings and the takeoffs. Then we started doing our hover exercises where they have a
20 figure eight and a box around it and the idea was that we would hover three feet above
21 the ground and we would fly that pattern in that hover. That's how you develop the skills
22 of maneuvering in a hovering. Cause you went forward, backward, left to right, and I also
23 went up and down an awful lot more than I should have.

24 RV: It sounds really complicated, but I guess if you continue to repeat it over and
25 over and you use your confidence and you use your instructor, you eventually get it.

26 MS: It is very complex in it because everything is interdependent. If you pull up
27 on the collective, you have to put a correction for the power in the throttle to keep the
28 RPM up. If you add power then you have to add torque with the tail rotor. When you do
29 that, then that also causes the helicopter to tilt a little bit because the thrust line isn't right
30 on the center of gravity. So the helicopter tilts and that means you've got to put a little
31 cyclic into it to keep it level. So, yeah. When you do something in a ship like that, you're

1 on the controls all the time. By the way, I mentioned the instability, I've wondered just
2 what that meant and one day during a solo flight on the way out, I decided I would let go
3 of the cyclic and see what it did. I did, momentarily, and suddenly the nose just pushed
4 way over forward and I almost—you know I thought, "This is really quick." So I decided,
5 well, I'd try it again, same conditions only this time the nose came up in a hurry. I caught
6 it before it got into anything hazardous, but it really made me realize that I had to be in
7 control of that aircraft all the time, there was no room for error in it.

8 RV: Was this something that ultimately became a nice challenge for you that you
9 want to continue, or were you thinking, "Well, you know, maybe I need to go back to
10 fixed-wing"?

11 MS: No, I always wanted to continue with that.

12 RV: Okay.

13 MS: I'll tell you a little later of one time when I really did start thinking twice,
14 but I got through that. Anyway, I got to the point where I could handle it. Another big
15 thing about the H-13 is that we did full autorotations, which is very challenging in that
16 when you're falling, you're going down at about, I think in that plane it was about a
17 thousand feet per minute, which is a pretty steep rate of descent. Then you flare by
18 pulling back on the cyclic, you lift the nose, and you convert that vertical energy, the
19 potential energy and the kinetic energy into the energy in your rotor system. It keeps it
20 turning. That's called the autorotation. Then, just at the right time, you rock forward and
21 level the skids and you touch down. I mean, if you're off just a few feet that touchdown
22 gets a little hard. If you're off a few feet the other way, it's even harder.

23 RV: And how did you do?

24 MS: I did well. I'm here.

25 RV: Yeah, I've heard enough that that is one of the scariest things to do in
26 training.

27 MS: Well, it is when you're learning, but once you've done it, you realize it's
28 like everything in the flight training. It becomes second nature to you. I've done, I think,
29 five autorotations under actual conditions.

30 RV: Wow.

1 MS: Including a night autorotation to the water and another one where my rotor
2 blade fell apart in the air. I'm very proud to say that in two thousand hours of flying, and
3 of all the stuff that I had gone through, not one person has ever gotten air sick and not one
4 person has stepped out of my helicopter with as much as a scratch on them.

5 RV: That's saying a lot considering all the flight time you did.

6 MS: When I describe some of these incidents you'll understand how much it
7 really means to me.

8 RV: Yeah.

9 MS: Anyway, we got through that. We got through our whole program to the
10 point where we had about, I think it was fifty hours in the H-13, which is a good bit of
11 helicopter time. To get a license, if you're already a pilot, you would need only about
12 fifteen hours to get an FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) license as a helicopter
13 pilot. But we got through that and from that we went to the H-34, which was another
14 great big beast.

15 RV: How long did the initial training take place?

16 MS: Let me see, I think I got there in November. I got my wings in February. I
17 was there in November when President Kennedy was shot.

18 RV: Tell me about that, Mike. I wanted to ask you where you were, and what you
19 were doing, and your thoughts and feelings in November of '62, '63, excuse me.

20 MS: Okay. I was getting ready to go up and meet with my instructor for the
21 briefing and I forget where I heard it, maybe it was on the car on the way into the field.
22 But I heard that he had been shot and I was stunned. But by the time I got up to the ready
23 room, I walked in and I told him, "The president's been shot." His response was,
24 "What?" I told him again and then we just sat and listened, but then we briefed and went
25 out and did our fight, but I was stunned by it and I was also—I guess the most crucial
26 thing in my mind was the audacity of anybody to attack the president of the United States
27 like that. That just seemed so out of place for that era 'cause we weren't in big conflicts
28 with anybody. The Cold War was going on, but that was contained with some ration. But
29 that was just something that, the last thing I would've ever thought of.

30 RV: What was your opinion of Kennedy?

1 MS: Well, my first experience of ever making a political statement was an
2 objection to Bobby Kennedy's comments. When he came out to Arizona one time,
3 somewhere in the paper, I remember, he did a speech. He talked about how brave the
4 sailors were during World War II. It was something to the effect that we just don't have
5 people like that anymore. So, I wrote my first letter to an editor and pointed out that there
6 was no question they were brave, but at that time, we had people who were exploring the
7 North Pole from submarines. That was right at the time of the *Nautilus* excursion to the
8 North Pole and that we had people that were working with every bit as much courage as
9 anybody showed in World War II. That influenced my thinking towards the Kennedys. I
10 think he was a great person, but I think that, in retrospect, the Bay of Pigs set us up for a
11 lot of problems that I don't think we should've had. Other than that, I think the guy was
12 just a good sailor chasing women, but he was a good person and it's still a very
13 heartbreaking memory to think that that happened.

14 RV: Yeah. So, we were getting to the next stage of your helicopter training.

15 MS: H-34, the big Sikorsky. This was the state of the art in the fleet at that time.
16 It had the, again, the R-1820, the big radial engine up in the nose, four-bladed rotor made
17 by Sikorsky, fully articulated rotor to dampen out the vibration, with a tail rotor for anti-
18 torque. They were using it in the fleet as rescue, not rescue, that was the Piasecki.
19 Anyway, they were using it for anti-submarine. It had the capability of going into a hover
20 over the water with some automatic stabilization built into it, electronic stabilization.
21 They would dip the sonar transducer down on a cable, let it fall down through the water,
22 and then set and ping for the submarines then. It was a pretty slick operation.

23 RV: That's a huge helicopter. That had to be intimidating to a point.

24 MS: The H-34 was intimidating. The T-28 was intimidating. Believe me, I
25 remember in that T-28, one of the things they told us was that with that super-charged
26 engine, you have to be careful of over boosting the engine. You push the throttle forward
27 and you watch your manifold pressure and if you get it over fifty-two PSI, you're going
28 to blow a jug and it's going to get very quiet in a hurry. So, one of the problems I had
29 during that time was, it just crossed my mind that I missed this phase, our multiengine
30 phase, we'll come back to that. But one of the problems that I had was I was very timid
31 about adding power. Then one day my instructor recognized that and he said, "Look,

1 you're not going to over boost this engine at all on take off. When you're ready to take
2 off, you push that throttle forward all the way to the stop, because it is never going to get
3 up above fifty-two PSI." Then he demonstrated and, boy, this thing went shooting way
4 up, and got up to fifty-two, and stopped right there. He said, "Now, if you need power,
5 use it." From then on, that took me out of my temerity and I was able to start flying it like
6 it was meant to fly. That was primarily in the formation flying, where in trying to stay on
7 station, you're going back and forth on the throttle to keep your position.

8 RV: Right. How long was the training on the H-34?

9 MS: The H-34 was another, I think, fifty hours.

10 RV: Okay. When you say fifty hours, how many weeks? Is that like a six-week
11 or eight-week course?

12 MS: It was a couple of months. I was going through very slowly.

13 RV: Okay.

14 MS: Weather, there were an awful lot of students, and it took me eighteen
15 months what should have been a few months less than that.

16 RV: Why was that, Mike?

17 MS: Again the weather. Pensacola's got miserable weather. If they had any
18 sense, they would move their flight training out to Luke Air Force Base, sunny weather
19 here all the time. But they would get those fronts that would come down across Florida
20 from the north. It would come in with a cold front and then it would go stationary, and we
21 would just get a steady drizzle for a week at a time. That slowed it down, but also it was
22 the beginning of the buildup. They were trying to get as many pilots trained for the Navy
23 as they could. So we had a pretty heavy load. And in helicopters I realized, later, that it
24 was during the transition from the reciprocating engines to the turbine engine helicopters,
25 the new generation. So, they were trying to get new pilots in on that, but helicopters were
26 only just coming into their own. They were the black sheep of the Navy while I was
27 there.

28 RV: Yeah. What did they explain to you was going to be the role of the
29 helicopter in the Navy? I know there are different birds for different uses, but what was
30 your general understanding? Did you think that you would be serving simply as maybe

1 search-and-rescue and support kind of or would you be flying missions out there toward
2 the front lines?

3 MS: We weren't even talking about frontline duty. Vietnam was hardly a topic of
4 conversation in '64 when I got my wings.

5 RV: Well, I'm talking about in general. How did you all see, I guess without a
6 conflict there going on immediately then you're not really thinking about how you're
7 going to hit that conflict. I assume so, is that correct?

8 MS: That's right.

9 RV: Okay.

10 MS: We weren't even looking at conflicts then. What little I knew about
11 helicopters at the time were that you have the Piasecki Banana Bird, the HUP we called
12 it, and they also had the Sikorsky. They were the two operational birds out on the fleet.
13 We learned the mechanics of the Sikorsky. We knew that one was for anti-submarine
14 operations and the other was utility operations and rescue work. So, that's really as far as
15 it went as far as anything that I really knew on what I wanted to do or where I wanted to
16 do it. I think we were probably more concerned about which coast we'd be stationed on.
17 People wanted the East Coast or they wanted the West Coast. They wanted to be close to
18 home or far from home, or whatever it might be.

19 RV: So after you finished the H-34, and this you said was around February '64
20 when you finished up?

21 MS: February 14th, 1964.

22 RV: Okay. Good memory. Then I do want to ask you, about this time where are
23 your thoughts on what's happening in Southeast Asia? How much are you guys aware of
24 what's going on? I mean, the Gulf of Tonkin hasn't even happened yet.

25 MS: No, that's right and we weren't thinking that way. Let me go back a bit and
26 let's come back to that in a minute, Richard.

27 RV: Sure.

28 MS: Because one of the phases that I left out on the flight training was multi-
29 engine training.

30 RV: Okay.

1 MS: Everybody that went through helicopter training went from their carrier
2 quals in the T-28 to the twin Beechcraft, Beech-18 the TC-45. That was just an old 1930s
3 vintage aircraft that the Navy used for training or for proficiency for people that were on
4 shore duty. It was a tail wheel, twin-engine aircraft, very fundamental in its
5 instrumentation. But we got to, first of all, get checked out to where we had a multi-
6 engine rating. Then we did our instruments and navigation training in that, advanced
7 navigation. That's where we got through it and went out and did a cross-country flight.
8 Some guys would go from Pensacola out to California if their instructor wanted to. I got
9 to fly all the way to New Orleans.

10 RV: Wow. What was that like?

11 MS: It was kind of an irritating experience. I had an instructor that was a bit of a
12 character. He had a reputation for slapping the students if they did wrong because you're
13 sitting side by side.

14 RV: Physically slapping you?

15 MS: Yeah, reaching over with a kneeboard and slapping you on the leg or hitting
16 you in the arm and telling you, "You really screwed up." Anyway, evidently somebody
17 had talked to the powers that be about that and he was given a little counseling in how to
18 be politically correct in the cockpit. Anyway, his introduction after the first flight or two
19 was "How do you like my technique in instructing?" and I said, "It's fine." Well, I was
20 called into the CO (commanding officer) and told that I had to change my ways. So, he
21 was kind of a strange duck. When it came time to pick our destination for the cross-
22 country, he wanted to go to New Orleans because that's where his wife was. So we took
23 off and flew out to Texas, and then up to Oklahoma, and somewhere up there we
24 refueled, and then came back across Texas, and then back to New Orleans and spent the
25 night there. Well, at the time, you flew with two students and one instructor. One did the
26 first leg and the other student did the second leg. That was my friend and classmate, Guy
27 Nickerson. We flew there and, unfortunately, this trip was made the night before payday.
28 We had no money at all. You know as an ensign, we got paid \$220.20 a month. By the
29 time we got flying, we got an extra hundred dollars for that, but that was it. I was, at that
30 time, with one little baby and another one on the way. Guy had a little girl. There was no
31 money to go spend having a good time in New Orleans that night. So we got there to the

1 airport and he just walked off and left us and said, "Go check into the BOQ (bachelor
2 officers quarters) for the night." We decided we would get a hot dog and then hitchhike
3 into town, not realizing how far it was. Meanwhile, he called his wife and while we're
4 walking out to the gate, they drove by on their way out, she picked him up. All of a
5 sudden, he came to a screeching halt and backed up and said, "You want a ride?" He
6 condescended to give us a ride into town. Well, he told us that it's because his wife made
7 him.

8 RV: (Laughs) Okay, gosh.

9 MS: One of those events that I've never forgotten.

10 RV: Yeah.

11 MS: Anyway, but the other thing about the twin Beech is that it was difficult to
12 handle on the ground. It was a little bit scary in that when you'd made your takeoff,
13 you'd go rolling down the runway and lift the tail wheel. Then if you had a crosswind,
14 you had to bank into it. You had to do that, they told us, very carefully because if you
15 banged into it you might dip the wing and scratch it or if you didn't bank enough you
16 might pick it up and go drifting off course quite a bit. Well, I was a bit leery, kind of like
17 the power in the T-28. I didn't want to overdo it. So I was struggling with it. Then this
18 instructor did have the good sense to see what was bothering me. He demonstrated, he
19 said, "Look don't worry about hitting that wing. No matter what they tell you in ground
20 school, you're not going to do it. Here." He added the power and he turned the yoke all
21 the way around to the stop as we were going down on our wheels, down the runway. As
22 we lifted off, it started banking, but we were up above where it would have hit at
23 anytime. So, that was the thing that broke the ice for me on the twin Beech and I realized
24 they're a real docile there playing a very good bird to be flying whether it's on takeoff, or
25 landing, or on instruments. It was a great plane.

26 RV: Right.

27 MS: Except the wings kept falling off.

28 RV: Just that little thing.

29 MS: Yeah. That was a structural thing that really plagued Beechcraft. So, I got
30 my orders to go to HU-2 up in Lakehurst, New Jersey. HU was a utility helicopter
31 squadron. At that time, there were three of such squadrons in the Navy. HU-1 was in the

1 Pacific Coast, HU-2 and HU-4 were at Lakehurst. They divided the utility work between
2 plane guard, flying from the carriers, and all the other utility work from the cruisers or the
3 supply ship. So, I went to Lakehurst just as they were phasing out the HUP, H-U-P, and
4 phasing in the UH-2, Seasprite. Now that was the beginning of the transition to the
5 turbine-powered helicopter. So there's a lot of excitement involved in that.

6 RV: Tell me about that. Why the transition and, from a pilot's point of view,
7 what did it mean for you?

8 MS: Okay. The turbine was the latest in technology, of course, but it was much
9 smoother and had a much better power-per-weight ratio so that they could put more
10 weight into the payload of the aircraft and less into the weight of the engine. Remember,
11 the R-1820 that we had in the H-34 was about fourteen or fifteen hundred pounds. The T-
12 58 and the UH-2 was about three hundred and some pounds. The H-34 put out 1475
13 horsepower and the 300-pound T-58 put out about twelve hundred horsepower. So, that
14 difference in weight was weight that we could carry people or cargo. It was also, to be a
15 simpler thing, was it was evidently easier to automate the controls on it. The UH-2 was
16 very revolutionary in that it had a automatic stabilization equipment, which is a helicopter
17 version of an autopilot and a lot of systems management that were pretty primitive in the
18 old reciprocating-engine aircraft. The turbine engine had an automatic RPM control that
19 maintained the rotor RPM at a fixed rate no matter what you did with the collective. So,
20 remember we talked about how coordinated you had to be when you changed one thing
21 you changed another?

22 RV: Yes.

23 MS: Well, with this one, if you went up and down on the collective, it would
24 adjust the power accordingly so that you didn't have to add any power to do any controls
25 to maintain rotor RPM.

26 RV: Okay.

27 MS: Let's see, there were a number of things about it that were pretty
28 sophisticated. It was the first all-weather helicopter that the Navy had. They hadn't really
29 gotten into the SH-2 yet for the anti-submarine work. That was just coming on line as
30 well. But we got started with the UH-2 and that had a system that you could literally fly
31 at hands off and complete a complete mission by just pushing buttons and making switch

1 adjustments. So, you could start the engine on the deck of a carrier, you could engage the
2 rotor system, you turn on all of your systems and when you're ready to fly, you get them
3 to pull the chains and chocks off the wheels and give it a command to go up to a hover
4 and it would go up and hover, whatever you set on the radio altimeter. Then when you're
5 ready to go, you've got a little switch up on the cyclic that you push. It would go forward,
6 left, right, or backwards, whichever you wanted it to do, but you're not actually holding
7 the controls. You would adjust that and then you would change the altitude setting that
8 you wanted and it would climb out automatically. Then with the navigation system that it
9 had, which was an ADF, automatic direction finder, you could find a man out in the
10 water, up to two hundred miles away, fly over him, go through a pattern by just putting
11 these controls in, come to a hover, maintain a hover over a victim and pick him up,
12 transition to forward flight, return to the ship, and make a landing. You could do that all
13 hands off, theoretically.

14 RV: Wow.

15 MS: It was a very impressive system.

16 RV: So, this is what you all were transitioning into when you got to New Jersey?

17 MS: That's right.

18 RV: Okay. I guess it's very welcomed by you all, as pilots, because of the
19 sophistication or did you miss old school flying?

20 MS: No, we loved it.

21 RV: Okay.

22 MS: It was great. It's just that it was not a very reliable helicopter at the time and
23 I can get into why on that in awhile.

24 RV: Okay. Tell me what your duties were there at Lakehurst.

25 MS: I started out at the public affairs office. We were deploying aboard the
26 carriers in the 6th and 2nd Fleets.

27 RV: Okay.

28 MS: 2nd Fleet was the Atlantic Fleet. The 6th Fleet was the Mediterranean Fleet—
29 and providing all the plane guard and utilities service for the carriers. When we deployed
30 we went aboard as a part of the ship's company, not part of the air wing.

31 RV: Okay.

1 MS: And all of our duties were helicopter duties. The air wing, they would stand
2 watch aboard ship, and they'd learn to operate the ship from the bridge. We weren't
3 doing any of that. But, when I got there, I was the public affairs office. It was a relatively
4 large squadron and with troops deployed around the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.
5 Some of them were still flying the HUP, Piasecki. Others were transitioning to the
6 Seasprite. So I was there during the first deployments of the Seasprite. That would've
7 been, I think, aboard USS *Enterprise*.

8 RV: Okay. That was your first deployment?

9 MS: No, I didn't deploy on *Enterprise*, but there was already a group out there.
10 Anyway, I was there at the squadron for about six months making a few short
11 deployments for training and indoctrination, but most of my duties were at the public
12 affairs. In that job I was writing the news letters that we sent out to all the detachments so
13 they could keep up with the news of their squadron mates and also writing the news
14 releases for the squadron.

15 RV: Okay. When was this, Mike?

16 MS: That was in the beginning in March of 1964. During that summer I made
17 one cruise aboard USS *Shangri-La* where we went up to New York for Operation Sail.
18 You know the big ships that they sail up and down the river now?

19 RV: Yes.

20 MS: I think that may have been the first, but they had the ships converge from
21 all around the world. We were the Navy's representatives. We tied up at Pier 52 and sat
22 there and enjoyed the show from the deck of the carrier. It was really an exciting thing.

23 RV: I bet it was. So when do you first go out on your first deployment?

24 MS: Well, that would've been the first and that would've been my first time to go
25 out and actually do some carrier flying in the helicopter.

26 RV: So you actually did some carrier flying on that cruise, on that one?

27 MS: Yes.

28 RV: Okay. What did you all do?

29 MS: As the co-pilot, I would sit there and monitor the instruments. I'd do a little
30 bit of stick time, too, and we worked as a team of four. We'd be doing rescue hover
31 practice and other than that it was just kind of fun flying. When I made my first

1 deployment to the Mediterranean it was about December, I think, and I went aboard USS
2 *Saratoga* CA-60.

3 RV: Okay. This is your first extended long-term cruise?

4 MS: That's right.

5 RV: How did you feel about that? Was this something that was welcomed? Were
6 you excited? You know, and we also need to talk about your family and where you are
7 with that and leaving them.

8 MS: Okay. I was very excited. One of the things to understand is that, and I don't
9 think I'm the only one that was this way, but that was a stage of the career where I was
10 completely self-centered. Everything evolved around me. I was the pilot. I was the head
11 of the family. I was the breadwinner and this and that. The family was just one of those
12 accompaniments that we enjoyed when we're at home, but I was begging to get out to
13 sea. That's what I wanted to do, and I finally got to do it.

14 RV: Tell me about your family. You're married and how many children?

15 MS: Well, in December, before I got my wings in February, my daughter was
16 born. I already had one son from the previous December. They went up and they got
17 settled up in Lakehurst just before I got up there. I stayed and finished and got my wings
18 and then drove the car up. My wife, at the time, was the daughter of a diplomat, State
19 Department, who had a pretty exciting career himself. At the time, he was the head of
20 USIS (United States Information Service) in Bogotá during La Violencia that occurred
21 there. He came up for the wedding and they published a picture on the cover of *Life*
22 *Magazine* that they had found a group of terrorists that had circled a window and they
23 were going up with a bunch of dynamite to blow that office up. That was his office. Then
24 over the next year, he became the deputy director of USIS in Saigon, and then the
25 director of USIS in Vientiane, and finished his career as the director of USIS in Bangkok.

26 RV: Wow. What was his name?

27 MS: Keith Adamson.

28 RV: Okay.

29 MS: But also while I was at Lakehurst, he was stationed back in Washington with
30 the Voice of America. He was the deputy director under Edward R. Murrow. So, he had a
31 very, very distinguished career.

1 RV: Yes.

2 MS: A super guy. Anyway, my family was my wife and my two children. It was
3 a very Spartan living because, again, we were not making a lot of money. It was a day
4 and age when the military was accepted, but I can't say that neighborhoods were really
5 thrilled to have the Navy around. Lakehurst was pretty good and Toms River, New
6 Jersey, was nice. Lakehurst was famous for the explosion of the *Hindenburg*, the
7 zeppelin. That happened right out in what was my front yard when I lived in the station.

8 RV: Wow.

9 MS: So, it was a very historic site, too. But it was mostly helicopters at that time.
10 They also did testing of carrier landing systems, the arresting gear. Our sister squadron
11 was HU-4 that was flying a variety of aircrafts that also had the Seasprite. But they had
12 the old Sikorsky H-19 and the Bell-47, the H-13 that they flew from the icebreakers. So
13 they were handling a lot of duties, but we had the all-weather version of the Seasprite for
14 rescue work. Our training involved familiarization with the helicopter, which was landing
15 and going through the different maneuvers that we'd do. Then we went out into Barnegat
16 Bay off the coast and we did our rescue practice. We had rescue crewmen that were all
17 volunteers. They were in the right weather conditions suited up with wetsuits so that they
18 would go into the water if necessary. They had, what we called luba gear, as opposed to
19 scuba. Luba is limited under water breathing apparatus. It's just a small tank, but with the
20 regulator that a scuba diver would use. They had the fins and the mask. Their duty was, if
21 necessary, to operate the hoist, first of all, and then they'd go down into the water to help
22 a pilot in distress. They were a very courageous bunch of people because even in
23 Barnegat Bay, where we had all the land references, everything to keep track of
24 somebody, we'd put a guy in the water, and then fly a racetrack pattern and come in and
25 make an approach on him to pick him up. Over and over, I would not be able to see him.
26 So everybody on the ship was busy watching out. We needed all eight eyes, in that case
27 we'd have six eyes because one would be in the water. That was our rescue training
28 actually in the water.

29 RV: How did you do with that, Mike?

30 MS: Did well. It was a great sport. Like I say, the challenge was to find
31 something. People don't realize how difficult it is to see, to locate something in the

1 ocean. You look back in World War II, they were off the coast of Midway with carrier air
2 wings flying all over the Pacific trying to find a whole big Japanese fleet with the biggest
3 battleship in the world.

4 RV: Right.

5 MS: They just stumbled on it. Our job was to go out in all weather and find a
6 little bobbing head in the water. It was very difficult.

7 RV: Why is that, because it's just so huge, and the weather, and the waves or
8 something else?

9 MS: All of the above. It's just, you're looking for a miniscule head bobbing in a
10 huge ocean. You usually have very little other than to actually see the head bobbing, they
11 had a radio, a PRC (portable radio communicator) that they would carry, but usually that
12 wasn't working. They had a life vest, an orange Mae West, with a little two-cell battery
13 light that was strapped on to it and that's almost useless. It wasn't until they came out
14 with the strobe lights that we really had a gadget that would help us locate the victims.
15 Then, of course, you get the pilots, they all like to decorate their helmets and, especially
16 when Vietnam got going, they liked to decorate them or paint them with dark colors and
17 that made them virtually invisible in the water. They were developing the Scotch-Brite, I
18 think that's what it is, the reflecting tape. That had just come on the market, so we were
19 trying to get them to do their helmets with the Scotch-Brite and good light reflective
20 colors. Our Seasprite, I'll tell you about that technically, it had the automatic stabilization
21 equipment. That had different functions. One was an altitude hold, you could fly with or
22 without the stabilization. But on the altitude hold, from sea level to two hundred feet, you
23 could put it on our radio altimeter hold, which was very precise. You turned a knob to set
24 the altitude that you wanted to hold and it was supposed to hold you at that altitude. That
25 was what you used when you were in close hovering over a victim. You would set it at
26 forty feet and it would maintain the altitude for you. Above two hundred feet, you used
27 the barometric altimeter, that tied into the pitot-static system so that it would sense the air
28 pressure, static pressure, and you would maintain the height on that. That's what you
29 used when you were cruising along and you just didn't want to hold your hand on the
30 collective all the time.

31 RV: It sounds very effective. Was it?

1 MS: It was relatively effective. When it worked right, it was very effective, but
2 we had a lot of shortcomings with it. Let's see, another mode was on the air speed hold
3 and that also worked on the pitot system. It would maintain the air speed by moving the
4 cyclic fore and aft to make it go faster or slower. It would maintain the air speed very
5 comfortably. You could turn with it, you could set a heading on it and it would maintain
6 the heading. It also had a Doppler navigation system that had a screen with a little tip on
7 it that showed the pattern and where you stood in the pattern. So, as you flew over a
8 victim, your first location, you flew directly over him, and you pushed the button to
9 engage it, and then you would fly a racetrack pattern following it on the screen rather
10 than looking at the water. It would tell you what direction you were heading, what your
11 base heading should be, and then where the victim should be in the water. A Doppler, it
12 would usually correct for drift of the water, as well. It was also very high tech at the time
13 and very challenging for our old time helicopter mechanics and electronics specialists
14 because it was more sophisticated than anything they had.

15 RV: So, how long did it take you all to learn this system? It sounds very
16 complicated versus what you had done just six months before.

17 MS: Well, it was not so much complicated, but very sophisticated. It took a
18 number of flights just to get the feel for it, and understand what it would do. Then you
19 were expected to do a lot of practice. We always flew as co-pilot during our first
20 deployment. So we got a chance to practice out at sea but not as the aircraft commander.
21 So we weren't the ones making the decisions as co-pilot, but we would do the flying. I
22 think that when I deployed in December of '64 to the Mediterranean, I spent five months
23 over there, I came home early, two months at home and went back, and within a month or
24 two I was designated an aircraft commander. So, it was just shy of a year of training for
25 that.

26 RV: I'd like to know a little bit more about that process. Can you walk me
27 through what a typical training day would be when you would actually, I guess, outside
28 of a classroom setting, what you would do or what are the stages of this training process?
29 I'd like for people who are listening to this in the future to understand kind of how you
30 and the Vietnam-era pilots went about this, learning this sophisticated system and then
31 implementing it.

1 MS: Okay, well, on all the aircraft, you begin with familiarization. Bam! That's
2 where you learn to start taxi, and take off, and transition to forward flight, do maneuvers
3 up in the air, and then come back and do your landing. You would also do practice
4 autorotation. The Seasprite, at the time, was a very expensive helicopter. It cost two
5 million dollars. So they didn't want us doing full autorotations. We did that in the H-13 at
6 Pensacola, but that was the end of it.

7 RV: Right.

8 MS: So we would go out and there was a lot of emphasis on autorotation. That
9 was the best investment the Navy ever made in these helicopters, by getting us to do a lot
10 of practice on it. So, we did our autorotations. We'd do it over the runway. We'd do it in
11 a planned maneuver. We'd do it in a surprise maneuver, the pilot in command would just
12 cut the power off down to idle and we'd have to autorotate down, do our flare, and
13 simulate a landing. Then when we got out to sea, we practiced doing it at sea, which is
14 completely different because you don't have any fixed references. It's very easy to
15 become disoriented and fix on the surface without watching your altimeter. Then, as we
16 advanced, we would do it on instruments where we actually went all the way down to a
17 hover over the water without looking out of the cockpit.

18 RV: What is the difference, I guess, emotionally, psychologically being out over
19 the water doing this stuff versus over the land or more in a base training?

20 MS: It's the references that you have for your special orientation, especially in
21 the Mediterranean. We used to call it "the Mediterranean milk." That was the atmosphere
22 over there. It was so hazy all the time. We seldom had a good horizon to use to know that
23 our wings were level. We could at least see the water usually, but a lot of our flying was
24 on actual instruments where we couldn't even see the water. So it was full
25 instrumentation. Then at night, it was almost all instrumentation because you very seldom
26 had a good moon and a good horizon that would give you any kind of a visual reference.
27 So you're just out there, I mean, you go close your eyes and try walking down the Bright
28 Angel Trail up at the Grand Canyon, knowing that on one side there's an abyss several
29 hundred feet straight down and on the other side you're going to bang your head on a
30 rock if you go the wrong way.

31 RV: It's got to be a bit intimidating.

1 MS: It's very intimidating and adding to that, the Seasprite is a new aircraft being
2 introduced, had a very poor safety record. In the three and a half years that I was there,
3 we lost nineteen aircraft in nineteen months.

4 RV: Wow.

5 MS: Mine was the nineteenth.

6 RV: Oh, really?

7 MS: Yeah.

8 RV: What happened?

9 MS: Engine failure.

10 RV: Can you walk me through that?

11 MS: Sure. By then, I was the aircraft commander. We were in the Aegean Sea.
12 The air wing wasn't flying at the time. They were getting ready for some night
13 operations, as I recall, but they sent me on a mission to a destroyer to drop I think it was a
14 chaplain down to the destroyer. So, I went over, we came to hover over the fantail of the
15 destroyer, lowered this guy down, and of course this ship is pitching and yawing, and
16 bobbing up and down like a cork. Got him down there, and brought the rescue hoist back
17 up. I transitioned and climbed out to two hundred feet and all of a sudden the engine just
18 started going bonkers on me. So we entered an autorotation. I estimated I had about eight
19 seconds to get to the water. We went down, made a good safe autorotation, landed
20 upright, everything was fine. We just sat there as the rotor RPM went down. The hull of
21 the Seasprite was built to be amphibious initially, but they took the amphibious features
22 out of it, which I can explain. But we sat there and then once the rotors got so slow that
23 they wouldn't maintain the altitude, it rolled over, and the blade hit the water, and started
24 breaking off. I waited till the bubbles cleared, like they taught us in flight training, I call it
25 a Dempster-dumpster, the crash training in the water. Anyway, when the bubbles started
26 clearing, I undid my seatbelt, tried to climb out my hatch because it was at the top. My
27 co-pilot, meanwhile, was trying to jump the gun and crawl out in front of me and he was
28 in my way. So I saw to it that protocol was maintained by grabbing him where I was very
29 persuasive in making him move back. He moved back, and I got out, and then he got out.
30 Got out there and there were my two crewmen already in their life raft. It was just
31 approaching sunset, a rather calm sea. It was kind of an exciting fun thing to have

1 happen. The other helicopter was launched, and picked us up on the rescue hoist, went
2 back, and that was it. The only trouble is that a few weeks later, I hadn't been flying
3 much after that, but a few weeks later, I launched on another flight and did my plane
4 guard duties at night on instruments. They gave me my signal to land. So I came around
5 the turn, lined up with the meatball, and was just beginning my descent and the engine
6 started doing the same thing. So we got down, this time my co-pilot was very quick on
7 response. There was an emergency fuel control. He switched that on. It took six seconds
8 to get that up to where it was in command of the fuel control of the engine. As I went
9 down, this is all on instruments, the only visual reference I had was the carrier was still in
10 front of me so I had a directional reference, but that's about all. Got down and on the
11 radio altimeter I got to seventy-five feet, undid my flare, and I'm also on the thumb
12 switch to get the RPM, the fuel control coming back up. I pushed it hard enough that just
13 as I rocked forward to make the landing in the water, my lights came on. The Seasprite
14 had some real good floodlights and the landing lights. Anyway, the whole world lit up
15 right around me. I saw a lot of spray going sideways through the windscreen up just
16 through my peripheral vision. I remember my only thought was, "My God, I'm going in
17 on my side." I just knew that was the end of the world for me, because that would've
18 been completely out of control. But the carrier disappeared and then it reappeared going
19 around in a circle around me and I realized I had my power back on. I was still airborne
20 and I managed to stabilize on my yaw by locking onto the ship. I air taxied over to the
21 carrier, and just hopped up on to the deck, and made my landing, they chained me down,
22 I shut down, and I got out. I mean, my legs were just absolute Jello. We came through
23 that. The aircraft was okay. It had saltwater all over the tail wheel. So I know the tail was
24 in the water.

25 RV: Yeah.

26 MS: But we survived that. That was a good night autorotation on instruments. It
27 took me many years to get over that, the fear.

28 RV: Of what?

29 MS: The fear of that event. I was afraid to fly after that.

30 RV: Really?

1 MS: Yeah, to the point where I was even considering turning in my wings, but I
2 got out of that. Then when I went to Monterey for a couple of years, I flew the T-28 again
3 and managed to get my courage back, so that by the time I got to HA(L)-3, I was ready
4 for it.

5 RV: This incident, the second incident, was in the Aegean as well or in the Med?

6 MS: Yes, it was also in the Aegean Sea. They almost had two of us.

7 RV: Did you talk to anybody about your fear and about what you were going
8 through after this?

9 MS: Well, right after the flight, my co-pilot and I went up to the room, we were
10 in a bunkroom. We broke out a bottle of gin, and we talked about it, and started playing
11 acey-deucey to try and get our minds off of it. Nobody else was around. The loser of the
12 game had to fix the next martini. The martinis were made in eight-ounce tumblers. We
13 were well into our second one when they announced that there was a fire on the ship.
14 Then they said the fire was down in a magazine below us. Then they called the ship to
15 general quarters, and both of us are three sheets to the wind but were also fully dressed.
16 We didn't even take our helmets off.

17 RV: Really?

18 MS: We just wanted to hit that bottle and get that out of our mind as quick as we
19 could, but since we were dressed, we were the first ones back to the plane that was
20 getting ready to launch for general quarters. Fortunately some other guys came out and
21 bailed us out of that. But yeah, that was a very frightening experience.

22 RV: So, did you, besides your co-pilot, did you talk with anybody afterward
23 about your fear and just what that was doing to you inside? Did you talk to a chaplain, or
24 to anyone else, any of your friends, your wife?

25 MS: We talked a little bit, but not really about the fear and such.

26 RV: Okay.

27 MS: And, no, I didn't talk to my wife about it.

28 RV: Okay. It brings up a point that I did want to cover and that was, how do you,
29 when you have close calls like that, how do you get your confidence back? I mean, what
30 is it inside a person that does that? Is it personality driven, Mike, or is it training? Is it the

1 outside influences, pressure from peers or family? Based on your observations on others,
2 what did you see? And then what was it for you?

3 MS: Well, again, it's all of the above. Remembering that we were a very
4 egocentric bunch of young officers at that time, that played an influence. The last thing I
5 wanted to do was chicken out of anything. Then one of the things they try to do after an
6 incident like that is get you right back into the airplane. But by then, our two helicopters
7 were grounded. So I couldn't. It was, like I say, a couple of weeks before I was able to go
8 fly again. During that interval, you're sitting there on pins and needles wondering if
9 you're going to be able to hack it. Got back in and if you get a few good flights, you start
10 restoring some of your confidence, but when you get into a tight spot like I was that
11 night, it dashes it to pieces and you have to start all over again. So, that was a rough go.
12 The peer influence, I would get a lot of support from the others, but you're also going
13 through an investigation, the one that we ditched, to go through an accident investigation,
14 the other one was just an incident, so it didn't go through that whole investigation, but I
15 had to make a statement. So you're also trying to be sure to cover your tracks so that you
16 don't make a mistake and tell them something you don't want them to know.

17 RV: Right. Is there a way for you to see that or did you see that as, you know,
18 you did something right, you did everything by the book. I mean, when you were met
19 with the engine problems, you did everything in your power to correct it and then you got
20 out. Is that a way to look at it or did you look at it that way?

21 MS: Yes. Yes, you bet I did. The CO looked at it that way, too. During that
22 period of time, I had gotten into a lot of trouble for misbehavior and was actually kicked
23 off the ship when I was over on *Saratoga*. That's why they sent me two months later
24 aboard *Franklin D. Roosevelt* and I was given the chance to demonstrate whether I was
25 ready or not ready to be an officer. Because what I had done would've been probably a
26 court martial offence.

27 RV: The crash?

28 MS: No, something else that had happened before that. But when they came out
29 with the fitness report, out of the forty-one officers of my grade, I was number one.
30 That's after going through being in trouble, and ditching a plane, and almost ditching a
31 second one.

1 RV: Wow.

2 MS: So I was regarded highly and was doing well. The powers-that-be
3 recognized me for that. We can cover that disciplinary thing in awhile if you want.

4 RV: Okay. Yeah, I'd like to if you're willing to. I guess, just a few more
5 questions about this. This is in 1965, is that correct?

6 MS: Yes.

7 RV: Okay. Tell me your thoughts on Southeast Asia because we have ground
8 troops on the ground in March of '65 and things begin to increase rapidly. What do you
9 remember were the thoughts and feelings of the men onboard and just your comrades
10 who may or may not be deployed over there?

11 MS: We were getting the news on Vietnam, but mainly what affected us was that
12 all the money was going to the Pacific Fleet. So, they cut the flight operation down
13 immensely to where we were lucky if we got our four hours a month for proficiency.
14 That was not just the helicopters, the whole air wing was suffering from that. The
15 proficiency was going down. We weren't banking the hours of flight time that we wanted
16 to, and with me, and I think that I can speak for a lot of the people, we were very
17 discouraged about that because the number of hours is what decides your career. I mean,
18 that's one of the major inputs into the promotion. If you're not getting the flight time,
19 they're not going to sit there and say, "Well, we had other things going on and he
20 couldn't do it, but we'll promote him after all." Without getting the hours, I felt that it
21 was a dead-end to the career. That's part of what got me into my trouble. So, we were
22 sitting there, when I was aboard *Saratoga* on the first cruise, we were drinking a lot. We
23 did not do our drinking ashore. We brought it back to the ship and drank there. The
24 Mediterranean was too dangerous to drink in. Anyway, that was what the problem was.
25 We would start drinking. We'd bring back a bunch of wine, and every time something
26 happened, rather than sit and pout about it, we would grab the wine and throw a little
27 party among ourselves. This one night I was really upset about something because I just
28 saw my whole career was going down the tubes as I sat around there. The helicopters
29 were grounded because of chronic problems that we were having, and that was before I
30 ditched the helicopters. I was seeing other guys that were getting flight opportunities that
31 I was missing just because I wasn't on the schedule the day they happened to fly. So, I

1 felt myself slipping back in, what was to me, a very competitive environment. So, I sat
2 down one night when I was super angry, I filled up my tumblers with gin, and was on my
3 second one when they announced an extension of five weeks on our deployment.
4 Somebody came in and said, "We're gonna have a party down at the officer in charge's
5 room." So we all went down and started drinking more and I was already ahead of them.
6 By then, I decided it was time for me to vent my spleen against the officer in charge,
7 which I did, much to my regret and shame. They gave me orders to leave the ship after
8 that.

9 RV: Do you want to talk about what you did or we'll just leave it at that?

10 MS: Well, I was just three sheets to the wind. I was shooting off my mouth and
11 just told him what a crummy guy I thought he was. I just blamed him for everything at
12 that moment and told him over and over in some very, very malicious terms. I remember
13 it vividly. But the next morning I was up in the wardroom having some coffee, trying to
14 sober up, and he came in and stood there and told me that he had written a letter back to
15 the squadron and told me that if I would apologize to him, he would tear up the letter. In
16 my stupidity and stubbornness, I said, "No." So he sent the letter and within a week, I
17 was off the ship.

18 RV: Wow. When was this, Mike, about?

19 MS: That would've been in April of 1965.

20 RV: Okay. You were onboard *Saratoga* then?

21 MS: That's right. So I got back to the squadron, I went in and had to explain all
22 of that to the CO. He said, "Well, I'll send you over to the flight surgeon and you talk to
23 him about it." I did. I guess that he also talked to or got communiqués from the officer in
24 charge and made the decision that he'd give me a second chance. So, he assigned me to
25 go out on the *Franklin D. Roosevelt* that went over and relieved the detachment aboard
26 *Saratoga*.

27 RV: Okay.

28 MS: So I got over and I did a good job.

29 RV: Okay. Why don't we stop there for today, Mike?

30 MS: That sounds good.

Interview with Michael Smith

Session [3] of [4]

January 24, 2007

1

2 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history
3 interview with Mr. Michael Smith. Today is January 24th, 2007. I am in Lubbock, Texas,
4 again and Mike is in Phoenix, Arizona. It's approximately 1:40PM Central Standard
5 Time. Mike, we had left off in our last session discussing your Mediterranean cruise and
6 the issues there. One of the things that you touched on and went in some detail on were
7 the problems with the Seasprite. I wondered if we could pick up there and you could go
8 into that again.

9 Michael Smith: Okay. The Seasprite was a brand new generation of helicopters.
10 There were three that they inaugurated in the late '50s. The UH-1 was the Huey turbine
11 powered and the UH-2 was the Seasprite, which was also turbine powered, and the SH-3
12 was the anti-submarine Sikorsky with multiengine turbine engines. They had developed
13 the very sophisticated systems in the Seasprite that gave it an all-weather capability. I
14 think I had described to you before how we could be out at sea and in zero-zero
15 conditions we could start and engage the rudder system, take off, fly out up to a 250-mile
16 radius, find a victim in the water, and come to a hover and pick them up. Then fly back
17 and land on the ship all in zero-zero conditions. The only trouble was that there were a lot
18 of problems associated with it. Some of them because the Secretary of Defense,
19 McNamara, when they were developing this, had to cut the budget. So he cut out some of
20 the safety features like the Seasprite was designed to be a twin-engine and he cut it down
21 to single-engine, which made us very vulnerable right there. Then it was designed to be
22 an amphibious helicopter so that we could land on the water and taxi right up to a victim
23 and pick them up. They scratched that from the program and then went to a hydraulic
24 hoist which was retractable, but some of this sophistication that we had that made it such
25 a wonderful craft was one, first of all, the turbine engine. It was a GET-58 and was about
26 360 pounds and put out over 1250 horsepower. So the power-to-weight ratio was
27 excellent. The engine itself was very good and very reliable, plus it was virtually free of
28 vibration relative to the old radial engines in the reciprocating days, but it was very
29 susceptible to foreign object damage. We had a serious problem because our mechanics

1 in the older helicopters were used to just really coarse kind of maintenance. If they had to
2 trim lock wire they'd just snip it and let it fall where it would. Unfortunately in the
3 Seasprite when they did that it would fall right at the intake and a tiny piece of lock wire
4 would wipe out the compressor section on the engine with foreign object damage. We
5 lost several planes because of that. Then we had a very sophisticated navigation system
6 for the all-weather capability that was a Doppler system and an automatic stabilization
7 system, which we called ASE (automated stabilization equipment), A-S-E. The ASE
8 would give us that capability to—it's an autopilot type system that would give us the
9 capability to fly hands-off. It would maintain with depending on the mode that we
10 selected, maintain our altitude according to a barometric altimeter or below two hundred
11 feet on a radio altimeter which was very precise. It was designed to maintain that altitude
12 at about plus or minus two feet when we're in a hover. That led to some complications.
13 One was, again, the sophistication of it calls for some very complex electronic test
14 equipment and calibration equipment that had to be installed aboard every one of the
15 carriers as well as back at our squadron. We learned after several years of problems with
16 this system, that the test equipment was just never installed and operating on our carriers.
17 We usually didn't have it when we needed it. When we did have it, it was not as accurate
18 as we were supposed to have. For example, one night I made a rescue in a stormy sea and
19 this thing was following the waves, which it was really designed to do. So if we had a
20 ten-foot swell we were going up and down ten feet with every wave. That's supposed to
21 be dampened out somehow and it just didn't happen. So we were just bouncing up and
22 down in the air and we couldn't get ourselves into a stable hover over a victim. That was
23 a problem. That was solved by getting a lead electronic petty officer that recognized we
24 need that test equipment. He installed it and everything was great after that. Then we had
25 a sophisticated control system that was developed by Charles Kaman, K-A-M-A-N, up in
26 Connecticut. He had started with the H-43, which was the old Air Force bird with the
27 sync copter, the two rotors mounted side by side and blades intertwined with each other
28 as they went around. The development, his invention, was the turbo-tab which meant
29 that—that was a tab that was put out two thirds of the length of the rotor system just like
30 an aileron on an airplane. It would go up and down cyclically and give us the control over
31 the rotor heads that we wanted. The advantage to it was that it had very low feedback on

1 the loads in the control system. So it could be a very light control system and it could be
2 flown without hydraulics. Hydraulics are a vulnerability that a bullet could cut a
3 hydraulic line and something like the Sikorsky where they had to have hydraulics. They
4 had to put a duplicate system in which went meant more weight and cost right there. We
5 didn't have to have that duplicate system because we could make a safe landing without
6 hydraulics. Then we ran into such things as onboard the carrier all of the squadrons
7 shared the ground support equipment including the hydraulic mule that we hooked up
8 when we wanted to do ground tests on the hydraulic system. Well, something like the
9 Phantom was very quirt, large orifices in its system and was usually contaminated with a
10 lot of junk. When we'd hook it up with the Seasprite we had these very fine orifices in
11 our control system and the hydraulic mule would contaminate our system and then once
12 we got going it would either cause bypass of the hydraulic filters and if it did then that
13 would contaminate the control system and we'd lose control, hydraulic control over the
14 aircraft. That got to be a problem and we lost a few helicopters with that until they
15 realized what the source was and the solution was to dedicate a hydraulic mule just for
16 the Seasprite. We seemed to solve that problem pretty well.

17 RV: Did any of these problems affect the morale of those around you?

18 MS: Oh, yes. In our squadron I used to be the public affairs officer. One day I
19 was noticing we were boasting about the number of rescues that we conducted since we
20 got the Seasprite. We had conducted about fifty rescues, but then I got to looking and
21 realized half of them were Seasprite crewmen. It gave you an idea of how many times
22 they had to ditch the helicopters and that was just within the first year or so. Then another
23 statistic was that in the nineteen months that it had been in our squadron we had nineteen
24 losses. One a month was pretty drastic. The big thing on the morale was that, of course,
25 we were scared to death when we'd launch off the carrier especially at night on
26 instruments. We were always sitting there with our hands on the controls whereas we
27 should've been able to sit back and relax with our hands off the controls. We didn't dare
28 let loose of the cyclic because it just might take a wild ride. I know one time I was out on
29 a training mission and in a hover just all of a sudden even with my hands on the control
30 the cyclic gave a nose up command and we were up thirty degrees nose up before I could
31 get it back down to level flight. Then another time it was thirty degrees bank to the left

1 and I mean it's almost instantaneous as if you did a hard over, intentionally did a hard
2 over with the cyclic. That made us very aware and we had to adapt to that, accept it, and
3 so we did it by just flying with our hands on the controls. That occurred when I was in
4 daylight VFR inside of the beach. If that had happened in the middle of the night, on a
5 stormy night in particular, it could've been disaster. Oh, let's see, what else was there?
6 Then we had retractable landing gear, which was an innovation on a helicopter. The
7 retractable landing gear was great because it streamlined the plane and we had
8 theoretically 150 knots capability, which would've made it the fastest helicopter going.
9 But we had to cut that down to 125 because they were having some other issues going on
10 with it. We had a couple of landing gear failure. One occurred to me when I had made a
11 landing on the carrier on the starboard side. We had a sudden bank to the right when we
12 should've been level on the wheels. We just barely recovered from that and found a drag
13 link was broken in the landing gear and it was just flopping in the breeze. A week later
14 the other one broke after I took off and came back and both of them we were able to send
15 to hover and get that piece changed. In doing so we found that there was a Murphy, a
16 mistake that could happen and therefore it did. We were able to get that corrected on the
17 whole fleet and eliminate that as a problem. If things like that, when you go into a new
18 generation of aircraft you run into problems and you've got to do all you can to anticipate
19 them. We didn't have a sophisticated safety program then like we have now in aviation
20 where you duplicate everything that could fail so that any single failure would be
21 controllable. In that case, any single failure meant you were out of business.

22 RV: Man, this thing sounds like a train wreck.

23 MS: Well, at that stage it was. We got into the safety issues and then we
24 recognized each weakness in the system. They made corrections. I'll give you a nice,
25 long story on that because the Seasprite ultimately became the safest helicopter in the
26 fleet, in fact about the best safety record of all the squadrons in the fleet.

27 RV: But you guys were the guinea pigs basically?

28 MS: We were the guinea pigs. Well, we called ourselves pioneers. Anyway, they
29 were having a problem out at HC-1 in San Diego. They were losing the aircraft, usually
30 in a hover. They lost five of them before one finally ditched right off the seawall in San
31 Diego and they were able to recover it. By recovering it they were able to find the

1 problem and it's this. They were in a hover and what they found was saltwater in the fuel
2 system, the fuel tank. They had a simultaneous flameout. Both engines, which is never
3 supposed to happen, flamed out because of that salt water. Well, they tracked down the—
4 you know, the Navy and the Air Force they're really good at really finding the base root
5 problem of the whole thing. What it boiled down to are those economy cuts that
6 McNamara imposed at the beginning. Here's what happened. They had decided that the
7 single engine had to be improved so they modified it and made the dual-engine Seasprite.
8 Then they found that with the extra engine, the extra weight took more power and it was
9 already underpowered with a single engine. It was even worse underpowered with the
10 dual engine, strangely enough. That's because the aircraft was so much heavier with all
11 of that and they did not increase the lift or the anti-torque capability and the strength of
12 the landing gear. They went in and beefed up the landing gear and they put a four-bladed
13 tail rotor on it to give it the anti-torque. Then they beefed up the transmission to handle
14 the additional power that was needed for it to hover with all this weight. That made it a
15 good aircraft. They thought that they had solved all the problems, but they took it out and
16 on that fifth one they found that they hadn't. That was another of the economy moves.
17 When he took it out of the amphibious stage they didn't bother sealing the hull so that it
18 could land on water and that lightened it and made it cheaper, but in a hover with all of
19 this extra weight it took more thrust from the rotor which kicked up a bigger salt spray
20 from the ocean and it was literally hovering in its own spray and all that mist. In doing so,
21 in a hover you're using more power so it was sucking more fuel. They had a vent on the
22 underside of the helicopter making it non-amphibious. The amphibious version would
23 have had the vent up at the top and it probably would've been fine. They cut out that
24 extra ten feet of aluminum tube and put in just a little short tube out the bottom of the
25 helicopter right in the spray. It was sucking in air to replace the fuel and in doing so it
26 was sucking in the mist. So it was drowning itself. Once they found that they were able to
27 make that correction. They'd already beefed it up and made it a viable aircraft and as a
28 result Kaman got another contract to build a new version as the light antisubmarine, the
29 LAMPS (Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System) program which was to operate this small
30 helicopter from the steering of a frigate and give it that additional range in protection of

1 the task force. It became a great helicopter, but we sure went through some growing pains
2 in getting there.

3 RV: Certainly sounds like it. Tell me about you, where you were personally
4 during this entire, kind of the pioneering phase, as you called it.

5 MS: I got into HC-2 in Lakehurst, oh, probably a year after I'd been introduced
6 into the squadron. They would've introduced it in about '62. I got there in the early part
7 of '64. We already had our first deployment had gone out. I think it was aboard
8 *Enterprise* on a Mediterranean cruise. There were others that had it. *Saratoga*, we had it
9 aboard the *Saratoga* and the *Shangri-La*. *Independence* had it. I forget who else was over
10 in the Med with *Enterprise*. Oh, that must've been *Saratoga*. Anyway, I'm not sure.

11 RV: It doesn't matter. We can look that up or whoever's reading this can look it
12 up.

13 MS: Well, one of them came back. It was either the *Sara* or the *Shangri-La* that
14 came back with the last detachment of the HUP, the H-U-P. The Army version of that
15 was the H-25 and that's an old Piasecki tandem-rotor system like the Chinook has. They
16 flew that and brought it back and then phased out the HUP in our East Coast operations.
17 That would've been in late '64.

18 RV: Okay. Then in '65 you were on the *Saratoga*, correct? That's where you had
19 that incident?

20 MS: In late '64 going into '65 I was on the *Saratoga*, but then I left the ship and
21 was deployed on *Franklin Roosevelt*.

22 RV: Okay. Is there anything else you want to talk about regarding the *Saratoga*
23 and you went through that incident and all of that, but I didn't know if since we had
24 talked last if there's anything you want to add to that. Of course, you can do this later, as
25 well.

26 MS: That incident meaning the ditching or—

27 RV: Well, yeah the ditching and just the being sent off the ship.

28 MS: Okay. Yeah, I was sent off the ship and managed to redeem myself and got
29 back aboard the *Franklin Roosevelt* where I did well. We deployed to the Mediterranean
30 and I think that was the cruise where we—it's probably one of the very few times that in
31 a long deployment a carrier has come back without a single lost pilot. That was quite an

1 achievement. The *Roosevelt* was a wonderful ship in so many ways. It was a good, stable
2 platform in a stormy sea and we were fortunate to have some really good top leadership
3 onboard. After that we deployed to the South China Sea. We were the second carrier
4 from the Atlantic to go over there. The first was the *Independence* and they had broken
5 some ground in extending the operation. From the carrier they deployed out aboard the
6 frigate that operated right off the coast of North Vietnam. There were a couple of very
7 spectacular rescues that were made by that crew. The pilot's name was Chuck Sap and
8 Chuck is supposedly here in Phoenix. I've been trying to get a hold of him to try to get
9 him to contact you. If I can't get him then I know Tim Thomasee, his other pilot, is the
10 other one. They made two incursions over North Vietnam and brought back two pilots in
11 some pretty spectacular rescues.

12 RV: Tell me what you did once you got over there on the *Roosevelt*.

13 MS: Well, when we got over there I was hard charging. They had just announced
14 the recruitment of candidates for the Seawolves. It was organizing and I had put in for
15 that and the CO sent an endorsement asking that they deny my request because I was
16 already scheduled for a third cruise. I was pretty bent out of shape over that and got out
17 there. Somebody went to the captain of the ship and said, "This helicopter is really risky
18 to fly and we don't want to go over the beach." So that opportunity to operate from the
19 frigate was cancelled. The captain said, "Well, if it's so dangerous then you'll just have to
20 stay within sight of the ship all the time." We got through eight months of that cruise
21 before we were allowed to fly away from the ship. That was only because they wanted
22 me to go over to the *Enterprise* fifty miles away and see how Bob Hope was doing on his
23 USO (United Service Organizations) show.

24 RV: That had to be very frustrating.

25 MS: It was extremely frustrating because the helicopter crews in those days were
26 not recognized as part of the air wing and by the fixed-wing pilots they thought we
27 should have the half wings like the blimp pilots had until we pulled one up on a rescue
28 hoist. Then that changed their mind. We saw the helicopter assignment as the end of a
29 career especially when you got into something like that where we weren't allowed to do
30 the job we were supposed to do. We had one case where a pilot went down in Yankee
31 Station and we could've gotten over and picked him up in a matter of minutes, but they

1 told us we couldn't go that far and instead they sent a PBY and had it in an at sea landing
2 which is pretty risky right there to pick the guy up. Several of us were really bent out of
3 shape over that. That should've been a rescue that we conducted.

4 RV: Mike, I'm a little confused as to why you were being limited again. Can you
5 explain again why you guys were not allowed to fly outside the sight of the ship?

6 MS: Because they felt that a single-engine helicopter was not safe enough. That
7 it's too much chance of complicating the problem of a rescue by going down ourselves.

8 RV: Do you think this has to do with that we're kind of on the dawn of using
9 helicopters in warfare? Do you think that mentality is part of this?

10 MS: Yes, very much so. They did not understand the helicopters and the
11 vulnerability of them or the vulnerability that we had with the systems that I described
12 earlier. They just thought, "Oh, that's dangerous and if you guys don't have the guts to
13 fly it then we won't make you do it."

14 RV: But some of you had the guts to fly it.

15 MS: Well, these two guys that flew off the frigate from *Independence* came back
16 with two Silver Stars. They had SAM-7s fired at them, not to mention all the other
17 ground fire, and they made it in. They got over—it's still single-engine, and they made a
18 hover. In order to hover they had to start ripping out their radios and anything else just to
19 pitch it out and get the weight down to where they could hover and pick a guy up through
20 the jungle.

21 RV: Wow. How did you feel about it? It sounds like and I can guess that you
22 wanted to absolutely do your job and not have to be limited like this.

23 MS: Absolutely. I was very hurt and angry with that, but that was the order and
24 so we had to live with it. Yeah. That's a sore point.

25 RV: This cruise on the *FDR*, this lasts from according to your notes here June '65
26 to February '67, is that correct?

27 MS: That's right.

28 RV: Let's stop for a minute on life in Southeast Asia. Tell me about your family
29 and how they were reacting to you being over there in the war.

30 MS: Well, I don't think that at that stage it was too much of an issue. It became
31 an issue during my tour with HA(L)-3. My wife had moved out to Phoenix and was

1 living near my parents. So she had family here. Her mom was still back in Washington,
2 but her dad was also in Southeast Asia with the State Department. She seemed to be
3 doing well with the two little kids, at least from what I gathered in the letters that I'd get.
4 It was tough because I had out of thirty-six months in the squadron I think I had thirty-
5 one months at sea. That was tough on all of us, but that was my career and that was my
6 choice.

7 RV: Sure. How did you combat being away? How did you communicate and how
8 did you deal with that?

9 MS: Well, we had letters and that's about it. Snail mail was the extent of our
10 communication. We had no phones, no email or anything like they have now. When we'd
11 get into port I remember calling her one time from Naples where I had to get up really
12 early in the morning, get ashore, into the phone at the post office where the phone
13 company was and reserve a time for a telephone call, an overseas call. After a few hours I
14 was able to make that call and talk to her for a short while because it's very expensive
15 and not a very comfortable way of doing things.

16 RV: Right. Do you want to talk to me about the *Franklin Roosevelt*? What was it
17 like living on this aircraft carrier?

18 MS: First thing I got to say is that I dearly loved life at sea. The carrier was just
19 about the best place in the world to be. It's frustrating. You go out there. You'd like to
20 have a little company other than a bunch of guys. The food was great. The first week that
21 I went aboard *Saratoga* I put on fifteen pounds with the food that they served. The people
22 aboard ship are really a great bunch of people. They all have a job. In fact, I'll relate a
23 conclusion of mine. I've never been able to get along with the people in the Air Force
24 that I've had to work with. I finally concluded that the reason is this: in the Navy when
25 we went aboard ship nobody was a waste. We all had a job to do and every man on that
26 ship had a job that was life critical to someone else on the ship, even if you're a cook,
27 you had to do it right or else people would get sick. There was little capability to take
28 care of a mass outbreak. If you were one of the compartment cleaners you also—that was
29 just a temporary assignment. You went up, like the one we had was an airman and he
30 became an air boatswain up on the flight deck. Most dangerous place in the world is the
31 flight deck of a carrier. These guys had to do their jobs right or somebody died.

1 Everybody on the ship did that. If the navigator was wrong they could run aground and
2 people could die. So we had our jobs, we knew our jobs, and we did our jobs. Contrast
3 that with the Air Force where you've got the 8th Air Force sitting over in a big base in
4 England flying over every day over Germany. You've got the pilots and the aircrews that
5 are the heroes of the operation, but they've got this massive ground support, the
6 administration and the maintenance. These guys, they get the airplanes ready to go in the
7 morning. They launch out over the channel and then they just sit there, hour after hour,
8 hoping that their planes are coming back. Well, when you do that there's nothing to do.
9 There's nothing critical other than you have to be sure that the runway is clear and
10 everybody gets their meals and the training is conducted, but during those hours if they
11 want to go in and take a nap they can do it and nobody's hurt by it. We couldn't do that in
12 the Navy. They had to sit there and think of reasons that they were important, that their
13 job was important. To do that they had to start making organization charts. So the Air
14 Force always had great organization charts whereas the Navy had great organization. I
15 don't say that to belittle the Air Force. It's just my observation on why I found it difficult
16 to watch a guy who made colonel and did a lot less as a colonel as I did as lieutenant, JG
17 (junior grade).

18 RV: Yeah. How close were you there with the members of your squadron aboard
19 ship, aboard the *Roosevelt*?

20 MS: Well, we bunked together. We ate together. We flew together. We had one
21 case where there was a team of pilots. They had been good friends through flight training.
22 They deployed. They roomed together. They flew together which meant the twenty four
23 hours a day they were together. After six months of that they didn't like each other
24 anymore.

25 RV: So too close, basically?

26 MS: Well, you're very close. In that case it was too close. The rest of us, yeah,
27 we got along pretty well. We had the separation between the officers and the enlisted, but
28 among the officers we were usually in the same area although *Oriskany's* fire gave a
29 lesson that that shouldn't be because the whole helicopter pilot crew was wiped out in
30 that fire.

31 RV: Tell me about that. What happened?

1 MS: We were out in the Tonkin Gulf and got word that there was a fire aboard
2 *Oriskany* and apparently they had these lockers down in the hangar bay with flares and
3 stuff in them. One of those white phosphorous or magnesium flares went off and just had
4 chaos in the hangar bay. The heat and the smoke and all went up above the hangar bay
5 between the hangar bay and the flight deck. That class of ship had two levels of quarters
6 for the officers of the air wing. The helicopter crew was wiped out. I found out online
7 through doing a search on your group, on your program, and got a fair rundown on it. I
8 think it was the monthly historical bulletin that the Navy put out. I participated in that.
9 They were at the stage where they were almost ready to abandon ship, just on the verge
10 of it. We got an urgent request to send some oxygen breathing apparatus, OBA. So I was
11 on duty that moment and we flew over with a planeload of OBA. From a distance, you've
12 seen these films or these pictures of the World War II carrier where you've just got this
13 tiny flat top just about ready to sink and this huge column of smoke coming up from it
14 just dwarfing the carrier. That's what I saw, just all of that flashed through my memory of
15 the World War II films. That's what we saw. I got over there and it was, I can't say it was
16 chaotic, but it was intense activity up on the flight deck with hoses going all over and
17 people going around. There was no radio communication. I just had to hover because you
18 can't make a landing in something like that without clearance from the ship. So we just
19 hovered alongside until we got somebody's attention up on the pri-fly (primary flight
20 control) and they gave us a green light to make a landing. We were able to offload all of
21 the OBA. This is a case where every person had his duty that they had to do and they
22 saved that ship.

23 RV: What did you do? I mean, you're hovering. Did you feel helpless that you
24 couldn't really get down and do what you needed to do?

25 MS: Helpless in that I had the mission and I had to wait until I got the clearance,
26 but no, not totally helpless. I wish that I could've done more, but that wasn't a situation
27 where they needed a helicopter rescue. That was a situation where they needed
28 firefighting equipment and people because they were devastated by it. They just put the
29 *Oriskany* in to the deep six as a fish house a few months ago. They showed pictures of it.
30 I don't know whether she ever went back into operation or not, but a wonderful ship like

1 that to meet a demise like that is heartbreaking. Do you remember the movie *The Bridges*
2 *at Toko-Ri*?

3 RV: Absolutely.

4 MS: That was *Oriskany*.

5 RV: Oh, yeah. It is a beautiful ship. Mike, what other things happened? What
6 other incidents do you remember or that kind of marked you or marked your career on
7 this deployment with the *Roosevelt*?

8 MS: Well, marked my career or marked my emotions?

9 RV: Either. Both.

10 MS: Okay. We had a very sad accident aboard *Roosevelt*. You gotta wait a
11 minute. (Becoming emotional)

12 RV: Take your time.

13 MS: Let's take a break.

14 RV: Okay.

15 MS: We were getting ready for a raid over the North. It was daylight. I was the
16 standby helicopter pilot. Usually, I would stay up at pri-fly with the air boss watching all
17 the operations and if anything happened I'd rush down to my helicopter and be ready for
18 a launch if it was necessary. Otherwise we have the other one up on plane guard. We
19 were getting ready. They had the flight deck spotted with some of the jets up forward, but
20 towards the back of the ship they have the flight wing, the air wings starting with the
21 Willy Fudd, that's the W-2F, what do they call that? Anyway, the one with the big radar
22 dome on top and they controlled the flights as they were out away from the ship, gave the
23 additional range for the radio communication. Behind that was a squadron of ADs, the
24 Skyraider, and then behind that were the jets. So they gave the command to start all the
25 props and jets. They started the props and the one Willy Fudd had a problem. So they
26 started to recognize the problem and shut down and they were going to transfer to a
27 standby aircraft. Well, because of the delay the Phantoms who were already on their way
28 up to the catapult and just as this one friend of mine, Jim Murphy, was backing out,
29 stepping on the ladder and going down to go over to the other ship, his Phantom was
30 turned onto the catapult up forward. In doing that, he had to get moving so they had
31 power and a lot of thrust out of a Phantom and turned at the same time. Just as Jim

1 stepped down on the deck and I saw the plane, the Phantom, blew him over and blew him
2 right over to the prop of an AD. It was really grim and, of course, he was gone after that.
3 That's the way the flight deck was. You didn't make a false move or a careless move
4 without expecting to die.

5 RV: How do you get past something like that and still do your job?

6 MS: Well, we do our job. I mean, that was the joy of the Navy. We did our job. I
7 never once saw anybody back down for any reason at all.

8 RV: When a situation like that happens how does the ship react?

9 MS: Get the mess cleaned up and get the launch off.

10 RV: So it continues on normal duties and—

11 MS: There is no break at all on the operations on the carrier. As long as they can
12 operate, it operates. I say that in the deepest admiration for what the Navy has to offer.

13 RV: When did this incident happen about approximately?

14 MS: It would've been in about, let's see, when did I say I got back? February?
15 That would've been in late '66.

16 RV: Okay.

17 MS: I don't remember exactly when, but—

18 RV: He was a good friend of yours?

19 MS: Yeah. He was a messmate. We'd sit and eat chow together quite often. We
20 always bantered about. He was one of the guys that I was fairly close to.

21 RV: Tell me about other situations where emotionally you were affected during
22 this cruise and how you dealt with that. I mean positive and troubling emotion.

23 MS: All right. We had numerous accidents. Flying plane guard, we were in a
24 pretty enviable position because when you look at all of the recruiting posters they show
25 these beautiful pictures of the jets coming in for a landing or launching off the bow of a
26 carrier. Those are taken from helicopters. That's what we got to watch all the time.
27 Watching the flight operations from off to the side of the ship was really a kick. I did
28 enjoy that a lot. We were the crew that went out and took the photographs of the carrier
29 and operations that were used for records and public affairs. Got some beautiful pictures
30 from the helicopter. That was a good part of it. The bad part was that we were usually in
31 a position where we saw the accidents happen around the carrier. I remember one time a

1 Phantom took off. There were two Phantoms launched from the bow. The first one went
2 up and when they take off they usually move to the side and then as they climb out they
3 start making a turn so their wingmen can join up. I looked up just as this wingmen
4 splashed in the water. He evidently became disoriented and went straight into the water.
5 We got over and started looking for the wreckage and there was—the only sign of
6 anybody was a shattered flight helmet. Then I saw another one where one of the ADs
7 took off and evidently he became disoriented, something happened, as commander of the
8 squadron and I just looked up in time to see him go up, nose up, and stall, spun, flew into
9 the water. We had a Vigilante one time, the RA-5, the most beautiful airplane ever flown
10 in the Navy, but what a horse it was to handle. He came in and he hit the round down,
11 broke off the tail and he went skidding down the angle deck and into the water. This was
12 at night. It was pretty spectacular seeing all the sparks fly, but they both ejected and one
13 of them, the ship went by him and everybody ran over to the side and threw their
14 flashlights in to mark his position. When they finally recovered him he had been hit in the
15 head by one of the flashlights.

16 RV: Oh, no!

17 MS: From over sixty-foot flight deck that was enough to do him in. On the other
18 hand we had some pretty spectacular things that were really a kick to see. Like we had a
19 Phantom come in and had a boulder miss the wire. So he went rolling off the angle deck,
20 little bit low on getting his power on. So we just saw him go off and then suddenly he
21 disappeared down below the flight deck. All we could see was salt spray coming up and
22 steam and then suddenly he inched his way up. He was on the verge of stalling and just
23 using the ground effect to continue airborne. He managed to get his speed up and with the
24 muscle power the Phantom engines had he was able to recover. That was a good thing.
25 Another one, the guy went off the flight deck. I was still on the deck going through my
26 checklist when they launched. I just happened to glance up after he had been catapulted.
27 All I could see was a plan view. He was almost perfectly vertical, right off the bow of the
28 carrier. That's usually unrecoverable, but he managed to get it over and recover and he
29 made it back, but what a view to see the top of a Phantom from the flight deck of a
30 carrier. Let's see, there's—well, that was pretty much it, the kinds of things we got to see.
31 Some were devastating and some were, you're just sitting and you say your thanks.

1 RV: Was your job when you guys were hovering off board there to perform
2 search and rescue, to actually go after people or what?

3 MS: That was our job.

4 RV: Okay.

5 MS: That was our primary purpose. The Navy had a regulation that whenever
6 they had flight operations they had to have two rescue vehicles with the ship all the time
7 whenever they launched a recovery. That could be two helicopters or it could be two
8 destroyers or one of each, but we're always right there to pick them up.

9 RV: Okay. Compared to what you did later, how was your total cruise on the
10 *Roosevelt*? Was this something that you really enjoyed or did it get better as your career
11 went along, or I guess I'm asking was this the highlight of your time out at sea?

12 MS: Well, I would say that I was never keen on shore duty. I liked the sea duty.
13 Each of those cruises was a highlight in one way or another. Yeah, we got lonely and we
14 got frustrated and wished we could be home, but quite frankly, I kept volunteering to go
15 to sea because that's where I felt my life should be.

16 RV: Let me ask you this, when you did go to the *Roosevelt*, and this is June '65
17 and as the war progresses, tell me first where were you on understanding what the United
18 States was doing in Southeast Asia when you first got on board the *Roosevelt* in '65 and
19 then how did it progress as you completed that cruise?

20 MS: I had just a mild understanding of all of it. I didn't know what Dien Bien
21 Phu was or why they had separated North and South other than the communists wanted it
22 and that was the way they settled it just like we did in Korea. I really could've cared less
23 because I was a Mediterranean sailor at that time and we were interested in the Russian
24 submarines disrupting our flight operations, the trawlers following behind the carrier, and
25 issues in Lebanon and Cypress. The rest was all fun for us. We were pretty distant from
26 activity going on in Southeast Asia. The only time I really became interested was
27 between the two cruises, the Mediterranean and the Pacific cruise aboard *Roosevelt*, I
28 found out that they were recruiting for the Seawolves and one of our pilots, another good
29 friend of mine Al Banford, if you haven't talked to him he'll give you a much better run
30 down on early days of the Seawolves. He was a plank owner. Al told me that he had been
31 accepted to transfer to HC-1, to put up a squadron into commission. So that's when I put

1 my request in and it was denied because I was scheduled for this West Pac cruise. I was
2 upset about that, not because I had great ambitions to going over and saving the world,
3 but this was a combat experience that I wanted to get so it was essential in my career. I'll
4 tell you an outcome. I mentioned the two guys that flew into North Vietnam and made
5 the rescues. One of them was Tim Thomasee, a classmate of mine. Tim, as a result of
6 that, he had been awarded two Silver Stars. He was given the choice of duty and he chose
7 to go into jets after that. He went into A-6s and ultimately got command of a squadron
8 and he took over command of USS, oh, wait a minute, the first, CVA-59 *Forrestal*. By
9 then it was up in the training command for the flight landing, shipboard-landing
10 exercises. He's probably the first of the helicopter pilots to be given command of a major
11 ship. That was really great to see. Anyway, that's the kind of things that I aspired to and I
12 didn't quite make it.

13 RV: Was there a rivalry between the fixed-wing and the helicopter pilots?

14 MS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you bet. I mentioned that we were not part of the air wing.
15 We were part of the ship's company. I guess that the thought behind that was we were
16 there to serve the ship and take care of the air wing on behalf of the ship. They didn't
17 want the helicopters under the command of the carrier air group commander because he
18 had an interest that maybe went beyond our capability. They wanted to be sure that we
19 were looked after.

20 RV: How intense was this rivalry? I mean, did you talk with these other pilots?
21 Did they try to talk with you? Did you eat with them?

22 MS: Yeah. We had to eat with them. Of course, they're all fighter pilots. You can
23 always tell a fighter pilot, but you can't tell them much. That's the extent of our rivalry.
24 We had a lot of fun with it.

25 RV: Okay. It wasn't a negative thing?

26 MS: Usually not.

27 RV: Okay. All right, well, as your time on board the *Roosevelt* went on before
28 you leave there, you're getting into 1967 and the war is changing pretty quickly. By the
29 time you left, did you have more of an idea of what's happening and why we were there
30 and why you were there?

1 MS: All I knew was that we were there to bomb the North. We were the first
2 carrier that spent all of our time on Yankee Station. We just went and made short
3 excursions down into Dixie Station. The difference is the Yankee was covering North
4 Vietnam and Dixie was covering South Vietnam. Launch our flights and then we'd hope
5 that they came back safely.

6 RV: Right. Are there any SAR (search and rescue) missions off the *Roosevelt*
7 that you'd like to talk about?

8 MS: We weren't allowed to go anywhere.

9 RV: That's what I thought. This was the place—you couldn't go out of outside
10 the ship?

11 MS: No.

12 RV: Okay. Okay. When you left *Roosevelt* where did you go?

13 MS: Monterey to the Navy Postgraduate School.

14 RV: Okay. Tell me about that, Mike.

15 MS: Well, it started—by the time that we were coming home I was pretty
16 frustrated with things and anticipating that I was going to get out of the Navy. I sat and
17 talked to one of my classmates that had been flying the photo Crusaders and he was
18 talking about what he wanted to do. He wanted to go to the test pilot school. I put down
19 that I'd try for the test pilot school on my dream sheet and also the postgraduate school. I
20 think I put that on. Otherwise, shore duty didn't thrill me. Lo and behold, we got back
21 and I had orders to postgraduate school and he had orders to the test pilot school. So I
22 decided, "Okay, I'll go ahead and take those and continue with my career," because by
23 then I thought my career was ended. So we moved out to Monterey for two really
24 delightful years. The only bad thing about it is that it was such an intensive program of
25 study that I didn't have any more time with my family than I did when I was aboard ship.

26 RV: How long did that last? Was that an eighteen-month or two-year course?

27 MS: No, the full two years. I got there in July of '67 and I left in June of '69.

28 RV: Right. Tell me things that you studied. What were they teaching you there in
29 1967, '68, '69?

30 MS: I was in the aeronautical engineering program. We were working toward a
31 master's degree in aeronautical engineering.

1 RV: I take it this is in a classroom, anything outside the classroom?

2 MS: Well, there was our proficiency flying and during that time I was flying F-
3 2F, the Grumman Tracker, just for four hours a month, but we had been cut down in our
4 flight time so much because of the budget going to support the war activities. We didn't
5 get a lot. We just got our bare necessity to get our flight pay. I got into flying the fixed-
6 wing multi-engine, which I had been rated in and out of flight training, but didn't get to
7 do. I had also become very nervous about flying by the time we got home because of the
8 accidents, they're incidences that I've had and the activity aboard ship was so intense that
9 I was jittery. So getting into the fixed-wing gave me a chance to get my sea legs back. By
10 the time I finished the program I was ready to go back into helicopters.

11 RV: Okay. I want to ask you about staying in the Navy and staying in the service.
12 Was it just getting into Monterey and having the ability to go through that and to further
13 your career that way or was it other things that kept you in service at that time when you
14 left the *Roosevelt*?

15 MS: Monterey was a real plum. I would have to say that that's ninety nine
16 percent of why I elected to stay in. The other plum would've been the test pilot school,
17 but other than that I dreaded the thought of going to the Pentagon.

18 RV: Why, Mike?

19 MS: Because it was so much bureaucracy. I never heard nice things about it and
20 probably because I was pretty immature about it. Shore duty is also very good for the
21 career and you can make the most out of it. I wasn't at a stage in my life where that
22 interested me.

23 RV: So getting into Monterey was it for you?

24 MS: That was a really great thing, yeah.

25 RV: Okay. Now where was that gonna put you and place you in your career? Did
26 you have a specific idea that once you got out of that and with your degree this is where
27 they were gonna place you or did you have it kind of narrowed down specifically or was
28 it an open crapshoot?

29 MS: Well, it was still an open crapshoot. My ambition was to get back into an
30 operational squadron, but it would've opened the door for me to go into one of the
31 desks—the positions back in the Pentagon where they were involved in either supporting

1 logistically or developing the new aircraft that were being considered for the fleet. That
2 could've been either in desks and Bureau of Personnel or in the engineering position. The
3 engineers that were back in Washington were managing the development program of new
4 aircraft.

5 RV: Okay. What did you do? Where did you go?

6 MS: HA(L)-3.

7 RV: Okay. Tell me about that.

8 MS: All right. Ever since I had talked to Banford about that before my Vietnam
9 cruise, I had dreams of going over to fly the Hueys in HA(L)-3. So when I got my orders
10 it was exactly what I wanted. We got them a few months before we actually departed. I
11 quit studying. I quit doing everything. I was ready to go over and fight the war and really
12 thrilled with the idea.

13 RV: How did your wife feel about that?

14 MS: She didn't say much at the time. I only learned later that she wasn't keen.

15 RV: Okay. So tell me why HA(L)-3? Why the Seawolves?

16 MS: Well, it was the only squadron that was operating in North Vietnam other
17 than the detachments aboard the carrier. There was a lot of glamour to that. It was combat
18 experience, second to none. It was an opportunity to fly another helicopter that I had
19 heard was really a great plane to fly, the Huey. It would get me some in-country
20 opportunity. I felt that that would've been good for my career.

21 RV: Did you know anybody who had kind of been through the HAL experience
22 before?

23 MS: I knew Al Banford, but I hadn't seen him since he went over there.

24 RV: Okay. When you got the orders, you—how did you get there? How were
25 you deployed over?

26 MS: Well, it started with the transitional training down at Ft. Rucker, which was
27 probably the most fun in my whole life. Being a sailor in a great big Army base is a kick
28 because we couldn't buy a drink. We were treated as royalty. We had ground-floor suites
29 in the high-rise BOQ (bachelor officers' quarters) and there was such a sense of
30 camaraderie with the soldiers that I've always looked back very fondly at that month or
31 so that I spent there.

1 RV: What kind of training, what transition training did you have to undergo?

2 MS: Okay. We had the familiarization with the Huey where we just learned to
3 start it and take off and land it and do different maneuvers. It had been a couple of years
4 since I'd flown helicopters so that was good to get. We learned the systems of the
5 helicopter. After that we got an introduction into the gunnery where we actually went out
6 and practiced maneuvers that we see doing in HA(L)-3 with the—well, let's see. One was
7 low-altitude flying with a 50-millimeter cannon mounted, fixed mount. That was to give
8 us the practice at shooting rockets. They had some old tanks and trucks sitting out in the
9 forest and we'd fly in low altitude strafe them and shoot at them.

10 RV: How was that for you, the firing part?

11 MS: That was fun. I've always prided myself that in my two gunnery training
12 sessions, one in the T-28 where we went up and we rolled in on a banner. I hit the banner.
13 I was the only one in my group. Then in the Huey we were flying two students with one
14 instructor. The other student with me was a guy who had had jet experience in fighters
15 and with a good shot. A great guy, Ken Hammond, we developed a real good friendship
16 there. When we rolled in on the tank I hit it and he didn't, but the gunnery was a lot of
17 fun.

18 RV: What else did you all do?

19 MS: We did a lot of autorotation. All you do when you're in training is practice
20 autorotation and we'd be flying out there. I finally learned how to anticipate it, but just all
21 of a sudden they'd cut the engine and we'd go floating down. They'd evaluate us on
22 selecting a good place to land and how we handled it. When I say I finally figured it out, I
23 realized that frequently I'd let go of the collective to reach up and change the radio
24 station or something. When I had my hand off the collective, that's when he'd cut the
25 engine. So I got to where I could plan my autorotations in advance, all part of the game.

26 RV: Yeah. What did you think flew better, the Seawolf, the Huey, or your
27 previous aircraft? Compare the two, I guess is what I'm asking.

28 MS: Okay. Here's part of it. The sophistication of the Seasprite was such a
29 challenge to us. It was very frustrating for the maintenance crew because they did one
30 study and in a month it took 273 man hours of maintenance to get one flight hour—I
31 think it was the 273. Maybe it was 73, anyway, an awful lot of maintenance just to get an

1 hour's flight out of a helicopter. The Huey was a very basic ship that was, somebody in
2 the Army really used his head in developing that because they were maintained by
3 draftees, soldiers that were really ticked off that they had to be away from home and
4 especially over in a combat zone living in tents and with rain and mud and poor chow.
5 The guy that led that program realized these guys were earning less than a minimum
6 wage. They were really disenchanted with the life they had and it had to be a helicopter
7 that they could kick in the side anytime they got mad and still be able to fly. It was a
8 great little helicopter. I don't think they had the growing pains that we had, but it was a
9 very simple machine compared to the Seasprite.

10 RV: Would you like to walk me through why you believe so highly in this
11 aircraft? I mean, tell me about what it was like inside. How did it handle? What was it
12 like to fly it?

13 MS: Well, I'll compare the two again. The Seasprite had a very nice flight
14 capability. It was like flying a fighter. Very maneuverable, yet it was stabilized and it was
15 smooth. It had an automatic blade tracking system so that anytime it developed a one per
16 rev, it would track it right out automatically. It was wonderful in that respect. The Huey
17 was also very maneuverable, but it was a lot rougher, a lot tougher, and vibrated a lot
18 more. It was maneuverable and worked out well over there in Southeast Asia. Part of the
19 difference was the training, difference in training between the Navy and the Army. In the
20 Navy with the all-weather capability we had to be very cautious. So the NATOPS (Naval
21 Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization) manual said, "You will not
22 exceed thirty degrees angle of bank or a thirty degrees nose up or down. You'll keep your
23 wings pretty level all the time," and it was kind of like flying a bomber. We were kind of
24 restricted in what we did. We'd horse around a lot and it would perform the maneuver
25 very nicely. Because of the instrument conditions vertigo is such a challenge, especially
26 in a helicopter, that you didn't do a lot of horsing around in it. I got into the—we just did
27 everything by the numbers. Whereas I got into the Huey and Leo LeFranz was my
28 instructor. One day he said, "Have you ever autorotated backwards?" I said, "No."
29 "Would you like to try it?" "No." "Do you think it can be done?" "No." "Well, here
30 watch this." Actually, he took it in and he started it going backwards in an autorotation
31 and demonstrated that the only thing is you're falling a lot faster so you've got to begin

1 your recovery faster. Get your forward airspeed so you can make a safe landing. He said,
2 “Now do you want to try it?” I said, “No!” He said, “Take the controls. Now just pull the
3 nose up and start slowing down.” We were up at a high altitude. He cut the engine and
4 told me to do that. Then he said, “Now stick your arm out into the wind as a slip screen.
5 What do you feel?” “I feel the wind coming from behind me.” He said, “See? It’ll fly.”
6 He said, “All right, now you’re getting down so begin your recovery and do your
7 approach to the landing.” So I did and sure enough it worked. So right then and there I
8 was well impressed at what the kind of things that you could do in a helicopter. Then
9 another thing was this thirty-degree angle of bank. He said, “You ever fly a ninety degree
10 angle of bank?” I said, “No.” “Here, let me show you.” I said, “No, don’t.” He did and
11 sure enough the Huey would go into a ninety degree bank angle and as long as you kept
12 positive Gs on it, it was just fine like that. I found that in Vietnam that was essential.

13 RV: Yeah. It sounds like this helicopter was perfect for the war, almost.

14 MS: Oh, it was made for it. In fact, the war was made for the Huey because it just
15 did such great things over there. I can’t say enough for what Bell put out in that
16 helicopter and for the training that I got from the Army.

17 RV: Was that month at Ft. Rucker enough or did you guys need more?

18 MS: Well, when we got over to HA(L)-3 we went through our indoctrination
19 training where we had to fly around and see what the different theaters were, different
20 bases, and then we had to do some flying to get qualified as an aircraft commander. That
21 was just to take cross-country’s or do utility work. Ultimately as an attack helicopter
22 aircraft commander where we actually ran the flights.

23 RV: Where did you all go to in Vietnam? Where was HA(L)-3 located?

24 MS: When I arrived they had shifted their operations from Vung Tau to Binh
25 Thuy. Binh Thuy was on the Bassac River which is an arm of the, what is it, the
26 Mekong?

27 RV: Yes. One of the —

28 MS: It’s parallel. It splits off into two rivers and then goes down to the Pacific,
29 South China Sea, but it’s a big river. We had the YRBM (yard repair, berthing, and
30 messing barge) was in there, the big landing barge that they had. They both were

1 operating up and down the river quite a bit. That was our base of operations and we
2 shared the Navy Binh Thuy with the VAL-4 Black Ponies. Are you familiar with them?

3 RV: I've heard about them and read that name. Explain what they are.

4 MS: VAL-4 was a fixed-wing squadron that flew the OV-10, the counter-
5 insurgency aircraft.

6 RV: Uh-huh. That's right.

7 MS: North American Rockwell built it and they armed it with a minigun and I
8 think a .20-caliber and 5-inch rockets as well as the 2.75-inch rockets. It was a real gun
9 ship, great little plane. They operated and they had commissioned them after HA(L)-3
10 had been commissioned because it had a longer range and a faster response. We had to be
11 out in the field with the boats and they could be overhead in most places much quicker
12 than we could except that we were better pilots.

13 RV: Why do you say that?

14 MS: 'Cause we were helicopter pilots.

15 RV: Okay.

16 MS: They were a good outfit. There was a good rivalry going there, too.

17 RV: I can imagine. Okay, talk me through the first few days there at Binh Thuy.

18 MS: Okay. It was a new base. We had good quarters. We had a fairly good mess
19 hall. We had a great maintenance hanger and flight line with the bunkers all around the
20 helicopters. I was assigned first of all to the maintenance division where I was the
21 division officer, maintenance department, where I was the division officer for the aircraft
22 division and then the avionics division. The aircraft division took care of the survival
23 equipment and different parts of the ship. That was just a matter of I was there, they had a
24 chief petty officer in each of those that saw to the things that went the way they were
25 supposed to and all I did was spend my time flying and smoking cigarettes. Well, no, I
26 didn't smoke then. Sitting with my feet on the desk.

27 RV: Okay. What was your first impression of the country of Vietnam?

28 MS: The smell. We got off the plane at Tan Son Nhut and the smell and the
29 humidity hit me right in the face. We got into town. We stayed at the Annapolis Hotel in
30 town and we got there. There were barricades set up and chain link fences all around to
31 keep them from throwing things through the windows. We got in and you could see it

1 was just a temporary place, but we got there and spent the night. I looked out and saw
2 that I wasn't gonna go downtown at all without a whole army with me. I was sitting on
3 the edge, pins and needles, at that until they finally gave me the word that the helicopter
4 was coming in and arranged my transport out to Binh Thuy. Got to Binh Thuy and that
5 was a good secure base. I was there after Tet of '68. Things were pretty well under
6 control. So I just concentrated on getting checked out in the helicopter. I became one of
7 the maintenance test pilots and that's where my training at Monterey came in because I
8 really knew aircraft and their systems and what they were supposed to do. I did what I
9 could hoping to get out on detachment.

10 RV: How long were you told that it would take for you to get out?

11 MS: I served three months there at the squadron before they put me on
12 detachment. That was doing the test flying, getting everything checked out and doing a
13 lot of utility work where I'd deliver aircraft out to the detachments. When they'd have a
14 problem I'd fly out and trade aircraft and fly the other one back. Also, delivering mail or
15 groceries or whatever we could to help the guys out there. I got to fly to every one of the
16 different detachments in the field where we operated and got to know my way around the
17 Delta pretty well.

18 RV: I can imagine. I want to ask you how different was the war? How did it look
19 different to you now, but you never really saw the war during the first cruise? I mean,
20 you saw the results of the planes going and coming, but you weren't in Vietnam. I mean,
21 you were not over land running missions.

22 MS: It was a kick flying over land as much as we did and especially because we
23 had no navigation aid.

24 RV: Really?

25 MS: We didn't have TACAN (tactical airborne navigation). The only thing we
26 had was the sectional map that had pretty good detail of the terrain and landmarks that we
27 could navigate by. I developed a VFR (visual flight rules) navigation skill. We all did,
28 that was probably the best the Navy had ever heard of. We could tell—we tracked our
29 position throughout a flight and we could've told you within a matter of yards where we
30 were over the Earth.

31 RV: How is that?

1 MS: Well, we had a lot of canals and a lot of different landmarks that were
2 marked on the map. We could just guesstimate from our altitude and the angle where we
3 were sitting on that map, but we had no radio aids at all.

4 RV: What about what you heard about the war about post-Tet and this is 1969.
5 What had changed about the attitude toward the war? What differences did you sense?

6 MS: Well, we had several of the Seawolves that had been there during Tet and
7 gone through that experience. They really took some fire. We lost aircraft. We lost people
8 in those attacks. They came back with some pretty violent stories. I didn't get in on any
9 of that. It was very calm by the time I got there to the point where it was almost a
10 disappointment because—I made a trip, after I'd been there for many months. I made a
11 trip into Saigon to visit with my father-in-law. We walked around downtown Saigon
12 without guards, without weapons. I was in my fatigues when I did it. I just felt that
13 comfortable with it. Getting out in-country we had wild country that we wouldn't want to
14 get close to and on the other hand we made one trip, I forget where it was, but it was in a
15 village where we had to land and wait at an airstrip. We expected Admiral Zumwalt to
16 come flying in. We were supposed to escort him, but he didn't show up. We just sat there
17 for an hour or two on the ground perfectly content. We didn't worry about it at all. In
18 other cases we'd have to fly into a field where we had to replenish with fuel and ammo.
19 We did it with our gunners sitting out there armed with their M-60s ready to shoot back if
20 we had to.

21 RV: So you're describing something that was, for a war, relatively calm?

22 MS: Yeah. It was not the frontline action that I initially thought I'd experience.

23 RV: Were you disappointed?

24 MS: Kind of, yeah. Yeah, but not really. When I first got on the detachment I was
25 skeptical because these guys would come back telling all these sea stories about the
26 gunfights they had. I think it was my first flight. The gunner started telling us that we
27 were taking fire and he started shooting. I didn't see any tracers or anything. I didn't
28 know how he could tell we were taking fire. I kind of jumped on him when we got down.
29 I said, "Are you sure we were taking fire? How can you tell?" He said, "I can hear it. I
30 can see the flashes." I thought that was crock-a-bully. Just trying to gun deck it and get
31 his air medals. Then a flight or two after that we came back and we had a bullet hole in

1 the helicopter. I didn't even realize that we had been under fire. It was real. By the time I
2 left or very shortly thereafter when I actually heard the AK-47s firing at us, I realized
3 these guys do hear it and they can tell whether it's aimed at them or not just by the sound.

4 RV: Right. Right. Do you have any other incidents that mark your time there
5 during the second deployment? I want to hear about those.

6 MS: You mean exciting things?

7 RV: Anything that marks your time there. When you think back about that time
8 what are you seeing and what are you feeling and particularly incidents that happened?

9 MS: There was one thing that bothered me and that was that the junior pilots who
10 had been there for a while. They were in command of the helicopter and they carried that
11 down on to the LST (landing ship, tank) with them that they were the top dogs. I was
12 there as a second-tour pilot as a lieutenant with a guy that was not even a year out of
13 flight training in. I took exception to that and had words with my officer in charge over
14 that that we're still naval officers and we've maintained the relationship of junior to
15 senior. When we're in the helicopter they're in command. That didn't bother me at all,
16 but on deck that was a different story. That seemed to pervade throughout the squadron,
17 but that's something that I lived with once I got my own helicopter that wasn't an issue
18 anymore. We had a good life. When I got out on detachment we were stationed aboard an
19 LST, the *Garrett County*. It was kind of a nice deal. We're anchored about three miles off
20 the mouth of Song Ong Doc over in the Gulf of Thailand. We were not under any fire out
21 there, not any major threats. They kept dropping grenades over the side if they thought
22 they saw something just to get a concussion that deterred any Viet Cong attack, any
23 sapper attack. We felt very safe out there. After a few months of that, they told us to
24 move to a base at Song Ong Doc where they had the barges tied up to the PBRs (patrol
25 boat, river) and we were moved into just about the most primitive conditions we could've
26 hoped for. We lived in a swamp, a little raised area of the swamp with some grazed trails
27 that would get us over to our helicopters. We had to go over to the Army base at Ca Mau
28 and swipe some PSP (perforated steel planking) to put down so that we didn't sink into
29 the mud. We had what looked like a very durable bunker right there and inside was one
30 of the scanners that they used in the P-3 to listen to sonobuoys. That was our defense. We
31 had these sonobuoys planted out there. I think it was Operation Duffle Bag where they

1 had the electronic sensors planted and they had a Coast Guard cutter. It seems to me it
2 was the *Dallas*, but I'm not sure. They were anchored out there by our LST. They had a
3 5-inch, .50 forward gun on it. If we sensed any movement out in the jungle then they'd
4 home in on that sensor and shoot it. That was pretty impressive what they had. You
5 remember the old Martin Denny music where you had the jungle sounds in the
6 background?

7 RV: Mm-hmm.

8 MS: You don't.

9 RV: No, I do. I do.

10 MS: Oh, you do?

11 RV: Yeah. Yeah.

12 MS: Well, that's the way it was. It was that kind of sounds that we'd heard of the
13 birds and the frogs and every once in a while you could actually hear a sampan gliding
14 through the water on this canal. When we did we'd call that in to the Coast Guard and
15 we'd hear a few 5-inch shots going off and over the sonobuoy we'd hear screams when
16 they hit. It was pretty impressive.

17 RV: Yeah. How was working with the Coast Guard?

18 MS: They were very responsive to that, but one night they made a bad mistake
19 and we had a disastrous result of it. To mark their position to get a relative fix we had a
20 reflector up on top of our barge. When they fired they aimed for the reflector rather than
21 put in the corrections for the target. So we took six 5-inch air bursts overhead. I think
22 there were two casualties out of that. That was pretty sad.

23 RV: Yeah. I can imagine.

24 MS: The really sad thing is that there's a book that I saw at the Naval Institute
25 that was the history of the Coast Guard. I looked that incident up and they did refer to it,
26 but all they said was that they did some friendly fire and there were casualties, but they
27 didn't even bother finding out who they hit, which I thought was disappointing. We went
28 out to the fire team, always two helicopters. The early part I was the wingman and the
29 fire team leader always called the shots. Then when I got qualified being the senior
30 lieutenant in the det., then I was always the fire team leader. We worked together very
31 well. I think the Seawolves were really great in that respect that they established the fire

1 team, they worked together well, knew what to do, and always looked after each other.
2 We'd go out either on a scramble where the boats would come under attack and we'd go
3 out to help them, provide air cover. We worked well with the guys in the boats and some
4 pretty heroic stories of the air crewman in some of that. Otherwise we'd go out and patrol
5 and we'd just look. It was search-and-destroy missions. We covered the southern end of
6 the U Minh Forest over on the western coast of the Delta and all the way up to Ca Mau
7 on the Song Ong Doc, the river, and then down to the south covering an area that we refer
8 to as VC Lake. There was a sad incident there after I left the detachment where our ship
9 was hit in an ambush and we lost the pilot and the door gunner, very good friends of
10 mine.

11 RV: Do you want to talk about that? Tell me about it. What happened?

12 MS: Sure. If you look at the, let's see, *Aviation Historical Review*, they did an
13 article on that, Jim Sprinkle did it. You can get a little bit better picture. This is too far in
14 my memory, but I added a little bit of info on it. Evidently, the Army had been hit with
15 this ambush and it ditched a helicopter in the lake. It was a very shallow lake, so they
16 tried to get people in and they kept coming under fire. The Seawolves responded and they
17 went in to see if they could get people out. One of them was shot and went into the lake
18 itself. That's where Bill Pederson and Jose Ramos died. This was all gunfire coming from
19 the shore. I learned later that when they did finally get in to rescue all the other, the
20 wingman was also shot and he had to leave the scene to get to a base before he lost all of
21 his hydraulics, I think. He just barely made it. The plane was down there and two victims
22 remaining. One was Jim Plona, and I finally saw Jim three years ago, four, five years ago
23 at the Seawolves reunion. It was the first time that I'd seen him. He came back with two
24 Purple Hearts, and a great door gunner—the copilot I didn't know and he was strapped
25 in, I guess, tied into that aircraft all night long. They both stayed out there all night before
26 anybody could get there to recover them. It was just a classic ambush where something
27 attracted the Army and they went in. First one was shot down with fire from both sides of
28 the lake. Then when the rescues went into get them they were shot at, too.

29 RV: But they got them out?

30 MS: Ultimately they got everybody out.

31 RV: Okay. What would you say was a typical mission for you, Mike?

1 MS: Well, mostly the hunt and destroy. We'd take off. We'd go flying up at
2 about fifteen hundred feet, fly over an area looking for anything suspicious, any kind of
3 boat. One of our crews flew over the U Minh and spotted a sampan and they did a rocket
4 attack on it and got a secondary explosion that they say blew a hole in the mud forty feet
5 in diameter. So he was carrying some heavy ammunition in there. Another case, this was
6 one that Pete Gingrich flew. I wasn't in on it, but it was right after I'd got aboard the
7 LST. He was out on a patrol just an hour before the Christmas truce was to begin. Near
8 Song Ong Doc they spotted an island with a company of what looked like Vietnamese, or
9 Viet Cong, which it was. Anyway, so we were in a free-fire zone, but he got clearanced
10 to hit it and he did a rocket and machinegun attack that they got into our reports. This is
11 fifteen minutes before the truce was due to start. They got intel reports a couple of weeks
12 later that they wasted twenty-six of the Viet Cong on that. They were en route to Song
13 Ong Doc for the Christmas holiday and also to stage an attack, I understand, on our base.
14 So he warded that off beautifully. Otherwise we'd fly along and if we took fire we'd
15 stage an attack. If we didn't take fire we'd look for a target of opportunity and make an
16 attack on it. Sometimes that was usually starting up at about fifteen hundred feet and
17 we'd go down, didn't want to go below eight hundred, but we usually broke it off at
18 about six hundred feet. We felt invincible up there. The helicopter was pretty durable.
19 They gave us a rundown one time on the vulnerability of it that all we were really
20 confronted with was small-arms fire. That would be the AK-47, mostly, otherwise just
21 single rounds. When we're up at altitude we were moving at sixty-five to eighty-five
22 miles an hour. We had armor plate under the engine so it was protected. We had armor
23 plate under our fannies so we were protected. We wore vests, bulletproof vests that helped
24 us. So that if we were on an attack, we were vulnerable from the front and that's usually
25 where the pilot got hit, but otherwise the helicopter was pretty sturdy because the only
26 thing that was really exposed to the enemy fire was the rotor system and the blades are
27 turning fast enough they didn't take a lot of hits. If they managed to hit that small motor
28 mass then they could destroy it. Otherwise we weren't that concerned. The door gunners
29 covered us when we'd make a stage run. It was always in a racetrack pattern. The lead
30 ship would go in a dive and take aim and then they'd break off before they got over the
31 target. We didn't want to fly over the target because that made us too vulnerable. So he'd

1 break off and go into a turn away from the target. By then the wingman was on his way in
2 so that if the enemy had tried to start shooting at us, the wingman would've put his head
3 down, put the enemy's head down. So we were safe in that regard and then by the time he
4 was pulling out we were rolling in again. That's where that ninety degree bank turn came
5 in so handy was that we could make a very fast turn and be pointed right at the target
6 again.

7 RV: Tell me about some times when your helicopter actually launched some of
8 its weaponry at the enemy.

9 MS: You mean the kind of targets we went after?

10 RV: Well, you can talk about that, but also times when you shot.

11 MS: Oh. Well, the events were really usually pretty nothing remarkable about
12 them. Let me see if I can recall anything. There was one time at VC Lake where we
13 sighted two sampans beached at a village and one of them was flying the Vietnamese
14 flag, the South Vietnamese flag. The other wasn't. So we figured they're all supposed to
15 be flying the flag. We got clearance and we staged an attack on the one that wasn't. We
16 just shot the daylights out of that one sampan and left the good guys sitting there.
17 Presume he was a good guy, but the message was fly that flag and be a friend or else
18 you're vulnerable. Another time we saw a sampan down in the river or in a canal, and we
19 had a 50-millimeter mounted on the, I think it was on the port side. So I just let the
20 gunner shoot at that and I watched a tracer go down and hit that thing right in the keel
21 and it literally broke in half and sank just from the impact of that one bullet. The fifty-
22 mike-mike was really a great weapon for us. It would penetrate a lot. Otherwise there
23 were times when we'd shoot at what we referred to as a Viet Cong tractor, which was
24 nothing but a water buffalo. With a minigun they just sent that buffalo dancing, but I
25 don't think it penetrated the hide even. It was just a 2.76 millimeter bullet and even from
26 up there it didn't have that much of a whollop unless it hit a person. I did one really dumb
27 thing. I thought maybe I'd try a tactic. We carried flechettes in our rockets. The flechette
28 is a ten-pound warhead, but instead of an explosive it's got these little nails in it. When it
29 gets away from the helicopter it breaks open and these things scatter about with such a
30 velocity that they'll penetrate a foot-diameter pine tree and cover many, many square feet
31 with a density that made it sure that nobody down there would make it without getting

1 hit. The problem was that we heard stories that the Viet Cong would get under water with
2 a bamboo tube. They'd breathe. We wouldn't see them and then when the coast was clear
3 they'd come up. I figured, well, if I suspected there was somebody down there I could get
4 to it, but with the flechettes they'd hit the water and just ricochet off without any
5 penetration. I figured the steeper I could make it the better off I'd be with the depth and
6 become a lethal weapon. I went out to try it by pushing the nose over into a steep dive
7 firing and then pulling out of it. I did that just to try it and I was never so scared in my
8 life as I was when I came out of that because that helicopter doesn't fly well in a steep
9 dive. Later I became even more scared because one of the weaknesses of the Huey that
10 they learned later was the rotor mast bumping. It's a teetering rotor that's just up on an
11 axis and it teeters and if it gets to a far enough angle it'll bump against the mast. It's got
12 so much energy one or two bumps and that mast will break. Well, I was very close to that
13 and I should've never had done that. That was the lesson I learned fortunately benignly. I
14 don't think my door gunners liked me after that.

15 RV: What else happened over there?

16 MS: Well, there was another experience where we had a hot scramble one, which
17 meant our boats were taking fire. I started my engine. I was the fire team leader and I was
18 the first one to take off. The LST turned into the wind for us and we were very heavy, but
19 I had developed a takeoff procedure that gave me the capability of launching with a lot
20 heavier weight than the Army would've allowed. The Army had a little go/no go chart on
21 the instrument panel. You'd pick it up into a hover and if you're in ground effect you
22 would check what you're expected power would be by the turbine RPM and that's in
23 percentage. If you were three percent, if you were hovering with three percent less than
24 that topping power then you could make a safe take off over a fifty-foot obstacle out in
25 front. If you had two percent you could just make a level take off and climb and get
26 translational lift and go. This was one of those cases where I could just barely get off the
27 ground, but I couldn't hover in ground effect so I just added what little power I had left in
28 topping power. You knew you were at topping power because that's when your rotor
29 RPM would start to deteriorate. I just kept climbing 'til I was about twenty or thirty feet
30 above the deck of the ship. Then I was going to ease the nose forward rather than do a
31 radical nose forward. The difference is that you've got the full rotor disc area giving you

1 lift and then when you tilt the rotor to accelerate, part of the thrust goes to the
2 acceleration and the rest of it is used for keeping you up. By my aeronautical engineering
3 training I knew that the loss in vertical lift was effect of the variable of the cosine of the
4 angle of tilt. Now that meant that the further you pushed it forward the more thrust went
5 into acceleration and the less thrust was available for keeping you up. This is just a very
6 fine line between staying airborne and accelerating or sinking. By getting up to altitude I
7 could kill a little bit of altitude to use that to get my acceleration going. Well, I cut it way
8 too close and I kept going down and just barely accelerating. What the goal was, was to
9 get up to fifteen knots where you'd pick up translational lift. In translational lift you
10 change the airflow through the rotor. It increases the efficiency by about fifteen or twenty
11 percent and you get more power to keep you airborne. I was going down. My rotor RPM
12 was deteriorating. We were getting closer to the water and my door gunner thought we
13 were going in and he pulled the release to jettison the rocket pod. That probably saved us,
14 or he thinks it saved us. I think that we would've made it, but fortunately we never found
15 out the hard way that we may not have. We did lose the mission because of it and a
16 rocket pod. That was a close call. That was another of the dumb things that I did. Really
17 the big thing was that I hadn't demonstrated that technique to the crew very much and
18 made them aware of what I was doing. Otherwise he may have felt a little more
19 comfortable with it. I hadn't briefed them on it. They were startled and probably
20 rightfully so. I'll take this chance. I don't even remember his name, but I was kind of
21 upset with him for doing that, but after a little afterthought if he ever reads this then I
22 hope he will know that I am fully apologetic for putting him into that position.

23 RV: That's the door gunner you're talking about?

24 MS: That's the door gunner that pulled the release on the rocket pod. He's a good
25 person, did a great job for me.

26 RV: Okay. Can you describe your crew? Who did you have in there?

27 MS: Sure. Usually I had junior pilots right out of the training command. They
28 were lieutenant, junior grade. They had had no experience out in the fleet. They were
29 given their orders to report to Ft. Rucker for transitional training and then directly to
30 Vietnam. They got there. They went through their indoctrination. They were eager and
31 they were good. Every pilot that we had over there was good either because they made

1 themselves good or they were just naturals at it. There was some really good people. The
2 door gunners were young kids, guys, right out of school. They were trying to avoid the,
3 evade the draft, but rather than go to Canada they enlisted and they had no idea what they
4 were getting into. They'd get out of basic training, boot camp, and have their orders to
5 Vietnam. They were sent straight over and one of the guys wrote a real good book. I
6 don't see it here, but he described that his arrival was to—he got into Tan Son Nhut and
7 after a couple of days at the hotel he was taken out to the detachment and en route as a
8 passenger they put him through an attack. So there was no downtime for the Seawolves.
9 Whenever they were airborne, they were ready to fight. That was his introduction into
10 HA(L)-3. The next flight was when he was riding along as an indoctrinee learning what
11 the door gunners were supposed to do. Learning how to shoot the guns and they got shot
12 up pretty badly. He had a heck of an experience and of course he got out. I guess all of
13 them got out of it okay, but their helicopter was shot to pieces. He learned in a hurry that
14 he better learn how to handle that gun. It was a great story. I don't know. Maybe you
15 picked up the book when you were at the Seawolves reunion. I can't even remember his
16 name. Oh yeah. *A War with No Name*, nope, that's not it. Sorry, I can't find it right now.

17 RV: That's okay. That's okay.

18 MS: It's a good one to read because he wrote it as part of his therapy for PTSD
19 (post traumatic stress disorder). After reading what he went through I can understand why
20 he's experiencing that. I feel it because of what happened to my shipmates, but he was
21 one of the shipmates that experienced it.

22 RV: Besides your door gunner who else is in the helicopter with you?

23 MS: Well, we had two door gunners. They sat there at the door. They had a, what
24 we called a monkey belt secured to the bulkhead and around their waist. So they would
25 sit there hanging out the door, usually with a foot on a skid. They had handheld M-60s.
26 They'd strap a couple of grips on them using radiator clamps and they would lean out
27 there and keep their eyes and ears open for any activity. Usually they were the first ones
28 that would tell us when we're under fire. As soon as they told us, we'd tell them shoot it
29 and they'd start shooting with their M-60s. They got to where they could sight something
30 and within a second of watching their tracers go down they could adjust and be right on
31 target. They were really spectacular gunners. I had one case where my gunner fell out of

1 the helicopter and we look at it now with a little bit of humor, but it sure wasn't funny to
2 him. This was "Red" Coming, John Coming, finally made touch with him a couple of, a
3 year or so ago. He was chattering away on his machinegun leaning out and we were
4 circling around a target. His gun jammed. Well, he was leaning into it fighting the recoil
5 and when the gun jammed he just went flying out the door. Fortunately he had his
6 monkey belt on. We called him Red cause of his carrot red hair. I heard the thud when he
7 was stopped by the gunner's belt. I looked over and I remember thinking, "Oh my God,
8 I've lost a gunner." I saw the strap pulled taught so I knew he must've been under there.
9 Then first thing I saw was a white-knuckled hand on the edge of the flight deck and then
10 another one, I mean really white. Then I saw the red hair merging over the flight deck
11 and I saw this sheet-white face coming up with it. He was climbing back on the skids and
12 pulling himself into the helicopter. I mean, there wasn't any blood in his head at all at
13 that stage. He got in and he was okay. So when we got down I chewed him out for losing
14 his weapon. It took him a minute to realize I was kidding him. That was one of the good
15 outcomes.

16 RV: Okay. Tell me about who else is on the helicopter with you and what they
17 do.

18 MS: Okay. Well, it was only two pilots and two door gunners. The pilot operated,
19 it flew the aircraft on an attack and operated the rockets because you aimed the rockets by
20 aiming the helicopter. So he had a gun site in front of him that he pulled down and he
21 would fire from that. The copilot operated the minigun, the flex mount. Earlier in the
22 game when they first started they were operating with the four M-60s on the flex mount,
23 two on each side. So we got the miniguns. The minigun would fire each side two
24 thousand rounds per minute and when it aimed out to where one of them was blocked by
25 the fuselage, the other one would pick up the rates. The other was firing four thousand
26 rounds per minute, quite a machine. That was one where we had a little handgrip that
27 we'd pull down in front of the copilot. He'd hold it and pull the trigger and aim the thing
28 with a little optical sight that he had in sight. That was also very deadly. The gunners
29 themselves, let's see if I can recall some of them. One that I already mentioned that was
30 lost at VC Lake was Jose Ramos. Jose was one of these really good looking young
31 Hispanic guys with a great sense of humor, excellent door gunner, and a top-notch sailor.

1 He was one that never complained and always did his job and he did it well. I don't think
2 there's anybody that has a bad word to say about Jose. That and another one, I remember
3 him as Joe Trosko, but then I heard that it was something else, his first name. Trosko was
4 a weightlifter. By that time we were operating from the village at Song Ong Doc there by
5 the barges. That's when we were living in the mud. Trosko was a muscle man and he
6 brought his 150-pound barbell with him out there. Well, the SEALs (Sea, Air, Land) were
7 operating with us and they loved him for that because they all worked out, out on the
8 barge pumping iron. Trosko would go out with the SEALs on some of their incursions.
9 They'd give him an M-60 since he knew how to use it. He'd carry it and they'd go out
10 and conduct their mission and come back in the middle of the night. He did that for fun.
11 He also operated the guns on the ship. He operated the 50-millimeter as well as his M-60,
12 but there was one incident out on the barge where they were pumping iron and I swear to
13 God this SEAL dropped this barbell over the side of the barge and this is in water about
14 nine knots of current, muddy, it's got the silt of eons of flow through it and about ten to
15 fifteen feet deep. This SEAL just dove right down into that muddy water and he felt
16 around with his hands until he found that barbell and he picked it up and swam to the
17 surface and tread water there by the barge. Then got the barbell up on his shoulder and
18 gave a big kick with his feet and got an arm up and then with one arm he pushed that
19 barbell up and back onto the deck.

20 RV: Wow.

21 MS: If you ever hear tales of the SEALs that seem outlandish, believe them.
22 They're an incredible bunch of people. Anyway, that was Trosko. He was another good
23 one. We had another guy I can't remember his name, but he was kind of a flaky guy. He
24 was good with the guns, good with the maintenance and he had a dog. By that time we
25 were living in a little sea hut over there on the beach and he had picked up this little pup
26 and every Vietnamese dog had a corkscrew tail. He named this dog Tit. The remark was
27 "Ain't she tits?" Tits was a fun little pup to have around, but our defense was like I
28 mentioned earlier was the sonobuoys out there, but also the French when they had been
29 there had set out landmines all around our area. Landmines would go off occasionally
30 with these animals running around. Also, part of the problem was that we were infested
31 with rats. Our recreation was to sit there with a 16-gauge shot gun and shoot the rats.

1 We'd put C-5 out as bait for the rats. They'd eat the C-5 and it was supposed to be a
2 poison. Well, so did Tits. One day another strange dog came in and this gunner didn't
3 want that strange dog messing around with his dog and he took out his M-60 and shot it
4 without realizing Tits was between him and the other dog. Tits was full of C-4 and made
5 a big blast when she was hit. That was the end of our pet, kind of a sick funny thing. It
6 was primitive and ultimately I'll get through my pictures and put them into the system
7 because, in fact, if you go onto Google Earth you can home in on the Song Ong Doc right
8 at the mouth of the river and you can see looking at it. The village is a little bit bigger, but
9 it's still the same river and it's still out in the middle of nowhere or on the edge of
10 nowhere.

11 RV: Mm-hmm. Mike, why don't we take a break for a moment?

12 MS: Okay.

Interview with Michael Smith

Session [4] of [4]

January 25, 2007

1

2 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone continuing my oral history interview
3 for the Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project. I'm talking with Mike Smith again.

4 Mike, we are continuing now the next day. We talked yesterday on the twenty-fourth.

5 Today is January 25th, 2007. It's about 1:37 Central Standard Time in the afternoon.

6 Mike, we had discussed a lot of specific instances that you went over. We talked about,
7 or you talked about the helicopter itself. You talked about the crew and what they did.

8 One general question that a lot of people have who are not familiar, say, with the
9 helicopter or with the Vietnam War itself or military history or maybe who are familiar
10 with this stuff, they want to know some general answers. One of these questions is from
11 your perspective what do you think people need to know about what you did specifically,
12 your tour there with the Seawolves, and then what do you think that people reading this
13 interview, listening to this interview in the future need to know about the HA(L)-3
14 squadron itself, just the history of the squadron?

15 Michael Smith: Okay.

16 RV: Big questions, I know, but they're important things that I know people have
17 asked of us in the past and rather than me answer them I'd love for you to try to answer
18 those questions.

19 MS: All right, well, let me start first with the purpose of HA(L)-3. The war was
20 really an Army, a ground war within the Republic of Vietnam. The Navy played a
21 peripheral role with their operations off the coast. That was the deep water Navy. They
22 started coming in because the Army was dealing with boats on the rivers and there was so
23 much water in that country, especially down in the Mekong Delta, that they were
24 depleting their resources just trying to fight a water type operation. So they evidently got
25 the Navy involved and I think that started about 1965. The first call came out for
26 volunteers for the brown water Navy. They became more and more involved in a couple
27 of things. One was keeping control of the Saigon River, which was the line of
28 communication for the shipments into Vietnam. The other was to help out in the
29 countryside where we had all the rivers and canals and ditches to control the Viet Cong.

1 Now I think that it was part of Operation Slingshot, which was Elmo Zumwalt's plan to
2 choke off the supply routes at the Parrot's Beak, which was an extension of Cambodia
3 going down towards Saigon that gave the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese beautiful,
4 easy routes to get close to the capital, not to mention the countryside. So they brought in
5 all of the brown water Navy with the swift boats and PBRs. They had what we called
6 Mike boats. I forget just what they were, but they were a landing craft that was armed for
7 combat. They put them into patrol the river. With the Army doing a lot of that first, then
8 the Navy, the Navy found that they needed air support and the Army couldn't provide it
9 because they were just overstretched. So they came up with the idea that maybe the Navy
10 could provide helicopter air support with gunships and the Army supported the Navy in
11 that by providing the UH-1 Bs, Bravos, as their gunship. The whole purpose was to
12 provide rapid air support to the boats that are down in these narrow channels that were
13 experiencing a lot of ambush. So that was the purpose of bringing HA(L)-3 into being
14 and that occurred in 1967. It was actually commissioned. It went over first to the
15 detachment of HC-1 out of San Diego. Then they were commissioned as a squadron in-
16 country in Vietnam, which I understand is the first and only time that a squadron has
17 been commissioned outside the United States.

18 RV: Before we move on to the other part of the question, what did you think of
19 Elmo Zumwalt?

20 MS: I think he was a very capable admiral, a very good person. One of the things
21 that impressed me, we were kind of a slovenly looking bunch operating down in those
22 river patrols. He's the one who introduced the idea of sideburns on the sailors and
23 moustaches, he allowed them. He caught a lot of flak for that because he was kind of
24 lenient on the sailors, but at that time, first of all, when they went out on patrol in those
25 boats they went out for many days at a time, a week or two maybe. They just had
26 whatever they had on that boat. They didn't have a lot of freshwater, needless to say,
27 which is always a problem in the Navy. So they had to conserve. They didn't wash. They
28 didn't shave. They didn't do laundry while they were out on patrol. They came back as a
29 pretty ragged looking bunch. Well, Zumwalt recognized that even as skuzzy-looking as
30 we may have been at that time, we were doing a heck of a job fighting and doing the
31 duties that we were assigned. He figured why stick with a spit-and-polish Navy in a

1 jungle environment and kind of relax the standards quite a bit. Like I said, he caught flak
2 from that from a lot of people, but to the sailor that was probably one of the most sensible
3 things going. As for his strategy, his concept of Operation Slingshot to cut off the
4 supplies coming in from Cambodia evidently was very successful. Now, that's just the
5 Navy talking so maybe it's all self-serving, but I think that they've got statistics that show
6 that they did cut down the infiltration and the logistic infiltration immensely with that
7 program.

8 RV: You're right, Mike. History does show in the quantities, the facts show that,
9 yes, infiltration did go down. That was a successful operation.

10 MS: Other than that I never really got to meet him. I flew his armed escort for
11 him one time down in the Delta and he sat in the door of the helicopter he was in and
12 watched over the countryside just like a door gunner would've done. He was a pretty
13 sharp person.

14 RV: Who was this person? It was his personal aid or—?

15 MS: Elmo Zumwalt.

16 RV: Okay. Well, you said you flew his armed escort?

17 MS: I flew as his armed escort.

18 RV: I see. I see. I see. Okay. So you saw him. He was watching the countryside
19 from the other helicopter?

20 MS: Yes.

21 RV: Interesting.

22 MS: I think that the troops over there had a great deal of respect for him. In fact,
23 the Navy did because they made him Chief of Naval Operations.

24 RV: Yes. Okay. Well, getting back to the other part of the question, what do you
25 think people need to know about if they say, "Mike, what did you do overall? How do
26 you look at your time there with the Seawolves?" how would you answer that?

27 MS: Okay. Bear in mind that in the Navy the pilots all have collateral duties. My
28 job when I got over there—I was put into the maintenance department and that was to
29 administer the maintenance on the aircraft. First it was as a division officer for the aircraft
30 division where we supplied and maintained all of the aircrew, pardon me, the aircrew
31 equipment. I forget what else. There was another division that I worked with in there.

1 When I came back from detachment I spent three months as the maintenance control
2 officer, which was scheduling the maintenance to be sure that everything flowed right in
3 the overall picture of the squadron. We had to have aircraft going out to detachment to
4 replace aircraft that needed scheduled servicing or combat damage repair. So we had to
5 keep them going all the time. We had a pretty remarkable record there. I remember one
6 year the CO announced to the squadron that we had flown over thirty-three hundred
7 hours that month and that's with, what was it? Almost a hundred aircraft. So 330 hours of
8 flight time in a helicopter in one month was astronomical in the Navy. When I was in
9 HC-2 if we got twenty hours a month out of our helicopters we were happy. So that was a
10 big job. We had, oh, what? Over five hundred people in the squadron. I think it was
11 probably the biggest squadron in the Navy. All of that had to be administered and had to
12 be, the flow of work had to be maintained. The other part was to just fly as a pilot on the
13 missions, the gunship missions, or on the utility missions. We had the latter part of my
14 tour a fleet of UH-1Ls which is similar to the gunship except it was not armed. It had a
15 more powerful engine and they were brand new airplanes built for the Navy. That did
16 utility work.

17 RV: Yes.

18 MS: We had our gunship operations and we had our utility operations carrying
19 people down around the Delta and carrying mail down and supplies as needed.

20 RV: Okay. When you were getting short, as they say, getting ready to leave, what
21 were your feelings? Did you act differently? Did you think differently?

22 MS: I don't think so, but maybe I did. No, I still was enthusiastic about being a
23 Seawolf and being in the Navy. There is one factor that impacted me and that was that
24 shortly after arriving at HA(L)-3 I got notice that I was not selected for promotion. So I
25 knew that my career was coming to an abrupt halt. If I didn't make it in that following
26 year then I'd have to be out of the Navy and that's what happened. So I was concerned
27 about doing the job right so that I would stand a chance for that promotion.

28 RV: Do you know why you didn't get a promotion?

29 MS: Well, I can only surmise because the Navy doesn't tell you the whys. Do
30 you remember I've talked about the problem I had in the Mediterranean?

31 RV: Yes.

1 MS: The trouble that I had, even though I came out of that smelling like a rose, I
2 think that there was some backwash on that that followed me over there. Then my last
3 detachment aboard the carrier, when we went over to Yankee Station, I didn't get along
4 with the officer in charge that much. I know that that was where I got the bad fitness
5 report.

6 RV: Okay. So you leave Vietnam October 1970, is that correct?

7 MS: That's right.

8 RV: Okay. Where did you go when you came back?

9 MS: I was stationed at Fallon, Nevada, Naval Air—it was an auxiliary landing
10 field or something. It wasn't an air station at that time. That's the base in the desert where
11 they brought all the squadrons for gunnery and attack exercises, bomb the desert.

12 RV: Right. Did you know at that time that you were gonna be getting out?

13 MS: Yes. I had nine months to go to figure out what I was going to do so I just
14 took advantage of it and stayed in and managed to get my full thirteen years to the day.

15 RV: Okay. Tell me a little bit about what you did there in those nine months.

16 MS: Okay. I was the aviation safety officer. I looked after the safety of
17 operations, both of our aircraft at the station, but also of the fleet aircraft that came in to
18 be sure that we all understood each other and what was expected in the way of safety. I
19 also was one of, let's see, four, three or four Seawolves that had been assigned there
20 coming back at the same time. They had just gotten a UH-1K, which is similar to the L-
21 model we had in Vietnam except that it was just a different designation. We used that as
22 the station search-and-rescue helicopter and utility helicopter. I flew that. I was
23 instructing some of the young pilots, new pilots, how to fly it and doing refresher training
24 on the experienced pilots, which wasn't altogether necessary, but the Navy did require it.
25 We had a fun time there just running around in the helicopter and doing what we wanted
26 because it was a small station as far as the people assigned there. They didn't know
27 anything about helicopters so we told them what was appropriate and they let us do it. I
28 guess the rest of the Navy might not have thought that was appropriate. I was talking
29 about things like landing out in the desert. Fixed-wing pilots couldn't understand that
30 helicopters could operate like that. We were doing things like full autorotations, which
31 the rest of the Navy was prohibited from doing, but it kept us on top of emergency.

1 RV: Yeah. I guess it also kind of entertained you to a point, as well.

2 MS: Everything at that stage was for fun. I could do no wrong.

3 RV: Did you have any bitter feelings about it? Did you want to stay if you could

4 continue with a career or were you feeling like, “Okay, it’s come to an end. This is

5 okay”?

6 MS: Well, there are two sides of that. One is as far as my career I was very hurt

7 and I can’t really say I was bitter. Now I can, but at the time I didn’t really feel bitterness

8 because my family had broken up and I had become the single parent of two small

9 children. Believe me, that occupied my thoughts more than anything.

10 RV: So you had the kids with you there?

11 MS: Yes. Had quarters on the base right next to several other officers and their

12 families and in those days the kids could walk out the back door and run right out into the

13 desert and play to their heart’s content. There was no concern about anybody doing

14 anything that would hurt them and they had a good time, we did.

15 RV: Yeah. Well, when time came when you got out, what were your plans for

16 your future?

17 MS: I went back to Phoenix, came back to Phoenix and enrolled at the American

18 Institute of, what is it? Not the institute anymore.

19 RV: University?

20 MS: Thunderbird Graduate School, they had a program in international

21 management. I worked to get a master’s degree in that.

22 RV: Was that a two-year deal?

23 MS: Well, it was one year. I stretched it out a little bit by being late turning in a

24 big paper I had to do, but they accepted that. It’s a private school so they were willing to

25 do anything they could to keep the money coming in.

26 RV: Right. Once you got the degree where did you go?

27 MS: I went to work at Garrett AiResearch where they were making turbine

28 engines and put my aeronautical engineering education to work. After a year and a half as

29 a development engineer I transferred to their field service department and went overseas

30 to South Africa to represent the company and their technical issues.

31 RV: Wow. How long did you stay in South Africa?

1 MS: Three and a half years.

2 RV: That had to have been interesting.

3 MS: Oh, it was wonderful.

4 RV: Can you make some comments about that time there?

5 MS: Yes, I can. It was at the height of Apartheid and I was of the right grade so

6 life was wonderful for me. It was considered to be the last of the colonial living, which

7 was very nice living and very elegant. Things started building up in the civil wars all

8 around and the intrusions across the border into South Africa trying to change the

9 government. Apartheid was a grim concept for everybody that was not in the leading

10 group. The country was beautiful. South Africa is probably one of the most wonderful

11 places in the world and I think it still is. I'd jump at the chance to go back if I could get it.

12 RV: Okay. You were there for, you said, three and a half years?

13 MS: Three and a half years and that was followed by a trip up to Europe where I

14 became the representative in Switzerland. There's an airline called Crossair that operates

15 out of Zurich and at the time they were the start-up airline that was operating three wear

16 engine metros that were made down in San Antonio used in our Garrett engines. I was

17 there just to offer them support to help them get their feet on the ground. That's grown to

18 the point where Crossair, although it had been financed initially by Swiss Air, is now the

19 owner of Swiss Air. They've had a great success story there.

20 RV: Yes. I'm familiar with that airline. Let me ask you about your attitude, your

21 viewpoint of the war after you got out. Basically when you got back to the United States

22 then you were out of the Navy, in grad school, and then in the private sector, did you

23 keep up with the war and what was happening in Southeast Asia?

24 MS: I followed it every night on the news and it was still a major part of my

25 thought process all those years and still is. Just thinking about that a little while ago and

26 issues that are going on right now. The big thing at that time was following the plight of

27 the POWs (prisoner of war) because there were six of my classmates that were locked up

28 in Hanoi during those years. So I was really tickled pink to see them get out along with

29 all the rest. Then just the progress that ultimately led to the loss of South Vietnam. Let's

30 see. I was bitterly disappointed with that, but I think the handwriting was on the wall for

31 some time once they had decided to move the Americans out.

1 RV: Did you think that Vietnamization had a chance to work?

2 MS: A very slim chance. I wasn't that enthusiastic about it. I was happy that
3 maybe we'd be getting the Americans out of there because they'd really done as much as
4 they could from my perspective. Now you go up to the North and you see a different
5 story. We were pretty pacified down in the Delta at the time. Well, I'm kind of rambling
6 on it. I don't know, what else can I do?

7 RV: No, you're not rambling at all Mike. I specifically was gonna answer. Where
8 did you think the United States was? It's 1975 in April. Saigon's gone. They're pushing
9 helicopters off the carriers and the war all of a sudden has ended for the United States.
10 Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon are saying peace with honor. Those are very relevant
11 questions and feelings. How did you feel when you heard this peace with honor? Did you
12 think that we had achieved that yet whilst South Vietnam?

13 MS: I didn't think that we really found peace with honor. I think the honor part
14 was that we were able to get our POWs back. As for leaving the Vietnamese on their
15 own, I think that that was a betrayal. It was only made up for by allowing so many of the
16 refugees to come into this country, but that didn't make up for the whole thing. I think
17 that the country was overwhelmed by a government that wasn't really that healthy for
18 them. All I can say about that is that it's evolved over the many years into a civil
19 relationship between us and Vietnam which may heal a lot of wounds that way.

20 RV: What do you think about having normalized relations with Vietnam today?

21 MS: I'm all for it. I don't like to see any barriers between any of the countries if
22 we can avoid it. Doesn't mean that I would support their concepts, but I think that it's
23 important that we have dialogue, first of all, and it's also important that we have a
24 country that is very generous in sharing its wealth. The only conflict we really seem to
25 have with that is do we tax the people and give it to the other people or do we open the
26 door for the other people to acquire the wealth through their own efforts? I think that with
27 Vietnam we helped out in that by allowing the refugees over here and getting them
28 established and productive in our own society and that has spread back to Vietnam to
29 make up for a lot of the damage that was done to the country during our efforts over
30 there. I think that it's gonna be good. It's growing pretty well to where they may not ever
31 become an ally during our lifetime, but they're certainly becoming much more friendly

1 and accepting their role as a victor, which I think at this stage is becoming very gracious.
2 It wasn't at first, but we're accepting our role as a friend and an economic partner. I'll
3 give you two stories that have helped me accept and get over any anger I might have had
4 with the Vietnamese themselves. One is that my roommate from Annapolis died on an air
5 raid over North Vietnam. His widow just went over last spring to North Vietnam and was
6 escorted out to the impact site where she left a little monument for him. The report I got
7 back from her was that they were very gracious toward her and helpful. She came back
8 with closure and feeling good having gotten over apparently a lot of the sorrow and
9 animosity that she's experienced over these years. Now, the other has to do with a
10 refugee that I worked with up at Ames Research Center. This is the person that gives me
11 so much hope and so many good thoughts about the Vietnamese. She started in our office
12 as a part time student while she was attending San Jose State. She was in her sophomore
13 year studying engineering. She could hardly speak English at the time. She had been in
14 the States—she had been a Boat Person for a year. Her dad had been in the South
15 Vietnamese Navy. She was working hard carrying anywhere from twenty to twenty-one
16 hours of credit at San Jose State and then going for additional credits at the community
17 college to study language and get some of the basic requirements out of the way so that
18 she could pursue her engineering. She stayed with it for a couple of years. She stayed
19 with Ames Research Center. She got her bachelor's degree in engineering and
20 mechanical, I think two or three bachelor's degrees out of that. Even as an undergrad
21 before she got her bachelor's, she was working in the arc-jet plasma-wind tunnel which is
22 a hypersonic wind tunnel and she had published two technical papers while she was still a
23 student and most of the scientists there at Ames didn't—the good ones would publish a
24 couple. The really exceptional would publish several, but just as a student she had
25 published two. She was studying the insulation for the space shuttle in the wind tunnel.
26 Anyway, the last time I saw her was about five years ago and she had advanced to the
27 associate director for aeronautics. So she was just about five steps down from the
28 president in the pecking order, just an absolutely remarkable lady. She got her PhD from
29 Stanford in engineering and there's no end to what she can achieve. She almost made it
30 into the astronaut corps, but on the final medical exam she had a problem with health that

1 they say probably came back from in Vietnam because so many people suffered this
2 problem. Anyway, she's my idol. She's my hope for the world.

3 RV: What does that tell you about, how does that speak to you about the
4 Vietnamese people?

5 MS: They have every capability that we could ever hope for. Given the chance
6 they can do anything that we can do. Given the opportunities they become very good
7 American citizens and very productive citizens.

8 RV: Yeah. Let me switch back to a couple of topics, wartime. I would like to
9 know your thoughts on the anti-war movement, then and now.

10 MS: My first thoughts—after you've asked me so many of these questions I've
11 realized I've skirted around that, my feelings on the war. Before we became thoroughly
12 involved in it, my brother and I were in conflict. He had come back from a tour of duty
13 with the Air Force in Berlin. He arrived back in the States in 1958 just as I was leaving
14 for Annapolis. He started protesting things, like they had the compulsory ROTC at
15 Arizona State. That was justify—the compulsion was justified on the basis of it being a
16 land grant college and therefore the federal government required it. Well, they staged a
17 demonstration that spread across the state to the different universities or colleges and
18 ultimately it was revealed that land grant was not—ROTC was not compulsory under the
19 land grant laws. That it was optional and the schools are the ones that set that
20 requirement. That was the end of the compulsory ROTC at Arizona State and the
21 University of Arizona with the demonstrations that they started. He carried that on. They
22 of course expelled him from Arizona State. So he moved up to Berkeley and found his
23 home up there just as the hippie movement and the anti-war movement was gaining
24 momentum. He was studying language and was a good student, but all the time I was
25 there at Annapolis I got two letters from him and both of them were denigrating our
26 involvement in Vietnam. Then in '58 to '62 we weren't doing a whole lot over there, but
27 he was commenting on it being illegal and I was saying, "This is what we've got to do,"
28 and supporting the idea that we get involved. I was a war hawk at that time. Even after
29 my first tour I was aboard the carriers, I went back to Monterey. I was able to make
30 contact with him again face to face and we argued it for the two years that I was at
31 Monterey to the point where we got into a big fight and he died of cancer at the time. We

1 didn't speak to each other for many months, which was kind of sad. Anyway, when I left
2 to go to Vietnam I wanted to go and I wanted to be a participant in what I thought was a
3 noble venture.

4 RV: So as you went through your time there and the anti-war movement grew
5 especially after Tet '68 and you go back over in '69, what were your thoughts then about
6 what was happening in the country?

7 MS: Well, my thoughts about in-country were still that we were on the right
8 track. The average GI did what he was told to do and trusted his leadership and maybe
9 more than he should've. I think that we were doing the things we were supposed to do
10 and for the most part doing it the way we were supposed to do it. What bothers me now
11 and bothered me then was in the media so much of the coverage was the grim side of
12 what was going on. A lot of it was exposure of things that were probably of questionable
13 value in our effort and even many that were harmful by the media and exploited by the
14 media. What this did was to undermine our confidence in our leader, which was a
15 betrayal of the forces over there because we were told to do a job and we did it because
16 we believed in our leader. By undermining our trust in them, they destroyed our will to
17 fight and that's going on right now. You've gotta have, in wartime, you've gotta have a
18 mutual trust between the leaders and the support units. We're losing that again.

19 RV: Do you see similarities between Vietnam and the war in Iraq, what's going
20 on today?

21 MS: Very much so.

22 RV: Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

23 MS: Well, if a guy's trying to tell me to go into harm's way I've gotta trust him.
24 If I have half the leaders in this country shouting that he's a liar, then I have to stop and
25 think. If I stop and think under attack then I'm dead or somebody's gonna be dead. That's
26 been happening to the point where you look at the situation now with the administration
27 and the attitudes toward the war. They've reversed themselves over the last year or two,
28 just without any real reason other than there has been the escalation by the enemy and
29 we're losing a lot of people. Actually the Iraqis are losing a lot of people because of the
30 violence and the insurgency. They're blaming the president for all of this. I can
31 understand open debate and I think that's very worthwhile, but you don't do it by name

1 calling and innuendos and elaborating with the editorials on things that may be wrong or
2 mostly things that you think might be wrong. I look back at some of the comments during
3 the, what was it, prior to the last election. There was one that Howard Dean mentioned. I
4 don't remember what it was now, but he just made an innuendo that I wonder if maybe in
5 referring to something that he thought maybe the president had conspired on and wasn't
6 telling us. Well, there was nothing to it, but there were people who would sit and harp on
7 that. Meanwhile we're all sitting there thinking, "Gee, maybe this president isn't that
8 good or maybe our generals aren't that good." I'm seeing that now for the first time in
9 this whole conflict where the generals are backing off and the Senate is questioning them
10 in an editorial manner rather than a fact finding manner and in the House. It's putting
11 them on the spot, in the spotlight, and that gets to be kind of tough. I'd like to see
12 information coming out to people and if there's a crime committed like Abu Ghraib
13 seems to have been, just like My Lai was during Vietnam, it should be prosecuted, but it
14 should be prosecuted through the court martial or through the courts themselves or the
15 impeachment process, not by the press. The press I think is doing us a great deal of harm
16 by undermining our confidence in the military and the government.

17 RV: What lessons do you think we learned from Vietnam, Mike?

18 MS: I think the valuable lessons were reflected probably in the first Gulf War
19 more than anything. Afterward, those people that stayed on went through a rough period
20 where the military had trouble recruiting people and the people they had were not the best
21 that we'd ever had. Drugs were a problem. Attitudes were a problem. All of this was
22 going on in the early '70s and the people that stayed on were able to put it back together.
23 Through their studies at the War College, through their studies and their leadership
24 courses that they've started imposing on the officers corps, ethics courses, all of this
25 stuff, they started getting the big picture, but they also started looking seriously through
26 their war games, evidently, on what do we really need in the way of the military. When
27 they launched their invasion in Iraq in '91 they were ready for it and I saw such great
28 leadership and great performance by the Army and the Navy and the Marines that they
29 made short work of that. Subsequently I've come to realize that the whole concept of the
30 military has changed. It used to be very competitive among the services. The Army
31 fought to get every nickel and dime they could and every ounce of glory just like our

1 Navy did. The Marine Corps was accepted by the Navy and we wanted them. They were
2 a vital part of our Navy, but we also belittled the Marines a lot back and forth. A lot of it
3 was just innocent banter, but it takes its toll after a while, even the joke. They have
4 reorganized to where they have these joint operations and whereas in the past the Navy
5 ran the Navy. The Marine Corps was the subordinate to the Navy. Now we've got a Chief
6 Naval, I'm sorry, the commandant of the Marine Corps and the Chairman of the Joint
7 Chief of Staff is a Marine officer. You have the joint command in the First Gulf War and
8 you have it now where they may be under the command of an Air Force officer. They
9 may be under the command of a Marine or a soldier or maybe even an admiral. They are
10 all focused on the same objective. It doesn't matter which service they're in, they're in
11 command and everybody recognizes and accepts that. I think that's a great concept. You
12 even had a Marine as the commandant of midshipmen a couple years ago. That did great
13 things there. That was unheard of when I was in the Navy. Now they've got a lady that's
14 the commandant. I think it's great to see.

15 RV: Okay. Are there any unlearned lessons, things that we just simply have not
16 gotten right?

17 MS: Well, we haven't gotten right the will to win, apparently. That's being
18 reflected right now in our so-called support of the troops. We haven't learned to avoid
19 getting into conflicts that we shouldn't be in. I'm not altogether sure that we should've
20 gone to Iraq in the first place, but I am sure that since we were committed that we
21 should've and could've—should've been able to trust and I think that we did trust the
22 president's judgment in that. That's what I say about judgment being undermined now. I
23 hate to see that.

24 RV: Concerning your tour, Mike, is there anything that you would change about
25 what you did during your two tours in Vietnam?

26 MS: Yeah, I probably would've stayed over there if I could've for that nine
27 months. Coming home was nice, but that was kind of a rough time for me, too. Finally
28 raised my kids and they went over to South Africa with me, but then they went back to
29 live with their mom and things settled down finally. It probably would've been better
30 rather than fight for custody of my kids the way I did, but they stayed with their mom.
31 That's afterthought. Let's see, as for in-country, yeah, there's one thing that's crossed my

1 mind over and over. When we were out on detachment, we did not really get involved in
2 any strategizing or knowing what was going on other than we were part of the task group
3 116 I guess it was, the Operation Slingshot. We knew we had to hunt and destroy the
4 enemy and protect the boat patrols. We'd go out on patrol without having any objective
5 in mind at all. There was nobody briefing us on where the enemy were or what we could
6 do. We weren't getting a lot of communications from other detachments on what they
7 found successful or found harmful in their operation. I think that we needed—if we were
8 going out in command of a fire team the way we did that we should've known what we
9 were going to go out for. Just going out and idly boring holes in the skies trying to find
10 people that looked like they were unsavory, I would rather have had specific assignments
11 to do. We didn't talk about strategy or the real objectives at all while I was in the
12 squadron.

13 RV: Is there anything that you think that the generals or the admirals or the
14 people on the upper echelons could've done differently as far as directing the war, kind of
15 the way overall that it went?

16 MS: Well, we've all complained about the war being directed by Washington and
17 I know there's a lot of truth to that. The individual out in the field really didn't have
18 much say over what he did. I mean, even down at our level there were two cases where
19 we had obvious enemy in our sight and we couldn't shoot without permission from the
20 district chief. The rules of engagement were such that we had our hands tied behind our
21 back. We couldn't do things. In one event we were out over the U Minh Forest and we
22 sighted a guy, it was the dry season. No swampy time of that event. We sighted a guy that
23 was in a blue shirt and black pants and he was running out in the open. As soon as he saw
24 us he just dropped down and laid on the ground hoping we wouldn't see him, but we did
25 see him. The blue shirt and the black pants were the uniform of the U Minh Thu, which
26 was a North Vietnamese regular army that was located in the U Minh forest. So he
27 should've been a legitimate target without any question. We were in a free-fire zone, too,
28 but the fear of violating the rules of engagement, we didn't do anything. After he realized
29 that we were just gonna fly circles around him, he got up and ran and *di-di*'ed into one of
30 the caves somewhere and we lost him. There was another event in that same area, but
31 right on the coast there was a little rivulet that went out and a small island right there at

1 the mouth of that rivulet and we flew down and spotted a junk there. Well, there was only
2 one reason to have a junk there and that was to bring supplies of some sort into the North
3 Vietnamese, to the enemy. Again, we had to get permission to stage an attack on them.
4 So we went down and we were hoping that we could drop fire. We went down and
5 hovered right by the junk and they were heading out as quick as they could to get into
6 international waters. We counted six eligible males on board. Well, a legitimate
7 Vietnamese junk would have families on board. We saw no sign of that, so these were
8 enemy. Again, we couldn't do anything without going to much higher authority to get the
9 clearance to do it. I know that the—when we were there aboard the carriers up on Yankee
10 Station, these pilots would come back with sightings of truck convoys up on the Ho Chi
11 Minh Trail and we'd immediately start spotting the deck for an attack on it, but then we'd
12 sit there once the deck was ready for a launch waiting and waiting and waiting because
13 they had to get permission all the way back at Washington.

14 RV: That had to be frustrating.

15 MS: Very frustrating. So I'm not sure. I think that the first Gulf War, that wasn't
16 a problem. The joint commander had the authority and he knew how to wield that
17 authority. I'm not sure how that's going over here right now. I get little tidbits of
18 information that tell me that they're back to Washington trying to tell them what to do
19 and they're afraid to make decisions on their own. That's too bad because the troops they
20 have over there are just stellar people. I mean, just from what I read in the news, which is
21 not the real friend of the soldier, I think that these guys are great soldiers over there.

22 RV: Mike, now in modern times and the present time, you know, 21st Century,
23 tell me about your thoughts on the Vietnam War, personal thoughts or just looking back
24 in general. You talked a bit about this already, but tell me about how you dealt with it
25 yourself.

26 MS: How I dealt with it?

27 RV: Yes.

28 MS: Well, I keep my thoughts going in other channels as much as I can. I do
29 dwell on it a lot and regret a lot of things that happened and things that I did. At the same
30 time I look back, I'm very proud of the effort that I put into it and I'm proud of the units

1 that I was with. I think that we did some pioneering thinking technically as well as
2 tactically. I think that I came out of it a much stronger person in many respects.

3 RV: Can you give me some details? What areas did you gain strength in?

4 MS: Well, for one thing I told you that I went back to school to study
5 international management. I expanded my interest well beyond the continental United
6 States. I used to joke about it that while I was over seas that most people don't even know
7 there is a world beyond the three-mile limit. That's still true of a lot of people.

8 RV: Yes, it is.

9 MS: We're in a global economy. We're in a global conflict. We're in global
10 tourism and I think that I understand a lot more. You get into debates at Thunderbird in
11 particular. We specialized in Latin American studies. One of the key topics was always
12 Fidel Castro in Cuba and I was able to read different things about Castro and get
13 something other than the official doctrine, which is that he's a bad, evil man. Well, he
14 may be a bad evil man, but I've learned to look at the good that's been done. What Cuba
15 was before Castro and what Cuba is now, I think it's far better now. That doesn't mean I
16 admire him for his treachery and his brutality, and I certainly don't admire Che Guevara.
17 I think that he fits right into the Osama Bin Laden respect, perspective. At least I think
18 that we could and should be opening more dialogues with countries like Cuba, maybe
19 with a country like Myanmar because we're not gonna be able to force them into our way
20 of thinking, but we can certainly persuade them into it. Unfortunately, I don't think we're
21 achieving that right now. I think the same could be said about a lot of Iraq and the Middle
22 East. If we were to bend a little bit more we might be able to make better inroads.

23 RV: Do you watch movies on Vietnam?

24 MS: Yeah.

25 RV: Can you tell me a little bit about what you've seen and your opinions?

26 MS: I think one of the brightest movies made was *Apocalypse Now*. Boy, we
27 didn't learn the lesson of that movie, but this insurgency in the Middle East, those people
28 certainly did. Do you remember the scene where Brando was talking about the village
29 where the Americans went in and I guess gave polio shots or something to all of the
30 children? As soon as they left the Vietnamese, the Viet Cong came in and chopped off all
31 the arms that had been inoculated. He commented that's brilliant because the enemy

1 didn't resent the Viet Cong for doing that. They resented the Americans for giving them
2 the shot in the first place. We're seeing that same thing occurring over in Iraq and
3 Lebanon right now. That was the best thing. I think the other favorite movie that I had
4 was *The Deer Hunter* because that was probably the first movie I saw that didn't portray
5 the American soldiers an animal.

6 RV: Any others that you think lent some credence to the war or ones that you
7 think are just hogwash?

8 MS: Well, I thought that *The Green Berets* was hogwash. As much as I like John
9 Wayne, I think that went overboard. I liked the story, but it was just so crudely or so
10 naively projected that it left me feeling cold toward it. Let's see, what was it? *Platoon* or
11 *Full Metal Jacket*, I don't remember seeing those. They didn't impress me much because
12 so much of what we're seeing now is if you go in to the combat zone and the bullets start
13 flying and for eighty-five weeks straight you don't have a minute's peace. That's not the
14 way it was. We'd have firefights and there were some places where they were in
15 firefights quite a bit of the time. I didn't see that and so I'd rather see some of the serenity
16 of that territory because it was a beautiful society in its own right. It was a beautiful
17 country and I wished that we were seeing more of that. There was something that came
18 through on the internet a while back called *Bonjour, Vietnam* and it's just something put
19 together by the French with scenic views of Vietnam and beautiful music to go with it
20 and it makes you realize what a lovely place it could be. I think that right now that's what
21 we should be projecting rather than any of the anger that has come back with us.

22 RV: What about books on the war? Have you read on it? Do you read on it?

23 MS: Well, let's see. One book I read I can't remember the author, but it's called
24 *Saigon* and it really dealt with the French colony. It went into the history of Vietnam
25 quite a bit and that was very good. I really enjoyed that. Let me think for a minute.
26 Another one that got my attention was Demille's book *Word of Honor* and that's the
27 story of a former Marine platoon leader that came back, got into his law practice and
28 fifteen years later was charged with a war crime. It was very, very poignant. It was kind
29 of a My Lai Massacre type situation where his Marines had been a party to and witness to
30 an atrocity that had gone on in a village and he gets into the background of what it is that
31 he had never told anybody. That is if there was an atrocity, but they just covered up for it

1 and accepted that that's the way the war was. If you haven't read that, that's a good one
2 to read. Let me see. I read the book about the Black Ponies and I enjoyed that, but that
3 was just a technical history of the squadron, and also on HA(L)-3. There have been a few
4 books written by the Seawolves that have been good. They give a pretty authentic
5 portrayal of what life was like in the backseat of the Huey as a door gunner. I can't
6 remember the guy who wrote it, who wrote them, but they were good. Other than that I
7 don't read a lot about Vietnam.

8 RV: I want to ask you about PTSD. You've mentioned this a couple of times in
9 the interview and I'd like for you to discuss it if you want to. Can you tell me about your
10 experiences with this and how you dealt with this?

11 MS: Yes. At first I don't think that I was sensing any PTSD, which just to point it
12 out that's post traumatic stress disorder. It's an emotional thing. I went for many years
13 occupied. My thoughts were occupied with the family and my career and not about
14 anything that really happened in Vietnam. It wasn't until 1982 that I went back to the
15 Naval Academy for a class reunion. I started seeing people that had been out of my mind
16 for many years and I didn't even recognize them. Then one year about '84 I think, I went
17 to my first Seawolf reunion and one of my friends was there. He brought over another
18 friend and said, "You remember Scotty?" I said, "No." Scotty was another classmate. We
19 had gone through flight training together. We had been in the same squadron, HC-2
20 together. Then he came over to HA(L)-3 while I was there and we did a lot of things
21 together. I couldn't remember him at all. I put a lot of these memories on ice, in
22 particular, a lot of the people. Even now I run into people and I don't remember them
23 until I really give it a lot of thought and then it starts coming back in my mind. I had
24 coped with the death of some very close friends. I mentioned one, my roommate at the
25 Academy and another was my copilot for many months and that was Bill Pederson who
26 was lost at VC Lake. Of course getting to The Wall, the Vietnam Memorial, when I
27 checked on their names and all that choked me up then and it chokes my up even right
28 now thinking of it.

29 RV: What was that experience like for you, Mike, at The Wall?

30 MS: That was a tough one. We just went and we got the names and locations
31 from the booth that was there and went over and had a look. Seeing their names on The

1 Wall just took my breath away. Afterward my wife and I we walked around the streets of
2 Washington for a good hour and a half before I could say anything.

3 RV: Did it provide some closure for you?

4 MS: No.

5 RV: Okay. Have you had any closure?

6 MS: Not really.

7 RV: Why not?

8 MS: I don't know, probably because I haven't really confronted it with that in
9 mind. I went to another reunion, and this has to do with the PTSD as much as anything. I
10 was at reunion four years ago of my class and my roommate's widow was there and she
11 started talking to me. I'd been up to visit her. She lives there in Annapolis now and she
12 had a picture of Dick on the table. It was the first time I had seen that picture since we
13 were in flight training. That brought back a lot of memories, but that was fine. Then
14 sitting there at the big banquet she started talking about stuff and that just broke me up
15 completely, just like it did yesterday. That seems to be the problem. After about fifteen
16 years after leaving Vietnam, I was up at working at Moffett Field for NASA (National
17 Aeronautics and Space Administration) and I started noticing depression. I went in for
18 treatment on that and they never did associate it with PTSD at the time, but I think it had
19 a lot to do with it. I'd just be driving along and somebody would trigger an emotional
20 reaction out of me without any idea what it was. That's just escalated over the years.
21 Then when we got back to the Seawolf reunion in June I noticed that there were guys
22 who were writing books about it and that was part of their therapy. Reading what they
23 had to say I began to realize that's a big part of my problem.

24 RV: So you think it's either, do you think it's getting better that you're beginning
25 to confront this and deal with this now?

26 MS: No, I don't think so.

27 RV: Do you think you will?

28 MS: I don't know. I've got my hands so full of the current events that I don't
29 really think that much on it.

30 RV: Yeah. Okay. What is it like to go to reunions and see all the guys and their
31 wives and kids?

1 MS: It's great to see them, a lot of them. It's disturbing when I see them and I
2 don't recognize them, people that I knew well at school. We were in a class that was on
3 the frontline. The guys that went into the Marine Corps were platoon leaders, a number of
4 them, and did some really heroic things. We were the first of the pilots to get over there.
5 Well, my class participated on the first grade. In fact, I've been told by another of my
6 roommates that he was the first plane to be launched from the first grade over North
7 Vietnam and that was the Willy Fudd that went up to direct the fighters and attack. They
8 were the first ones off the ship. I had to point out to him that he couldn't launch until the
9 helicopter was there for him. He won't listen to that. Let's see, what was I trying to say?
10 Refresh my memory.

11 RV: Well, we had talked about PTSD and moving into today and dealing with it
12 and then the reunions.

13 MS: Yeah. Going back to the class reunions, I was sitting at a table one night. We
14 were drinking a beer and there were five of the POWs that were there. I just got to adding
15 it up estimating a total of thirty-six years, sitting there, that had been spent in the Hanoi
16 Hilton. These guys came out of it so well. I think they're doing better than I am over their
17 experience. You had Paul Galanti came back and was reassigned to the Naval Academy
18 and he finished his career in the Navy mostly working with the midshipmen and as a
19 speaker, the spokesperson, for the Navy ethics and command decisions, things like that I
20 gather. I haven't really talked to him since then. That's an excellent way for a person to
21 recover from an experience like that. Another one was Mike McGrath. Mike is the one
22 that drew out his experiences in the Hilton on toilet paper and managed to smuggle it out
23 with himself. Mike came back. He was restored to flight status in the A-7s, the attack.
24 They gave him command of the replacement air group, the RAG squadron where they
25 trained the pilots in transition and then to get them ready to go out to sea. Then of all
26 things they gave him an assignment as the squadron commander on active duty, or in the
27 theater of operations. As I understand it, it was with the promise that he would not be
28 required to go into combat ever again. Sure enough, the first Gulf War broke out while he
29 was over there in the Indian Ocean and he and his squadron were among the first. These
30 are really strong people that we had out of that. Eddie Davis just died a few months ago
31 and he died with a smile on his face, I'm sure, because he was able to readjust to all of it.

1 These guys are an inspiration to me and a lot of the class were an inspiration. One of the
2 other guys sitting at that table was Tim Thomasee and I think it was Eddie Davis that
3 commented to him. They were talking about the time they were in Hanoi and Eddie made
4 the comment, "I sure wish you could've come over and gotten us out." Tim responded, "I
5 tried." He's the one who came back with the two Silver Stars for the operation, incursions
6 into North Vietnam that I told you about yesterday. That's the kind of people that we
7 would get to see at the reunions.

8 RV: How long have you all been getting together as a group?

9 MS: Well, we would usually get together every five years since graduation, but
10 the first time I got there was in 1982 so that was the twentieth reunion. Another nice thing
11 happened that time. My roommate Dick Laws, his wife Karen was there at the chapel
12 Sunday morning for the end of the reunion. She popped up. I hadn't seen her since we
13 had been in flight training. She reintroduced herself and told me that she was glad to be
14 there for the reunion, but she wasn't really there for the reunion. She was there because
15 her daughter was a plebe of the academy. I just thought that was wonderful. Her daughter
16 went on to graduate in I think, well, I forget when. She went to flight training, went
17 through jet training, became an instructor in the training command and has become the
18 instructor of the year in the Naval Air Training Command. That was a real tribute to her
19 dad. That's the kind of people that I dealt with at the academy. As midshipmen you'd see
20 people that you didn't think were going to make a hill of beans in the Navy and they
21 came back. One in particular was Leighton Smith. He became the commander of the
22 forces, allied forces, in Southern Europe during the Bosnian Conflict and deputy CNO
23 (Chief of Naval Operations). Tim Thomasee I mentioned got command of the carrier,
24 probably the first helicopter pilot to get that. They're a pretty remarkable group.

25 RV: Certainly sounds like it.

26 MS: In fact, another one was a Marine, John Ripley. Do you watch *War Stories*,
27 the series on Fox News by Oliver North?

28 RV: Yes. Yes, I have.

29 MS: They had one a few months ago on the bridge at Dong Ha, about the North
30 Vietnamese invading South Vietnam in an armored assault. They came down in their
31 tanks and the Vietnamese Marine battalion was told, "Hold the bridge. Keep them from

1 crossing.” They had to blow it up. Well, Ripley was there as their advisor and a captain in
2 the Marine Corps. He realized that they had to destroy that bridge. So he and a couple of
3 others got satchels of explosives and they literally went hand over hand under the bridge
4 with these satchels of explosives and wire and they rigged that bridge and blew it up.
5 That stopped the North Vietnamese advance on Hanoi. That’s quite a courageous act.
6 John’s been recognized in many ways. He’s a very good person, very humble person, yet
7 he’s one of the best decorated of our class. So being associated with people like that and
8 being able to get back and see them year after year is a great thrill.

9 RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam, Mike?

10 MS: Yes. I would like to go back as tourist.

11 RV: Where would you go? What would you do?

12 MS: Well, I’d love to see the Highlands up north. I’d love to do a lot of good
13 touristy things. I’d also like to go back down to Binh Thuy and Song Ong Doc and see
14 the areas where I operated. I understand that the U Minh Forest is great for bird watching
15 now.

16 RV: Mm-hmm. I want to ask you about this oral history interview. How has it
17 been to talk about all of this, talk about your tours in Southeast Asia and your career and
18 you just looking backwards?

19 MS: Well, it’s been refreshing to be able to speak about some of these things. Not
20 many people are interested in hearing in what I have to say. It’s nice that somebody will
21 listen and maybe this will be remembered. I don’t think my kids even know what I did
22 over there. In fact, I know they don’t because last year one of our door gunners died up at
23 Pagosa Springs, Colorado. My son called me and told me “I had just read the obituary on
24 this guy.” That he had been a Seawolf and flown four hundred missions in Vietnam and
25 what a great hero he was. I’m just sitting there thinking, “You know, Chris, I flew six
26 hundred and I’ll bet you don’t even know that I was there.” I think that’s true.

27 RV: Did you say that?

28 MS: No, I didn’t say that. It’s been hard enough keeping good contact with the
29 kids over the years with all the family feud that went on.

1 RV: Mike, why do you think that people either don't want to hear about Vietnam
2 or just simply have forgotten Vietnam or they kind of shun away from it even if they are
3 aware of it?

4 MS: I think that it was such a divisive war that they don't want to be a party.
5 They don't want to stir the pot.

6 RV: Okay. So it's still divisive?

7 MS: Yes.

8 RV: Okay. Well, Mike, is there anything else that you would like to say or talk
9 about that we have not covered before we end the interview?

10 MS: No. Let me just look over some notes that I have.

11 RV: Okay, sure.

12 MS: That's about it, other than telling sea stories.

13 RV: I certainly appreciate your time and your willingness to participate in the
14 Vietnam Archive's Oral History Project. It's been a pleasure and an honor to talk with
15 you.

16 MS: Thank you.