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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with William Harper  
Conducted by Kelly Crager  
July 1, 2008  
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

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

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech  
2 University conducting an oral history interview with Mr. William Harper. Today is 1 July  
3 2008. Mr. Harper and I are both in the interview room of the Special Collections Library  
4 of the Southwest Collections. Good Morning, Mr. Harper.

5 William Harper: Good morning.

6 KC: To start off with can you give me some background about your early life?  
7 When were you born, where?

8 WH: I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in April 13, 1926. I got grade  
9 schooling in Birmingham. My mother died when I was quite young. In 1939 my father  
10 was a reserve officer and was recalled to active duty. This was two years prior to World  
11 War II. He [sent] me off to military academy. I went to Castle Heights Military Academy  
12 in Lebanon, Tennessee, and I graduated from high school at Gulf Coast Military  
13 Academy. By that time in 1943 he was already overseas in Europe and I ended up at The  
14 Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. When I turned eighteen in April of 1944, I guess, I  
15 entered the service, enlisted in the service and was assigned to the U.S. Army Air Corps  
16 and assigned, further assigned as an armorer gunner on a B-25 airplane. After several  
17 months of training, et cetera, and assigned to a crew I decided that that life was not for  
18 me and I applied for infantry OCS (officer candidate school). This occurred about the  
19 time of the Battle of the Bulge. So an eighteen year old didn't have any trouble that

1 wanted to be—get into OCS. I completed OCS I was still eighteen years old. By this  
2 time we were preparing to invade Japan and I was sent to the Philippines to join the unit  
3 that was going to be one of the spearheads. I was very fortunate when the two atom  
4 bombs were dropped. I spent several years on occupation duty in Japan and came back,  
5 got out of the service and went into the insurance business in Birmingham, Alabama. I  
6 ended up getting married quite—fairly soon after I got out. Then the Army sent me a  
7 letter saying that all the chiefs had stayed in the service because it was a nice job for  
8 them, the majors and the colonels and the generals, but all the lieutenants and captains  
9 had gotten out and they wanted to know if I was interested in coming back into the  
10 service as a Regular Army officer. I thought it over and I had no skills, civilian skills. So  
11 back I went into the service. During the time I was out of the service using the GI Bill I  
12 had learned to fly. I had a pilot's license. I applied for flight training with the Army and  
13 was selected for flight training, but the classes were very small. There were only about  
14 twelve of us in the class. For one thing, the war was over. There wasn't any big need.  
15 We're talking 1949 now, '48 to '49. There was no need for a lot of Army pilots because  
16 the Army was scaling down. When the Air Force broke away from the Army they took  
17 all the airfields and they took all the flight instructors. So the Army people who wanted to  
18 learn to fly in the Army had to go to learn to fly in the Air Force. So they were Air Force  
19 instructors and we got Air Force wings until the Army came out with their own set of  
20 wings about two years later.

21 KC: Let me, if you don't mind, back up a little bit. Now first off what were your  
22 parents' names if you don't mind?

23 WH: My father's name was Harold Harper and my mother's name was Gladys  
24 Petree Harper.

25 KC: All right. Now you were growing up in the 1930s. You were born in 1926  
26 and you're growing up in the 1930s. Obviously, this is the midst of the Great Depression.

27 WH: Right.

28 KC: How did that affect you and your family?

29 WH: Well, remember my mother was dead. I can remember my father giving me  
30 fifty cents for a hair cut and somehow I lost that fifty cents and I thought I lost it in the

1 park playing ball. We were out there at night with a flashlight looking for fifty cents.  
2 That's how bad it was.

3 KC: Sure.

4 WH: No car, we didn't have a car until I was well into high school.

5 KC: Now did you have any brothers or sisters?

6 WH: No.

7 KC: No brothers and sisters. So it was just you and your dad working, trying to  
8 find your way through the Great Depression in the South. It must've been pretty difficult.

9 WH: I think that's why when the opportunity to go back in the service came, he  
10 was a major then and I think that's why he took that.

11 KC: What did he do? What was his specialty in the Reserves?

12 WH: I don't remember, but I remember they did send him to a place in  
13 Livingston, Louisiana. I believe it was Camp Beauregard, Louisiana. It was a National  
14 Guard camp and he was the CO (commanding officer) of that installation. Then he later  
15 became CO of a place called Camp Fannin just outside of Tyler, Texas. I remember  
16 visiting there several times. Then he went overseas with Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and by that  
17 time he was a full colonel. He went up rapidly from major to colonel because he had a lot  
18 of prior service.

19 KC: So you have this military background, this commitment to military service in  
20 your family. I mean, let's face it, it was you and your dad. Your dad was clearly  
21 committed to the military as maybe not completely as a way of life until, of course, he's  
22 brought into the war.

23 WH: Well, he was in World War I, as well.

24 KC: Oh, is that right?

25 WH: Yeah, he was a veteran of World War I.

26 KC: Okay. So he went through two wars as well as you did. What kind of effect  
27 did this have on you as a young man, as a seventeen year old, eighteen year old knowing  
28 the war is going on and seeing this commitment of your father? Was this something that  
29 drove you to military service?

30 WH: I think so. Going to the military prep school that I went to, the military  
31 college that I went to, that was just it. That's the only life I knew.

1           KC: Sure. What did you like about the military prep schools? What areas did you  
2 excel in?

3           WH: Oh, the military science and tactics.

4           KC: Okay, just something about that appealed to you.

5           WH: I didn't do well in chemistry and calculus, things like that.

6           KC: What about the college? What did you like?

7           WH: At college?

8           KC: Yes.

9           WH: When I was in college I was more interested in getting out of school and  
10 getting back into the service.

11          KC: Sure, sure.

12          WH: I don't remember enjoying very much of college. Being a freshman in a  
13 military college is pretty arduous training. They don't give freshmen much.

14          KC: Sure, sure. Talk about that for a little bit. What sort of things made it so  
15 difficult for a freshman?

16          WH: Well, of course, freshmen room with other freshmen. So I had the  
17 advantage [over] my roommates since I knew how to make a bed military style where  
18 you can bounce a quarter off of it. I knew how to shine brass and I knew how to do this  
19 and do that and march and do the manual of arms and that sort of stuff. You know, the  
20 instruction to me was pretty easy as far as that goes. What really got me and this is  
21 something I will never forget. I'm standing there on the first or second day chin all  
22 tucked in and I'm looking around like this and an upper classmen came up behind me and  
23 he says, "What are you looking around for? You want to buy this place?" I broke out  
24 laughing and that was a mistake, also, laughing in ranks. That got you some demerits,  
25 you know, that type of stuff. Looking back on it, it was funny, but at the time it wasn't  
26 funny.

27          KC: I bet it wasn't. Any sort of hazing rituals that you had to endure while you  
28 were there?

29          WH: Oh, I don't know that it was something that would—whatever it was I was  
30 already precipitated and caused it. There was an elevator. I lived on the third floor of this  
31 barrack and there was an elevator there, of course, off limits to all plebes. Whenever I

1 was late for the steel, that's when they blow a bugle, and all the plebes, all the first year  
2 guys had to be standing in line. You had to run down there before that steel blew. I would  
3 always get caught, I would jump in that elevator and there would be an upper classman  
4 waiting at the bottom to nail me as I got off and that sort of thing. Trying to beat the  
5 system, everybody tried to beat the system. I ended up paying for it.

6 KC: So you finished, I believe you said, 1944. What did you hope to do when  
7 you got out? Was there a particular—you knew you were going to go to the Army  
8 obviously, what did you hope to do when you got into the Army?

9 WH: When I got out or when I got in?

10 KC: When you were leaving this military school before you entered the service in  
11 the United States Army, what were your aspirations? What did you hope to do?

12 WH: I wanted to be a pilot, win my wings of silver, off we go in the wild blue  
13 yonder, was the only way I could think.

14 KC: Sure, sure.

15 WH: I ended up—in those days it was the Army Air Corps. There wasn't any Air  
16 Force. It was the Army Air Corps. I ended up getting in the Army Air Corps, but that's as  
17 far as I got. He said, "We don't need any more pilots. We've got plenty of pilots. We're  
18 gonna make a gunner out of you." They did, but I didn't like it so the infantry was all I  
19 knew. When I went before the OCS board they said, "What other branches do you want  
20 to get in?" I said, "I just want to get in the infantry."

21 KC: Well, what—I'm sorry, what unit were you assigned to originally as a  
22 gunner?

23 WH: Oh, it was a training—I was in training command. I took training at, oh,  
24 Wichita Falls. What's the name of that Air Force base there? Sheppard Field.

25 KC: There you go.

26 WH: I went from Sheppard Field to Denver, Colorado, to Lowry Field. It was  
27 only a matter of three or four months before I—I think you had to be in the service three  
28 months before you could even apply for OCS so just, maybe I had waited an extra month  
29 before I would apply for OCS. As I say, the Bulge was one of the big things, we were  
30 losing a lot of second lieutenants in the infantry over there.

1 KC: So there was space for you in infantry OCS. All right. Where did you go  
2 from there?

3 WH: I went from there to Ft. McClellan, Alabama, for a short [time] and then  
4 over to the Pacific, to the Philippines.

5 KC: Okay, with what unit?

6 WH: With the 33<sup>rd</sup> Illinois National Guard, the 136<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team.

7 KC: What were you going to be doing there?

8 WH: I was going to be leading a platoon of infantrymen on the invasion of Japan.

9 KC: All right. Now obviously that doesn't occur, thank goodness that doesn't  
10 occur. The war is over in 1945. Were you intending at this time to make the military a  
11 career when World War II ended?

12 WH: Well, I had an obligation. They were sending people home based on points  
13 and if you'd been overseas since '43 or '42 or '41 or whatever, you had amassed a lot of  
14 points, so many points for each month of service, so many points if you got a medal or  
15 commendation or a medal of some sort. Depending on the degree of the medal extra  
16 points for that. So I didn't have very many points. I didn't have any, my points especially  
17 being in a combat zone were very few. I had two years of occupation duty before I even  
18 got home. I hadn't seen my father now since about—he went overseas in '43 and this is  
19 like '47. So I decided to come home and get out.

20 KC: Sure. What were your duties during this occupation in Japan primarily?

21 WH: They were exceptional for a second lieutenant.

22 KC: How so?

23 WH: I was the public relations officer for the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which in  
24 wartime strength is [fifteen thousand] people and the job normally called for a major  
25 which is considerably higher than a second lieutenant. I held that job for eighteen months.  
26 I got promoted, of course, during that time, eighteen to twenty months, I guess. I was  
27 doing quite well efficiency report wise. I was getting excellent and I guess that's one of  
28 the reasons I got a notice from the Army that they'd like for me to come back in the  
29 service. In those days occupation of Japan and this is the early days of the occupation, I  
30 had a jeep, my own personal jeep, I had a horse, I had a Chris Craft Runabout motor boat.  
31 There was a Japanese mechanic to take care of it who didn't speak English and I didn't

1 speak any Japanese. I kept him happy by giving him a bottle of very rare old Suntory  
2 whiskey once a week and some cigarettes. I didn't smoke and I didn't drink that Suntory  
3 with scotch whiskey, I didn't drink scotch whiskey. So I gave him a bottle of Suntory and  
4 maybe a carton of cigarettes every week and with a calendar to tell him when I wanted  
5 the boat and where I wanted the boat. I'd have to bring the gas because the Japanese  
6 didn't have any gas. I had a pretty—for a second lieutenant I had a great job.

7 KC: Yeah, it sounds like you were making out pretty well there.

8 WH: I really did, yeah, I enjoyed it. I didn't really have any bad tours in the  
9 military. I can't think of any bad ones.

10 KC: All right. Well, you're out in 1947 and you said you tried insurance, I  
11 believe it was.

12 WH: Yeah.

13 KC: Any particular reason?

14 WH: No, no, I don't know. I had gotten married and my wife says you've got to  
15 get a job so I had to go get a job.

16 KC: What was your wife's name?

17 WH: Her name is Jean.

18 KC: Jean, okay.

19 WH: Yeah, we celebrated our 61<sup>st</sup> wedding anniversary last September.

20 KC: Congratulations. Well, from this pleasant duty in the occupation of Japan  
21 back to the United States in the South and trying to sell insurance, there had to have been,  
22 I would think there'd have had to have been some sort of drop off or some sort of let  
23 down. Before the Army called you back to see if you were interested, did you have any  
24 regrets about leaving the Army for that short period of time?

25 WH: Yes, I think I did. I still do from time to time. What if I'd have stayed in? I  
26 would probably have gotten promoted to captain faster. As it worked out things—you  
27 know, I ended up—once I got through flight training, I got through flight training in June  
28 of 1950. Part of that time I had gone to Washington about an assignment, what could I  
29 expect after I got out of flight school. They said, "We're going to send you to Japan." I  
30 said, "Well, I've been to Japan. I don't want to go to Japan. Send me someplace else." So  
31 they said, "Well, if you don't take any leave if you'll leave right from Ft. Sill, Oklahoma,

1 and go straight to—we'll send you Salzburg, Austria," and I said, "Fine." I got to  
2 Salzburg, Austria, and the Korean War started in June of 1950. I sat over in Salzburg for  
3 three years, came back in July of '53 and that's when the Korean War ended. The timing  
4 was perfect. Otherwise I'd have been over there and lord knows I might not even be  
5 talking to you now.

6 KC: Now, when you're initially in the Army you decided you wanted to fly and  
7 you weren't going to fly, they weren't going to let you fly. They had plenty of pilots.  
8 They said they needed gunners. This is pretty disappointing to you and you wanted to  
9 move into the infantry and you did. Why back in flight training in the second go around?  
10 Did you still have a desire to fly?

11 WH: Yeah. I still had that interest in there and then I used my GI Bill when I got  
12 out of the service, I used my GI Bill to learn to fly with a company called Southern  
13 Airways. They later expanded and became an actual airline and flew throughout the  
14 South. When I went to flight school I did not divulge this to anybody, any of the Air  
15 Force pilots who were my instructors. I breezed through the course, you know.

16 KC: Why did you decide not to tell them?

17 WH: Why?

18 KC: Yeah.

19 WH: I figured it would not be to my advantage. I think when an instructor gets a  
20 hold of somebody he wants to teach him his way. He doesn't want to be compared with  
21 somebody else. He wants his student to believe everything he says and do it his way. If  
22 the instructor thinks you've got some other ideas or I don't know what the rationale was,  
23 but it paid off handsomely.

24 KC: How so?

25 WH: Well, for one thing, in the class we had it started off much bigger than it is  
26 and my instructor had four students and that's a lot of students for a flight instructor. He  
27 had to fly with—he had to fly with two of them in the morning and two of them in the  
28 afternoon. You were getting a lot of flight time in there. But after a certain time period of  
29 two or three weeks all of a sudden one of them was gone and two or three weeks later  
30 another one was gone and pretty soon now we're just down to two students. One of the  
31 reasons I could hear him say to these other guys, "Well, if Harper can do it," and I'm

1 trying to keep a straight face and I did not divulge to them, any of the people in my class  
2 that I had a pilot's license.

3 KC: So the washout rate was pretty high there.

4 WH: Oh, yeah.

5 KC: Obviously.

6 WH: See there was no—it wasn't like we've got a war, we've got to get them out  
7 and let them run in the field like they did helicopter pilots. No, that was it.

8 KC: What were you flying during this training?

9 WH: We flew Air Force planes at first and then at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, we got into  
10 the Army, the Army had light aircraft. Later the Army got more into helicopters than  
11 fixed-wing. In Austria I was flying L-5s, L-17s, and L-20s, if that means anything to you.  
12 They were liaison aircraft.

13 KC: Sure. So you finished flight school earlier in 1950.

14 WH: Right.

15 KC: Your timing couldn't have been better, I guess, to avoid, I couldn't say to  
16 avoid, but to not have to face the Korean War.

17 WH: I didn't know there was a war on. I got to Austria and found out we were at  
18 war.

19 KC: Sure, sure. What were you doing in Austria, in Salzburg?

20 WH: I was assigned to an infantry regiment and each regiment was assigned two  
21 airplanes and two pilots. When I got there they had two airplanes and three pilots. One of  
22 the pilots got promoted to major and sort of promoted himself out of the job because the  
23 job only called for two captains or a captain and a lieutenant or two lieutenants. About  
24 two or three months after I got there the other pilot in my unit flew into a logging cable.  
25 We're flying in the Alps over there, Salzburg is right on the cusp of the Alps. He didn't  
26 see this logging cable in the valley and he hit that logging cable about, I guess, three  
27 hundred feet in the air and the aircraft came to a stop, didn't hit the propeller, but it hit  
28 inside the wing there and then just stopped him and he fell and just all but into the  
29 ground. So I was the only pilot they had. Of course, with the war in Korea mounting up  
30 they didn't send any replacements over for us. So I was the only pilot in this regiment  
31 with two airplanes for a long time, almost the whole time I was there.

1 KC: So you were in Austria for essentially the entirety of the Korean War.

2 WH: Yeah, I was there exactly three years.

3 KC: Was there any desire on your part to participate, to try to find duty in the  
4 Korean War?

5 WH: Oh, I thought about it, but I was having such a good time and I was my own  
6 boss. The regimental commander who was a colonel and the lieutenant colonel, the  
7 executive officer thought I was the best pilot in the world primarily because whenever  
8 they wanted to go somewhere I'd get them there and we wouldn't crash and burn.

9 KC: Build them a level of confidence just by getting them there alive. I  
10 understand.

11 WH: So here I was number one. I enjoyed the benefit of that.

12 KC: Sure, sure.

13 WH: One of them used to drive me crazy, though. In Germany and Austria  
14 there's not much real estate over there compared to Texas, for instance. It's just  
15 inundated with little bitty villages, little bitty things and on a damn German map or an  
16 Austrian map it's just nothing but these little bitty towns there. We had a couple of places  
17 to shoot artillery. One of them was called Graffenwöhr and it was up in northern  
18 Germany quite a flight from Salzburg up to this place, a couple of hours as I recall. One  
19 of these colonels, I forget which one it was, as we were flying all over this thing he would  
20 ask me, "What's the name of this town? What's the name of that town?" to try to see if I  
21 guessed, if I knew where I was. I had no idea. I've got my eyes on a steeple or a railroad  
22 track that I know or some landmark that I'm flying to. I ended up just getting me a little  
23 note and writing down a whole bunch of names of towns and if he asked me a question I  
24 would just read the next one and read it off to him.

25 KC: And he didn't know the difference?

26 WH: He didn't have a map back there. I wouldn't give him a map. I was really  
27 having a good time over there. I didn't really have any bad assignments. I did have a tour  
28 in Iceland in 1957, I guess. I spent a year in Keflavik, Iceland, flying helicopters. I wasn't  
29 really excited about helicopters when I first learned to fly helicopters, but after that year  
30 in Iceland I became fairly proficient with it. Then in 1959 I got assigned to the  
31 presidential unit in Washington, D.C., and ended up flying Eisenhower, Kennedy, and

1 Johnson, which were real highlights. I went from captain to lieutenant colonel just like  
2 that in three years there.

3 KC: That is very impressive. What did you do, just to try to keep some sort of  
4 chronology here, where did you go from your time in Salzburg? You left in 1953. Where  
5 did you go after that?

6 WH: I went back to the states to the Army aviation school at Fort Rucker, it was  
7 in at—it's still at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The Air Force, when they broke away the Air  
8 Force kept all the bases and all the aircraft and all the instructors. We did have one  
9 airfield at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma that they used for training, advanced training I'll call it. The  
10 Air Force gave you your basic training and gave you your wings and the Army signed  
11 you off on short field type work and adjusting artillery and that sort of stuff, Army  
12 specialties. We did that at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. Then in 1954 we moved from Ft. Sill down  
13 to Ft. Rucker, Alabama. [I was one] of the advance parties and I was at Ft. Rucker from  
14 '54 to ['59]. My family stayed there. We lived in Dothan, Alabama. My family stayed  
15 there from '54 to '60, I guess, when we moved up to Washington. I had a tour in Iceland  
16 for a year and then went right back to Ft. Rucker.

17 KC: Where did you do your helicopter training?

18 WH: When you're eighty-two your mind leaves you for a while. I'll think of it in  
19 a minute. San Marcos, Texas, just down the road here.

20 KC: Sure, sure, sure.

21 WH: I'm trying to think, Gary Air Force Base it was called. These places are  
22 like, I guess, Reese Air Force Base they don't exist anymore.

23 KC: Yeah, they've kind of slowly disappeared over the years.

24 WH: This was near New Braunfels, right on the other side of New Braunfels.

25 KC: Sure. Now you mentioned that you weren't all that crazy about helicopters.  
26 First, what led you into helicopter training?

27 WH: Well, I was a Regular Army officer and I had been flying for about three  
28 years. The Army was building their helicopter base up because of the experiences in  
29 [Korea]. If you've ever seen the sitcom *M\*A\*S\*H* those helicopters, that was the early  
30 helicopters. My position was they don't pay you any more money for flying a helicopter  
31 than they do for an airplane. I just, I wasn't so sure about those helicopters and you didn't

1 have a parachute in a helicopter. I had an experience during my helicopter training that  
2 really scared the devil out of me. It occurred on the day I soloed the airplane. My  
3 instructor—I was a captain in the Army and he was a captain in the Air Force. He got out  
4 and he said, “Okay, we’re going to solo you again.” We were way out in some corn field,  
5 not a corn field, but some field outside of New Braunfels there. He got out and he very  
6 meticulously fastened his seatbelt. There were no doors on the helicopters in  
7 summertime. He lit up a cigarette. He was a smoker. He came around to my side, I was  
8 sitting on the left side and asked me if I wanted to stretch my legs or something so I did  
9 and got out. Then I got back in and he leaned over to tell me what he wanted me to do.  
10 The engine is running. The blade isn’t turned up. It’s at idle, but the blades are turning  
11 around. He says, “Take off and come around and shoot a couple of landings and then  
12 we’ll call it a day and go in.” I said, “Okay.” He sort of backed away and I cranked this  
13 motorcycle type throttle and I cranked the engine up to full [RPM] (rotations per minute)  
14 and started my take off run and everything was fine. I started to make a turn to the left.  
15 About that time all hell broke loose, the biggest loudest banging and carrying on you ever  
16 heard and I just knew the engine was coming apart. It was that serious. I increased my  
17 bank and by this time I’m banking like so (gesture), I start to slide out of the seat. My feet  
18 were coming off the pedals and panic started to set in (laughs). It wasn’t until I got back  
19 on the ground and realized it was my seat belt, that I hadn’t fastened my seat belt and it  
20 was flapping against the outside there and just beating the devil out of the side of the  
21 helicopter. Anyway, I flew them and was minimally proficient in them until they sent me  
22 to Iceland and that’s all we had were two helicopters up there.

23 KC: So how did you get duty in Iceland?

24 WH: I had two choices. I could go to Korea on—by this time it was occupation  
25 duty or I could—and Korea was I want to say a sixteen-month tour and Iceland was a  
26 twelve-month tour. So I said, “I’ll take the Iceland tour.”

27 KC: Sure, sure. Now what were you doing in Iceland?

28 WH: We had a, it was called the Icelandic Defense Force. We had an Air Force  
29 squadron of interceptors and remember in ’47 to ’57 the Cold War was on. Iceland is part  
30 of the distant early warning, the DEW line one that goes through Iceland there. We had a  
31 Navy Neptune P-2V squadron looking for submarines and checking the—the Soviets had

1 a big fishing fleet, hundreds of vessels all of which were capable of carrying troops to  
2 invade Iceland. Iceland had no Army, no Navy, but they had a police force but they had  
3 no weapons. The [country], they were just strictly I guess neutral or something, but they  
4 were part of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The military had an Air Force  
5 base there called Keflavik Air Force Base. By having Keflavik Air Force Base we can  
6 take a jet plane and fly from the United States into Greenland and refuel and from  
7 Greenland into Iceland and from Iceland into Scotland or Germany or [anywhere in  
8 Europe]. If we hadn't had Keflavik, if we wanted to replenish our military stock of  
9 aviation in Germany we'd have to package the plane up and put it on a ship and send it  
10 over there and then have them assemble back. It would've been a pain in the neck. This  
11 way you could fly them over there by having a base. I think they use that same base in  
12 World War II, Keflavik. The Army had a unit there, a [battalion] combat team with some  
13 artillery and some tanks and infantry. Our mission there was to guard the airbase against  
14 ground attack. The Air Force was there against the air attack and the Navy was there  
15 against the submarine attack, I guess. It was a one-year tour and it wasn't bad duty.  
16 Iceland should've been called Greenland because the weather wasn't really that bad. It  
17 was dark for six months out of the year. During the winter months it would snow a lot  
18 and heavy winds, but in the summer months it was quite pleasant.

19 KC: You mentioned the Cold War and maybe now is a good time to ask you just  
20 a more broad, general question about your interpretations, your perception in global  
21 politics, that sort of thing. What is clearly becoming a career military officer when you  
22 look at the role of the United States in post-World War II it's obviously changing and  
23 changing dramatically from what it was prior to the Second World War. What are your  
24 perceptions as a young officer in the United States Army on this changing role for the  
25 United States on the global stage?

26 WH: Well, that's a heavy one. I don't think at my status and rank and position I  
27 gave that a whole heck of a lot of thought. However, the Hungarian Revolution occurred  
28 in 1957 and we got a lot of refugees and things that were coming through Iceland.  
29 Keflavik was also the, Keflavik and Reykjavik were places where refugees were  
30 streaming into whatever by means they could get there to get out of the country. I'm  
31 trying to think if there was any other uprising of something that the Russians put down in

1 '57. Protection was—we just knew it was going to happen and we're trying to prepare for  
2 it, especially with the Strategic Air Command. If anybody, they were really on pins and  
3 needles about preparations, preparedness, and not being caught short.

4 KC: Sure. So is it fair to say that, again, as a young Army officer what you saw  
5 the United States doing at the time was worthy, protecting America's European allies and  
6 promoting American goals. That can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. But  
7 what you saw was the United States pursuing an important goal, I think what I hear you  
8 saying here, in protecting these other countries, protecting NATO allies for the United  
9 States for their benefit and for the benefit of the United States. I say that because this is  
10 going to eventually lead us into Southeast Asia. We're going to see massive differences  
11 between the two although sometimes they weren't seen as being quite so different, the  
12 circumstances surrounding each. All right. Well, after Keflavik, your time there, where  
13 do you go, after your twelve-month tour in Iceland is over?

14 WH: I went back to Ft. Rucker, Alabama. Rucker was the Army aviation school  
15 and the Army aviation center. I went back to Ft. Rucker and was the information officer  
16 there, based primarily all of my experiences as a public relations officer for this division,  
17 why, they gave that same job to promote Ft. Rucker. Then in 1959 I was assigned to  
18 Washington to the presidential helicopter unit. My family moved up there in '60.

19 KC: How did you get assigned to this? It seems like some pretty choice duty  
20 you've wound up with again. How did you get assigned to this?

21 WH: I had no bad, really in thirty-one years I can't look at a single time other  
22 than my initial two or three months in the service that weren't really enjoyable.

23 KC: How did they choose you for this new position, new duty in Washington?

24 WH: I like to think it was my charisma and—

25 KC: Good looks.

26 WH: I don't know. It was primarily a transportation—the Army had several  
27 branches of service like the infantry and the artillery and the chemical warfare and people  
28 like that. Certain of them had Army aviators assigned. Most of the Army aviators started  
29 off in the Transportation Corps. The Transportation [Corps] had the big helicopters. I'm  
30 trying to think of the old ones, the banana-shaped helicopter. They had some in Vietnam  
31 in the earlier days. This unit that I joined in Washington was a transportation unit, but the

1 people who managed the pilots for the Army wanted to get other officers of other  
2 branches into that unit rather than they all be Transportation Corps because for one thing  
3 that was a drain on the Transportation Corps to provide so many officers to a unit to  
4 whereas if they could just provide one or two in there they could send those officers to  
5 other places where they needed them. There weren't that many pilots within the Army.  
6 The Vietnam War situation really escalated the pilots, the warrant officer program. We  
7 were turning them out by the hundreds. Anyway, that's how I got there. I got there as a  
8 captain and I guess I made major about two or three months later. About two or three  
9 years later I made lieutenant colonel. So I caught up real fast.

10 KC: Yeah, absolutely. What do you think led to these rapid promotions?

11 WH: My charisma. (Laughs) No, no, I think I waited a long time as a captain.

12 KC: I'm sure.

13 WH: Regular Army, it was primarily because during Eisenhower, Eisenhower  
14 didn't—you know even though he was an Army general, he didn't do the military  
15 services anything. We got no pay raises. We got no promotions, we got nothing. It wasn't  
16 until I got out that the military finally got somewhere. I guess I was in the right time at  
17 the right place.

18 KC: Sure. Now you were able to fly three different presidents, you say.

19 WH: Right.

20 KC: All right, you—

21 WH: I came at the end of Eisenhower's and all of Kennedy's and eighteen  
22 months with Johnson.

23 KC: So what were your duties like with this? How often would you get to fly one  
24 of the presidents?

25 WH: I was the executive officer of the unit and I did the assignments so it was  
26 just when I wanted to fly, I flew. In those days because of the Cold War we had people at  
27 Anacostia Naval Base, if you're familiar with Washington in the old days the Navy had  
28 an airfield called Anacostia and the Air Force had a field called Bolling, Bolling Air  
29 Force Base and Anacostia and their runways ran together. You could land on one and taxi  
30 to the other one or you could land on either one. They were both right along the Potomac  
31 River and right across the river was Washington National Airport. So they subsequently

1 in years shut those airbases down because of the collision possibility. The Air Force  
2 moved out to Andrews Air Force Base. They kept the base there, but they put non-flying  
3 units in it. The Navy did the same thing. They kept the base but not flying units in it.  
4 Well, my unit had to provide helicopters for 24/7 to evacuate the White House. Our duty  
5 was strictly White House. The base that we operated from, Davidson Army Air Field,  
6 which is just outside of Washington, also had the requirement to evacuate other high  
7 ranking people in the Pentagon as well as senators and congressmen. There were bases  
8 outside of Washington, D.C., in the Catoctin Mountains set up to handle these people. In  
9 fact, they were underground offices. There was food lined up in the hallways there, the  
10 aisle ways and all this is underground. You fly over, you would never know this  
11 installation was there. It would just be a helipad disguised as a tennis court or two tennis  
12 courts with a net painted on the ground rather than a sitting up thing.

13 KC: Sure. How many times did you visit this complex?

14 WH: There were several of them, one of which was Camp David. Now Camp  
15 David was very popular with Eisenhower. In fact, he renamed it. He renamed it after his  
16 grandson, it was Shangri-La.

17 KC: Shangri-La, right.

18 WH: Just down the hill, Camp David was situated in Maryland, but just down the  
19 hill from it was Pennsylvania near Gettysburg and on the other side was West Virginia  
20 and so it was all right. Ike had a farm in Gettysburg. We would fly him to his farm in  
21 Gettysburg and then we would take the helicopters and fly back to Camp David and sit  
22 there over the weekend. If any special visitors were coming to see Ike we would either go  
23 get Ike and bring him to Camp David while another helicopter brought the visitor in from  
24 Washington, or we would take the visitor to—it depended on what Ike wanted to do as to  
25 whether he wanted to bring the visitor to his farm or he would meet us there. Mamie  
26 didn't like to fly helicopters. She would always drive.

27 KC: Who were the more significant VIPs to whom you flew Ike or them to Ike?

28 WH: They'd be foreign visitors maybe or just like the—you're taxing me now.  
29 This has only been forty-eight years ago. It wasn't just Ike that we went to Camp David  
30 with.

31 KC: Sure, sure. Well, that's okay.

1           WH: You know, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs or whoever they want to take  
2 on the weekend up there.

3           KC: Sure, I just wanted to know if there was any one particular that stood out.  
4 Well, that's fine. What about your time flying JFK? You flew him through his entire  
5 administration?

6           WH: Yeah. Well, with JFK we had a different helicopter. When Eisenhower was  
7 there we were flying the H-34 helicopter which was a single-rotor helicopter with five  
8 blades. The engine was in the front with the big clam shell doors. The passenger  
9 compartment was—the pilot's compartment was eleven feet off the ground. The pilots  
10 shinned up the outside, take the window and slide the window back and got in your seat.  
11 The copilot went up the other side. You were cut off from the passenger completely  
12 except by radio. When Ike would get onboard, we would always be in the cockpit ready  
13 to go. I would salute and sometimes he would salute back and sometimes he wouldn't.  
14 He being a five-star general and I was a captain or a major at the time, why, I understood  
15 that he wouldn't necessarily salute. When Kennedy came onboard he came on—the Air  
16 Force One was a 707. When Eisenhower was president Air Force One was a  
17 Constellation. If you remember the Constellation, the three-tailed arch thing with piston  
18 engines and you had to start them one at a time. When Kennedy came in he came in with  
19 a 707, that was the Air Force One. The Army ended up with some Navy anti-submarine  
20 helicopters that we converted to VIP configuration. They had a bathroom onboard and  
21 they had a galley onboard and they had that because Kennedy had a bad back. They had  
22 some special seats, two special reclining type adjustable seats made just for his back.  
23 They had the picture windows and they had couches instead of airline seats and things. It  
24 was pretty well, with rugs on the floor and two doors, a door in the front where the  
25 president comes in and a door in the back with strap hangers. You always flew with a  
26 doctor, always had a physician and he always had a, because of the Cold War he had at  
27 least a major in civilian clothes with a handcuffed bag that had the intercontinental  
28 ballistic missile buttons or something [the president] would touch to retaliate or send a  
29 message to Strategic Air Command. We called him the bag man. I think they still have  
30 got this guy. Then if the president was going to some state, he'd have the state senator or  
31 the state representative onboard with him. So when they got off in his locale, why, there

1 was their state representative with the president and that sort of thing. Anyway, with  
2 Kennedy he walked up the steps and there was the pilot and the copilot. If you've seen  
3 those helicopters on TV they're the same ones now. These are later models, the same  
4 company makes them and they're the same basic air frame. They've just got better  
5 engines in them and now they've got some extra stuff to deflect heat-seeking missiles, a  
6 lot of improvements on it as there are in most airplanes.

7 KC: Sure.

8 WH: Ike only liked to go to Camp David and to Gettysburg. The Kennedy's had  
9 a place in Hyannis Port and they had a place in Palm Beach. So we enjoyed that  
10 atmosphere, you know.

11 KC: I bet so.

12 WH: Johnson only liked Johnson City, Texas.

13 KC: Well, that's not quite Hyannis Port or Palm Beach, that's for sure. It has its  
14 charms, though, for sure. Well, tell me about your time taking Lyndon Johnson from  
15 place to place.

16 WH: I hate to say this on the tape, but Lyndon Johnson, he was an SOB.

17 KC: (Laughs) Great, explain that to me.

18 WH: From the first [day]—Lyndon Johnson didn't have any worry for anybody  
19 unless they could do him some good. I mean, he didn't look—people that worked for  
20 Lyndon Johnson were in the way. They were dirt. He just had nothing good to say to  
21 them. I hated the thought of the poor old Secret Service that had to guard Lyndon  
22 Johnson. He was just so egotistical and he had—well, I asked then to go to Vietnam to  
23 get away from this thing. The worst job the Secret Service could do, Clint, I am trying to  
24 think of the guy that was Johnson's number one body guard, Clint—now, that's his first  
25 name was Clint and I'll think of his last name in a minute. He had a small drinking  
26 problem in the Secret Service. He had had some disciplinary problems, but he had been  
27 there a long time. So the worst thing as far as the Secret Service goes is to be [on vice  
28 president detail]. The vice president, A, he never goes anywhere. B, he doesn't have any  
29 status. People don't really come out to see him when he drives into town or something.  
30 He ended up with Johnson's, being Johnson's aide, his Secret Service guy. It wasn't until  
31 the terrible day there in Dallas when he threw himself over LBJ and all of a sudden next

1 thing you know LBJ is the president and who do you think he put in charge of the Secret  
2 Service? And who do you think—it was payback time. I don't know how long he lasted  
3 after he was sworn in. I know there were no helicopters on [the Dalls] trip. I was there in  
4 Washington when they came back that night, flew him into the White House. Mrs.  
5 Kennedy along with the Johnsons and then took LBJ's, not LBJ, John FK's body out to  
6 Bethesda Medical Center. We flew him out in the helicopter. It was a bad night. As I  
7 recall, it was raining, a terrible night. Anyway, it wasn't—I doubt he was in office two  
8 weeks before we ended up out in Johnson City, Texas. The assassination was, what? The  
9 twenty-second of November. By the tenth of December anyway we were out at Johnson  
10 City and they weren't set up for a presidential entourage. At his ranch he had about a  
11 five-thousand-foot paved runway there, but the Secret Service had to bring in a bunch of  
12 motor homes and prefab type buildings to house their agents. They had to surround the  
13 ranch, that kind of stuff, put in protection they hadn't even dreamed that they were going  
14 to have to do. They had to do all almost overnight. He stayed out there through  
15 Christmas, I know. Of course, the pilots were running back and forth. He was trying to  
16 show off and he had all these old rancher friends. He liked to go hunting in the morning  
17 at like three o'clock or four o'clock in the morning. He had some girlfriends. He had the  
18 Air Force fly them in and then once they got into Austin, to Bergstrom Air Force Base we  
19 would pick them up in the helicopter and take them out to one of these adjoining ranches  
20 and he owned a lot of property around his ranch. Then we'd take him out there and then  
21 he'd say, "Come back and get me about three or four o'clock in the morning." Had no  
22 concern for the pilots or crews that waited all day long, and he wouldn't tell them  
23 anything. What got us was we knew his wife and daughters knew this was going on and  
24 they just put up with that. He was an SOB. He really was.

25 KC: Now was this—that is incredibly interesting. Was this something that you  
26 were expressly forbidden to mention or is it something that you just knew better than to  
27 leak this, what was going on out there?

28 WH: No, no. It was just one of those things. He's the commander-in-chief. I liked  
29 the job.

30 KC: That would be a quick way to lose that job, I would think.

31 WH: Oh, yeah.

1 KC: And probably a lot of other things, truth be known.

2 WH: No, it was one of those things that we put up with it. I was in a position  
3 where I could go back to Washington any time I wanted to, but that's where the action  
4 was, especially when he's the new president and we're learning new things. We had to  
5 keep helicopters out—we had to keep helicopters—we still had that mission at Anacostia  
6 Naval Air Station to provide for the evacuation of the White House whether he was there  
7 or not. We had to have those helicopters there. I had the opportunity to sort of pick and  
8 choose. I wanted to see what the rest of them were having to go through and how long  
9 was a reasonable length of time to send a replacement pilot out there. We wouldn't  
10 replace the helicopters. We'd just send the pilots out there. Of course, there were daily  
11 flights from Washington out to Bergstrom out to Austin with people, White House  
12 business because he was running the White House from out there at his ranch.

13 KC: Sure.

14 WH: We had plenty of ways to get people back and forth. So I kept them out  
15 there maybe for a week and then rotated him back to Washington until he finally came  
16 back to Washington.

17 KC: A couple of questions here, one about these rendezvous with LBJ and what  
18 you called girlfriends. How many of those do you think there were?

19 WH: Three at least.

20 KC: Three, three girlfriends or three of these different rendezvous which you  
21 were aware?

22 WH: I think there was three different—the Air Force had some little blue jets.  
23 We called them the LBJs. I remember some of the missions when I got pick up—we  
24 wouldn't necessarily know their name, but pick up a certain party, there being an LBJ  
25 landing out there at Austin at Bergstrom and take them to—of course, the different  
26 ranches we had noted as to where they were.

27 KC: So his family may have been at, say, the home ranch, but LBJ would've  
28 been a different part of the ranch, a different home on the ranch. I see, okay. Interesting  
29 stuff. Well, let me jump back to Kennedy. I should've asked you this question before, but  
30 it had slipped my mind. You were responsible for moving Kennedy from place to place

1 on a fairly regular basis, I think, from what I hear you saying. When Kennedy is  
2 assassinated what's going through your mind? How did that affect you?

3 WH: Well, shock, shock and awe. We were just—saying, “Well, why did it  
4 happen?” We were in Washington, of course. Of course, we got the word, anybody in the  
5 White House got the word almost immediately. Well, we knew the vice president was  
6 now the president and the loss. Everybody—I don't think—Kennedy had more of an  
7 affinity for the people that worked for him as well as the people that worked with him. It  
8 was just a loss. We'd known JFK, I mean, we had known LBJ as a vice president. He was  
9 hard to live with as a vice president. He had the same temperament. He didn't change  
10 when he became president just maybe a little bit more emphasis to it. He was a hard  
11 passenger to carry. He was always complaining about something, either too fast or it was  
12 too cold or it was too hot or something, you know. “When are we going to get there,” you  
13 know, and “Are we there yet?”

14 KC: Kind of like with a little kid in the backseat on a long trip.

15 WH: Yes, exactly.

16 KC: But a little kid who can control your destiny.

17 WH: Yeah, he didn't like being vice president. That was pretty obvious that he  
18 didn't like that.

19 KC: Well, what other memorable events took place the time that you were flying  
20 any of these three presidents?

21 WH: I think one of the ones that I really remember the most happened with  
22 President Eisenhower in December of 19, I wanna say '59, but it could've been '60. He  
23 met with Prime Minister of Great Britain—I'm trying to think of his name—in Bermuda.  
24 All of a sudden one day, it was a Friday afternoon in December, I got a call that they  
25 wanted the helicopters over in Bermuda. If you've ever been to Bermuda they don't have  
26 a lot of vehicle traffic there. Everybody rides around on these motor scooters and they  
27 didn't see Ike very well with a motor scooter and a hard hat on. The prime mister, who in  
28 the hell, I can't think of this guy's name, I'm going to admit it. Anyway, I was told to get  
29 some helicopters and fly down to Norfolk Saturday and spend the night Saturday night  
30 and then leave Norfolk at eight o'clock Sunday morning and fly one hundred miles due  
31 east of Norfolk. When you go east of Norfolk you're in the Atlantic Ocean.

1 KC: Right.

2 WH: At that point I was going to meet an aircraft carrier and that aircraft carrier  
3 was going to take my helicopters over to within about fifty to a hundred miles of  
4 Bermuda. We didn't want the Bermudians to think they were being invaded because  
5 whenever you see an aircraft carrier you see two or three destroyers, you see two or three  
6 U-boats, you see two or three—there's a whole bunch of vessels there. There's not just  
7 one. So this was one of the highlights was, A, doing this and getting on this ship, landing  
8 on this aircraft carrier, which was a first for any of the pilots in our group. Then getting to  
9 Bermuda and deciding, well, we need to reconnoiter where we're going to land. The  
10 governor general's house was on the—there was a hill there in Bermuda, I don't  
11 remember the name of the mountain they called it, but the government general's house  
12 was on top of this hill. We were going to pick up Ike at I think it was Hamilton Air Force  
13 Base, the Air Force had a base there in Bermuda and fly him to this location there. He  
14 was meeting prime minister somebody. Anyway, I'm going to make a dry run and find a  
15 place to land and the Secret Service wanted to go along. The White House  
16 communications people, they were always—the president has to be in communications  
17 24/7 wherever he is. He's got to be able to get on the phone or a radio or something. We  
18 were still in that Cold War phase. I'm flying around over this estate, pretty easy to find  
19 the governor general's house in Bermuda. I saw this spot down there and went in and  
20 flared and of course the helicopter kicks up an awful lot of dust and dirt and trash and  
21 leaves. I've got this stuff going all over this place. As I'm landing I look over there and I  
22 see the gardeners over there kneeling down with some—doing whatever gardeners do. I  
23 paid no attention to it you know and I landed and told the copilot to keep the engine  
24 running, but to stop the rotor blades because this is that old helicopter where I had to slide  
25 the window back and climb out and go down. The people down below got out. So we  
26 were on [the ground] and it looked like this place I had in mind was a pretty good place.  
27 There weren't any telephone lines around it. There weren't any big antennas sticking up  
28 and trees and that sort of stuff. About this time, here comes this old gardener coming  
29 over. "I say, you can't land here" you know. I'm trying to push, "Get away, old man,  
30 we're busy here. We've got work to do. The President of the United States is coming in  
31 here, don't you know that?" "But I'm the governor, don't you know." The worst of that

1 was that. He got my attention real fast. I thought my career with the Army was over. It's  
2 just getting started when it's over. Anyway, he allowed as to how that wasn't a good spot.  
3 He convinced me in a minute and we found another spot. Looking back on it, that, I will  
4 always remember. When you see something it may not be what you really think it is  
5 because he sure didn't look like the governor until he started talking.

6 KC: All right. Well, that's a good time to stop and take a break for a few minutes.

7 WH: All right. Yeah, we haven't even got—

8 KC: All right. When we left off you were discussing some of your more  
9 memorable experiences flying Ike and LBJ and JFK around. When did this duty end for  
10 you?

11 WH: It ended in 1965. By that time I had been a lieutenant colonel for over a  
12 year, year and a half maybe almost two years and the branch said that if I was going to  
13 make full colonel, O-6, that I needed to get some command time. All of my experience  
14 up to that time had been either flying or the brief time I was an infantry officer in World  
15 War II. They had arranged for me to go to Fort Gordon, Georgia, and get a battalion there  
16 for 18 months and that would meet the minimal requirements. I had already been to the  
17 Command and Staff College and those other tickets. You had to get your tickets punched,  
18 you know, to get rewarded certain grades. Once I finished that it was '67 I had orders in  
19 February of '67 to go to Vietnam and I decided that if I went early I might get back early.  
20 After the football games on January the 1<sup>st</sup> I headed out to California to Travis Air Force  
21 Base which is the jumping off place for all military people going to Vietnam was Travis.

22 KC: Sure.

23 WH: I got out there and being a lieutenant colonel it wasn't hard for me to get on  
24 the next flight going to Vietnam. When I got to Vietnam in early January the person I was  
25 to replace had decided to extend so I didn't really have a job when I got there so they had  
26 me on what they called repo-depot, replacement depot, for a few weeks. Finally they  
27 ended up assigning me to MACV headquarters and I ended up with a Marine Corps full  
28 colonel who was not a pilot, he was a ground pounder. He didn't like pilots and, of  
29 course, I am a pilot and that is all I had been was a pilot. I decided that I needed to get out  
30 of Saigon. I got out of Saigon and ended up down in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps at Can Tho and was  
31 assigned to the 13<sup>th</sup> Combat Aviation Battalion. It was commanded by a full colonel , an

1 O-6, which is unusual for a battalion to be commanded by a full colonel but there were  
2 five lieutenant colonels in this battalion. It was unique, the battalion was unique because  
3 it was the only U.S. military organization of any size in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps The rest of the people  
4 in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps were advisors to the three Vietnamese Army divisions that made up the 4<sup>th</sup>  
5 Corps There were no regular Army U.S. military divisions in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps They had four  
6 assault helicopter companies and one fixed-wing reconnaissance Airplane Company. An  
7 assault helicopter company had 30 UH-1 helicopters, it had 153 or 4 enlisted men. They  
8 had 15 officers and they had 55 warrant officers. The warrant officers bore the brunt of  
9 the Vietnam War and that is because some of them were over there two and three times.  
10 The lieutenant colonels and the colonels, if they got over there at all, were only over there  
11 one time because there just weren't that many jobs for them. In addition to that group  
12 there would be maybe one officer and maybe twenty or so maintenance people then there  
13 would be some others so others assigned to that aviation company. In round figures it was  
14 250 to 300 people in this company along with 30 helicopters. I had four of those  
15 companies and then I had a company with about thirty fixed-wing airplanes. The fixed-  
16 wing airplanes were there to adjust artillery fire and for reconnaissance and observation  
17 and that sort of thing; jobs that you didn't waste a helicopter on. A helicopter crew  
18 consisted of four people, two pilots and a crew chief and a door gunner. Both the crew  
19 and had gun, as well, M-60. These were not the gunships, now, these were just strictly the  
20 troop ships. That is the make up of the battalion. With three airfields I think at the time  
21 there was a lieutenant colonel in charge of each airfield but they were all part of this 13<sup>th</sup>  
22 Battalion. The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was headquartered in Can Tho Vietnam which was also the  
23 headquarters for the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps had a brigadier general, the U.S. brigadier  
24 general. The Vietnamese had a lieutenant general named Minh, M-I-N-H, and there were  
25 a lot of Minh's over there they were like Smith and Jones, I guess, in our outfit. Then at  
26 each of these other air fields there was the 21<sup>st</sup> ARVN Vietnamese division and the 7<sup>th</sup>  
27 ARVN division and the 9<sup>th</sup> ARVN division, yeah. Are you familiar with those?

28 KC: Just in some background research, yes.

29 WH: Okay, those were the three divisions and every day one of those three or  
30 sometimes more than one of those three would have an operation. Each division had a  
31 full—a U.S. Army full colonel as an advisor to the major general who was the division

1 commander. The colonel advisor also had a staff there, you know, the people—a planning  
2 staff at each division. Then down to the battalion and company levels well then those  
3 Vietnamese units were further American advisors even down to the company level, there  
4 might be a captain or a lieutenant down there. It was our job then to move people  
5 throughout the delta because the roads were not safe. You couldn't drive from Saigon  
6 down to Can Tho, you wouldn't get there. You would have to have an armed escort,  
7 generally with gunships. The few convoys that made it always had to have gunships  
8 before them.

9 KC: Sure.

10 WH: Helicopters were the only means of movement in the delta.

11 KC: Well, let me, if I may, back up before we get you to Vietnam and we will  
12 work our way through that again but you had a very good introduction there. Alright now  
13 there you're you have been around the block a few times, I think it's safe to say. You're  
14 aware, obviously, of global politics, no question about that. We talked about the role of  
15 the United States in NATO and your time in Iceland and Austria. How aware were you of  
16 the situation in Southeast Asia and Vietnam in particular throughout this time, throughout  
17 the Kennedy administration and LBJs administration?

18 WH: While I was assigned to the White House they sent me on temporary duty to  
19 the Command and General Staff College. That was strictly a counterinsurgency type  
20 environment there, that is what the Command and Staff College was preaching. We were  
21 made aware of the political, I hate to use the word upheaval but there was a terrible, there  
22 was quite a bit of turnover within South Vietnam with the Madame Nhu and Diem. Yes, I  
23 was fairly cognizant of what was going on.

24 KC: Now, were you at the college, was this during the Kennedy administration as  
25 they're preaching counterinsurgency?

26 WH: Yeah.

27 KC: Okay, that makes an awful lot of sense.

28 WH: Alright you're aware of what is taking place here and obviously you're  
29 aware of the increased role of the United States around the world. If you can, compare  
30 growing American involvement in Southeast Asia and then Vietnam in particular with  
31 what you saw on the other side of the world with the United States and NATO and it's

1 European allies. How would you compare those two? Is this something that you saw as  
2 being part and parcel of the mission of the United States now? That the involvement in  
3 Vietnam was part of the same game as American involvement in Europe? Did you see  
4 that differently? What was your impression of this?

5 WH: No, no I see it that we were involved in it. The big thing was the difference  
6 in the support that the general population gave to that involvement. It 100% behind it in  
7 once instance in World War II and it was, I won't say 100% against it, but there was  
8 considerable opposition to it and that opposition grew as the war progressed in Vietnam  
9 and the body count increased.

10 KC: Sure.

11 WH: We lost fifty something thousand in Vietnam. We have only lost 4,000 in  
12 Iraq and already that—you know, there's no end to that yet.

13 KC: Right, right. Well, when you were moving from one position to another you  
14 had somewhat jokingly, although I am not completely sure that you were totally joking,  
15 when you said you went to Vietnam to escape LBJ earlier. Why Vietnam? This was—  
16 you had your choice of—you have had a very good time in the military so far, dangerous  
17 duty.

18 WH: No, it was a Korea move. When you're in the Army you can't think of  
19 whatever, you can't reach a plateau where you're satisfied. Okay, I have made major this  
20 is as far as I want to go, you know, you don't really stop there. There's always one level  
21 more you want to obtain and, of course, in my case that would be brigadier general. I  
22 know why I didn't get it but that doesn't mean that I wasn't going to keep trying to get it.

23 KC: Sure.

24 WH: Miracles happen, they had already happened to me, you know, in a number  
25 of cases to be where I was in the first place especially with the background that I came  
26 into. So, yes, I wanted to go to Vietnam it was—of course, my wife and family didn't  
27 want me to go to Vietnam but it was just a place a career officer has to go.

28 KC: Okay, very good.

29 WH: That is one of the tickets you have got to get and the sooner the better, you  
30 know, and as it turned out I came back December the 23<sup>rd</sup> in time for Christmas. In early

1 '68 I made full colonel and got promoted. It was a, you know, if you're going to be in the  
2 service you have to look, you know, you have to have some ambition.

3 KC: Sure.

4 WH: So that is what it was, ambition and that is where I was supposed to be.

5 KC: Alright, well, you said that your family was obviously opposed to your  
6 leaving and going to Vietnam. Did you have any children by this time?

7 WH: Oh yes, yes. I had three children.

8 KC: You had three children, and what were they ages when you left?

9 WH: I think the youngest was about, I am going to say 10, 12, and 14 or 16,  
10 something like that.

11 KC: So they were old enough to be especially the teenagers are old enough to be  
12 aware of what was going on and the growing opposition to the war.

13 WH: Well, I think the opposition it was because of the body count, the American  
14 lives being lost, you know. Whereas you read in the paper today one, two, three, or four  
15 being killed over there, there was thirty and forty being killed every day.

16 KC: Sure. So you know you're going to Vietnam.

17 WH: Yeah.

18 KC: What had been your impression of the way the war was being fought up to,  
19 say, January of 1967?

20 WH: I didn't really know because I hadn't run into anybody coming back from  
21 over there. At the job I had at Fort Gordon we didn't get any—I'm aviation oriented,  
22 now, you know, primarily my heart is in flying, it's not as an infantry officer. Whatever  
23 an infantry officer could tell me would be of no interest to me going over there as a pilot.  
24 I expected to go over there as a pilot. As it turned out, they didn't need me as a pilot, they  
25 didn't need me at all when I got there and I sat there for several weeks waiting for an  
26 assignment until I could get a flying job. I didn't run into any, for instance, any warrant  
27 officers that had just been to Vietnam to give me an idea, an inkling of what the  
28 operations were like.

29 KC: Okay.

30 WH: The operations with U.S. military combat troops and Vietnamese combat  
31 troops was entirely different. For one thing, we had a language barrier. The pilots

1 couldn't talk to the passengers. The pilots could only talk to other pilots or to what they  
2 call the C&C, the command and control helicopter. Generally there would be an  
3 interpreter along with the major general that was in charge of that division even though  
4 he spoke some English. They generally had an interpreter there to make sure that his  
5 desires and the advice from the American advisor that they were speaking the same  
6 language, you know, so they didn't have any terrible mix ups.

7 KC: Sure.

8 WH: I think there's a difference there having U.S. people supporting and U.S.  
9 people and U.S. people supporting non-U.S. people. The relationship is a lot different.

10 KC: Sure, and that is something that plays its way out throughout American  
11 involvement in Vietnam.

12 WH: Yeah, and I guess the same thing happens only twice as difficult in Iraq as it  
13 was in Vietnam. At least in Vietnam—well, we didn't know, you know, they didn't wear  
14 uniforms over there. The Viet—we are talking Viet Cong now there were no North  
15 Vietnamese in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps They all wore black pajamas and the only way you knew the bad  
16 guys were if they were young enough to be in the service then they were Viet Cong. If  
17 they didn't have on—you know they had conscriptions over there like were mandatory,  
18 you know. If you were military age well you were in uniform.

19 KC: Right. Alright, so you're aware, you're following what is going on there  
20 although you haven't, like you say, you haven't had any firsthand experience or even  
21 talked anyone with firsthand experience. Like you say, you say no warrant officers to tell  
22 you what these missions are like or how they're being carried out, things like that but  
23 you're aware, obviously, of what it taking place there. You need to be there for a year, is  
24 that right?

25 WH: Right.

26 KC: Okay, very good. So you wind up in Can Tho. Before Can Tho you're in  
27 Saigon originally with Military Assistance Command there in Vietnam. You were there  
28 what was it a month, I believe, January to February or something like that?

29 WH: I was there for yeah probably a little over a month, yeah. I didn't get down  
30 to the delta until March and I got there in January so it was that period between January  
31 and March.

1           KC: Okay. While you're cooling your heels here, while you were waiting for a  
2 job, as you said it didn't work out the way it was originally intended, and you're dealing  
3 with this Marine Corps officer who despises pilots. For the short time that you were in  
4 Saigon what were you doing?

5           WH: I was assigned to the MACV OI, office of information. There again that job  
6 that I had when I first came in the service it was on my record there and so as a last resort  
7 they sent me to that. This Marine colonel was sort of in charge of MACV OI and he  
8 really didn't know what to do with me. All of a sudden here I report into him, you know,  
9 so the first thing he did was send me around to get acquainted with the company, I mean  
10 with the country. That is how I learned about 4<sup>th</sup> Corps compared to 1<sup>st</sup> Corps and 2<sup>nd</sup>  
11 Corps and III Corps that they had—it seems a little more—the war wasn't quite as  
12 aggressive down there because they had been fighting it for a number of years. The  
13 Vietnamese liked it to be picked up about eight or nine o'clock in the morning, flown out  
14 the wherever they were going to have the operation and then at three or four o'clock in  
15 the afternoon they liked to be picked up and brought back. They didn't like to do  
16 anything on Saturdays and Sundays, which was far different from what the active Army  
17 was doing further north in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps It didn't take me long to figure out if I  
18 was going to leave Saigon where I should go.

19           KC: So you spent a couple of unhappy months there in Saigon, but not bad  
20 months, but you were wanting out of Saigon for the variety of reasons that you have  
21 mentioned before. So you find yourself in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps or IV Corps in the delta. You  
22 originally go to the 13<sup>th</sup>, was a combat aviation battalion.

23           WH: That was the only unit to be assigned to.

24           KC: Alright. Now what was your—what was the general mission of the 13<sup>th</sup>?  
25 What was the 13<sup>th</sup> doing there in the delta in IV Corps

26           WH: They were the eyes and the ears and they had the gunships, of course, so  
27 they had the support mission to support these three Vietnamese divisions. That is why the  
28 battalion was scattered like it was. We had two companies up at Vinh Long which was  
29 the northernmost areas and two companies down in Can Tho which is the southernmost  
30 and one in Can Tho which was the headquarters of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps and also the  
31 headquarters of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

1 KC: Okay. Now, when you say that you or the mission of the 13<sup>th</sup> was to support  
2 these three ARVN divisions in IV Corps, what kind of support are we talking about?

3 WH: Primarily combat assault support. Let's be realistic about it, if the general  
4 commanding the 21<sup>st</sup> Division and his wife and family wanted to go to the post exchange  
5 in Saigon on a Saturday morning, why, he would ask for a helicopter and I would send  
6 him a helicopter and off they would go. By the same token, when we had a bunch of  
7 people getting ready to return to the United States a lot of the mechanics and ground  
8 people, cooks and what have you that we had didn't do any flying, all they did was you  
9 know every day they were they were working in the compound. I managed to make sure  
10 they got a Chi Com rifle or they got some kind of souvenir to take back with them, you  
11 know, in recognition of their service over there. That is when it would be sort of pay back  
12 time between the division that I was supporting. I would ask them for—you know,  
13 whenever the captured Viet Cong equipment—they weren't using it. They were using  
14 U.S. military equipment you know they weren't shooting those old rifles and things that  
15 the Viet Cong were using. I got a lot of that kind of stuff, the Chi Com stuff to give to the  
16 people who were returning. Everybody got something when they left.

17 KC: Sure, sure. Alright, well—

18 WH: Then during the—you know, there was a lot of transportation between  
19 Saigon and 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, administrative type stuff. We had a brigadier general who was  
20 commanding 4<sup>th</sup> Corps and I have him a full time helicopter and a full time crew, they  
21 were there for him whenever he wanted to go. We didn't bother that helicopter at all. He  
22 would use it to go back and forth to MACV and his staff would use it. Then we had—  
23 whatever you can think of that you would need. Since we couldn't drive between these  
24 installations, we had to fly between the installations. Just the routine battalion type stuff.  
25 The companies would have to send in daily reports, you know, they would have what  
26 they call the morning report which is a company requirement, Department of the Army  
27 wide. Everybody has got to get in the morning report by a certain time, you know, and  
28 that means you have got to inventory how many people you have got and who is AWOL  
29 (absent without leave) and who is sick and who is off on leave, that sort of stuff. To get  
30 that to battalion headquarters they had to have a helicopter to fly them back and forth to  
31 Can Tho, that kind of stuff.

1 KC: Okay, right.

2 WH: And replacement people going home, their tour is over and we take them to  
3 Saigon and we pick up the new replacements and bring them back. There's always, you  
4 know, on a day-to-day basis two or three helicopters flying or even more on just routine  
5 type operations, just standard stuff every day.

6 KC: These people who were finishing their tour in Vietnam and people who were  
7 coming in Vietnam, we are talking about American advisors to these three ARVN  
8 divisions here, is that who you're talking about?

9 WH: Advisors as well as the people for the aviation unit.

10 KC: Sure, sure.

11 WH: The only way the advisors could get down there was on a helicopter and the  
12 only helicopters were in that 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

13 KC: Okay. Now they're also responsible for support, these combat assault  
14 missions.

15 WH: Right.

16 KC: I am not going to say take me through a standard combat assault mission  
17 because obviously there's no such thing as a standard. But in general, what kind of—how  
18 would you prepare, how would your battalion prepare for a combat assault mission?

19 WH: Well, it would depend on where it was going to be as to which units would  
20 be involved. Remember, we had four assault helicopter companies, two in the north and  
21 two in the south. We had two ARVN divisions in the north and one ARVN division in the  
22 south. It depended on the size of the operation. The Vietnamese commander would go to  
23 his advisor, his American advisor and he would say that "I have information that there's a  
24 Vietcong group and the size could be anywhere from a company to a battalion of Viet  
25 Cong located over here," and he would circle this area on the map. He would like to set  
26 up an operation to go in there and wipe this group out. Between the two of them they  
27 decide how many troops that they were going to need to attack this objective. With that in  
28 mind, then the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion would get an operation order on a certain day, they would  
29 pick up X number of troops as provided by the senior advisor would tell us how many  
30 General Minh wants for this operation. I would get those helicopters from the nearest  
31 company that was to that division. If it exceeded the capability of that helicopter

1 company to provide those helicopters then I would augment them with other helicopters  
2 from one of the other units. They would generally pick these troops up about eight  
3 o'clock in the morning at their headquarters and fly them out to a—they would fly them  
4 out to the area that was—the target area, the objective area. Now, the objective area in  
5 some cases would be pre-prepped by artillery. They would start firing weapons in which  
6 case we didn't have helicopters flying around because of the artillery trajectory. Once  
7 that prepping ended up then the helicopter gunships would go in low and firing and check  
8 to see if there were any enemy involved. What they wanted to do was have the enemy  
9 shoot back at them and then they would know, A, where they were which they could then  
10 start putting down their own suppressive fire and if it was real heavy they might go back  
11 to the command and control helicopter and say "Hey, it's too hot down here lets find  
12 another place. You know, instead of coming at them from the south lets come at them  
13 from the north where they're not prepared for us." Lets face it, in a lot of cases down  
14 there we had a brother in the Viet Cong and the other brother was in the ARVN and there  
15 was a lot of—by the time they had picked the subjective the word had gotten out and the  
16 Viet Cong if they really wanted to fight they would stay there and fight. If they didn't  
17 want to fight they would long gone by the time the helicopters came in what we called a  
18 walk in the sun. We would put—we would go in there and put them in and they would  
19 land and the helicopters would go back to a nearby dyke and land on this dyke and sit  
20 there and wait until they were ready to be brought back. If it turned out there was nothing  
21 there, there were no Viet Cong, they would go in and pick them up and then take them  
22 back, you know, that would be that for the day.

23 KC: Sure, sure.

24 WH: When they got into contact that was a different thing, that is when, you  
25 know, the helicopters would get shot down and people killed. That is what happened on  
26 the 26<sup>th</sup> on Easter Sunday, by the way of 1967 when the colonel commanding this  
27 regiment was killed in a combat assault. The Viet Cong were able—they were stronger  
28 then they thought they were, there were more of them then they thought there were. They  
29 were able to get one helicopter down on the ground and then a medevac helicopter went  
30 in to pick up the wounded out of that first helicopter and they got shot down. Then the  
31 colonel went in there to pick up everybody else and he got shot down and we had three

1 helicopters on the ground there along with some people who were not—who weren't  
2 dead, they were alive. Some of them were injured and some of them were not. The  
3 colonel never left the cockpit. He was killed before he hit the ground and the helicopter  
4 burned. The other three people got out of it, you know, were later rescued.

5 KC: What were the VC using to knock these helicopters out of the sky?

6 WH: Primarily they either hit the engine or the tail rotor blade or they would hit  
7 the pilots, you know.

8 KC: What type of weapons were they using?

9 WH: Rifles and machinegun.

10 KC: Okay.

11 WH: We didn't have any heavy weapons that I recall, you know, there were no  
12 artillery pieces or anything.

13 KC: Sure, sure.

14 WH: We were fortunate in the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps compared to what they had up in the—  
15 the North Vietnamese were being supplied by the Russians and they had a lot of anti-  
16 aircraft weapons and things like that that we weren't exposed to.

17 KC: What type of ships did you have here? Were these the Huey, the UH-1, were  
18 they the Cobra? What was your battalion responsible for?

19 WH: Okay remember 1967 was the big build up in Vietnam. There were 500,000  
20 troops in Vietnam in '67 that was the biggest build up. When I got there in March we had  
21 the five units that I discussed a while ago. As the months progressed I got a Cobra  
22 gunship with about twenty-five UH-1 Cobras. I got another company of Mohawks.  
23 Mohawk was a twin-engine surveillance airplane that had infrared on it and it had a  
24 device for detecting ammonia.

25 KC: The people sniffer.

26 WH: The people sniffer was on them. Then they had some kind of side-looking  
27 radar thing that they could pick up sampans and they could pick up the heat from the  
28 sampan at night on the canals. That came in and let's see what else. Another  
29 reconnaissance airplane company came in so that battalion was augmented then by three  
30 different companies just practically overnight, you know, because of the big build up. We

1 had trouble housing, finding places for them to stay. We were constantly building things  
2 like that.

3 KC: Sure. Now, you mentioned the sampans. I gather that part of the  
4 responsibility of the, what was it, the 164<sup>th</sup> which was the larger unit that housed the 307<sup>th</sup>  
5 and the 13<sup>th</sup>, I believe is what it was. Were you involved in or was your battalion  
6 involved in any interdiction missions in addition to these combat assault and these more  
7 administrative missions?

8 WH: You know, there was what they call the riverene force. The Navy was  
9 involved with some of their patrol boats along the Mekong and along the Bassac. We had  
10 two rivers running through 4<sup>th</sup> Corps the Mekong and the Bassac. As far as pure  
11 interdiction I don't remember other than using those, I can't think of their names now, the  
12 Mohawks. We used the Mohawks and we used them at night a lot for that because there  
13 was a curfew, no sampans on the water at night. Anything on the water at night was to be  
14 construed as Viet Cong so they were free game to shoot. Of course, you know, we didn't  
15 have—helicopter gunships were a line of sight thing. If you couldn't see it you couldn't  
16 hit, you know, we didn't have that capability. Later after I left they got—in '68 they got  
17 some aircraft that were powered gliders, made no noise at all, and they were down in Soc  
18 Trang as I later learned. They were used exclusively for identifying, for interdicting the  
19 canals at night, you know. They could slip up on them—you know, in a helicopter they  
20 make a lot of noise, you can here them coming from—they couldn't hear these little  
21 things flying. We didn't have any specific missions but it was just understood and from  
22 the helicopter at night you really didn't, you know, there was no we could other than  
23 setting up an ambush or something which sometimes they did that, you know, if things  
24 really got out of control or they saw something with a lot of movement. That is the way  
25 the Viet Cong moved, you know, that is the way they got around in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps The canals  
26 were just so dense over there that you could go, you know, anywhere by boat. To answer  
27 your question, I don't remember specifically being—that was a big mission for us.

28 KC: Okay.

29 WH: It was a sideline type thing.

30 KC: Sure, sure. Maybe something if it presented itself maybe but that wasn't,  
31 your primary goal was not indicting missions it was supporting the ARVN divisions and

1 the other aspects. Okay, terrific that certainly clears that up for me. You also mentioned  
2 the VC and how they're moving and they're moving arms and things like that. What was  
3 your general impression of the VC that your battalion encountered?

4 WH: My impression was they did a hell of a job. I mean they kept us on our toes.  
5 They were aggressive with little to nothing, you know, they weren't passive at all. They  
6 were active. If they weren't active in one spot they would be active in another. I guess  
7 they kept the little hamlets all stirred up, you know, because they lived off the land, they  
8 didn't have the big PXs that we had and the big, you know mess halls and mess trucks  
9 and what have you. They had whatever they got they had to take, you know, to survive. I  
10 was impressed with their war making capability.

11 KC: Do you think that was an advantage for the VC the fact they didn't—the  
12 tooth-tail-ratio, so to speak, wasn't so much tail for them as it was for the United States?

13 WH: Absolutely, absolutely. They were not for—they were hit and run type thing.  
14 They would try to hit us at a weak spot and then be gone. They didn't hang around for us  
15 to retaliate in force like I want to be. We always try to get there and overwhelm them  
16 with force rather than—their tactics were hit and run and they were quite effective at it.

17 KC: While you were with the 13<sup>th</sup> is there any particular action with the VC that  
18 stands out to you for any reason?

19 WH: Well, the one on Easter Sunday was probably the biggest that happened  
20 while I was there, of course. It involved the tank commander being killed and a lot of  
21 decorations there. We had one helicopter pilot should have gotten the Medal of Honor.  
22 He ended up getting the Distinguished Service Cross which is the next step down. To  
23 suppress—since we had about six or eight people on the ground in front of the Viet Cong  
24 they had already got the helicopters down so the people were—the delta is flat so they are  
25 digging in with their hands. They're trying to get some kind of cover because the Viet  
26 Cong, you know, now that they have got the helicopters down now they're trying to shoot  
27 at the people out there, they can see them. This helicopter pilot, we had what they call a  
28 smoke ship and all he did was dispense smoke but to be effective with a smoke ship you  
29 have got to get down on the ground, you have got to be grass high. He flew back and  
30 forth, back and forth in front of these Viet Cong so they couldn't, you couldn't really aim  
31 at anything. So if they can't aim at the people on the ground they aimed at this helicopter.

1 How he and the three other people on there did not get killed or even injured is amazing  
2 because when it was all over the helicopter was written off, it was just un-repairable.

3 KC: Is that right? It had been hit so many times.

4 WH: It was hit so many times. He is now a minister, by the way. He is a Catholic  
5 priest. We had a reunion of this unit last month in Fort Rucker and he was there.

6 KC: Sounds like he had the fear of God literally put into him.

7 WH: I think so, I think so. That is the only thing I can imagine.

8 KC: That is just tremendous.

9 WH: That was the highlight for me and, of course, the minute I heard it I was not  
10 involved in this operation. I went to church, you know, being Easter Sunday, I went to  
11 church I wasn't even in uniform. I was wearing casual clothes. As soon as I heard that the  
12 commander had been killed and they knew he was—you know, sometimes you have to  
13 wait for them to be pronounced dead or something but burning up in the helicopter he  
14 didn't get out and all the eye witnesses, you know, they knew he was dead. I just went to  
15 the headquarters and said I am assuming command of this battalion. I went and got my  
16 combat boots on and got a helicopter and went out to where the operation was, you know.  
17 By that time the Viet Cong—we got close air support in, got some heavy weapons, Air  
18 Force type airplanes came in and did a much better job than our gunship. We didn't have  
19 Cobras in this operation, we just had modified UH-1s. Anyway, the operation had scaled  
20 down to where we could rescue the people on the ground. I went in the next morning with  
21 a graves registration team and we recovered Colonel Dempsey's, Jack Dempsey was his  
22 name, so we recovered his body the next morning. He was physically pronounced dead in  
23 the morning. But that was probably the biggie for me.

24 KC: You hadn't been with the 13<sup>th</sup> for all that long before this happened.

25 WH: No, no, no we are talking ten days, a week or ten days. Not very long.

26 KC: How well did you know Colonel Dempsey?

27 WH: I had known him when I was in Washington he was assigned, he was in  
28 Washington in the Pentagon.

29 KC: Oh, so you had a previous relationship with him.

30 WH: Yeah, I knew him. I had known him before. I knew when I signed into his  
31 headquarters that I was the senior lieutenant colonel of the five that were down there. But

1 I didn't want to be, not having been a battalion commander, I didn't want to now be a  
2 battalion executive officer would have been a—it would look on your record. What you  
3 want to do is be the lower grade in the higher position rather than the higher grade in the  
4 lower position.

5 KC: Sure, sure.

6 WH: The executive officer in the battalion is a major, calls for a major. There's  
7 one lieutenant colonel and several majors in the battalion, one of which is the executive  
8 officer.

9 KC: Because like you said it was unusual that a full bird colonel was in charge of  
10 this battalion rather than a lieutenant colonel so, yeah, that would have been you know  
11 for promotion reasons that would've been a little uncomfortable, I would think.

12 WH: Right. So anyway, after the smoke had cleared several days later I think  
13 being Easter, a lot of the brass from Saigon and my boss in Saigon was a brigadier  
14 general. He had been over there for two or three years and his family was in Thailand. He  
15 had flown over from Saigon to Thailand to spend Easter with his family. So he didn't get  
16 back to Saigon and he didn't find out about this until he got back to Saigon that Dempsey  
17 had been killed. So he came rushing down there. By that time I gave him a briefing as to  
18 what had happened, how it happened, and what have you. He told me that Dempsey's  
19 replacement was due in there in the latter part of July, another full colonel was due in to  
20 replace Dempsey, but that he wanted me to continue as the CO of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion until  
21 that time happened. Subsequently, as time progressed and July was fast approaching I  
22 had to come up with something. So I suggested to him that he form another battalion. He  
23 says, "Where do you want to put this battalion?" I said, "I want to put it in Soc Trang." I  
24 said, "The 21<sup>st</sup> Division is the most active division." I said that—and to this battalion they  
25 added the Cobra company and the Mohawk company and extra Bird Dog company to  
26 give it—so that one battalion would have eight or ten units there. So we would—and  
27 make it more—form an aviation group, which they did in 1968 after I left they formed an  
28 aviation group that was entitled to have a colonel as a commander and lieutenant colonels  
29 commanded these other battalions. So that worked out to my benefit. I was a battalion  
30 commander over there with the 13<sup>th</sup> and with what was then known as the 307<sup>th</sup>. As I say,  
31 they were bringing troops into the country like mad, the big build up was going on.

1 KC: So you were the first commanding officer of the 307<sup>th</sup>, then.

2 WH: Yes, sir.

3 KC: Okay, all right. Well, let me take you back to this Easter Sunday incident  
4 briefly. You'd known Colonel Dempsey for some time.

5 WH: Right.

6 KC: What was it like to lose someone, not just a commanding officer and all the  
7 responsibility that meant for you and the change for your experiences and what you're  
8 going to do, but on a personal level what was it like to lose someone who you'd known? I  
9 don't know whether you would call it a friend or an acquaintance or a boss or what it  
10 would be like. But if you can, explain what that was like.

11 WH: Well, let me tell you a little bit about Jack Dempsey. When Army aviation  
12 started to explode after the Korean War, and they started this program about helicopters  
13 and they started the program in 1955 and '56, of the warrant officer program, a young kid  
14 with a high school diploma could become a warrant officer and a helicopter pilot. Jack  
15 Dempsey was, I guess, a lieutenant colonel or maybe even a colonel. The Army didn't  
16 have any senior officers. We had no general officers as Army aviators. They decided to  
17 have some senior officer training things. Brigadier generals, major generals and colonels  
18 went to Ft. Rucker and learned to fly and then they went back to—as the Army was  
19 building up this aviation thing they were the nucleus of those commanders. Dempsey was  
20 one of those people that went back and was an assignments officer. As a colonel he was  
21 an assignments officer for, I guess, colonels and lieutenant colonels in Army aviation. He  
22 had the branch for officers' assignments, I think. He got his wings and went right back to  
23 the Pentagon and didn't get a lot of flying. He maybe got two or three hours a month or  
24 four hours a month. To get flight pay in those days you had to fly four hours a month.  
25 You could go without flying for two months and fly eight hours and get back, you know,  
26 that sort of thing. When he got to Vietnam he wanted to build up his flying time. If his  
27 paperwork kept him busy during the daytime he would fly at night. I had occasion to fly  
28 with him a couple of times and I noticed he was not really that good a pilot. He always  
29 took somebody with him in case something happened, a more qualified pilot. But when I  
30 went to Vietnam I had a white, the Army issued these big, nice, white flying helmets. I  
31 had mine painted camouflage. It looked really good. You couldn't see it. With the OD

1 (olive drab) on the helicopter, of course, we were wearing green either nomex green or  
2 the green flight suits or something or the green uniform of the—whatever that jungle suit  
3 was we wore it was green. It really was a helicopter. Well, Jack Dempsey wore a white  
4 helmet and I asked him several times why don't you get that thing painted green because  
5 it stands out, a white thing with a green background. That's the target. He didn't wear the  
6 chicken plate. Everybody I knew we had a vest of Kevlar, I guess it is, about so thick. It  
7 was uncomfortable to wear especially in the heat of the delta down there. Then the  
8 combat soldiers had one that went across their back. They wore this thing over and it had  
9 front and back coverage. With the pilots sitting in an armored seat we didn't need that.  
10 We had the armored sides and the back was armored. What you didn't have, though, was  
11 the bubble in front of you and there was nothing there. I ended up in my helicopter  
12 having a bunch of stuff—I couldn't see right down there. I could see out here, but I—if  
13 somebody is shooting at you and you go right over them, why, you're just asking for it.

14 KC: Yeah, I think they called it pucker factor when you're going over the top of  
15 them.

16 WH: He just ignored that and it was uncomfortable so he didn't wear it and, of  
17 course, he got rounds in the chest. I think that that was—he was trying to build his time  
18 and every member of the staff, I talked to them all after—when I first came in there as the  
19 new CO, they didn't know me, half of them didn't know me especially in these  
20 companies. Nobody in these companies knew me until I showed up as the new CO there.  
21 Anyway, so that sort of hurt that he was trying to make up for loss ground. The gunship  
22 people when he went in to pick these people up they said, "Wait, wait we're about to get  
23 these guys on the run. Don't go in. They don't look like—you know, the smoke is  
24 keeping the fire off of them and we've got TAC air coming and just hold off a little bit."  
25 But he was just bound and determined to go in and get these people on the ground. He  
26 could see them, you know, and knew they were in trouble. Everybody tried to tell him not  
27 to, but he went in anyway. I think his copilot got shot. One of the door gunners might've  
28 gotten—they weren't evacuated. They were treated in-country. So their wounds weren't  
29 that bad. One of them was not injured at all. That was sort of the background. As I say, I  
30 hated that it happened, but I can see how it did happen.

31 KC: Sure.

1 WH: Why he was trying to catch up, trying to get more proficient.

2 KC: But you also say that he was bound and determined to get these wounded  
3 men out of there, as well.

4 WH: Oh, yeah. He knew it was going to be hazardous because the others—it was  
5 plain that there was three other helicopters on the ground there. They only got there  
6 because their pilots got shot. He knew what he was looking at. It was a shame. He was  
7 well liked and he had been there, I guess, he only had three months or so left to go. So he  
8 had been there nine months.

9 KC: Well, like you say, now that makes you the CO of the 13<sup>th</sup>. Aside from  
10 losing a comrade and possibly a friend in Colonel Dempsey, this means a whole new role  
11 for you now with the 13<sup>th</sup>. How does this affect you personally? How does it affect you  
12 on a daily basis? What changes for you as you assume command of this battalion?

13 WH: Well, it was sort of like, well, you've been training for this all your life, all  
14 your military life anyway, command. That's what you know—I was an infantry officer in  
15 those days. Nowadays they have a special aviation branch, but in those days the infantry  
16 officer had to satisfy the infantry branch in every respect, at every level, you know, to get  
17 to the next level that you got your tickets punched in the right places. I just figured, well,  
18 I had the experience with pilots and this was a pilot environment with 130 helicopters  
19 there and twice that many pilots. You've got to have plenty of pilots to fly them, two in  
20 each helicopter. I felt this is what you're supposed to do. I felt comfortable with the job.

21 KC: Okay.

22 WH: I'd had eighteen months of ground time with the ground battalion worrying  
23 about the mess halls and worrying about this and worrying about AWOLs and things like  
24 that. We didn't have any AWOL problems because there's no place they could go. They  
25 couldn't get to Saigon unless they went on a helicopter.

26 KC: All right.

27 WH: We didn't have any drug problems there in '67. I was surprised at that.

28 KC: That leads me to say did you expect in '67 to expect there to be drug  
29 problems?

30 WH: I expected it because of the fact that it's just habitual among the U.S. forces.  
31 Remember, we had the draft then so we had a lot of folks in Vietnam that didn't want to

1 be in Vietnam. They would manifest the fact that they were there. The thing that pacified  
2 them, I guess, was the availability of cheap drugs. Well, the people in the aviation unit  
3 wanted to be in an aviation unit. They were doing what they liked to do, the pilots did.  
4 The mechanics were learning a skill. They had wanted to be helicopter mechanics. The  
5 rest of the people in the company, the cooks and the clerks and whatever they had in  
6 there, mostly maintenance people were all volunteers. We didn't have any draftee pilots.  
7 We didn't have any draftee mechanics. They were all regular Army volunteer type. They  
8 weren't part of the draft.

9 KC: Sure.

10 WH: That's a different—when you're working with professionals you don't have  
11 those problems. You don't have AWOLs, you don't have drugs, and you don't have  
12 crime, so to speak.

13 KC: So even before you left for Vietnam there was an understanding that there  
14 was a prevalence of drug use among American troops in Vietnam?

15 WH: I don't know whether prevalence was there, but it was just—yes, there was  
16 drug use there and it got worse. Of course, there was fragging, for instance. This was an  
17 event that had never happened in our Army before. All of a sudden they were throwing  
18 hand grenades in the officers' tents and that sort of stuff. None of that in IV Corps  
19 primarily I guess because of the caliber of people that were in the service there as  
20 opposed to the draftee type thing.

21 KC: Sure, sure. As you say, they were professionals and they were volunteers  
22 and they wanted to be there rather than being forced into it. It's also been my  
23 understanding that drug use was generally much more pronounced in the rear than it was  
24 in combat units. Because in combat there was, number one, very little time, number two,  
25 you're more concerned with staying alive and staying alive with your friends.

26 WH: I think in the combat units it was limited to marijuana or something you  
27 could smoke. Yeah, I was very fortunate in being where I was in that respect. It's  
28 something I didn't have to worry about.

29 KC: Sure. Well, your replacement is going to make his way to, was it Can Tho, I  
30 guess in July of 1967. When he arrives what was the process for handing over command  
31 here? What did you have to do to bring him up to speed?

1           WH: Okay. There was an orientation period they have about a week where  
2 got him acclimated to the location of the three airfields and the different units and  
3 introducing him to the company commanders of these units. When the selected day came  
4 for the actual change of command, the major general from Saigon came down and we had  
5 a formation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion in front of the battalion headquarters with a band playing  
6 and the guidon of the battalion was handed by me to the major general who then handed  
7 it to Col. Robert McDaniel, was his name, to him and he now assumes the command of  
8 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. I'm now out of a job and en route down to Soc Trang to activate the  
9 307<sup>th</sup>.

10           KC: So you already knew that you were going to Soc Trang to activate the 307<sup>th</sup>  
11 when you—okay.

12           WH: General Seneth, his name was Seneth, General Seneth. When I talked him  
13 into this battalion primarily for a job for me at the rank that I held, he says, “What are  
14 you going to call this battalion?” Every battalion—in the 13<sup>th</sup> it was the Delta Battalion  
15 because of the Mekong Delta. I said, “I'm going to call it the, ‘Phantom Battalion,’  
16 because I'm the only one in the battalion.” (Laughs)

17           KC: That's how it got the name phantom. (Laughs)

18           WH: That's how it got it's name. I purloined a helicopter from the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion  
19 for the new battalion, it has to have a helicopter. The battalion commander's call sign is  
20 the six. He is the commander, the five is the executive officer, the four is the supply  
21 officer and the S-2 or the Delta 2 is the intelligence, and Delta 3 is operations and Delta 1  
22 is administration. So whenever somebody says, “Delta 1,” you know he's down there for  
23 paperwork or something. If it's Delta 3 then it's operations. You can expect he's going to  
24 give you something to do. But I was Phantom 6.

25           KC: With no other phantoms anywhere around.

26           WH: With no other phantoms involved. But everybody in the Delta Battalion  
27 knew that I had been a Delta 6. So whenever they had an operation going, even though I  
28 didn't have any part to play in it, I didn't have anything to do until they gave me some  
29 people. You know, this was before the Cobra company got in and before the Mohawk  
30 company got there. I go out and insinuate myself into whatever was going on as Phantom  
31 6.

1 KC: Well, I'm sure that—

2 WH: Nobody ever said, "Phantom 6, why don't you go back where you belong?"

3 KC: You didn't know where you belonged?

4 WH: If I had been a Delta 6 that's what I would've said. He never did say that.

5 KC: Well, he was probably grateful for your assistance and experience, I would  
6 think. Had this replacement, this new CO of the 13<sup>th</sup>, had he any experience in-country  
7 before?

8 WH: No, no, no, no. This was a first time for him, but he was a colonel. He had a  
9 little more flying time. I think he came up through the ranks as a pilot. He had served as a  
10 captain and major and lieutenant colonel. Primarily in the infantry like I had but he had  
11 more flying time. He wasn't a senior officer trainee like Jack Dempsey was.

12 KC: Sure, sure. So you've kept yourself or you're keeping yourself busy as the  
13 commanding officer of the 307<sup>th</sup>, the sole phantom, as it were. You keep yourself busy by  
14 inserting yourself into some of these missions with the 13<sup>th</sup>.

15 WH: Well, I had to find a headquarters. I had to get a building set up for the  
16 headquarters. I had to get my own quarters set up, but I set that up while I was Delta 6  
17 and the airfield commander worked for me. I filled out his efficiency report. So I told him  
18 I needed a set of quarters set aside down there at Soc Trang. I said, "If you don't make  
19 them nice I'm going to take yours."

20 KC: Did you mean it?

21 WH: Well, he thought I meant it.

22 KC: That's just as good, I guess.

23 WH: Anyway, he improved on what he had. I had a damn popcorn maker in  
24 mine.

25 KC: Well, you're going to put together this brand new combat air battalion in Soc  
26 Trang. What goes into that? That seems like a tremendous amount of work,  
27 responsibility, coordination.

28 WH: The big thing surprisingly enough is [the replacements] come over gung-ho  
29 and they want to do something right away. They want to get out there and mix it up, but  
30 you've got to—we weren't prepared for them to come. Because of the build up and where  
31 to put them and the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps we didn't have any U.S. military. We didn't have any

1 infantry divisions down there. They were all up in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps and III Corps, combat, U.S.  
2 military combat people. We were still supporting the ARVNs. So the units they sent  
3 down there were not trooping-carrying units. The Cobra ships didn't carry anybody but  
4 the crew of the Cobra. The Mohawk thing was just either single pilot or pilot and  
5 observer. So they were not—they were support personnel, but they performed certain  
6 missions. They could only fly then, in the case of the Mohawk they uncovered the  
7 information of the targets of opportunity. They provided that kind of stuff. The gunships  
8 were responsible then for doing what [the mode-up]—we had UH-1s that we just hung  
9 rockets on and machineguns on. They really weren't made for gun platforms. They were  
10 hit or miss. They had to shoot a lot of rockets before they really—each pilot had his own  
11 technique because it wasn't like aiming a rifle because it would be how they were  
12 mounted on the airplanes to—the Cobra was designed to be a gunship. The make-shift  
13 stuff that we had in these other companies were not. They were just—they were effective  
14 but not nearly as effective as the Cobra unit was. The big thing was housing and getting  
15 mess set up and getting the company—getting everybody a place to live, the pilots  
16 especially because they were the ones doing most of the work flying the airplanes and the  
17 support personnel and trying to build hangars so the maintenance people wouldn't have  
18 to work in the rain. During the monsoon season in the delta it would rain like mad. Water  
19 would build up in the fields. I can remember a lot of times helicopters—we couldn't land  
20 in the water to let the troops out. We would come to a hover just at the top of the water  
21 and the little Vietnamese would jump off and just go out of sight. They had on a steel  
22 helmet and big heavy M-1 rifle or something and down they would go and the crew chief  
23 would have to reach down there and grab that rifle and pull them out. I'm laughing at it,  
24 but it wasn't a laughing matter then.

25 KC: I bet it wasn't funny at all then.

26 WH: Yeah, that kind of stuff. I guess housekeeping was the first step to get them  
27 in and get them settled and then start giving them missions. Of course, they needed  
28 orientation, too. That's when we would try to put people from units—instead of having  
29 two brand new guys in the cockpit we'd have one brand new guy and somebody else in  
30 there that knew the lay of the land.

1 KC: That's another question I was going to ask you. You have all these,  
2 eventually having all these men coming in. Where are they coming from? Are they  
3 coming from Stateside, they coming from other parts of Vietnam?

4 WH: No, they're coming from Stateside. They're coming over as units. In some  
5 cases, in the case of the Cobra company and the Mohawk company they were on the—the  
6 ship was—all the company was on the same ship and they flew out to the ship and got the  
7 company commander and maybe the first sergeant or something, one or two people from  
8 these units and flew them back and flew them on down to Can Tho where they were  
9 going to be based, way in advance of when the ship would even land so that they'd have  
10 some idea of what to expect and they go back and get the company and bring it down.  
11 That first part there was mostly housekeeping, getting set up, getting organized and then  
12 orientation, getting to know the lay of the land, what to shoot at and when to shoot and  
13 that sort of stuff. Then once they got into the pattern they fit in fine because they had  
14 training back in the Stateside. They know how to do that, how to work with them, with  
15 what we call the slicks.

16 KC: Right. So this was August of '67 when you're beginning to put together—

17 WH: Yeah, August—

18 KC: I'm sorry.

19 WH: Go ahead.

20 KC: When do you think that your battalion was ready to go out on these  
21 missions, these combat support missions? About how long did it take?

22 WH: They were going pretty steady by October, November. It was August,  
23 September they were coming in. I'd say there was at least a thirty-day period of  
24 climatization. In a lot of cases the equipment, they didn't get all of their equipment, that  
25 kind of stuff.

26 KC: Sure, sure. So as battalion commander here and, again, in support of these  
27 ARVN units, you were in a position to observe the relationship between ARVN officers,  
28 ARVN commanders and the American advisors. You yourself, I assume, weren't one of  
29 these advisors, but you were in a very good position to observe the relationship between  
30 them. Could you describe, if there was such a thing as a typical relationship between

1 ARVN officer, ARVN commanders and American advisors, could you describe what you  
2 think would be a typical relationship between them?

3 WH: It depended on several things. It depended on—the Vietnamese had some  
4 gung-ho soldiers and officers and commanders. When you were an advisor to one of  
5 them, why, your job was pretty easy. It was just about getting them if it involves  
6 helicopters that they wanted to use, if it involved gunships or whatever, you know. If you  
7 were an advisor to a unit that was not so inclined then your job was harder. It's harder  
8 because Saigon is looking in those days, I don't want to use the word body count, body  
9 count was a big thing. The only way you could say you were doing your job was if you  
10 had body count. They were competing between these three ARVN divisions. So naturally  
11 they were trying to—if they were behind in the count then they wanted more helicopters.  
12 They wanted more [gunships] to do more of that sort of stuff. I think the relationship was  
13 based on the whims of some of the commanders. When I'm talking commanders I'm  
14 talking major general level in the Vietnamese. The 21<sup>st</sup> was a real gung-ho, the whole  
15 outfit was. So the advisor personnel were top notch. At least they were aggressive. They  
16 were enthusiastic. They liked their job and you could tell. You could tell from their radio  
17 conversations, listening to them. Once an operation started then the advisors to that unit  
18 were the ones that were talking to the helicopters, either the gunships or to the transport  
19 helicopters. As a commander you were monitoring that kind of conversation. You didn't  
20 want the ground commanders to overwhelm or to ask for something that you knew you  
21 weren't—your people couldn't provide. You didn't want the ground commander to get  
22 the helicopter pilot in such a position that he couldn't survive the thing, if you get what  
23 I'm talking about.

24 KC: Sure, sure.

25 WH: There was a lot of “Why can't they land and pick up this thing? Why  
26 can't”—sometimes you'd have to ameliorate the situation and say, “Look, we'll do it, but  
27 we're not going to do it right now.”

28 KC: Right. I would think that, obviously, personalities of the commanders and of  
29 the advisors would play a big role in that. You ever find yourself caught between these  
30 two forces, between an advisor and an ARVN officer, ARVN commander who had  
31 different ideas about how something should be done or if something should be done? Do

1 you ever find yourself in the middle of something like that, one wants something and one  
2 wants something else?

3 WH: No, but it did happen a lot. The advisor was there to advise and his boss was  
4 in Saigon, you know, or his boss was in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps there and we both worked for the same.  
5 In my case, once I became CO of the 13<sup>th</sup> I was billeted right down there next to the 4<sup>th</sup>  
6 Corps commander. I had to eat dinner with him every night. Every night he would ask me  
7 what's going on during the day, blah, blah, blah. Or he would bring to my attention some  
8 friction that he had heard about or what did I know about or how did this happen or what  
9 do you think about so and so. That's one of the ways I stayed abreast of what was going  
10 on in the different divisions was through the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps commander. He had been there  
11 two or three years already.

12 KC: Okay. The 307<sup>th</sup>, what was its major mission? What was its purpose? Again,  
13 was it combat support like the 13<sup>th</sup> and administrative things as well?

14 WH: Right, combat support.

15 KC: Okay. Well, let's leave that part behind a little bit and get back to maybe  
16 some of the more mundane aspects of it. You were in Can Tho for a while. You were in  
17 Soc Trang now with the 307<sup>th</sup>. Describe the base there for me.

18 WH: In Soc Trang?

19 KC: Yeah, we'll do Soc Trang for example.

20 WH: Soc Trang had a five-thousand-foot paved run way. It had been a French  
21 base during the French war. Then the [U.S.] Marines had been in there back in '62 or '63  
22 era. It wasn't until '63 probably that the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion came down and occupied it.  
23 Everything was on the north side of the runway. We had a five-thousand-foot strip  
24 runway and everything was on the north side of the runway, sort of surrounded by canals  
25 but pretty tight knit complex. You couldn't help but run into everybody. There was no  
26 face that you didn't see at one time or other once or twice a week. The base was that  
27 small. The officers had one mess and the enlisted men had a mess. Each one had a—the  
28 mess was also the club involved. We had a swimming pool with a big old rotor blade off  
29 of a Chinook there for a diving board. That's about it. As I say, most of the supplies came  
30 in by air to supply that base with either ammunition or rockets or food.

31 KC: Any supply problems since you were being supplied there?

1           WH: No, no, the supply situation was pretty good. Really, I was amazed at how  
2 well the mess halls kept stocked with food and ammunition supplies because we shot a  
3 lot of rockets off. Even the L-19, the Bird Dogs, they would put rockets under their wings  
4 and they would identify the targets to the Air Force planes by firing a rocket at it. If they  
5 didn't hit the target they'd say the enemy is a hundred yards to the north of that thing or  
6 to the south of it or something, describe where it was.

7           KC: What did you do for recreation? Even a commanding officer at Soc Trang  
8 has to take a little time off.

9           WH: At both places there was no place to—you didn't leave the compound.  
10 There was no—in Can Tho you could drive from the airfield into town. In fact, I was in  
11 the MACV 4<sup>th</sup> Corps compound, my billets were there. But the airfield was maybe five  
12 miles out of the way from there. So that room was secure. There wasn't much—you  
13 created your own. It was a seven-day deal. If we weren't doing a combat assault then we  
14 were sending people to the PX or we were sending them, they had to go pick up  
15 somebody. We had some truancy in some of the units and they had a jail up in Long  
16 Binh. We called it the LBJ, the Long Binh jail.

17          KC: Once again LBJ worked his way in there.

18          WH: We had occasion to fly the mail up to service time and then come get him  
19 when his time was up and bring him back. I don't recall horseshoes or something like  
20 that. If you call that recreation that's probably what I did the most in Soc Trang was pitch  
21 horseshoes.

22          KC: Sure, sure. Communication with your family back home?

23          WH: Yeah, a lot of letter writing. Yeah, they were good about that, exceptionally  
24 for the good about that. The drawbacks to that unit with all of those helicopters was I had  
25 a bunch of midair collisions and a bunch of unexplained happenings in some cases  
26 involve loss of life and some case it was just carelessness. I had a helicopter land in a  
27 minefield one time. The helicopter caught fire and burned up. The four people that were  
28 involved jumped out of the helicopter and ran through the mine field, but they didn't set  
29 off any mines.

30          KC: Really? Wow.

1           WH: I had another helicopter that was buzzing down a canal, came around a bend  
2 and ran into an airboat. The helicopter lost that battle for some reason. I had a midair  
3 collision right there at Soc Trang. A unit was coming back, there were two helicopter  
4 units at Soc Trang. One of the units had been on an assault carrying troops and they were  
5 coming back at the end of the afternoon about three or four o'clock. They always liked to  
6 show off when they were coming into their home field to the other helicopter pilots  
7 because all pilots whenever they hear an airplane they look up. So they knew everybody  
8 would be looking at them. So they got in real close, make a real tight formation and two  
9 of them ran together and killed eight people there needlessly. Speaking of LBJ, I had a  
10 plane, went up there to pick up the prisoner, picked him up and as they were taking off to  
11 come back to, I guess it was Soc Trang or Vinh Long, an Air Force F-4 was coming in to  
12 land. The helicopter's climbing up. The Air Force pilot cannot see the helicopter. He's  
13 got his nose up like that (gesture) and all he sees is the runway out in front. He's letting  
14 down and the helicopter's climbing up and the helicopter lost. The pilot went on and  
15 landed the F-4 with minor damage and the helicopter blades hit the bottom of the plane  
16 and shattered and they crashed into the jungle. They had to leave him there. It took us a  
17 week to get everybody out, to find them and to get them out. That was bad. I'm having to  
18 explain to this major general in Saigon what's going on down there in the delta and I'm  
19 shaking my head and wondering the same thing, "What's going on? How do you stop  
20 these things?"

21           KC: It would've been difficult to assert any control over something like that. So  
22 it must be pretty freakish.

23           WH: Well, you still feel responsibility for it and then there's the business of  
24 writing these letters home to explain this to all the people, the ones that were killed we  
25 had to write home. What kind of explanation can you give for some of that stuff? The  
26 midair collisions are hard to explain because that was just showing off. There was no  
27 reason to do that.

28           KC: Why don't we take a break right there?

29           WH: All right.

1 KC: Before we started to record you were comparing to some degree your  
2 experiences flying the presidents, which was I think by all standards a pretty exciting  
3 series of experiences for you.

4 WH: Absolutely.

5 KC: To your experiences in Vietnam. Would you mind going over that for me  
6 again, please?

7 WH: Well, from a career standpoint and from my personal experience the flying  
8 of the presidents was exciting, especially the times that they were actually onboard the  
9 aircraft and you were in control and their destiny was in your hands as well as your  
10 destiny. In looking back on it, the eight months I had as commander of a battalion in  
11 combat of real truly professional people that you had their respect and they had your  
12 respect, I think probably means more to me than the flying of the presidents. That was a  
13 fun thing to do. It was an exciting thing to do. I enjoyed it when it happened, but once it  
14 was over, why, I don't have those—I'm trying to express it in a way that makes any  
15 sense. I just don't have the professional feeling that I really did anything that anybody  
16 else couldn't have done as far as being the actual pilot of the airplane that they were  
17 onboard or the helicopter they were onboard. Whereas in Vietnam I felt I brought  
18 something to that battalion because I'd had previously eighteen months of doing the same  
19 sort of thing but in a different environment. So I knew about what people needed. I knew  
20 about the housekeeping thing. I knew about checking on the mess halls and making sure  
21 that their food—you know, the Army lives on its stomach and so do pilots. They live on  
22 their stomachs, too. You can't let the little things—if the little things slip then the morale  
23 is going to start to slip. We had excellent morale in that 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion [and] in the 307<sup>th</sup>  
24 Battalion. I think it's because of the day-to-day interest that commanders shows. If the  
25 cooks know that he is going to come in there and have breakfast and if it's supposed to be  
26 ready at six o'clock it better be ready at six o'clock. We don't want the cook showing up  
27 at six o'clock, that sort of thing. I feel that that year I spent in Vietnam was more  
28 productive for me. As it turned out, I got back home in early '68 and got promoted to  
29 colonel so it must've been.

30 KC: Sure, sure.

31 WH: There, it wore me out.

1           KC: I think that, or I would think that you would have learned more about  
2 yourself and what you were capable of in your time in command of these two battalions  
3 in Vietnam than any other time in a combat situation, combat circumstances.

4           WH: Yeah, I was satisfied. I had the background and it was just up to me to do  
5 the job. My efficiency reports bore that out. Apparently my superiors were, I won't say  
6 impressed, but they recognized it.

7           KC: Well, in December of 1967 your one-year tour in Vietnam is done. Explain  
8 to me what it was like to leave. I mean, you are the father of the 307<sup>th</sup>. I mean, this was  
9 yours. You created it literally from the ground up. What was it like to leave the 307<sup>th</sup>?

10          WH: In Iceland—let me go back a step to a one-year tour I had in Iceland. In  
11 Iceland we kept track of the time in Iceland by a radio show called *Gunsmoke*. *Gunsmoke*  
12 came on every Sunday evening about seven or eight o'clock, I forget when, but your time  
13 in Iceland was determined by how many *Gunsmoke* did you have left to go. In Vietnam  
14 there was never any thought like that. There was—I sort of hated to go because I was  
15 living the dream for a lieutenant colonel to be a battalion commander in a combat zone  
16 and doing what he liked to do and not being shot at every five minutes, sleeping under  
17 sheets at night. Whereas if I'd been an infantry lieutenant colonel up there out in the  
18 boondocks that's a horrible life I didn't want to lead.

19          KC: Sure, sure.

20          WH: It was not like I was counting the days to get home, but I knew that, A, my  
21 tour was up. I guess I could've volunteered to extend in which case I would've had a  
22 divorce on my hands. (Laughs) So when my time came I left.

23          KC: A number of veterans that we talk to express some sense of regret having to  
24 leave before the overall job was completed. Did you experience any of that?

25          WH: No, no, I didn't. One thing, one motivation that I had, when I had that  
26 command directed assignment at Ft. Gordon, Georgia, being battalion commander [in  
27 1965], the major general in charge of the base when I showed up there from Washington,  
28 D.C., with my pilot's wings on and nothing else and a lieutenant colonel and the orders  
29 read that I was going to have a battalion in his command, a commander that he didn't  
30 choose, he looked at me like a stepchild. He really didn't want me. He wanted a  
31 lieutenant colonel coming back from Vietnam to—because this was '66, '67, '66 I guess

1 it was, '65 I take it back, January of '65. He wanted somebody from Vietnam and here  
2 I'm coming down from Washington and had been a pilot and all of that and he didn't  
3 really care about me flying Kennedy and LBJ at all. As it turned out at the end of that  
4 eighteen months for reasons I don't know he took a liking to me. Before my tour was up  
5 he wrote a letter to me and said, "I'd like for you to come back to Ft. Gordon." I  
6 answered his letter saying, "I'd like to come back to Ft. Gordon, but I'm on orders to  
7 Mineral Wells, Texas, to the helicopter school there at Mineral Wells, Texas." Damn if  
8 he didn't change those orders and have me back home where my wife and family was. I  
9 had an incentive to get on back there because he knew when my DEROS (date eligible  
10 for return from overseas) date was, when I was due to return. That was another incentive  
11 for me to cut—and I was ahead of the game. Sometimes if you wait around something  
12 bad is going to happen you might as well get out of there while you can, get out of Dodge  
13 while you can.

14 KC: Sure, playing with house money.

15 WH: Yeah, you're right.

16 KC: For sure.

17 WH: I didn't have that. I don't think I had that inclination to stay there.

18 KC: Sure, sure. Well, you leave Vietnam in December of 1967 and, of course, the  
19 Tet Offensive at the end of January 1968. What were—how did that—when the news of  
20 the Tet Offensive hit how did that strike you having just left?

21 WH: That was really shocking because I lost a lot of friends there. The battalion  
22 commander, not the battalion commander, but the lieutenant colonel at Vinh Long was  
23 killed. Some of the other bases suffered extensive damage. They came in in ambulances.  
24 The Viet Cong commandeered some ambulances and drove into the airbase. Normally  
25 the guards at the base, at the front gate see an ambulance coming in, nobody argues with  
26 an ambulance. It was full of Viet Cong and full hand grenades and smoke grenades. They  
27 drove up and down the row of helicopters putting a grenade in here and a grenade in  
28 there. It was distressing to read about it, to hear about it. I'm going like this (gesture).  
29 There's just a month separating.

30 KC: What happened to the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 307<sup>th</sup>? What role did they play in the  
31 offensive?

1           WH: Well, you got me there, see, because I don't—there's always been—before  
2 I took over there in '67 there were battalion commanders and after I left the battalion  
3 commanders and those rascals did not show up for the reunion. Nobody, I can't tell you.  
4 The only thing I can talk to you about is 1967.

5           KC: Sure, sure.

6           WH: I'm sorry about that, but we know who they are and we write to them and  
7 ask them to come. We'd like to hear from them and I'd certainly like to hear from them,  
8 talk to them.

9           KC: Huh, that's strange. Well, you're still a career military officer. What do you  
10 do when you get back?

11          WH: I went back to Ft. Gordon there and the general had me just before I got  
12 promoted to colonel, why, he had me in the operations, the G-3 section which was a job  
13 befitting my rank. I also ran the airfield there and they had several airplanes and  
14 helicopters and that sort of stuff. When I got promoted to colonel, why, he could no  
15 longer keep me there at Ft. Gordon. So I ended up going back to Ft. Rucker, Alabama,  
16 and was a department director there of the aviation school at Ft. Rucker. I quietly ended  
17 my tour there. By that time I had thirty-one years and so I retired to Tallahassee.

18          KC: Oh, okay. So you retired at Ft. Rucker. Very good. Well, looking back on it  
19 on the Vietnam experience for you and for the country as a whole, the United States as a  
20 whole, what can you say is the most important lesson you learned about yourself as a  
21 result of your experiences in Vietnam?

22          WH: Oh, boy, that's a poser. One thing I learned, Vietnam wasn't a popular place  
23 and by '67 it was starting to show. In the earlier part of that time we weren't as involved  
24 in there for one thing in '62, 3, and 4, and 5, but in '67 was the big build up. There were  
25 more people over there now than there had been ever before. Of course, those people  
26 have relatives back home and they are the ones that are starting to raise, starting to have  
27 the protests and that sort of stuff. Having selected the military as a career and having a  
28 commander-in-chief and supporting those things that have been drummed into you for  
29 twenty years, if you don't like it, get out. So it's one of those things. I liked it. You accept  
30 the good with the bad and you try to make the best of what's handed to you. In my case  
31 the best that could be handed to me was handed to me and it was fortuitous for me. It was

1   unfortunate for Colonel Dempsey. I certainly wouldn't wish that. My experience over  
2   there in Vietnam would've been entirely different. We wouldn't be talking here today  
3   because it would've been so routine, you wouldn't be interested in it. All in all, I guess  
4   when you sum that up it was a good experience for me. I supported it, otherwise I  
5   wouldn't have been there. I could've always retired at twenty years instead of thirty  
6   years. I had that option. I had already had twenty years in, so.

7           KC: Well, what about for the country as a whole? What do you think was the  
8   most important impact of the Vietnam War for the United States?

9           WH: Oh, we lost a lot of credibility. We lost another war. We didn't do worth a  
10  damn in Korea. That was pretty obvious. The country was certainly not behind the  
11  Vietnam War. You're looking at Iraq now as another Vietnam, you know. Afghanistan,  
12  the Russians, that was their Vietnam, Afghanistan is and damned if we're not back over  
13  there doing the same thing the Russians were doing and losing. I think the general  
14  consensus of the country was that it was not a popular place to be. We shouldn't be  
15  meddling in countries that far from our shores. We keep sticking our nose in and it gets  
16  bit off. The guys in the military, though, they're there. Some of them are losing, some of  
17  them are losing their enthusiasm for it and I think that it's the repetitive tours. In Vietnam  
18  it was a year. In Iraq, they're trying to make it a year, but it's up to fifteen months and  
19  then they're only home for a few months and back they go again. So that's got to be a  
20  bummer for someone in the military today. In Vietnam days we didn't call up the  
21  National Guard. We didn't call up the Reserves. We did it all with conscription. Is that  
22  the right word for that?

23           KC: Yes.

24           WH: Yeah. The helicopter pilots were all volunteers, but the ground pounders  
25  weren't. The infantry troops weren't. They were the ones—we were losing both, both  
26  pilots and ground personnel.

27           KC: What do you think about the changes in the United States, Stateside, home  
28  front during the war? What do you think about the changes both during the war as this  
29  growing protest? What is your reaction to what's taking place at home during that time  
30  and how do think that has changed the way we look at who we are in the world today  
31  since then?

1           WH: Well, of course, in Vietnam some of that stuff was sort of censored. The  
2 troops on the ground, the *Army Times*, which is their newspaper they got once a week if  
3 they were lucky, didn't show those protests or anything. They just showed the good side  
4 of the war, who was getting promoted and la-di-da, that sort of stuff. The only way you  
5 found out about that was from letters from home and the clippings that they would send.  
6 Then to the one-year situation there was in the case of the warrant officers they were  
7 finding themselves coming back. Some warrant officers had to serve three tours over  
8 there. That's a three-year stretch. Now, they were home for at least a year or so. We  
9 didn't start pulling those people out until 1970 sometime, '72, even as late as '72. It had  
10 been going on then for ten years. I just think that—we're about in the same boat now.  
11 The feeling among the country is about the same now as it was because in '68, '69, '70,  
12 the Vietnam era. I think the country is thinking we've been in this thing now in Vietnam  
13 for longer than World War II, not quite as long as, I mean in Iraq, not long as we did in  
14 Vietnam, but longer than World War II. It's a place where we don't belong so the  
15 country's, they're supporting it but haphazardly. I don't know that there's any way out. If  
16 Obama gets elected whether he can just shut the door and bring everybody home. I don't  
17 think that can happen. I don't think we can get out of there. I think the country would be  
18 worse off if we did that, phased withdrawal. Look what happened to phased withdrawal  
19 there in Vietnam. We figured the Vietnamese could hold their own and all they did was  
20 cut and run. I don't know. I'm glad I'm not still in the service.

21           KC: Well, Mr. Harper, that sounds like a pretty good place to end this interview.  
22 Is there anything else you would like to add before we—?

23           WH: No, sir. I just appreciate you taking your time and having me out here.

24           KC: Oh, it's my pleasure. I'm glad you were able to come out. Well, this will  
25 conclude the interview with Mr. William Harper.