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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Robert Caron
Conducted by Kelly Crager**

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Transcribed by Emilie Meadors

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.

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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History Interview with
2 Mr. Robert Caron. Today is December 22, 2009. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus
3 of Texas Tech University, and Mr. Caron is joining me from his home in Fort Walton
4 Beach, Florida. Mr. Caron, to begin this interview, I'd like to get some biographical
5 information from you if I can. Can you tell me when you were born and where?

6 Robert Caron: Why do you guys always go right to the age?

7 KC: (laughing)

8 RC: Actually, I was born the Ninth of May in '33.

9 KC: In 1933, very good. Where were you born?

10 RC: Up in—actually, not far from West Point. About forty, forty-five miles from
11 West Point, a little town that no one's ever heard of called Accord—A-C-C-O-R-D—
12 New York. Kingston is a little bit more famous name. I think George Washington had a
13 temporary headquarters there when he got run on New York by the British way back
14 when. It's right along the Hudson and like I say, a few miles north of Kingston in that
15 area.

16 KC: Okay, very good. What were your parents' names?

17 RJ: I'm sorry?

1 KC: What were your parents' names?

2 RJ: Goldie and Percy. Most of my distress earlier—now, I'm getting used to it—
3 that's my middle name, Percy. And it's old country.

4 KC: Yes indeed, yes indeed. What did Goldie and Percy do there in New York for
5 a living?

6 RJ: My mom basically stayed at home. Back in the old days I think that was much
7 more common now that everybody's got a career. My father worked as a laborer. A very
8 difficult job in a rock quarry which we don't ever see anymore; nothing that I've seen. He
9 worked hard and the dust and so forth from the crushing of the rocks and so forth go on
10 to these visual problems later on, eye sight problems. He actually passed away long, oh, I
11 think early seventies. It's a little bit complicated when he was sick and unable to work the
12 family had financial difficulties and frankly speaking, I wound up in a foster home for
13 many, many years.

14 KC: Did you have brothers or sisters?

15 RJ: Oh yeah, I had one brother and three sisters. I had an older sister and then the
16 other two sisters and the brother. One sister passed away and the other sister and my
17 brother live in Sacramento now.

18 KC: So, being a son of not a large family, a medium sized family on a—as you
19 said, your mother didn't work outside the home. So, your working class father, working
20 class family. You said it became very difficult and it wound up with you being in a foster
21 home. What sort of memories do you have about your childhood?

22 RJ: It was difficult, there's no doubt about it. I talked to my friends sometimes
23 and we'd discuss hoping that was exaggeration. It was kind of a real humble beginning.
24 The old nineteenth century Horatio Alger stories that would probably be before your
25 time. They were very popular when I was a kid. I bounced around from foster home to
26 foster home. Not a lot of love involved to tell you the truth. Some of it was mercenary,
27 some of it was I worked with a family in Hurley, New York, Kerhonkson, New York, and
28 worked on the farm a little bit and bounced around. In fact, everybody did that from
29 about from the first grade, second grade on up to high school. Eventually the last family
30 where I was a foster child, they eventually adopted me and it didn't turn out to be all that
31 great, but it was all right. The only good thing that happened all this time was one of the

1 young ladies who worked with the welfare department of New York State had to be a real
2 good family friend of the then Senator Wicks from the Kingston area in New York who
3 became a very powerful politician. Set a majority leader in the state senate and actually
4 under Governor Dewey, a lieutenant governor for a short period of time. She told him
5 about the young man that was doing okay and had difficulties and so forth and so on. To
6 make a long story short, he took an interest in me, had a couple interviews with him, sat
7 down and talked a little bit. He liked what he saw so at some point in time, I don't
8 remember exactly, when sophomore, junior in high school so at some point in time, I
9 don't remember exactly when—sophomore, junior in high school subject of going to
10 West Point came up and he was able to use his situation of politics to get me an
11 appointment to West Point and then I went in there in 1952 right after high school.

12 KC: Wow, that's incredible.

13 RC: Well, sometime my friends and I, we talk about it and say, "Well Bob, got to
14 close the door on your parents and your real family, but then you open up that window
15 that they talked about and just how you got into West Point." Without that, of course,
16 who knows where I would have wound up.

17 KC: Sure, sure. Now, when did you enter foster care? At what age?

18 RC: I think around seven.

19 KC: Around seven years old. So, this would have been shortly before the Second
20 World War started sometime in that area.

21 RC: Yeah, exactly. I still remember talking about that. My mom reading the paper
22 to me one day and talked about the War in Europe, you know? And it would soon come
23 to the United States. I remember being very distressed, you know, "Wow, going to have
24 this war here in America, you know?" But that's all I remember. She had the headlines
25 there and that's about all I remember from that.

26 KC: Were your brothers and sisters sent to foster homes as well?

27 RC: They were with me sometimes, other times there were by themselves. I was
28 with my brother for awhile and then the lady, in fact, the family that adopted me she
29 wasn't too keen on him and sent him back to the welfare system. He went to live with my
30 other sister up in a neighboring town. We were able to stay in contact over the years. We
31 only lived twenty, thirty, forty miles apart at the most. They did fine, my sister Mary did

1 all right. My brother was in the Air Force, moved down to Sacramento where he became
2 big in labor for this rice mill industry and negotiated contracts and stuff like that. He did
3 okay, you know.

4 KC: So, in spite of these early difficulties, it sounds like your family did very well
5 for themselves?

6 RC: Well, it was a struggle, but, you know, you have to do what you have to do,
7 Kelly.

8 KC: I don't want to harp on this for too long a time here, but what was it like as a
9 young child for seven years you're in foster care and you lead this somewhat itinerate
10 life, I guess. Sometimes you're with your brothers and sisters and sometimes you're not.
11 What was it like for you as a child? What kind of effect did that have on you?

12 RC: You know, it's hard to say, Kelly. You know, you see kids today that have a
13 little problem and they give up and they turn bad, turn into—well now we've got drugs,
14 well now as a kid there were no drugs, you know? But now they're everywhere and it's
15 easier to go astray maybe. I don't know why, whether I got it from my mother, my father,
16 but I always had the ability to study and focus on school. In fact, I really enjoyed school
17 much to the dismay for friends and so forth and most of whom didn't like school. But I
18 enjoyed school, I did well at school. My sister's brother, they did okay, you know? I was
19 lucky in that I was able to focus and, you know, as I say, there was no love involved. I
20 remember one foster parent telling her husband, didn't know I was listening. I used to
21 listen when I was a kid. She said, "I don't care what they pay me, I don't want him here,
22 you know?" And her husband who was a really nice guy, he owned this chicken farm and
23 all kinds of stuff; had a few cows, chickens, grew corn. He really liked me, and I liked
24 him, and we got along real well. Of course, he had to go along with what his wife wanted.
25 Another family, they sent me back to—I don't know why, it was like a foster place, but
26 was called the industrial home. I know why it had that name. I still remember the address,
27 77 East Chester Street or Chestnut Street, rather right there in Kingston. By focusing on
28 school and so forth I think I was able to put a lot of that aside and, you know, who
29 knows, you look at yourself and say, "Well, could I have done this, could I have done
30 that? Why am I like this, why am I like that?" I don't know, you just do the best you can
31 with what you've got and push on, Kelly.

1 KC: Well, you obviously did pretty well in school, and you made quite an
2 impression on your political patron as it were.

3 RC: Yeah, I was lucky to a large degree. I wasn't valedictorian, I think I was
4 number three. We had a one girl that came in from nowhere and blew us away with a
5 ninety-five percent average, you know? And up in New York where you've got regents
6 and really good quality schools, it's not like you're in knowhere and you can get A pluses
7 all the time. It was good work and I got along well with the other kids in school, you
8 know? Wound up being student council president and then I played a little football and a
9 little basketball and track. I ran track a little bit. So, I was busy and kept busy. I really
10 enjoyed high school. I don't know why, but a lot of kids, a lot of friends that couldn't
11 wait to get out. I remember the graduation day, I almost cried. I said, "Man, this is it, this
12 is the best time of my life. And from now on it's going to be focused on whatever I'm
13 going to do in life, go to college. As you know, once you go to college, things change.
14 You're your own boss and you've got to apply yourself and nothing comes easy.

15 KC: What do you think it was that caught the senator's eye about you? What did
16 you bring to the table that impressed him so much?

17 RC: Hell's bells. I was fifteen, sixteen. Really looking back, Kelly, I didn't know
18 squat. I thought I was doing good, why, I don't know. I really don't know, I was hard
19 working, focused and I was a really good student. Not to brag, but in the eighth grade test
20 that we took up in New York, I think it's called Regents, I'm not sure. I remember I got a
21 two dollar and fifty cent prize, Kelly, because I was the top average, like ninety-eight
22 almost ninety-nine for all those tests. I thought, for one I might keep that check, but you
23 know, back then two dollars and fifty cents was a fair some of money.

24 KC: Sure, it was, especially for an eighth grader.

25 RC: Today it's nothing. Kids get that everyday from mom they complain.

26 KC: Well, tell me about your time there at West Point, at the military academy.

27 RC: West Point was great. I mean, where else can you get a hundred, two hundred
28 thousand dollar education practically free, you know? You first went in they would like
29 two hundred bucks which would cover clothing and books initially. If you didn't do that,
30 they just took it out of your salary. We got, I think it was, half a PFCs pay per month, but
31 it was certainly different. I look back and two things stand out. One, I never did accept

1 that it was a game, you know? It was the faculty West Point tradition against you. They
2 would break you down and show you that you weren't what you thought you were. But if
3 you were what you thought you were and you make it than that was great, too. The other
4 thing was you talk about what I brought to the table. As a foster child you learn to take
5 care of yourself, make decisions even though they're kid decisions. I got to the point
6 where I really hated to have somebody tell me what to do. West Point, from the day you
7 walk in there that first year that you do this and do that, you know. Of course, it's
8 changed a lot now, but I remember not taking orders very well, but hell's bells if you
9 didn't take them you were history. I had to go with the flow so to speak. But I had some
10 wonderful classmates. Norm Schwarzkopf was a classmate.

11 KC: Really?

12 RC: Two or three other four-star generals. Bob Sorely, Lewis Bob Sorely; we
13 knew him as Bob the whole time. He is a wonderful outstanding author and he still
14 corresponds to this day. I don't know if you know about him.

15 KC: Yes, I do.

16 RC: Did we talk him before?

17 KC: No, we have not.

18 RC: Yeah, he's an awesome writer. His book got better war about the Vietnam
19 War. Abrahams is a classic and was just recently was in the news as one of the two books
20 that were regarded by experts as the foundation or not foundation about how to pursue
21 things in the Middle East.

22 KC: That's absolutely right. It made a comeback here in the news the last few
23 months. Well, that's incredible.

24 RC: Well, we'll get into that later on. Let's go and talk about something else.

25 KC: Sure, sure.

26 RC: Yeah, I had some wonderful classmates. My best friend George Lawford,
27 who was wounded in Vietnam, is right over in Texas near by. We correspond a lot, talk a
28 lot, and go visit him occasionally when he's not busy with the grandchildren. But no,
29 that's one of the benefits, I guess, is I have some wonderful friends who I did go to
30 school with and spent four years with. Of course, upon graduation served with some and
31 lost contact with most of them, of course.

1 KC: Tell me about the academic rigors there. Tell me about the curriculum, the
2 classes there.

3 RC: I'll tell you what, it's another thing I look back on and say, "What the devil
4 happened?" I'll tell you. I did good in school up through high school, and I don't think I
5 ever learned to focus at the point where I should have and develop good study habits.
6 Everything was so darn easy and if I didn't get it the first time there were enough
7 students around me—classmates rather—that would ask questions and then I would say,
8 "Oh, that's what it is, like that!" So, when I got to West Point it was hard, okay? The
9 math book that we might take trigonometry and so forth and calculus would take a year to
10 go through in high school. You went through that in just a few months. Some of my
11 friends had come in through the military and they went up to Fort Stewart in New York.
12 The school, the pep school for like nine months and they had both math books that we
13 had the first year already covered. See, I'm struggling to keep up and these guys, it's old
14 stuff to them, you know? One of my roommates, shoot, we'd be in our rooms from 7:15
15 to taps time and I'd be studying trying to figure out what was going on in this math book
16 or whatever and he'd be done in an hour. He wound up number seven in the class, just a
17 brilliant young guy. So, it was hard, and I don't know why—one of the fortunate things is
18 I had a year of French in high school so at the point you had to take one language and I
19 requested French and fortunately I got it so I could take some of that time that I didn't
20 need to apply to French classes and applied to my math stuff. Because math, you had
21 everyday and it weighed a lot for class standings and depended and decided where you're
22 going to be at the end of your year.

23 KC: Sure. Now, when did you enter West Point?

24 RC: Woo! You try to pin down my age again. 1952.

25 KC: In 1952.

26 RC: I graduated high school on the 23rd of June and moved to West Point the
27 first—I think it's the first Monday of July and with my bad luck was the first of July was
28 a Monday, so I had exactly one week off from high school till I walked in there and
29 dropped my bags, stood attention, and proceeded into my new life.

30 KC: So, you were going to grow up very quickly then cause there wasn't a whole
31 lot of time off.

1 RC: Yeah, as I told my friend, “Hell’s Bells.” I didn’t know left face from right
2 face. You know? I mean, I really didn’t know squat. And these guys that came in from
3 the military two, three years so they knew all this stuff, you know? My bad luck was I got
4 stuck with the other people who, like me, didn’t have the military advantage so to speak
5 and I tell my best friend in Texas that all the time. I said, “George, the best thing that
6 could happen to me was I could have been your roommate the first year or even the
7 second year.” Because he was just more polished by life having been in the military. He
8 was a real go-getter and smarter than hell. I think I learned a lot from him, but anyway,
9 we struggled, and we got through.

10 KC: Now, you enter in 1952. This is early on in the Cold—

11 RC: Kelly, did you say ’52 or ‘62?

12 KC: ’52.

13 RC: Okay, that’s right.

14 KC: So, we’re early on in the Cold War, here. Did you believe that you were
15 being trained or groomed for any particular role in the Cold War or were you just being
16 groomed as someone who’s going to come out as a junior officer and go where they told
17 you to go?

18 RC: I think the latter is probably more appropriate, Kelly. We were nuts and bolts.
19 We were going to select our artillery MG, the service we were going to go in. At that
20 time, we could still—one corps of the class could go Air Force because they didn’t have
21 the Air Force Academy yet. I remember studying—of course, we studied military history,
22 Hannibal’s Seizure, all those things, but I remember discussing—and this is, again,
23 before your time—the two islands off the Chinese coast between Taiwan and mainland
24 China, Quemoy and Matsu. Now they may call it something else, but we discussed, you
25 know, why we needed to defend those against mainland Chinese. I said, “Well, suppose
26 we gave those islands back to the mainland China. What difference does it make?” And
27 then in Africa there was a great deal of terrible things going on, again, maybe before your
28 time, Kelly. I think Uganda, the Mau Mau people coming out of the jungles and slicing
29 off people’s heads with machetes and stuff like that that. We were more seemed like
30 attuned to the itty gritty nuts and bolts and the big picture Cold War, I think, was still
31 over our heads. But, you know, one of our class contributions to West Point, there’s a hall

1 that goes from Don Hodder gym to Nike Stadium, the football field. We have a bunch of
2 pictures up there that do focus and talk about or show things how the class contributed to
3 the victory in the Cold War.

4 KC: Very interesting. So, it sounds like you were certainly aware of quite a bit
5 that was going on there. You were finding our place in it, it sounds like. What sort of
6 profession in the Army did you gravitate toward? What did you want to do? Was it
7 artillery, engineering? What did you want to do?

8 RC: Well, at that time when you grabbed the point, we had a bunch of math, but
9 just a few little bit short of a degree in math and the same with engineering. Initially I
10 thought I wanted to go Air Force, but later on when the Army got the wrong navigation,
11 got helicopters and airplanes. I started leaning more toward that and I just, for some
12 reason, I really thought I would like artillery. We could go artillery at that time, the five
13 combat branches, artillery infantry armor, signal, and engineers, I guess. What usually
14 happened was the engineers—you chose your branch by class standing. The engineers
15 armor, they were gone about half way through the class. So, when it came time for me,
16 there was none of that, but I really wanted to go artillery and then once you graduate you
17 have to go to your regular Army like we were then to jump school and or ranger school,
18 but right about that time aviation started to open up. I went to jump school immediately
19 and then went to flight school and then onto my first assignment which turned out to be
20 in Germany and went to a nuclear capable artillery outfit. What they called a 280 mm gun
21 which at that time was the only artillery piece in the world that could fire nuclear rounds
22 and we spent a lot of our time every year north of Frankfurt near a little town called
23 Fulda. It's famous in history because it's a big valley that comes right down from
24 eastern—now was the Eastern Europe, Eastern Germany rather right on into Western
25 Germany, Frankfurt area, and it was called the Fulda Gap.

26 KC: Yes, sir.

27 RC: And it was our job that if anything bad happened, we were supposed to put a
28 nuke around the middle of the Fulda Gap. Whether we would or not, who knows, we
29 never had the chance.

30 KC: Yeah, thankfully that never was the case.

31 RC: Exactly, exactly.

1 KC: So, it sounds like you had a very trying experience there, but also one that
2 was very rewarding in terms of your education there at West Point. It sounds like you,
3 through a lot of hard work and ability you did very well there. You were, again, going
4 into artillery, but you mentioned that you had this interest in going to aviation, into Army
5 aviation. What led you to want to lean toward the aviation?

6 RC: I don't know. You can't just put your finger on it and say, "I'm going to be a
7 pilot." I keep going back to my good friend, George. He was a pilot when he was
8 seventeen, eighteen years old. Although I didn't go aviation, he knows as much or more
9 than I do about aviation and he just loved it, you know? It slowly dawned on me that I
10 wanted to fly and artillery, that's the other reason why I chose artillery is one of the few
11 places or branches, rather that did support aviation. The infantry people, if you went
12 aviation, they looked down their noses at you wasting your time.

13 RC: Kelly, I've got the stock Market on my TV.

14 KC: Yes, sir.

15 RC: Let me go turn it down a little bit.

16 KC: Sure.

17 RC: It's starting to bother me.

18 KC: Sure.

19 RC: I'm back. My wife is tied, and she just ran out the very instant you called,
20 and I didn't realize it, but she had her TV on.

21 KC: Now, you were mentioning that you were going into artillery, but you also
22 said you had to go to jump school. Now, was this something that was common back then?

23 RC: Yeah, regular Army officers, which we were, when you graduated from West
24 Point, you had to go one of the two early on. Then as the time evolved, there were three,
25 jump, ranger, and aviation. So, you wound up usually taking two out of the three. If you
26 went aviation, then you really didn't have the time to go to ranger school. At that time
27 that appealed to me because I thought it was easier, but ranger school is a whole lot
28 rougher than the others. Jump school was just a whole lot of fun.

29 KC: Describe that for me.

1 RC: If you've never done that which you probably haven't it's just an exhilarating
2 experience. We were young, cocky, and a little bit stupid. We weren't smart enough to be
3 scared so it was just a month of a lot of fun down at Fort Benning, Georgia.

4 KC: How well did you do in jump school?

5 RC: Oh, there wasn't a relative term of doing well. You either jumped or you
6 didn't.

7 KC: You made it, or you didn't.

8 RC: Everybody did fine. I think I sprained my ankle on my last jump. One day we
9 jumped at high winds and I remember very clearly a boy named Bill Hipotski was being
10 dragged through the dirt and mud. It had rained, a little bit of high winds. The risers
11 caught him behind his helmet, and we dragged him through the mud face down. The
12 NCOs who ran the school, they saw what happened right away and were able to save
13 them. A couple others got into the trees and swung down and smacked against the trunk
14 of the tree and injured a little bit badly and had to go back to another class. But no, it was
15 just a lot of fun. We got out of the point and still we're all in great physical condition. In
16 fact, your jump school was in January of that year after graduation and I remember
17 running all during the Christmas holiday and I knew it wasn't going to be easy. I was
18 running out in the heat of Phoenix, Arizona, but the NCOs had just come off two weeks
19 of Christmas holidays eating and drinking, you know, and they were not in shape like
20 they normally were. So, it made our month a whole lot easier for us.

21 KC: Those little advantages add up, don't they?

22 LC: Yeah, one of my good friends was a track star and he talked at the wrong
23 time. So, as we drove around the track, he had to jog around us as we drove around the
24 track. He was laughing the whole time because he was in such great shape it didn't bother
25 him.

26 KC: Now, you also mentioned that you went to aviation school.

27 LC: Yeah.

28 KC: Tell me about that.

29 LC: Oh, that was a lot of fun. It was broken down in two parts. We went initially
30 to San Marcos, Texas, not too far from Austin and then to the B phase, the tactical phase
31 back at Fort Rucker which was the home of our Army aviation. It was kind of in its

1 infancy, but the year before, '56, the Air Force ran the school and the Air Force and
2 Army always had a little bit of a hostility and they seemed to take great pleasure and
3 failing as many as they could to show the Army guys that they couldn't do what the Air
4 Force could do, which was, of course, to fly. And they seemed to take great delight in
5 that. But in '57 they got some civilian instructors who didn't have the same, I think
6 hostility. They may have got the wrong word, but it's close enough. I remember my
7 instructor was—he was a very unlikeable guy. Oh, actually my first instructor was a
8 retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who had back in the Army aviation days had flown
9 the hump over in India, over the mountains. You with me?

10 KC: Yes, sir.

11 LC: And maybe that's before your time, too, but he used to tell some wonderful,
12 wonderful stories. One time he was telling us how he got iced over on the wings, which
13 of course means they cut through the air and you start downwards, and you don't come
14 out of it. But as he got into a spiral, got down from the cooler air to the Warmer air the
15 ice actually fell off and he was able to save the airplane and climb back to altitude and get
16 over the mountains. But he was terminated for some other reason. I'm not sure what it
17 was it got pretty complicated there. Each instruction had three students. I remember to
18 this day us three sitting there and got some news that our guy was gone. We all liked him
19 very much and we looked around the table trying to find out where we're going to go.
20 There was this young guy that was this arrogant jackass, the best way I could put it. We
21 looked around and my friend Jack who just recently passed away with cancer said, "I
22 don't want that guy." My other friend, I forget Bobby somebody, he said, "Well, I'm
23 okay." And being the hero that I was I could handle that, right? I could handle it. So, it
24 turned out I went to that guy's table and became his third pilot but looking back it was a
25 poor thing to do because he and I didn't hit it off from the outfit as I knew we wouldn't.
26 And so, we made what should have been a wonderful experience like the jumping thing
27 just what it was. Everyday was difficult.

28 KC: Now, was he a civilian as well or was he—?

29 LC: No, he was civilian, yeah.

30 KC: Okay.

1 LC: They just changed in January of '57 to all civilian instructors unless the Air
2 Force guys where they went.

3 KC: Okay. Now, although you had this personality conflict, this instructor, how
4 would you rate the way he instructed you? How was his teaching, how well did you do
5 under his tutelage?

6 LC: I passed (laughing). Which, of the situation, so I could hope for because he
7 was such a jerk, you know, he would purposely give me a low grade so he could be up
8 for a check for the—you know, over the time you took check rides to show your progress
9 and so forth and he gave me a low grade. His hope was I would do poorly on the tests—
10 the check rides, which are done by the active Army people. Then he proved his point that
11 I couldn't fly, but I always came out getting a lot better on the check rides than I did with
12 him. So, you know, what he's trying to do didn't really work, but it put a lot of mental
13 stress. And I recall clearly the devil. We took instrument training and the way you'd do
14 that; you'd cover the windows and look only at instruments. This is, you know, so when
15 you had bad weather and stuff like that, clouds, whatever, can't see the horizon you can
16 still fly the airplane. One of the things like you may perhaps remember when Joe
17 Kennedy was killed flying at night. He had very little instrument training and when you
18 lose your license which he did in the evening, over water, bad weather, coming into La
19 Guardia or JFK. He lost it and what happens is you feel like you're at a turn and you're
20 not because of inner workings. It gets really complicated and the more you fight it, the
21 more scared you get. I'm pretty sure you can't even think straight, okay? But getting back
22 the instrument training you cover it up and I'll tell you what, it was 120 degrees in there
23 between our personality conflict and so forth. So, you know, I remember that day very
24 vividly getting out and practically throwing up.

25 KC: Oh wow.

26 RC: So again, like I say, what could have been a wonderful experience was soiled
27 by this guy's inability to communicate with his students. It's not my fault. I'm there to
28 learn. I'm eager to learn, but this guy just chose to be a real jerk, you know? And not
29 focused as a good instructor will whether it's classroom, pilot, or whatever. How can I
30 get this person to perform their best, you know?

31 KC: So, you make it through. When do you graduate from flight school?

1 RC: We started—after jump school in January we did flight school at San Marcos,
2 Texas, from February to June. We finally went over to Fort Rucker from June to
3 September we flew the tactical phase, you know. If I didn't make it clear, this is airplanes
4 as supposed to helicopters.

5 KC: Right.

6 RC: So, we were flying what we called the L-19 in those days.

7 KC: Okay.

8 RC: And we finished up there in September and then we had about a month off
9 and then I went over to Germany for my first assignment.

10 KC: Okay, now you're apart of this artillery unit in Germany. You're guarding
11 the Fulda Gap. When you say, I believe, it was 280 millimeter I think you said?

12 RC: Yeah, you got it.

13 KC: With nuclear capability. What was it like for you to be in this position?
14 Again, at the height of the Cold War there in the late 1950s with the focus being on
15 Europe and being on a potential Soviet Invasion of Central and Western Europe. And
16 there you are guarding the full to gap arguably the most important place geographically in
17 Europe at that time with these considerations. And you're a young man and you are
18 involved with this mission. What was that like for you? You've come an awful long way
19 from a little town in New York.

20 RC: (laughing) yeah, again, you asked me about the West Point and the Cold War
21 stuff like that.

22 KC: Mm-hmm.

23 RC: We knew, of course, the seriousness of the Cold War and what was going on,
24 but once again, you know, on a daily basis you're forced to learn your trade. See, I was
25 there four years and three years I just filled my airplane. Each artillery unit at that point in
26 time had a flight of two airplanes which you would observe artillery fire, fly the
27 commander around, and stuff like that. Then one year of that I was allowed to do what
28 we call go on ground duty and actually work with the artillery itself and be one of the five
29 or six officers we called batteries as supposed to companies in the infantry and so forth.
30 So, it was just—what do I want to say? We knew there was serious situations. We knew
31 it could get bad, but, you know, you put it out of your mind because you're so busy with

1 the daily routines. You had hundreds of young soldiers and some of them were great,
2 some of them were not so great so you're busy trying to keep them straight and they were
3 trying to get in your face sometimes. It was just a terrific learning experience and my
4 battery commander, to this day, I regret not getting to know him better. Was a wonderful
5 officer who had served in Korea as a forward observer, his artillery men, of course, and
6 he got the DSC, Distinguished Service Cross which is second only to the Medal of
7 Honor. And the way he got that was the Chinese had come into the conflict and they were
8 overrunning his position and the only thing he could do to survive maybe, was to call the
9 artillery rounds on his own outposts, own position. So, he did that, and he basically got
10 down into a hole of some kind and the rounds actually killed and drove off the Chinese
11 and he's able to survive. But not only was he a great, courageous leader, he was a
12 wonderful administrator, one of the rare combinations. We all know Patton was a great
13 leader, but he didn't like paperwork too much. I regret to this day that I didn't get to
14 know him better and fully comprehend what a great, great officer he was. After that year,
15 of course, I went back to the States and left him. He went to Vietnam and then later on he
16 got throat cancer and passed away. I still keep in contact with his wife to this day. That
17 was one of the most rewarding experiences in those four years in Germany. Also, I got to
18 learn to meet the German people and I really liked them. Very, very few times was there
19 a point or a thought that these damn Germans were here defending them, they don't give
20 a hoot, whatever. By and large, they are good people. At that period of time the War in
21 Europe was still devastated. I remember clearly flying down my little old L-19 down to
22 Munich and seeing this huge mountain, but not ski mountains. A three thousand foot
23 mountain off to the west of the city and as I got closer, I could see what was coming was
24 rubble from the city's destruction during World War II.

25 KC: Wow.

26 RC: This is only '45 to '58 is only a little over ten years and this country was still
27 devastated.

28 KC: So, you spent your first few years or first couple of years, I guess, as a
29 forward artillery observer?

30 RC: Well, mostly I flew, and we would practice doing that on occasion and our
31 summer training. They had a big training area called Rafts and Bears. You'd go out there

1 twice a year, once in the winter, once in the summer and do a little of that, but my
2 primary job was to take care of the airplanes, take care of the boss, advise them what we
3 could do and couldn't do. But back then the one year I was on the ground I was what they
4 call executive officer under the commander for one year and then I was special weapons
5 officer which means I was responsible for preparing the artillery rounds, to put them
6 together. Whenever we move, we have special vans where the nuclear components were
7 held. Then if we were called upon to do our thing—which, luckily, we never were—we
8 assembled those things and then get it ready to fire. So that was my job. And then we had
9 two (coughing) platoon officers, we had two guns in each battery and direct them and
10 help them along with the commander. Yeah, that's about it. It was just a lot of fun. As I
11 was saying, the German people were pretty darn good.

12 KC: Did you have any sort of specialized training or education on how to handle
13 these nuclear weapons, these nuclear rounds?

14 RC: Oh yeah, we went to special weapons school in a little town called Permacon
15 and we did that. It wasn't complicated, you know. Here it is, you put it together and when
16 it's not together you keep it separated and you keep it properly secured, you know,
17 because that was probably one of the most important elements of—the Cold War was we
18 had nuclear weapons and we had to secure them and take care of them (audio cuts for a
19 moment).

20 KC: Okay, now you were in Germany from 1957 to 1961. Is that correct?

21 RC: Exactly, yeah.

22 KC: Okay, now where do you go when you leave Germany in '61?

23 RC: I went back to Fort Sill for an assignment.

24 KC: So, you're staying with artillery then.

25 RC: First I went to Texas to helicopter school.

26 KC: You did? When you came back from Germany you go to helicopter school?

27 RC: Helicopter school, yeah. The commission officer tried to get them rated in
28 helicopters. Later on, the Warrants were pretty much one or the other and mostly they
29 were in the helicopters. So, we just have so many more positions in helicopters. We had
30 like three or four thousand pilots I think at one time in height of the Vietnam thing.

1 There's not enough commissioned officers to go around. So, I went to chopper school
2 which was interesting.

3 KC: Tell me about that.

4 RC: I think choppers are more fun than airplanes, you know, because you can do
5 so much more, you know? You can land almost anywhere. You got the space big enough
6 with rotor blades you can land, you know? But taking off is not that easy because you've
7 got to lift up and clear the trees and whatever your surrounded by. But choppers are just a
8 lot of fun and as I became more proficient in helicopters, I really enjoyed them more than
9 airplanes. Airplanes once you get off the ground, which is the second most dangerous
10 thing you do, the other was landing. You know, it's pretty damn boring. The describe
11 airplane flying as hours and hours of boredom. Boredom interrupted by seconds of stock
12 raving terror.

13 KC: Where did you go to helicopter training here in Texas? Were you in
14 Weatherford?

15 RC: Yeah, how'd you know that?

16 KC: A lot of pilots have trained there.

17 RC: I was trying to think, was it Weatherford or Weatherbee, but you're exactly
18 right. It was Weatherford.

19 KC: Excuse me, what helicopters were you training on here.

20 RC: (laughing) Once again, it might be before your time, Kelly. The OH-23.

21 KC: Okay, tell me about the OH-23.

22 RC: It was called the Hiller Killer. It was called that because the mast, instead of
23 being round, was kind of oval. And if something happened and you made an abrupt
24 movement with the cyclic, the narrow side of the oval would come in contact with the
25 main mast and that was it. Things started falling apart and then you went straight down,
26 and they killed—I don't know what the numbers were, maybe there weren't that many
27 before they found what the problem was. So, I went through that and it was a D or C
28 model and very low, very poor power. As a matter of fact, on a real hot day it was tough
29 to get off the ground with just the structure as a student.

30 KC: Was your transition to rotary wind, was it difficult for you?

1 RC: No, it's easier than straight helicopter because you knew about aviation. If
2 the terminology is good, you know, when you're first getting into helicopters you're
3 going to take off, go cross wind, then down wind, and then turn final. Say, "What the hell
4 are you talking about?" So, a lot of that is easy. You know about regulations, you know
5 about BFR. They say, well, we're going to VFR today, you know what they're talking
6 about as opposed to, "What do you mean VFR?" "Oh, that's Visual Flight Rules for you
7 dummies." So, it was much easier. A little quick story—I had bad luck with instructors,
8 Kelly. The day before my tech ride we G2'ed where they might take us. So, sure enough
9 the place that I took my truck out to the coldest place, land here and do this and do that. I
10 did exactly like my instructor showed me. One of the things about helicopter flying is you
11 don't want to be so far from the airport that in theory, engine quits, you can't make it to
12 the airport. So, I'm going down wind, you know, you know what downwind is? You take
13 off, you turn left, and it's like you're climbing out to from A to B. Instead, you turn left,
14 and you go downwind which is with the wind and then you come around to turn left on
15 base, whatever it is. And then you turn left and then the final, as you're approaching the
16 air field is—you know what that is. I did my down wind, exactly what my instructor told
17 me. My check pilot looked at me, "Why, you must be a dummy." What did he do? He cut
18 the engine. Of course, when they do that it's okay, but you've got to drop the collective
19 instantly, so you don't lose your RPM and slow down and kill yourself. So naturally I
20 was way out there and had nowhere to go. So, it got explained to me, you know, why
21 were you so far out? "Well sir, I'm just a young lieutenant. We did this yesterday and this
22 is where I was supposed to be. Make a long story short, that was the last time that guy
23 instructed. The next time he was maintenance test flight officer. His name was Porter
24 Huff. Okay, jump ahead to 1969 with Air American I'm in Udorn flying into Vientiane.
25 Who gets out of this big swing airplane co-pilot? It's this guy, Porter Huff. Make a long
26 story short he was co-pilot, he stayed co-pilot his whole career and never advanced. So, I
27 guess the point I'm trying to make is he was a damn poor instructor pilot, and he wasn't
28 much of a regular pilot because he never advanced past co-pilot. I don't know, the Army
29 just made some bad selections somewhere along the line.

30 KC: I encountered his name the other day, as a matter of fact.

31 RC: You're kidding.

1 KC: No.

2 RC: Porter Huff?

3 KC: Mm-hmm.

4 RC: In what way?

5 KC: I can't remember. As I was doing some background research for this

6 interview, I encountered his name in some book that I was reading. I can't remember

7 which one it was.

8 RC: That's new. Another weird part of the story of Porter Huff, I'm working part

9 time at this tennis court here because I play a lot and I enjoy it and I have a lot of fun, this

10 guy's named Huff. I said, "That's funny. My instructor helicopter was Porter Huff." You

11 know what he said? "He was my uncle." In this small world. I said, "I can't believe it."

12 But yes, Porter was this guy Charlie's uncle.

13 KC: That is really interesting.

14 RC: Life's funny sometimes. The older you get, the more you realize it.

15 KC: Okay, now let's go back here to Weatherford to your rotary wing training.

16 You said that it was a lot more fun than flying the fixed wing. It sounds like you were

17 doing okay there. Do you feel good about your time? Do you feel that you were trained

18 appropriately? Do you feel that you came out prepared to do what the Army wanted you

19 to do?

20 RC: Oh yeah. You know, Porter just—mechanically he was okay, all right? How

21 to take off, how to land, all that stuff we were okay. It's just that—like in this case, you

22 know, he really should have known that with the check pilots are looking for is you're

23 not so far out on down wind that you can't make the field if he cuts the engine on you,

24 you know? I mean, it's not a big thing at all. No, I really enjoyed helicopter school and I

25 think almost any pilot would tell you that out of both fixed wing and the helicopters,

26 choppers are a heck of a lot more fun. Well, there's more to do, you know? You fall

27 asleep in a helicopter—speaking of that, you see that story on those two guys that fell

28 asleep maybe, maybe not and overflew Cleveland by an hour and a half?

29 KC: Oh, the Northwest Airlines, yes.

30 RC: I mean, in helicopters you got three things. You got the collective cyclic and

31 the power. Later, helicopters, the power and collective were combined together so I

1 picked up some of the collective power was brought in automatically, but yeah, they're
2 just a lot of fun. You do so much more, you know. At the end you quits, guess what? You
3 can land almost anywhere? Airplanes the engine quits, holy man, where's the nearest
4 field?

5 KC: Right.

6 RC: As I say, I had a little bit of bad luck with personality in the first case and the
7 second guy could have been a little bit sharper, but, overall it was very rewarding, very
8 interesting, and the choppers are what got me where I am today to a degree by being able
9 to get to Vietnam in the Chinooks and then from the Army to Air America in fixed wing
10 and then when the future in fixed wing looked bleak I was able to jump through
11 helicopters in Thailand and extend my career and then, of course, back to Saigon and
12 then later on I was working with all companies in Indonesia and stuff like that. So, the
13 choppers kind of opened up a whole new avenue, a whole new career for me.

14 KC: It certainly sounds like it. So, you finish, was it, late '61 or early '62 when
15 you finished there in Weatherford?

16 RC: It was only, I think, two to three month school. I got there in early April;
17 April, May, June; went to Fort Sill, and at Fort Sill with the Otter Company. Do you
18 know what an Otter is?

19 KC: Yeah, but I'd like for you explain what this was.

20 RC: Say again?

21 KC: Yes, I do, but I would like for you to explain for the interview what it was.

22 RC: Oh, it's a big Canadian airplane—bird lodge, fuse lodge, single engine.
23 Again, like my H-23 from chopper school, very underpowered. It took forever to climb
24 and stuff like that, but it could carry, in theory, a spot of soldiers you could take them
25 somewhere and drop them at a big door which was easy to get out of and so forth, but it
26 was a wonderful old airplane. Now they have it and the beaver which is called the L-20,
27 another Canadian aircraft. They have turbine engines in them, and they are so much a
28 better airplane than the old Whitney. I think its six cylinder and nine so maybe it's nine
29 cylinders. It's been so long, but a good airplane and very solid. Had to be, my first solo in
30 the Otter when I got checked out. Once the thick swing raided, the air plane raided as you
31 go different airplanes, you take a four, five hour training ride with an instructor pod with

1 local company and stuff like that. But I was going to say, I remember my first solo, I
2 rounded out just a little bit high. You know, you pull back the power and pull back a bit
3 on the yoke and then you slowly land, right? Well, I'm slowly landing, and I'm slowly
4 landing, and I'm slowly landing, and I'm thinking, "Oh my god, I rounded out too high.
5 I'm going to put these struts right up my butt here if I don't land soon." But finally, I did
6 hit the ground and fortunately it wasn't so high that it damaged anything. I have heard
7 stories of people settling in from too high. Now I have to do it in the airplanes built more
8 for motion forward and so forth as opposed to straight down. Consiquently the stretch will
9 break, and the struts will break and cut the main fuse line, but anyway, I completed the
10 transition no problem and was there for about, let me see, '62. I was supposed to—the
11 reason I was sent there initially because I was supposed to go to the artillery advance
12 course which you go when you're a captain or a junior major, stuff like that, but the
13 Army and it's omnipotence made a big screw up. They sent a big helicopter caught me in
14 Korea in mass. Once again, make a long story short, Korea's called the short tour. You
15 probably knew all this, Kelly. And then you're there for a year and then you rotate. Well,
16 if you're sent over as a unit, you come back as a unit. Which means, there's a disaster
17 waiting when you get thirty new pilots into that company all at the same time and nobody
18 knew it was the country, knows anything about the operations, you know, just makes life
19 extremely difficult. So, what they did was they just—they didn't have thirty-five people
20 to stand over there. This was an infancy of Army aviation and didn't have thirty, forty
21 chopper guys just to go over there because one of the reasons was, it's a big helicopter
22 and you have to have a lot of chopper time and some medium helicopter time so you can
23 qualify for that because they had a bunch of rules and regulations. When they told me, I
24 was going to go over there I said, "I'm not qualified. I don't have five hundred hours of
25 helicopter time." They said, "We'll waive it." I said, "That's okay, I don't have any
26 medium helicopter time." The answer was, "We'll waive it." I said, "You guys are all
27 right." "But I'm here for advance course." "You get it when you come back." To make a
28 long story short I went through the transition and got to Korea. Again, you know, I didn't
29 like the outfit. The helicopter was called the BUS, big ugly sucker, to clean that up for
30 you a little bit, Kelly. And then I came back then I went to advance course, you know. It
31 wasn't much of a year over there. I didn't like Korea all that much. I never have gotten

1 used to Kimchi, but over the three times you think I'd get to like it a little bit, but it
2 wasn't that great.

3 KC: It never grew on you. Well, tell me about your time there in Korea with these
4 helicopters. Or is there nothing really memorable?

5 RC: Nothing really memorable. A bunch a guys I had never bet before, we went
6 over together, and we never meshed as a unit. The two or three guys that came from
7 Seattle, Fort Lewis, that had a little click, but the commander came out of nobody,
8 nobody outstanding or anything. So, the whole company and the other pilots refer to it as
9 a lost year. You're over there, you're out away from everything, family, and friends back
10 in the States. Korea at that time was not a fun place, you know. It wasn't like during the
11 Korean War in the early 50s, but it was just not a fun place. Cold, nasty, and I hated
12 Kimchi. Have you ever smelled Kimchi?

13 KC: Yes, yes, sir. I have.

14 RC: Do you eat Kimchi?

15 KC: No sir, I do not.

16 RC: Well, I've got a Thai wife. I don't know why. I think god's punishing me.
17 She loves Kimchi and so she'll make it once in awhile and then I have to leave the
18 kitchen so to speak. It's all right, the people are all right. You know, can't say anything
19 bad about the people. I made a couple of good friends over there. Once again, I played
20 tennis in—that's an area where, you know, once you get in and you're accepted you can
21 meet a lot of nice people because the tennis aspect transitions you right away and you're
22 accepted and so forth. I went back over there in '81 I guess it was and met some
23 wonderful people that time. But then I didn't fly helicopters. I flew fixed wing like a VIP
24 pit and stuff like that, so it was quite easy.

25 KC: Okay, so you make it back to Fort Sill. When did you come back to Fort Sill?

26 RC: I came back in March-April of '64.

27 KC: In '64, okay.

28 RC: I was at Sill '61, '62, went early to Korea, came back early '64. I went right
29 to advanced course which conducted in two parts the field artillery. The field artillery, the
30 105 guns, your 8-inch; of course, above a 280 had been retired to the museum at Fort Sill.
31 Then you go down there to about May, April/May to June and July something like that,

1 maybe a little longer. And then you go to the anti-air Cav side. The missiles and stuff like
2 that, of course, and then it was honest John and so forth. You study that for awhile and
3 then you finish up and then you go onto the next phases of your life which was from Fort
4 Sill a few months and then down to El Paso, Texas. I enjoyed El Paso, Texas.

5 KC: And what were you doing there? This is Fort Bliss I assume that's your
6 station.

7 RC: Just going to the artillery anti-aircraft part of the school. Missiles and honest
8 johns and stuff like that. You know, I can't remember anything to tell you the truth.

9 KC: Sure.

10 RC: Very little.

11 KC: So, this takes us into what, 1965 probably?

12 RC: This takes us into December of '64 and then went from there after a couple
13 of—took some of our Christmas vacations and went to Fort Benning, Georgia, and that's
14 probably where I had the more enjoyable time. We got into a caribou unit, another. We
15 just loved these Canadian airplanes. It's a great big monstrous—do you know what a
16 caribou is, Kelly?

17 KC: Yes.

18 RC: Air Mecca had some to tell you the truth. I went there, got transitioned and
19 was there about six months and just doing beautifully. I mean, really loved—Benning
20 was okay, and I really loved the airplane. Every Army pilot you ever talk to that flew it
21 loved it and just hated it when if went over to the Air Force in January of '67. So anyway,
22 I was there with a caribou and we're doing fine, doing our thing and we're in a two story
23 building. We, the Caribou Company 187, first floor, to the 147 Chinook Company on the
24 second floor. And everyday we watch those Chinook guys trot up the steps to the second
25 floor to their miserable helicopter, right? Because we're sitting there grinning with the
26 queen of the Army fleet and snickering because me and Luke Caldwell and two other
27 guys, I can't remember their names now, we knew we had helicopter time and nobody
28 else seemed to know it. We're snickering because we think we've put one over on the
29 Army. So, anyway, the Army Fort Benning goes back to Washington and the Pentagon
30 says, "We ain't got enough chopper guys." I say, "You got some." And they say, "You

1 have some that you don't know about." Computers didn't exactly have—we had these
2 IBM punch cards.

3 KC: Yes.

4 RC: Remember those?

5 KC: Mm-hmm.

6 RC: It said, "Run those through." I'll be damned. They ran them through and out
7 come these four cards.

8 KC: And they got you.

9 RC: Bob Carat, Luke Caldwell, another guy, and the fourth guy, and guess who
10 stops snickering and went to the second floor the very next day. Oh god, we cried. The
11 next thing is we had to get transitioned and the Chinook was pretty complicated. A big,
12 new, air craft and you couldn't do that locally, so we had to go down to Fort Rucker and
13 get transitioned, which we did. That was July, July of '65 and that's the same time that
14 Josh came on the air radio with jets upsetting the 1st Cav of Fort Benning to Vietnam. So,
15 our Chinook became part of that process. We didn't go with the 1st Cav, we came later,
16 but after the transition at Fort Rucker, came back to Benning and then the rest of the three
17 months was we were packed up and getting ready to go to Vietnam, which we did. We
18 got there in the fall of '65.

19 KC: In the fall of 1965. Okay, why don't we stop there?

Interview with Robert Caron

Session [2] of [5]

Date 13 January 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Robert Caron. Today is January 13, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Caron is joining me once again from his home in Fort
4 Walton Beach, Florida. Mr. Caron, when we left off last time, you were at Fort Benning,
5 Georgia, and you talked about how they had discovered that you had helicopter time and
6 that you're going to make this transition to Chinooks. Tell me about the transition to
7 Chinooks.

8 Robert Caron: Oh, my initial transition to big chopper helicopters occurred in
9 early '63 and that was probably the most difficult because I had very little light helicopter
10 time; what we call the H-13 and in helicopter school, the H-23. So, it wasn't as big a deal
11 as I thought, but it was difficult in that the Chinook has rotor blades front and aft. So,
12 when simple things like turning, for example, you had to actually cross coordinate so to
13 speak. You know, pull your cyclic left and then you'd actually push the left pedal to
14 move the back end over to one side. It took some getting used to, but once you got used
15 to it. It was a good helicopter. Like a lot of new things, there were some people who
16 thought there were problems when maybe there weren't, but all in all, it became a real
17 solid helicopter. I think as we've seen over the years, it's still the back bone of the Army
18 heavy lift.

19 KC: Sure, sure. What did you find the most challenging when it came to the
20 transition to Chinooks?

21 RC: Just that.

22 KC: Okay.

23 RC: The idea of cross controlling to make that darn back end of the chopper go
24 where you wanted to.

25 KC: Okay.

26 RC: But it was typical, you know. Helicopter flying is basically very simple, you
27 know, once you get the hang of it. So, it wasn't all that difficult except, as I say, for the
28 two rotors. I was always a Sikorsky man, but Vertol, who made the Chinook, was
29 different for me. But once you got the hand of it, it was fine.

1 KC: Now, where did you transition to the Chinooks?

2 RC: At Fort Benning.

3 KC: At Fort Benning, okay.

4 RC: Oh, I'm sorry. We went down to Fort Rucker.

5 KC: Okay, I thought you'd mention it before.

6 RC: We were at Benning and then when I joined the units then they would ship

7 me down to Rucker. That was about ten of us in the class, so we had a lot of new people.

8 KC: Now, you mentioned that the 1st Cav was transitioning to or was being

9 moved to Vietnam. Of course, this is earlier in 1965 when John Macy makes the

10 announcements. The summer of '65 when the 1st Cav goes to Vietnam. Now, were you

11 going to be in support of the 1st Cav?

12 RC: Not at all. The 1st Cav had their own battalion of helicopter. I think, I forget

13 the number of them, but then that battalion started to call two Huey outfits which

14 included, I think, the slick and some gun ships. Slicks were, of course, those without

15 weapons that mostly carried people. Then they had their own company of Chinooks. So,

16 they went over there with their own support. We joined later and became kind of like a

17 general support for all of Saigon and actually to Pleiku, the Qui Nhon area all the way

18 down to the Delta.

19 KC: Okay, so you covered quite a bit of territory when you got over there?

20 RC: Oh yeah, yeah.

21 KC: All right, now you've mentioned that you were going to be making the move

22 to Vietnam in the fall of 1965. I believe you got over there in September of '65, is that

23 correct?

24 RC: Actually, November.

25 KC: November of '65, okay. All right, now what did you think about the War as

26 then was in Vietnam in 1965? You know you're getting ready for this. What was your

27 opinion of American involvement in Southeast Asia?

28 RC: Hey, when you're a soldier, you don't have any opinion, you know? You

29 may have some second thoughts, a little bit, but the country wants you to do something

30 and you darn well do it, you know? We had absolutely no problem going over there,

31 okay? Supporting the people—our country decided—and there are people on both sides

1 of that question, you know, that we were there to support them. Our government was
2 fully committed, at that time, called the Domino Theory. Today, maybe we think it
3 wasn't all that valid, but who the heck knows. At that time, we were fully committed, and
4 it was our job and just like it was today in Iraq and Afghanistan, they go where the
5 country tells them and with minor reservations. They're one hundred percent behind their
6 countries efforts and that's the way we were.

7 KC: You mentioned these minor reservations. Did you have any yourself?

8 RC: No, absolutely none.

9 KC: Okay.

10 RC: I've been in the military, really, counting schools, from 1952. I was well
11 indoctrinated, and I'm not one of those people who try to second guess the government
12 thinking I'm smarter than everybody else, you know? All that does is get you into
13 trouble.

14 KC: And, of course, in 1965 the War wasn't as controversial or as unpopular as it
15 would be, you know, three, four, five years later as well.

16 RC: You're exactly right, Kelly. Later on, a couple of photos came out that were
17 just disastrous as far as public opinion and you, of course, know what they were. The
18 colonel shooting at the Viet Cong guy in Cho Lon and then the little girl running down
19 the road with no clothes on trying to escape napalming by aircraft which later proved to
20 be South Vietnamese forces and not as—I think it was Reisner that claimed, and some of
21 the other ones claimed that it was U.S. people that did that.

22 KC: Those photos certainly had a massive impact on American public opinion in
23 the War.

24 RC: I've heard that, that guy read that the gentleman who took that picture was a
25 famous photographer. He said had he had the chance to do over again, seeing what the
26 results of that picture were, he would not have done it. He would not have published the
27 picture.

28 KC: Can you're talking about the—the photographer who took that picture of the
29 gentlemen of the colonel shooting at the prisoner in at Cho Lon, Saigon. Yes, yes
30 absolutely. And it was—those two pictures are good examples of a lot of
31 misunderstanding that was surrounding the War in American involvement there as well.

1 The pictures are controversial and the stories behind them most people don't know or
2 understand, but the pictures certainly made a very, very big impact on the role of having
3 the War.

4 RC: And the people who did that, they knew what they were doing. There
5 probably was not one—I shouldn't say that—darn few columnists and people like that,
6 that were not against the War. A lot of you people are quasi-intellectual, and they think
7 they know better than everybody else and they were against the War. A lot of the stories
8 and pictures they took were slanted to show that we were losing the War and that we
9 were wrong to be there.

10 KC: Definitely the case. As you're preparing to go to Vietnam, what sort of
11 mental or psychological preparations are you making? This will be the first time that you
12 will be involved in an actual combat zone here. What are you thinking of?

13 RC: Lord, you know, to tell you the truth you're so busy and so far, away and it's
14 so complicated because not only do you have to fight the War, you've got to prepare
15 yourself and your equipment. And one of the first things, I was handling supply in our
16 company. One of the first things you've got to realize is that there is no demand in that
17 place except for the Chinooks for the 1st Cav that got there two, three months ahead of us
18 to set up a supply line. So, your first thought is, "How will I get my part?" They go
19 through, they hire headquarters and finally out of MAC-V back to the States and you take
20 talking months of getting your equipment and in the meantime your helicopters are down,
21 you know, and if you don't use the old philosophy, what we used to call, sixteen
22 helicopters worth or sixteen airplanes and you have one bird which has become the
23 hanger queen and you get your parts off it to make the other fifteen or so flyable. The
24 thoughts was, "How in the devil are we going to accomplish this in an expeditious
25 manner so that we can keep the darn things in the air? Because as you well know,
26 helicopters flight time versus maintenance ratio last I heard was like ten to one as
27 suppose to airplanes which a more like two to one or something like that. So that was a
28 grave concern. As far as going there and doing combat, you know, basically that's what
29 you trade for. One of my warrants had a great expression, a guy named Rolly Harden.
30 What a wonderful partner and wonderful person. One of the things he loved to say is,

1 “You take the king’s money and fight the king’s battles.” And that’s exactly, like ninety-
2 nine percent was felt.

3 KC: Okay. Describe for me the—well, I should ask you this first. When do you
4 get your orders to go to Vietnam?

5 RC: Well, heck, I don’t remember. I think I moved over to that company the end
6 of June, early July; something like that I believe.

7 KC: Which company was this ?

8 RC: Oh, I’m sorry. The 147th Chinook Company.

9 KC: Okay.

10 RC: Helicopter Udon. I’m not sure what it was. As soon as they announced the
11 1st Cav going over, I think it was forgone conclusion that we would eventually get orders
12 to over there. And I don’t recall exactly when it was. I mean, we’re talking thirty-five and
13 ten is what, forty-five years ago? You’re testing the old cobwebs, Kelly.

14 KC: (laughing) That’s what I’m supposed to do.

15 RC: Okay.

16 KC: Did you have any time off? Most people I speak with say they had a roughly
17 thirty day leave to go home or to go wherever.

18 RC: No, we had very little time. It was right there—what little family I had was
19 right there so there was just—I don’t even think I went off to see my mom. My mom at
20 that time lived in New York. I don’t think I even went up there, but I don’t recall anytime
21 off.

22 KC: Describe for me the trip, your trip to Vietnam across the Pacific.

23 RC: I was fortunate. I went with the leading party. We flew over in November of
24 ‘65 and flew over on Pan Am which was at one of our great airlines. It has since gone by
25 the board, so to speak. It was an uneventful flight. As it turned out I started up a
26 relationship, a friendship rather, with the stewardess on there. I saw a picture of here and
27 I was standing beside the airplane talking about, you know, me going there and so forth
28 and her getting on going back. As a matter of fact, we both corresponded and two or three
29 times she came over there with other people and if I were able to, as it turned out I was,
30 we’d meet in Saigon for a quick cup of coffee. Other than that, it was very, shoot, just

1 like jumping on an airplane and going from one coast to the other. Nothing exciting,
2 nothing unusual.

3 KC: And your entire unit went over as a whole?

4 RC: Yeah, we had about ten or fifteen in the advanced party and then the other
5 people packed up their helicopters and stuff and went out to the West Coast and boarded
6 the ship. I think the ship took about, oh, maybe at least three weeks to get over there. So
7 that was the hard part on that ship for twenty, twenty-one days whatever it was trying to
8 stay alert, stay focused and everything and not get bored to tears and try to maintain some
9 kind of conditioning and what not. So that was the hard part of the people on the ship, but
10 once they got there, they embarked there to Vung Tau as I recall and in no time, we were
11 ready to go. At that time there was very little in the way of ports and support facilities at
12 the smaller cities so to speak like Vung Tau. So, I remember we'd throw things on the
13 life boat and move them in that way and offload them on the small docks. It's very cool,
14 they put helicopters together and flew them off. So that took awhile, but not all that long.
15 I don't recall how long it took right now. It was pretty much uneventful. People knew what
16 they were doing, they all did a good job and we had absolutely no problem.

17 KC: Did you fly into Tan Son Nhut?

18 RC: All the time, all the time.

19 KC: When you came in-country for the first time did you fly into Tan Son Nhut?

20 RC: Yeah.

21 KC: Okay.

22 RC: Exactly, yeah. That was the big international airport. There were two, Tan
23 Son Nhut and Bien Hoa which was about, oh, fifteen miles to the east or north east.
24 It's more fighter and so forth, military, as opposed to Tan Son Nhut which was the big
25 civilian base coming in and out. But there was a lot of military there, too.

26 KC: Sure.

27 RC: There's a famous story I want to tell you real quick.

28 KC: Okay.

29 RC: Pan Am comes in and the people on the ground are getting some F-4s off to
30 go do combat somewhere and the tower tells the Pan Am guy to please hold north until
31 they clear the runway. And about the third turn the Pan Am captain was back and he said,

1 “Tower, do you know that every time I make one of these turns it costs my company like
2 two thousand dollars in fuel?” It was quiet. Then power goes back and said, “Roger, Pan
3 Am 12, please make a four thousand dollar turn to the left. I’ll call you when I get the
4 runway clear.” And that’s where he was. Even later on when I lived in Saigon there were
5 nights when you’d see flares going up and tracers in the air and you hear all the bombing;
6 it was pretty exciting times.

7 KC: I bet. Describe for me your initial impressions of Vietnam. When you step
8 off that plane at Tan Son Nhut, describe for me what you see, what you hear, what you—
9 you’re entire experience when you step off that plane.

10 RC: Once again, that’s forty-something years ago, but I had been in Korea from
11 ‘63 and ‘64 so it wasn’t like people were new to me, you know? I knew what to expect a
12 little bit. The Vietnamese are a little bit different, a little smaller boned and smaller
13 stature maybe than the Chinese, who to me, I’m sorry, the Koreans who to me are more
14 like the Chinese and even the Japanese. You know, you got used to the language barrier
15 after awhile and things were very primitive. I remember we didn’t have desks for our
16 offices and stuff like that and wherever it was we did our administrative work. I was
17 involved in going out on the local economy and tried to communicate. You did a lot of
18 finger pointing and stuff like that and buying some desks which looked pretty good at the
19 time, but about three months later when the wood started to dry the desk was split down
20 the middle or down the sides and you were left with a mess basically. So, there were
21 some surprises like that that you had to anticipate, but everything was a slower pace. One
22 of the big things learned right way is you don’t know where the bad guys are. It turns out,
23 years later, the bad guys were fifty miles north of us or less at a little town called Barilla,
24 and we really didn’t know that. There were other times when people said, “Bobby, didn’t
25 you know the Viet Cong were sharing that beach there north of Saigon along the coast a
26 couple of miles?” “Hell no, I didn’t know that.” And then there was a small mountain
27 right there, oh, ten miles, twelve miles, a little bit north of us. I’m reading about a
28 prisoner who was captured in the Delta and walked north. They said, they spent some
29 time at that mountain with their big caves and they were hidden in there and so forth. So,
30 it was difficult to imagine how great the—not how great, but how complex—the battle
31 was, you know. You might be shooting up front and you’d have people a few miles away

1 behind you off to the side. And I've had people tell me, "Bob, the Viet Cong, if they want
2 to, they could have ten thousand men outside of Bien Hoa in one day if they wanted to."
3 So that was one of the difficulties, but, you know, you just pressed on and believed in
4 your leaders and did what you had to do.

5 KC: As part of this advanced party, you've mentioned about having to set up
6 desks and things like that or to purchase them. What other sort of responsibilities did you
7 have as part of this advanced party?

8 RC: That was pretty basic, really. That was really next to nothing. As I said, the
9 initial concern was, how do we maintain our supply lines to maintain these very
10 complicated huge helicopters, you know? We used to kid there are ten thousand moving
11 parts all trying to go different directions at the same time. And try to coordinate with our
12 battalions. See, our battalion was twenty miles away which is, of course, unusual as
13 compared to the States I'm saying, but in combat that would often be the case. We have
14 to work through them, run supplies through them. Sometimes you had to work directly
15 with the headquarters and the MAC-V. I don't recall—really, we were all that successful
16 for awhile. One of the things that saved our butt a little bit was when we left for Benning,
17 we midnight requisitioned a lot of stuff. Now, we were told if we did that and I remember
18 our commander telling us, you know, "Be careful." If we did that and they found us out
19 when we got to Vietnam, the command would be relieved immediately. Actually, we had
20 no choice, you know? We went over there, and you need a critical part to take days to get
21 the requisition to Saigon, MAC-V headquarters, and more days—we're talking days no
22 computer, none of this stuff. So, it was very difficult and would take maybe a month to
23 get a part that would put your helicopter down. Two of those would be two helicopters
24 down, you know? So that was the big challenge going back and forth up there.
25 Unfortunately, the road between Vung Tau and Saigon was not as secure. You could go
26 back and forth, but next time you try to do it you might not make it. It was a lot of flying
27 involved. One of the things wrong with our Chinook company is we didn't have a small
28 helicopter for the commander and his staff, his operation which would probably be like
29 me. They'd run around and jump in a Huey for example, run up to Saigon and then do
30 what we had to do and then come back. We didn't want to use the Chinook to do that, but
31 occasionally we would probably do something like that.

1 KC: So, you were the supply officer for this?

2 RC: Yeah, that's another thing. There was no TONE, which you know what that
3 is.

4 KC: Yes.

5 RC: I hope, for a supply guy. So, it's an additional duty. So, I'm a patrol leader
6 plus I'm a supply guy, see? Everybody had additional duties, but other than operations
7 which when you go out and prepare to fight and do what you had to do, supply was
8 probably the most critical element of that thing, of the whole operation.

9 KC: Describe for me how you overcame these difficulties.

10 RC: I tried to communicate with battalion—the battalion, they have an S4 which
11 is the supply guy. Try to communicate with them, we'd go up to MAC-V in Saigon and
12 talk to majors and colonels and captains up there and try to expedite as much as they
13 could and understand that sometimes we would have to strip one helicopter to get these
14 vital parts to keep three or four more flying. It's better to have one helicopter down for
15 really ten, fifteen different things that would allow it or make it not able to fly and then
16 take the part off that particular chopper and allow five other ones to fly. So, that was
17 something that commanders didn't like to do, but I think they had to realize very quickly
18 that really there was no choice. We had one Chinook company supporting the whole
19 Delta. You're talking two, three hundred square miles and then going north to Nha Trang
20 and Qui Nhon. We actually helped the 1st Cav there on several occasions. I remember
21 going to Pleiku and supporting the 3rd Infantry or the 4th Infantry division up there. So,
22 that's quite a long ways to go.

23 KC: So, you have, again, quite a geographical area that you've got to cover with
24 all of this as well. Now, were you based out of Vung Tau?

25 RC: Vung Tau, yeah, that was a bitch.

26 KC: Tell me about that.

27 RC: Darn gosh center of Vietnam.

28 KC: Tell me about that. You say Vung Tau was a bitch. Tell me about that.

29 RC: I'm being sarcastic, Kelly. It was the center. We had a beach. Actually, in our
30 case we lived right in town in a place called the Pacific Hotel. One time we slept in tents
31 and when we went down to the Delta, stayed for a few days or went up north to Nha

1 Trang or Qui Nhon with the 1st Cav in support of them. Otherwise, we had it pretty easy,
2 you know.

3 KC: Describe daily life for me there at Vung Tau.

4 RC: Well, like I say, we lived in the town so that really made our life much easier
5 than living in the tent and so forth and so on. You know, up around six or even five,
6 whatever depending on the missions and head out to the airfield which where we worked
7 out of, of course. And then we had mission's everyday. At the outset and all the
8 helicopters were healthy, hell, we flew a thousand hours a month which is kind of
9 unheard of.

10 KC: That's an awful lot of time.

11 RC: For a helicopter that size. Our missions, and in fact we had to go quite a ways
12 to, you know, you might work for an hour of moving a 105, moving ammunition, moving
13 food and supplies, but it would take you an hour to get there. So, we put a lot of time on
14 helicopters and then about March or April we were down to about two hundred hours a
15 month because the helicopters were not flyable and the supply system had not come to
16 the point where, you know, there was stuff on the way even as you requisitioned new
17 stuff. So long days, but you know, not all that difficult. A lot of our brethrens, the slugs in
18 the Army, in the Marines. They were doing stuff day and night, you know, and getting
19 attacked and mortared, so we had it pretty darn easy to tell you the truth.

20 KC: What did most of these missions consist of? You talked about packing 105s
21 and Howitzers. You've talked about supply and things like that. What would most of
22 your missions consist of?

23 RC: Actually, most of us—in fact, our first mission was just north of us, that little
24 place called Xuan Loc which coincidently was where the last big battle was in '75 when
25 we lost Vietnam. The South Vietnamese forces put up a wonderful battle there at the
26 rubber plantation that unlocked, but eventually overrun by superior forces. Probably most
27 of it was moving people. We could carry, oh, legally, every now and then you tried to get
28 rid of your seat, but if you couldn't, you didn't. That's all there was to it. I remember
29 carrying not that far from Saigon 83 Vietnamese soldiers and then one advisor. The sad
30 part about that was we lifted out of this area, like a cemetery area and flew these troops
31 back to where they're going. I know it's a little closer to Saigon. I don't recall what the

1 mileage was. We took—the other thing, you can always expect ground fire. Whenever
2 possible, you got to about two thousand feet which put you out of the affective range of
3 small arms which is ending under a 12.7 in which equates to our fifty caliber, so you felt
4 safer so to speak. On a short mission like that, you didn't always get up to the 2000 feet
5 and you might then just go to treetop level. Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself. We
6 took about three rounds. Nobody was touched except the young, armor captain advisor
7 that we had was sitting not that far behind me near the door. One round went right under
8 his breast plate right into his heart.

9 KC: Oh, no.

10 RC: And that one bit of any soldier was scratched. Anyway, to answer your
11 question, majority was moving people in and out of combat and then moving ammunition
12 to support occasionally the 105. I remember working with the elements of the 173rd right
13 there near Saigon. Actually, out of Bien Hoa to the north.

14 KC: Okay, now you mentioned this young advisor was shot. I assume he was
15 killed?

16 RC: Oh yeah. Yeah, I remember people meeting us and putting him in a body bag
17 and zippering up. I kind of regret I didn't get to know who it was, but I'm not even sure I
18 ever got out of my seat flying the helicopter, you know? Just watch him go up that's all I
19 remember. He was a young RA captain and I'm pretty sure his armor, but I always look
20 back and think, "Golly, one round hit somebody, and it had to be him." It was so sad, but
21 that's what war's all about, you know?

22 KC: Sure.

23 RC: Bad stuff happens.

24 KC: Was this the first casualty that you saw while you were in-country?

25 RC: First one real close to me probably.

26 KC: Describe what that's like. This young man's just been killed right behind you
27 in your helicopter. What's that like for you?

28 RC: Well, you know you're in combat, you know it's going to happen, but the
29 tremendous sadness, you know. Like I say, great sadness, here's the young man in the
30 prime of life and he's gone. What kind of bad luck that cause that guy down there on the
31 ground to aim at such a point that he hit right under his breast plate, you know, right into

1 his heart, dead instantly and you just think about what excruciating bad luck for him, you
2 know? And of course, the next day you think, “Well, who did he leave behind? Wife,
3 children, father, mother, sister, brother, you know?” It’s just a tremendous feeling of
4 sadness that’s bad to happen.

5 KC: What sort of actions do you take when this happened while you’re in the
6 helicopter?

7 RC: Nothing you can do. That’s one thing about a Chinook, you’re not that
8 maneuverable. If you try to do anything quick, you’re going to kill yourself. So, there’s
9 not much you can do. Like I said, early on we tried to fly at two thousand feet. We still
10 get hit occasionally and you hear a pop a little bit, but of course the noise above the
11 choppers you couldn’t hear much of that. Or you’d be down right at tree top level hoping
12 that they weren’t quick enough. If they saw you coming, they’d hear you first, of course,
13 wouldn’t know where you’re coming from. They’d be in the trees and they wouldn’t see
14 you until you’re right on top them and then you’d be gone before they had the chance to
15 get that AK-47 round and get some rounds off at you. That’s about all you could do.
16 Later on, when the SA-7s came out, man, that was a nightmare, Kelly. One of the Huey
17 outfits lost eight of their sixteen helicopters the first day those things came out. They
18 were just incredibly destructive.

19 KC: Very deadly.

20 RC: Oh gosh, yes. And then you can forget about being say, two thousand feet.
21 Those early ones went up to about like five, six, seven thousand feet so they took out that
22 base where you felt comfortable between two and five than if you thought there were
23 fifties down there at 12.7 and you’d try to be above five thousand, of course. Then, of
24 course, you’re climbing up, you’re coming down and all that takes time.

25 KC: Well, while we’re on this topic, Mr. Caron, tell me about the different kinds
26 of challenges and your approach to flying in Vietnam. Its one thing to fly around Rucker
27 or Benning, but what was it like flying around Vietnam under fire in combat? I’m talking
28 about the weather. I’m talking about topography. I’m talking about the flora. Tell me
29 about what it was like to learn to fly in Vietnam.

30 RC: One of the best ways to answer that was one of our first missions we’d take
31 some supplies up, oh, I would say it was coordinate positions and they’d be thirty, forty

1 miles north of Vung Tau, maybe fifty or sixty. I don't remember getting back to the two
2 thousand feet level. We tried to do that, but of course, when the monsoons were in the
3 south, I forget the time of year. That was a bit more so than the rest of the year than the
4 nasty weather and clouds would force you right down to the ground. Well, if you're a
5 couple hundred feet you're sitting duck for anything. Small arms, AK-47s, like that. And
6 those things put out about five, six hundred rounds a minute. They were an awesome
7 little weapon. And then I remember distinctly, I had about two or three helicopters with
8 me, so we had to turn around in that bad weather and climb out and go back to get above
9 the clouds. Now you're above the clouds and you don't know what the terrain is, so you
10 look for a hole to get down and if you're where the bad guys are that's, of course, the
11 other thing. The bad guys are everywhere. You think they're not there and then they're
12 there. You think something else that might be there, you avoid that place and maybe
13 they're there, maybe they're not. So, you always have to be aware of wherever you went,
14 there are people that are going to be shooting at you. So, you tried to stay up above the
15 clouds, look for a hole, and hope the hole you came down in, you know, wasn't that bad.
16 And of course, when you're heavy loaded like that, your rate of climb is, what, one
17 hundred feet a minute which means you're sitting duck. And that's a pretty darn big
18 helicopter, it's hard to miss. You had to be so careful wherever you went when you went
19 down. I remember another mission we were carrying a tank engine up to a place called
20 Lei Kei which became famous later on in the War. It's northwest of Saigon. But one of
21 the big problems we had early on was we couldn't have medal on medal because of the
22 built up electrical energy in the hook which blows the helicopter for external lifts. So, we
23 had a huge donut, about twelve inches in diameter, just a massive bit of nylon that would
24 hook up between our hook and whatever one's we're trying to lift. In this case, it was a
25 big conex container. I've seen load masters on top of conex trying to hook it up on the
26 helicopter and interbertantly touched the hook to get knocked off the conex to the ground
27 because the electrical shock. So, what they did later on, they had an element—a
28 grounding element and they have this medal rod in one hand and a donut in the other
29 hand they touched that rod because they hook and discharge the electrical current built up
30 in there and then hook the donut on it. Well anyway, as we fly it got to where these things
31 would turn. So, you're talking about five, six thousand pounds and the thing turning one

1 way than the other and it would just literally melt. So, we're going up to Lei Kei and they
2 wheel the bad guys around and like load master engineer we'd call them, you're saying,
3 you know, we're going to lose it, we're going to lose it. So, we don't want to let down
4 because we don't know what's below us. It's either—we're out in the middle of rice
5 paddies in the middle of nowhere so we made a decision, "Okay, we're going to go
6 down. Keep an eye out, if we get on the ground when you guys take care of that and see
7 what we can do, and the other guy's just stay there and get your M-60 ready." So, just
8 before we got to the grounds it broke, came off. It only fell a couple of feet, but we say,
9 "Well, maybe it's okay, we'll do our best." So, we got another donut on and lifted it up,
10 took it onto our destination. We heard later on that it was okay, but we never were sure.
11 So those two things just kind of show the difficulties that everywhere you went you had
12 to be so careful. Of course, you got a million dollar helicopter you're trying to protect. Of
13 course, now is ten or fifteen million. Who knows? And then the weather was such a
14 problem that you had to be so careful.

15 KC: What was the hairiest experience of your time that at this first tour?

16 RC: Well, have I told you about Site 85?

17 KC: No, you've not. Lima Site 85? You have not.

18 RC: Okay, well that was clearly the most difficult, the most complex, and the
19 most dangerous. Anyway—

20 KC: Tell me about that from very beginning to very end. From the time you
21 received the mission and how you prepared for it. Take us through the whole thing.

22 RC: This is, I think around March. It may have been April. I'm not even sure
23 anymore. We got this mission to go to Laos and move some kind of equipment. It was
24 called a tackan. Do you know what tackan is

25 KC: Yes, sir.

26 RC: Okay, anyway the Air Force didn't have Johnny Green jet, didn't have
27 Charlie Greens yet. So, we had to go over there to Vientiane, Laos, and coordinate with
28 Air America, go to the psych, move a tackan to the mountain top which was straight up
29 and straight down. Have you read much about 85, Kelly?

30 KC: A little here and there, yes.

1 RC: Well, you know, you can look on the computer and find it and so forth. But
2 anyway, this turned out—this is really complex. We had to fly up out of Vung Tau to
3 Pleiku, from Pleiku over to Dak To which is a Special Forces camp and later on had at
4 least one huge battle there and refuel there out of bladders and stuff, fly over Laos, and
5 we had no idea what was down below. We got no briefings that I can recall about all the
6 dangers involved. We're not told what to do if we took two Chinooks and one went
7 down. Should we leave it? Should we stay with it? Should we call for air support? So, we
8 went from there across Laos which is technically only about an hour or something like
9 that. Landed in Ubon Ratchathani. We just call it Ubon. We got briefed and refueled
10 there, flew up to Udorn which was the famous location Air America, CIA, and all the
11 other good stuff and got briefed there. Then we flew just a short trip up into Bien Chen
12 and Laos right across the Mekong there and there we got briefed again where we're
13 supposed to do—actually, all we do is follow an Air America porter, so I never knew
14 where the heck we were exactly, but we went up northeast past the Plain of Jars and up
15 this mountain top, move this tackan up there and we also blew some fuel bladders as I
16 remember. In fact, I just organized some pictures and stuff and sent it off to, let me see,
17 maybe to Paul. I'm not even sure, I forgot. I think I said nukes and stuff. Anyway, very
18 fortunately we didn't have one problem with our Chinooks. If we had, as I say, we
19 weren't briefed on what to do, you know? Will we all be wiped out, could we expect
20 Friendlies on the ground to help us out? You didn't know what to think, but all
21 beautifully did everything we were supposed to do and then we just retraced—our trip
22 came back exactly the way—we went up Vientiane, Udorn, Ubon, probably flew into
23 Pleiku. I'm not sure if we stopped at Dak To again or not, Pleiku, refueled and on down
24 to Vung Tau. But that was the most complex, could have been the most dangerous, but it
25 turned out to be the choppers worked beautifully, just a piece of cake so to speak.

26 KC: And you, again, like you say, successfully dropped off the tackan there at the
27 85 and then make your way back.

28 RC: Yeah, exactly.

29 KC: You received no fire or anything?

30 RC: Say again?

31 KC: You received no ground fire or anything?

1 RC: Not at all, I don't think they expected anything like that. Actually, the bad
2 guys weren't all that close and they didn't know what was going on. Later on, when of
3 course, they had good intelligence and they figured out what that tackan was able to do
4 which was able to allow our bombers and fighters and bomb over and overcast in the
5 Hanoi area just by exactly knowing where they were the azimuth from this tackan and the
6 exact distance and they can bomb with great accuracy. Once they realized what it was,
7 that's when they sent a division or so of troops down to surround them out and then try to
8 destroy it and take it, but the mountain was so—the hillsides were so steep that it was
9 impossible to do until just like the Greeks at Thermopolis, they found some trader that
10 showed the bad guys how to come up this secret path and they eventually did that and
11 overwhelmed the people there. There were some Air Force people and civilians and they
12 were all killed.

13 KC: Yeah, it was, it was complicated and very, very ugly.

14 RC: Yeah, General Secord lives down here not far from me. He was in charge of
15 all that and he tried to get the ambassador to get his name out to pull them out a week
16 before and even a few days before. He kept hesitating, kept hesitating. Finally, you know,
17 there was no time left.

18 KC: What other memorable missions do you have that you could relate to me?
19 Your time here with the Chinooks in the Army.

20 RC: Well, that one's clearly the most interesting. Just getting shot at a few times
21 and they hit our radios and get smoke in the cockpit and we had to land and figure out if
22 we really hurt bad or not. That happened three or four times. If it wasn't you it might
23 have been one of the helicopters you were with, you know? We were pretty fortunate to
24 not have anything really bad. We were what they call general support. So, we wouldn't
25 normally—well, I don't think we ever put troops on the ground that were in contact with
26 the enemy. Now, on occasion when they had trouble, we would extract them from the
27 same place. They were never supposed to be in contact with the enemy, but every now
28 and then there would be enemy just outside of the perimeter and you'd win for the pick
29 up and that's when we got holes through the fuse lodge, holes through the router blades
30 which held together quite good anyway. The radio shot out stuff like that.

31 KC: Well, tell me about some of these extractions.

1 RC: Well, we could get hit like that.

2 KC: Tell me about some of these extractions. What was the general policy? How
3 would you go in? How would you approach it? What would you do when you're
4 underground while you're extracting these men? Tell me about your procedure for an
5 extraction.

6 RC: Well, basically we would get commission and the location. We
7 communicated to people that were supported them with gunships and flicks, what they
8 call TNT ship command and control ship. They would tell us if we identified the location
9 and maybe put out smoke or not depending on how close they were. Once we got
10 ascertained where the good guys were and hopefully the bad guys weren't that close, we
11 came in from whatever direction we decided was the safest, you know, and come in—a
12 big helicopter like that, you don't do anything quickly, you know. I say come in carefully
13 and so forth and so on, but the last quarter of a mile you're pretty slow and pretty
14 vulnerable. So, this command—a lot of places weren't big enough for more than two
15 helicopters or even more than one. So, we'd have like a column of whatever you want to
16 call it, but of course it would be in and out. Of course, the thing is, you're big so you can
17 take a lot of people. If you get out and you'd have the back door—not door, but ramp
18 down and they just run down as fast as they could hoping they're coordinated on the
19 ground. So, you get in whatever number was appropriate. Let's say you had one hundred
20 down there to be picked up. They take twenty or thirty on the first helicopter and then, of
21 course, get out as quickly as you could and probably go out the way you came in because
22 it was the safest after all. And then, of course, lifting up and turning and preparing the
23 grounds. The second helicopter is not that far away so you just got to be careful
24 communicating what you're going to do. I'm going to turn right; I'm going to turn left
25 and so forth and so on. I think it was the 173rd or even the 101st there that a couple times
26 they had some real problems. As I was saying before, we were called to do an extraction
27 and although the area's supposed to be pretty secure, it wasn't always that secure. We
28 never got—I don't think we ever got anybody—I know we haven't gotten anybody
29 killed. We had a few people with bullets spit up. One guy got hit in the face, another guy
30 got hit in the soldier, a guy got hit somewhere else, I forget. We were pretty lucky. I think
31 early on that first year they didn't know what to expect, they weren't ready for

1 helicopters, big helicopters. We were more lucky than those that followed on the next two
2 years. Of course, one thing I might throw in here, we did have a problem with what they
3 call a quill shaft. It was part of the hydraulic system that drove your blades and
4 everything. The blades are heavy and they're going around at this tremendous rate of
5 speed not forgetting what the speed would be at the blade tips, but certainly way up there.
6 It was supposed to be three, four, five, ten times stronger than it had to be to do what it
7 did which was drive the hydraulic system. Two of them broke. Luckily it broke on the
8 ground so basically what happened was the aircraft shut down. Something happened to
9 one of our Chinooks carrying the 173rd people along with their chaplain and I think we
10 figured out later the combining gear box, which allows the blades to intermesh. See, the
11 front blade and back blades, they overlap. So, if you could imagine if those things
12 weren't—you know, if the airplanes in World War II fired through their propellers.

13 KC: Right, right.

14 RC: It's hard to imagine how you can do that, right?

15 KC: Mm-hmm.

16 RC: I never could fathom how they could do that. So, these things—the dephasing
17 element in the combining gears would make sure the blades didn't mesh. Well, this one
18 day they meshed, and I don't know if they were finding out what happened. They went
19 straight in and in the jungle corps we couldn't find the helicopter for several days, but I
20 only got to remember clearly that the brigade chapter was on board helicopter equipment.
21 They all perished. I remember the commander calls all together the next day and says,
22 “Look, this is what's going on, this is the problem. If you guys don't want to fly this
23 thing until we get it fixed, I'll understand.” But everybody stepped up and flew. We
24 didn't have anymore problems after that.

25 KC: Now you say everyone stepped up and flew. Was this flying your regular
26 missions or to find this one jumper?

27 RC: Flying regular missions because if one bird went down, you know, how do
28 we know if that problem's not going to affect the rest of them? This quill shaft in theory,
29 the blades are so big and so powerful and so much force that the quill shaft that you
30 directed moving those blades with everything would be reversed. They'd be now running,
31 the blades would be just flying around at will and all this force would take that collective

1 of cyclic rather that stayed between your legs and it'd go around in a big old circles and
2 just destroy your knees, your legs, everything that was in the way. You're talking
3 thousands and thousands of pounds forced back with that hydraulic system that controlled
4 it. You'd be helpless.

5 KC: Right.

6 RC: That was a concern. The dephrasing of the blades was a concern, but they
7 were resolved later on.

8 KC: Now, while you're talking about these extractions, what sort of coordination
9 do you have with the troops on the ground?

10 RC: Very little, as I remember most of it was done by the command and control
11 ships. You know, they got too many people on one frequency, you know, nothing gets
12 done. So basically, we may have a second radio listening, but mostly we would just
13 depend upon the command and control ship or who was ever in charge on the ground to
14 just tell us when to come in. You try to get there at the right time. If we're there early, we
15 hang a little bit from one side to the other and then come in as we were told. It wasn't a
16 big deal, you know, just make sure you had the right frequencies and how many, and how
17 many in the first helicopter, how many in the second. Make sure they knew how many
18 copters are coming in and they didn't all have to get on the first one, you know, because
19 when you're running away like that on the ground if you have a helicopter come in, you
20 want to get on it, you know?

21 KC: Right. Now you said that you'd get twenty to thirty on, but you also said you
22 had as many as eighty-three Vietnamese soldiers on there. What would you typically
23 take?

24 RC: Emerge and evacuate and the Vietnamese soldiers who were much lighter.
25 You know, we think of the American guys with all this equipment close to 250 while the
26 Vietnamese soldiers are sly, they may be 120 pounds and then twenty, thirty pounds
27 worth of stuff or maybe not. They maybe wouldn't be as equipped as well as ours, for
28 example, but I still can remember that day, 83. It's like when I left Saigon that last day,
29 you know, on that rooftop. You know, the Huey you got like seven seats, something like
30 that. But, when they're little—children, women, you just throw them on until you can't
31 get anymore on and they don't worry about seatbelts and then you lift the collective if

1 you get off the ground then you go. If you can't, you gotta kick two or three people off
2 which has happened.

3 KC: Sure, sure. And we certainly want to spend a lot more time on Saigon when
4 you're with Air America here. How many American troopers or American soldiers would
5 you typically take on a lift?

6 RC: If we had time and pace was not an issue, I think we had seatbelts for like
7 thirty, thirty-two, thirty-three, something like that.

8 KC: Okay, when you finish with a mission whether it's dropping off supplies,
9 artillery, moving men, moving troops from one place to another, what would you do
10 when you got back? You would land at whatever it was, whether it was Pleiku or down at
11 Dung Tao whatever it was, what would you do when the day's mission was over?

12 RC: Well, make sure, first of all, the helicopter was in good shape. You know,
13 look for bullet holes and all that kind of stuff. Then the engineer and the people on the
14 ground would check any problem that we had. You know, we'd write it up in the log
15 book and they would fix it and then the pilots would go debrief the operation sky who's
16 like an S3, the battalion or a large unit D3 division. Did explain how the mission went,
17 were there any problems, try to get back with the people that we worked with and tell
18 them this was a problem; this was right, this was not right. Of course, mostly you talk
19 about which is not right because if it goes right, then, you know, you don't waste time
20 trying to communicate that back necessarily.

21 KC: Right.

22 RC: But no, just do the normal stuff. Find out if there was anything wrong with
23 the helicopter, refuel it, get it ready, and check everything out. Then, of course, there
24 were all kinds of inspections that you got to do. Opened up this panel and that panel,
25 check the blades check the gear. We had four wheels in the Chinook; two in the front,
26 two in the back and they, of course, the Chinook you could drive on the ground, you
27 know, like a car. And the debrief of the operations guide and it was really important—the
28 commander would be there, you know, make sure you knew what was going on. But that
29 was the easy part, really.

30 KC: What kind of toll did these extreme numbers of hours—you say as many as
31 one thousand hours a month. What sort of toll did it take on your birds?

1 RC: The birds?

2 KC: Yes.

3 RC: Well, as I told you before, it may have slipped by. We went from a thousand
4 hours the first two or three months to two hundred hours about four months later. The
5 parts were just not there and there was only so much. You could strip off our hanger
6 queen to make the other ones flyable and, of course, I'll tell you the truth, a lot of people
7 got their ass in trouble because of that. See, this is early in aviation. A lot of your
8 commanders came up before aviation was the big thing. They're used to trucks and truck
9 maintenance. So, when you tell them it takes ten hours to keep the thing flyable, that goes
10 right over their head. So, they don't grasp that you need more time. They think, "Well,
11 I'll tell you, you're going to do it for five hours, but you do the best you can before that."
12 But then the next time, not so much putting the time in because we could work, you
13 know, fifteen, sixteen hours a day, but mostly was the dark parts because everything is so
14 critical. You know, you look at that thing and you wonder, "How the hell does that thing
15 stay in the air?" It's just incredible the complexity of a large helicopter like that. So,
16 yeah, it took a big toll and there were days when nobody flew to tell you the truth. A
17 couple days was out at the beach swimming and playing volleyball because there's
18 nothing to do. So that was the fun part of the whole thing.

19 KC: Are you saying nothing to do, nothing to do? Or nothing you could do
20 because of the shape of the helicopters?

21 RC: Exactly.

22 KC: Okay.

23 RC: Hold on one second, Kelly.

24 KC: Sure.

25 RC: As I say, I'm getting better, but I'm not there yet. Oh, there's only so much
26 admin stuff you can do doing this and that, you know? And a company like this, that's
27 another thing, you got thirty, forty officers, you know? You've got about five or six
28 commission or seven or eight, whatever, and about thirty warrant officers, you know? So,
29 they don't have a lot to do if their not doing their job which is fine.

1 KC: What about you? You're a pilot as well as in charge of supply here. What are
2 you doing to ensure that you're getting the parts that you need to keep these helicopters in
3 the air?

4 RC: On the damn phone trying to say, you know, "What have you got for us, if
5 you got anything for us." And then they would be in turn calling the States trying to get
6 things on an airplane and fly it over as quickly as possible, you know? So, the biggest
7 stuff may come by both—I'd say probably very little of that, really. As I said, we
8 anticipate a little problem, but, you know, when you're ten thousand miles almost from
9 the supply source, you know, anything is the problem. Any little thing you don't have is a
10 problem because you can't just call up with a flight out the next day. If you're at Fort
11 Benning, you know, you say, "We need this." And maybe they can get it to you the next
12 day within two days. But you're talking, what, is it six thousand miles? I fly to Bangkok
13 every once in awhile and from here, it's twenty hours in the air, okay? Actual flying time
14 twenty-two hours or something like that. So, you know, whatever and you realize, you
15 know, it takes forever to get a part. As I say, commanders don't really appreciate the time
16 and maintenance it takes to keep one helicopter in the air. There's just only so much you
17 could do.

18 KC: Do you think that changed over time? Do you think that commanders are
19 more aware?

20 RC: Oh yeah, it became more—hell, I remember when I first started out, some
21 commanders, they didn't want you to show up to their staff meetings with a flight suit.
22 They wanted you in fatigues. One of the instructors at the advanced course at our schools.
23 What do you do? Well, you do what the hell the commander wants. You stop somewhere,
24 put fatigues on and then you don't show up in your flight suit, you know? So, that took
25 time. Of course, back in those days there was no aviation branch as there was today. So,
26 it was much more comminated. Your commanders were all O-line infantry, O-line
27 artillery, engineer, armor. They just didn't believe the complexity of these helicopters.
28 That's why later on they sent some of these colonels and majors to flight school to try to
29 get some kind of understanding of what it was when we talk about when we say we can't
30 do this because of that.

1 KC: What parts gave you the most trouble? The ones you needed the most and the
2 ones that were the most difficult to acquire?

3 RC: (laughing) I was thinking about that. You know, I don't know why, but every
4 morning I shave, I'm sitting there with nothing and my brain just going nuts, nothing to
5 think about. And it's incredible, but I swear everyday, Kelly, I think, "What could I have
6 done, how could I have anticipated the difficulties?" For example, as soon as I found out
7 the 1st Cav was going over, I could have run up to the 1st Cav Chinook people and say,
8 "What do you guys think is going to be your problem? Can you communicate back to me,
9 what your problems are so I can learn?" They only got over there about three or four
10 months ahead of us so maybe there wasn't much they could have learned. "See, you're a
11 division, but you have power." I'm a little damn gentle support company that I go to my
12 battalion, they go to the brigade, and they go to MAC-V. What could I have done to make
13 it easier? We had a maintenance detachment, the 772nd which supported the Chinooks.
14 They did direct support maintenance. The other support was higher echelon, and it gets a
15 little complicated, but maybe I could have sat down with them. "Okay, what do you
16 foresee? What are your problems here today at Fort Benning? What do you foresee
17 happening over there in Vietnam and what factor of ten or twenty do you want to mope
18 on these problems to let us know to supply people? The commanders know how difficult
19 it will be to keep these things in the air." And I didn't do that as much as I think now, I
20 should have. And I'll be damned if I don't know why, you know? To me it's very
21 reasonable today. I should have done most of the things I just mentioned to you. I talked
22 to the Chinook guys at the 1st Cav which are right at Fort Benning and then talked to
23 those people and see what they're going to do and then someday or another try to
24 communicate phone call or otherwise. But you know, in places like Vietnam you're out
25 in the middle of nowhere. Phone calls are not that easy, you know? If you want to pick up
26 the phone today, we call somebody. Christ, we e-mail, we do this, we do that. Over there,
27 every little problem was multiplied by ten or twenty fold. So, exact parts, no idea.

28 KC: Yeah.

29 RC: But I could identify those, I think, earlier on and then told the commanders
30 what the problems were. I'll tell you the truth, they wouldn't have probably believed us
31 early on, but as soon as they saw the uses going one thousand hours in March, the 200 in

1 June. They sent their people down to look at the companies and say, “Is this really a valid
2 thing? Is there something this guys doing wrong, and I need to sac his ass and get
3 somebody else in there, you know?”

4 KC: Was there ever any sort of pressure to do that? I mean, did you guys feel any
5 pressure to—

6 RC: Oh yeah, yeah. We’d put aircrafts in the air that we weren’t sure about and
7 we’d strip a piece off that bird to make this helicopter flyable all the time. The
8 commander was always under pressure. “Why can’t you get more helicopters in the air?
9 What are you doing wrong?” I once had one say they would send someone down there to
10 talk to you people to see what the hell you’re doing wrong. A lot of pressure, like I say,
11 they didn’t understand that this ten to one ratio was pretty damn valid. It’s hard to put it
12 into words what it is you do, but you’ve got to pull off the inspection panel, you got to do
13 this, you got to do that. Just so many difficulties.

14 KC: How were your mechanics? What was your opinion?

15 RC: Oh, we got good people. We had wonderful people. Some of them, you
16 know, not maybe skilled. They could do everything, but good people, hard working
17 people. I think, and I’ve heard it before, aviation got the best people. And that’s one of
18 the reasons why drugs got to be a big problem in Vietnam. I think it got to the helicopters
19 last and the people say, “Well, it’s because we had better people. We had smart people,
20 good people.” I remember in artillery when I was the fire director center guy in my
21 battery, we call it. I remember GT scores 130, 140. You know what GT score is, Kelly?

22 KC: Yeah, but will you please explain it for the interview?

23 RC: Basically, it’s intelligence score. It’s like an IQ test, “What’s your IQ? Oh,
24 I’m 130, 140.” This GTQ score was similar to that and the higher it was, basically, the
25 smarter you were. You might have people that loaded the guns that may have a GT score
26 of 100 or 80 or 90. 80 is getting a little low, but you didn’t need a GT score of 135
27 because all they had to do was lift this six hundred pound shell, and stick it in the artillery
28 piece, pull the lanyard and fire it, push the button and fire it, you know? We got good
29 people at aviation. I think I can say that categorically.

30 KC: Okay, now you’re back from a mission, a typical mission, a non typical
31 mission; whatever it might be. You’ve debriefed, you’ve gone over your helicopter,

1 you've inspected it, you have gone as far as you can go trying to get parts and trying to
2 make sure that things are running smoothly. You're finished with that part of your life for
3 the day. Now what do you do? You're off duty.

4 RC: There ain't no off duty in Vietnam.

5 KC: Okay, describe that for me.

6 RC: What you do then though to ask you question, Kelly, is the next question out
7 of your mouth is, "What do we got for tomorrow? And do we have the helicopters to
8 fulfill the mission? Do you we have the deposits to fly? And do we have the right pilots
9 to fly?" One of the things you learn very quickly in aviation is you get a feeling pretty
10 soon, who are the strong guys—not necessarily weak, but not quite as strong, okay? And
11 you make sure you have a strong guy with another guy, okay? You go over that time and
12 time again and a lot of times the Warrant officers were the instructor pilot because that's
13 just the way things worked out. Very few commissions, I think, were IP instructor pilots.
14 So, you make sure you got your teams right and people available. People got sick, you
15 know. So, make sure you had your people. There weren't many hours being flown. You
16 wanted to make sure everybody got their fair share. So, once you get done with the day's
17 mission, then, of course, determine tomorrow. And then, of course, the boss always had a
18 meeting about this or that. So yeah, you were busy at six in the morning to seven, eight
19 o'clock at night. We had it easier, like I said, because we had a good place to live.

20 KC: Sure, say it is seven or eight o'clock at night and your finished with all of
21 this, what do you do?

22 RC: Write a letter home, something like that.

23 KC: Who would you write to?

24 RC: There wasn't much to do. There wasn't much night life there to even think
25 about. Later on, when I got to Saigon, you know, little night life, you know, but at this
26 point there was little to be done. And then, if you got up at five or six in the morning, you
27 know, you didn't want to stay up too late at night. I know, if I didn't get my eight hours
28 of sleep, I was a grumpy old man or in that case, grumpy young man.

29 KC: Right, did you go to the—was there an officer's club available there?

30 RC: No, no.

31 KC: Nothing like that?

1 RC: No, we just had—we ate at the hotel if we were lucky. The caribou people
2 had their own buildings, they ate there. Sometimes you go—we had like a bar downstairs
3 and had a few drinks and stuff like that. Occasionally we'd get a Filipino band in and
4 there were singers and stuff like that, you know? Later on, in the timeframe, they had
5 quite a few Filipino bands that were traveling throughout Vietnam and then some of the
6 locals got where they could sing some songs for us and stuff like that.

7 KC: What was your relationship like with the Vietnamese?

8 RC: You know, there was not a big relationship, okay? In the hotel cooking and
9 stuff like that on the flight line, it was all Americans. I'm just trying to think very few.
10 You'd have your secretaries and stuff like that, that did some—you know, back in those
11 days you didn't have copy machines. You'd type stuff up on these stupid old ancient type
12 writers and then you had your carbon paper copies and stuff like that. It would take
13 forever to do just the simplest job like the morning report, you know? I'd get out every
14 morning. Sometimes it'd take half the morning to get the darn thing done and really,
15 should take a good person thirty minutes to an hour to do something like that. There
16 wasn't a lot of work with the guard. We had guards, maybe some drivers were
17 Vietnamese, but there wasn't a lot interrelationship with the local people. Some of the
18 menial tasks, lesser tasks. We were there to fight a war.

19 KC: Let me ask you about that in relation to the earlier question. What was your
20 opinion in the way the South Vietnamese were fighting the War? What was your opinion
21 of their fighting ability?

22 RC: I didn't have enough contact to know. I went by what I heard and a lot of
23 times I heard they weren't that good. The commanders were corrupt, but I think that was
24 true. People like Bob Solely who were closer to this. The great author was my classmate.
25 He said there were some wonderful officers, some wonderful fighters, and like I was
26 saying before, Kelly, at the end of the War, they fought wonderfully well, really well, but
27 they were just out numbered and out gunned there at the end. Out numbered twenty to
28 one. And although they fought well in that rubber plantation there it was war locked.
29 They were encircled and literally wiped out. Though, they fought very well. One of my
30 classmate's brother was a Navy man. He worked with a Vietnamese Navy man and he
31 had tremendous problems with his children being ill and so forth. He never once asked

1 from special help from his counterpart, the American guy. Their stories are wonderful,
2 the courage, bravery, there was a lot of corruption. A lot of that was at the higher levels
3 after the War was over. There was stories of collaborators and spies at the various highest
4 level, you know? One of the movie stars slept with half the generals. She was a VC spy,
5 you know, things like that. At the lower level I think a lot of them were very courageous
6 and fought well. Sometimes the leadership was inept, other times, it was suspect, other
7 times it was great, but misunderstood.

8 KC: Well, let me follow up on that with this question. What was your opinion of
9 the way the United States was fighting the War during your time there in '65, '66?

10 RC: You know, Kelly, you're so engrossed to what it is you're doing. For
11 example, I went back to the States in the fall of '66. My sister says, "What about this,
12 what about that? Up north, this happened, that happened." I said, "Lily, I have no idea." I
13 was so busy doing my little things for this war effort I didn't know what the hell was
14 going on in Da Nang or over the higher headquarters of Saigon and what this was and the
15 Air Force bombing Hanoi and so on and had no idea. "Were there drugs?" I said, "Hell
16 no there were no drugs." That's when what's his face, Hemmingway's son came out with
17 the big exposé in maybe late '66. The troops were smoking pot all the time, you know? I
18 said, "I never saw that." And I didn't. And to this day I have not seen in the military.
19 Now, I've heard a lot of stories, even a couple pilots were supposedly involved when I
20 was over in Korea later on, but I really couldn't give you a good answer to that, Kelly,
21 because I don't know. The overall picture is going well or not going well like the Tet
22 Offensive. Well, it was nasty, I just missed that by one or two days, but it was nasty.
23 Now, was it effective, did they do what they wanted to do? Hell no, but the reporters back
24 in America said they not only did what they wanted to do, they kicked our butts. Well,
25 the truth is they didn't.

26 KC: Right.

27 RC: They did some nasty stuff. They killed a bunch of people in Wei. It took a
28 long time to get them out because they were fantastic fighters and no two ways about it.
29 Whether its fear or what, some of their fighters just were really courageous, you know,
30 fought to the bitter end until they're killed, really. So, you know—now at the end, it was
31 a mess. Congress pulled money away. In fact, I flew General Weyand who was the Army

1 chief of staff in March and came over here to look around and see what he could do and
2 even I know, Peter Potter of Air America, I knew there was nothing he could do then.
3 Congress always said they're not going to send over anymore money. What he's doing
4 there I don't have the slightest idea and we didn't accomplish anything. Once again, I
5 mentioned Lai Khe before; he wanted to go to Lai Khe. I explained to him, I said, "Sir, I
6 was up there about a month ago and we got mortared. So, he turned—we're in a Huey, of
7 course. He turns to his colonel who is from the party there in Saigon, the Bed Hoa, asked
8 him what he thought, and he said, "I think we'll be okay, sir." So, we went on and
9 pressed on for Lai Khe. About half way up there, my operations at Air America, he says,
10 "Bob, they're getting mortared in Lai Khe." So, I turned to the general and said, "Sir,
11 they're getting mortared, what would like to do?" he talked to the colonel a little bit, I
12 forgot his name, and we went back to Bien Hoa, dropped him off and they did whatever
13 they wanted to do. But later on, became—once the people back—once the reporters, they
14 were so against the War it influenced people back in the States and you have these
15 people, hippies and whatever, making all these marches and everything and the support
16 for the War completely evaporated. Maybe like today almost, we're trying to find the best
17 way to get out of that situation.

18 KC: What about R&R? Did you get a chance to go on R&R?

19 RC: Yeah, that was one of the nice things. I got thirty days free leave.

20 KC: Thirty days?

21 RC: Well, what happened was I was there for a year and you know, you could go
22 back to the States for the year and come right back over or you could stay and get a job of
23 your choice. So, I put in for the Caribou Unit there at Vung Tau. Things were looking
24 good until about November when they said, "Bob, forget it." I said, "Why?" he said,
25 "The Caribous are going to the Air Force." The Air Force hated the fact that the Army
26 had these nice big airplanes. Again, we're doing a great job. So, I went to—I stayed there
27 for six months and got free thirty days leave, went back to the States, and went around
28 the world. Actually, went to Germany and met some friends over there, came back to
29 America. I told you, I talked to my sister and she asked me all these questions about the
30 War and how it was being fought. This, that, and the other thing. As I explained, I said, "I
31 didn't see that because I was too busy doing my own little thing." So, I did that for six

1 months and then, well, I'll do this one more time. So, I had another thirty day free leave
2 and then came back. I don't know where I went that time, to tell you the truth. I finished
3 up in December of '67 and that's when I got out and went with Air America.

4 KC: Why did you decide to re-up? Why did you want to stay for another six
5 months?

6 RC: Well, just like I explained, I go back to the States six months to a year and
7 come right back over getting what kind of job, I didn't know. But by extending, I could
8 get my choice of job. I'm extending the 1049 form and the way I worded it, which of
9 course, everybody did if I can get this job, I will extend. So, they needed people badly so,
10 you know, all things being considered I got the job no problem. I was flying out of MAC-
11 V. I was flying right out of Tan Son Nhut so. I mean, it couldn't get much safer for me. It
12 was a VIP flight and that's when I flew all those move stars and wonderful people. I got a
13 couple of stories I could tell you about that.

14 KC: Okay, now you've put in for the caribou and you were denied because they
15 are going to the Air Force.

16 RC: One January of '67, yup.

17 KC: One January of '67. So, you had already re-uped for the six months.

18 RC: No, remember I said, I re-uped if I could get this job.

19 KC: Right, right, right.

20 RC: And then I didn't get the job so all I did then was changed to what I wanted,
21 my dream list which was MAC-V flight detachment.

22 KC: Now, for obvious reasons I'm sure you chose that, tell me why you wanted
23 this gig.

24 RC: Why what?

25 KC: Why did you want this position? Why did you want this job?

26 RC: Well, if I was going to be there, that was the easiest and safest job. If my
27 name was Schwarzenegger or Schwarzkopf, rather, I might have said, "Okay, I want a
28 battalion company commander job like that so I can be a hero." I was flying and that was
29 the most fun, the most interesting. Flying is a great gig. As I say, I lived right there in
30 Saigon and I went to work every morning at five or six o'clock whenever it was and did
31 my thing. Mostly I was back that same night or might have been a couple days later.

1 KC: Well, you seem to want to gloss over this, but I'm not going to let you. I
2 want you to tell me about your time here with MAC-V, I want you to tell me about these
3 flights. The helicopters you were in, the personalities you met, the missions that you were
4 on. Tell me all about this. It's very interesting.

5 RC: Well, let me see, I flew Henry Fonda and I got one picture, nice gentleman. I
6 flew Charles Hesston, wonderful gentleman down at the Phu and down to Can Tho. I
7 remember telling him, "Sir, with your influence and so forth, if I were you, I would not
8 fly anywhere in Vietnam on a single-engine airplane." I mean, if you go down, you're
9 captured; you're propaganda, food, okay?

10 KC: Right.

11 RC: The other thing, if you go down, you might not survive the crash. But I said,
12 you know, you don't need to be flying around Vietnam in a Beaver, a little single-engine
13 airplane. I flew Glenn Ford up to Pleiku, a nice guy. I flew James Gardner somewhere, I
14 forget where. He was another nice guy. I did fly him, but the guy that did Perry Mason,
15 the big guy.

16 KC: The name isn't catching right now. I could see his face clear as day.

17 RC: Yeah, and maybe the most interesting was Chuck Connors, the rifleman. And
18 he was telling me how he got into movies.

19 KC: Raymonburg, by the way.

20 RC: Raymonburg, I loved him, too.

21 KC: Why Chuck Connors, why was he so interesting?

22 RC: He was a baseball player for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He went down to
23 Mexico in the off season and saw a bull fight. The guy did a darn good job and as the will
24 down there, they clapped and awarding him so to speak, the tail and the ears. And he said
25 to his friend, he said, "That's interesting, that's great." He said, "But I'm a baseball
26 player and I hit a home run. I don't just squat, I trout around the bases, raise my hand in
27 happiness and whatever and that's it." He said, "I got to think of something to do." So, he
28 comes back to America and the next baseball season he hits his first home run, and he
29 says, "I turned around to the umpire." And said, "What did you think about that?" he
30 said, "What the hells wrong with you, get around the bases, take us down to first base."
31 And he says to the first base coach there, he said, "You know what, I have never stolen

1 second base. I am going to steal second base.” So, he lumbers on—he’s a big guy.
2 Lumbers on down to second and dives in head first, okay? And then he gets up, dusts
3 himself off rather, and trots onto third base. He tells the third base coach, he said, “I have
4 never stolen a home plate. Today I’m going to steal the home plate.” So, he runs, runs,
5 runs, and dives in face first into home plate, gets up, dusts himself off, and the people go
6 crazy. “Who is this fool and what is he up to, right?” The next day gets a call from a big
7 movie producer. He said, “My name is so and so.” He says, “I think you can make it in
8 the movies.” And that’s how he got started and became the rifleman.

9 KC: I’ll be darned.

10 RC: Yeah, interesting story. He was a really nice guy, very perusable.
11 Unfortunately, I never got a bunch of pictures with them because I had this idiotic
12 thought that they’re here to be with the troops and I’m bothering him. Hell, they were
13 there for me also.

14 KC: Yeah, you were part of the troops.

15 RC: Yeah, of course I was, and I could have taken and gotten a bunch of pictures
16 and had them on my walls. Now all I got is poor old Henry Fonda.

17 KC: What kind of aircraft were you flying? Was this a chopper, was it an
18 airplane?

19 RC: A Beaver.

20 KC: Okay, so you were flying in a single-engine.

21 RC: For Charles Hasten, I think a twin fixed wing on it was, we called it, the L-23
22 or something 91 or whatever it was with one of our first turbine engine airplanes. I flew
23 them around in twin engine as far as I could remember. I try to think, I bumped into
24 Krishna Well when she was there, a gorgeous girl just walking down in the middle of the
25 street there, Tu Do Street in Saigon. In fact, I got a Christmas card from a friend of mine
26 last year and Chris Noel was at his party—has a big helicopter and he fly’s it around and
27 does demonstrations and stuff. He of course, he’s changed a lot since our glory days.

28 KC: I’m sure of that, yeah. How would this work? You’re there at the
29 headquarters, somebody says, “Okay, we’ve got Glen Ford coming in, we’ve got
30 Charleston Hesston coming in, who wants them?” Or do they assign them to you? How
31 does that work?

1 RC: Just assignments. It's your day in the barrel—we had about thirty, forty
2 pilots. Every once in awhile you get a day off or something like that. They just think who
3 they got, you know, just got the mission and the passenger's name and then you saw who
4 it was. Charles Hasting, Glenn Ford, whatever or whomever other. Nobody wanted to fly
5 this person to that person. It wasn't that big a deal, you know? I mean, so they're movie
6 stars, hell, we were fighters in a big war. It maybe by draft but, you know, I think we felt
7 we were as important as they were so there wasn't any butt kissing and stuff like that.
8 They were there because they wanted to be there, okay, with one exception. Jane
9 Mansfield was there; he was not popular. In fact, James Gardner had very un-nice things
10 to say about her.

11 KC: Why was Jane Mansfield so unpopular?

12 RC: She wouldn't—not work with the troops; she wouldn't become one of them
13 and show that she cared. She just wanted to stand around and look good. She didn't want
14 to talk to anybody in particular, have any friendly exchanges and stuff like that. She had
15 shorts on. I didn't see her because I was not there at that particular time with shorts on
16 and whatever and he legs are all black and blue from whatever. She just didn't look as
17 good as you do in the magazines. Of course, that's normal.

18 KC: Sure.

19 RC: But the big thing was she just didn't try to make herself appear to the troops.
20 Like Raymond Burr, for example, and James Gardner. They didn't want to hang out with
21 the generals like our good buddy Bob Hope liked to do. They wanted to get down with
22 the troops as quickly as they could. Like this guy, Senesce, was his name.

23 KC: Gary Senesce, yes.

24 RC: Senesce, yeah, I love him.

25 KC: He's great, yes.

26 RC: But he does that now. He's one of the few and he does that thing with
27 veterans for Golden Corral, have you seen that?

28 KC: Yeah, he's got his own band, the Lieutenant Dan Band, I believe it's called.

29 RC: Yeah, the Lieutenant Dan Band, you know where that's from?

30 KC: Forrest Gump.

31 RC: You got it. See, you're smarter than you look.

1 KC: (laughing) I make contact every once in awhile.

2 RC: I just say that.

3 KC: All right, one of the questions I have here, you were flying these Hollywood
4 VIPs, and did you fly any political VIPs? Anyone from Washington DC come down
5 wanting to make an appearance in Vietnam that you were aware of?

6 RC: No, just I think General Weyand, but that was much later after I came back
7 from Thailand. In fact, I was looking the other day for some reason. It was March 31,
8 flew him around, in fact, finding a mission. But like I said, there was nothing to find, he
9 already had his instructions, you know? We were pulling out—we were out within thirty
10 days so to speak. Congress had laid down a little more money. With no more money, you
11 can't find a war. I can't think of anything else. We flew a bunch of people, you know,
12 nothing sticks out in my mind, off the top of my head. We flew into—that was later, that
13 was later. I'm sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. Are we going to finish up today or do it
14 one more time or what?

15 KC: I think we'll do one more time. I've got just a couple more questions here
16 about your time in Saigon and then we can wrap it up today and then pick it up at another
17 time.

18 RC: Okay.

19 KC: Well, how long were you here at Saigon with MAC-V?

20 RC: One year.

21 KC: You were there for one year?

22 RC: Yeah, two to six months yeah.

23 KC: So, you were there from, what, I guess it would be November or December
24 of sixty—

25 RC: Six to the end of December '67.

26 KC: Okay, so you got out, like you said, just prior to the kick of the Tet Offensive
27 early in '68.

28 RC: I didn't make that clear. What happened was, I left there in the middle of
29 December and went back to States and immediately went to Air America in Washington
30 for an interview in January, got hired in February just real quick and then got back over
31 there for my training admin and flight training with Air America and was scheduled to

1 leave Saigon around, hmm, whatever it was a week before the day of the Tet Offensive. I
2 forgot the days of that were. So that was actually a little bit later, yeah. That was in '68
3 that, that occurred.

4 KC: Okay, very good. So, you're back with Air America at that time?

5 RC: Yeah.

6 KC: Okay, well, you already probably given me the answer that you're going to
7 give me to this question, but you stayed there for an additional tour. For that last year
8 you're in Saigon. I assume you're seeing the sights of Saigon living life like you'd expect
9 one to live in Saigon. What was your impression when you left Vietnam in December of
10 '67? What was your impression of the War then? Had it changed since November of
11 1965?

12 RC: What I saw, or think I saw, Kelly, was the fact that Saigon never got out of
13 wartime footing. You never had the feeling you were at war. That's the absolute
14 fundamental truth. It was one goddamn party after another, you know? There's night
15 clubs all over town, the people on the Black Market were going like crazy. There was no
16 do without in Saigon, none. The troops did without, they were out fighting, but the
17 leadership in Saigon never ever got serious about the War. That's facing it in a nutshell,
18 and that's why they lost. The communists were out there—have you heard the old joke
19 about this peasant picks up these two mortars grounds outside Hanoi and go south on the
20 Ho Chi Minh trail? Two months later he gets down but can't go. He comes up to this
21 mortar outfit and pops two mortars down on the ground. Oh god, I'm so tired. The mortar
22 man, the first one, it goes out. He grabs the second one, puts it in, too, it's gone out. He
23 turns and looks at the guy and says, "Well, what the hell are you waiting for? Go get me
24 two more." That's the way it was with the slugs, you know? Just desperately hard, tough,
25 life okay? If they didn't do it sometimes, they were killed, but the people in Saigon, were
26 trapped. They didn't know what the hell war was all about.

27 KC: You spent a year in Saigon, and I moved through this very quickly, you
28 spend a year in Saigon. Can you tell me about your time there in Saigon itself? The city?
29 Tell me about the city and tell me what you were doing there in addition to your regular
30 job.

1 RC: I flew, that's all I did. It was unfortunate, but as a major all I did was fly.
2 Certainly not getting good for your career, but that's all I did. I'd come back at night,
3 sometimes seven, eight o'clock at night. There were a couple bars down there. We might
4 go down and have a beer to drink or something like that. There was this one night club,
5 rather and it had a fancy name like Maximilian or something like that. I remember
6 walking by one night and seeing these people go in. I saw two women go in. Two of the
7 most beautiful women I've ever seen, you know, for what I could see. Just absolutely
8 gorgeous and I didn't know what was going on in there because, you know. Do you know
9 the expression Joe Shit the Rag Man? I didn't know what was going on then, but there
10 was some really big parties going on and people doing things. Have you read that book
11 *Khaki Mafia*?

12 KC: No, I have not.

13 RC: Interesting. The Army sergeant major was involved in drafting corruption;
14 pitiful, just pitiful. It makes you sick to think about it. His buddy was the guy that I had
15 flown—oh, let me back up. This girl that took me to Vietnam in November of '65, we
16 correspond, we have coffee, and she says, "This guy wants me to be his secretary." She
17 flew him over there, I guess, somehow. I said, "Who is this?" "General Cole." And I said,
18 "He doesn't want a secretary, he wants you, you know that." And I said, "You're better
19 off sticking with Pan Am and doing whatever it is that you do and go with this SOB."
20 This SOB later on, was involved in Black Markets up to his damn eyeballs. All it did was
21 reduce him back to colonel and let him retire. He was the boss in Germany for awhile.
22 They took his picture off the wall, he, and the sergeant major. They were busy with the
23 slot machines if you haven't heard about those big, big corruptions. They made thousands
24 and thousands of dollars. Now, they say those guys still go in as quickly and getting their
25 money. He should have been court martialed, shot, whatever. I mean, a general officer
26 involved in something like that is beyond belief. So, how did I get onto that?

27 KC: (laughing) Well, you're talking about Saigon; it's in a run of things in
28 Saigon.

29 RC: Yeah, so there was, like I said, parties going on and the good life. If you had
30 money and power, you know.

1 KC: All right, do you find that you're getting tired of Vietnam by the end of this
2 second tour? Or I guess the third or second of the six month tour? Were you tired of
3 being there?

4 RC: No, not at all, it's still exciting. I never thought that. I was happy to be
5 coming back. Probably I was crazy, Kelly.

6 KC: (laughing)

7 RC: What guy wants to come back to Saigon to fight a war again, you know?

8 KC: Right, right. Well, do you have anything else to add about your time there in
9 Saigon?

10 RC: No. Oh, I developed a great hatred for Jane Fonda.

11 KC: Well, tell me about that. You were not alone, of course, but tell me about
12 that.

13 RC: I have some friends here in town, Ron Webb, Bud Day, they were prisoners
14 up there.

15 KC: You're friends with those two men?

16 RC: Yeah.

17 KC: Oh, that's terrific, yeah.

18 RC: Bud Day's my lawyer, he did my wills.

19 KC: Is that right?

20 RC: He's still a sharp old man.

21 KC: Oh, that's incredible.

22 RC: He was good to our pilot meetings we had down here, a wonderful guy. They
23 remember when Jane came through there, you know? The stories that she accused them
24 of lying, you know, that was not true. They were being tortured and this happened and
25 that happened. Somebody slipped her a note, and she gave it right to the VC commander,
26 you know, and she got that picture taken of her manning a 12.7 which is the anti-aircraft
27 gun, like the 50 caliber. Oh no, she caused death and injuries to more soldiers because her
28 being there gave them aid and comfort. Which by definition is treason and why she still
29 walks this earth and not in jail, is simply beyond my understanding. In fact, someone else
30 did the same thing. Former secretary of something of a state or what it was, he went over
31 there also, and he never got thrown in jail. I don't understand how they let that happen.

1 People afraid to do things? I don't know. When that guy spit in her face at a recent book
2 signing, I wasn't broken hearted over that either. Of course, it was a nasty thing to do.
3 Well, what she did was not only nasty, but absolutely criminal and treasonous.
4 KC: Well, you certainly aren't alone in the way you feel about that. That's a
5 guarantee. All right, well, Mr. Caron, let's stop there for today.

Interview with Robert Caron

Session [3] of [5]

Date 20 January 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Robert Caron. Today is 20 January, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Caron is joining me by telephone from his home, again,
4 in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. Mr. Caron, when we left off last time, you were winding
5 up your second tour there in Vietnam. You were in, I guess, the third of the six month
6 extended tour in Vietnam. You were in Saigon. You were relating stories about how you
7 were flying VIPs around the country. People like Henry Fonda and Charlton Heston, Jim
8 Garner, people like that. You gave me a very good thorough description of all of that.
9 What I want to do today is begin with the period when you're winding down from
10 Vietnam, your last tour as a member of the active duty U.S. Military where you're
11 involved there. As you were preparing to leave, what were your thoughts on what you
12 had seen and what you had done in Vietnam up to that time?

13 Robert Caron: I'm sorry, Kelly. I got distracted for a second. My wife yelled at
14 me. Say again, please?

15 KC: Sure, as you're winding down your time here in Vietnam, what kind of
16 thoughts did you have on your experiences there? What did you see? What did you learn
17 from your time there? How did you reflect back, or did you reflect back on your time in
18 Vietnam up to that point?

19 RC: Well, I keep going back to that same old thought that sometimes you're just
20 so busy doing the everyday nuts and bolts, you don't have time to sit back and look at the
21 big picture. I don't recall _ anything significant. I knew that my time was drawn to a
22 close with the military and I didn't know what would happen; I didn't know how long Air
23 America would go on, for example. Did I think about coming back to the military? Not at
24 that time, although later on—as a matter of fact, when I flew General Weyand that I
25 talked about, later on with Air America, that's one of the things I answered. I said, "Sir,
26 after this is over, what job is it going to be?" I said, "How do I get back into the
27 military?" and he said with one of his guys with him, he said, "Talk to him and he'll tell
28 you what form to fill out and something like that." It was just a basic form which at that
29 time, the military was still coming back a little later than they were—late '75 and six that

1 they were looking for people. But anyway, at that time, I just was thinking, you know,
2 I'm moving onto another career. It wasn't solidified yet, but I talked to a bunch of people
3 there, pilots and so forth. Personnel people there in Saigon that it shouldn't be hard with
4 my background, having spent two years in Vietnam flying helicopters and air planes that
5 they needed people badly, really. So, they just said, "Get back there." And they gave me
6 the address and phone number. I got back to America was right around the holidays and
7 just celebrated the holidays with my brother and his family in Sacramento and then flew
8 back to Washington and interviewed with—I think his name was Red Dawson who was
9 the personnel guy. I filled out some paperwork, he says, "Okay, basically you're on and
10 we'll send you tickets here rather quickly. Which they did and then there I was, on the
11 way.

12 KC: Now, you had the chance to speak with Air America personnel while you
13 were in Saigon, you say?

14 RC: Yeah.

15 KC: And this is late 1967.

16 RC: Exactly.

17 KC: And what sort of things were they telling you about this? Why did you
18 inquire and what were they telling you about it?

19 RC: Well, I felt like I needed to change to military. I'm not sure what reciprocated
20 that exactly, but I just wanted to change and that was the nearest thing to what I was
21 doing. By that time, I'd been flying for many years and it was real exciting. You know,
22 flying was so much fun and so entertaining and everyday was different, you know? It's
23 not your basic upper job, eight to five or whatever. It was so exciting that I wanted to tell
24 you what I was doing and that was pretty much exactly what I was doing. I think I
25 mentioned that when I came back, I went to airplanes parked on the other side of the
26 ramp flying the same type of aircraft. I flew a twin turbine for the Army. I forget what it
27 was called now. They took queen air and put turbines on it and then I went across the
28 street to Air America and flew the bulpars and they'd put two turbines on the old C45
29 piston thing. So, it was the same thing, and it gets in your blood, Kelly, it's hard to
30 explain. You want to do it and you don't even think about it. "Well, I could have gotten
31 shot down today, could have gotten shot down yesterday, I could have crashed in that

1 fog.” You know, these things, they’re just leading points in things that you’re doing, and
2 you don’t think about it other than at that time that they’re occurring. So, I just look
3 forward to something a little different, but at the same time, similar.

4 KC: What did you know? And this is while you’re still with the U.S. military in
5 Saigon. What did you know about Air American? What did you hear about their
6 activities?

7 RC: Not a hell of a lot. I didn’t know about their extraordinary history in Korea
8 flying into China and doing all those things, you know. Good people and just so many
9 great people that were involved in that and started it. I guess Air America had four, five,
10 or six or more names throughout their history. I didn’t know much about it, I just knew
11 what they did, what I’d seen, and the people were good. Some folks have said that with a
12 bunch of extraordinary great pilots that did wonderful things. You know, to us, we were
13 just pilots that were just like everybody else, the Average Joe. We just did something a
14 little bit different, that was all. What I enjoyed, too, is you got a mission and you went out
15 and did it. That was especially true later on in the helicopters.

16 KC: All right, you wind down your time there in Vietnam. You know that Air
17 America is something that you’re certainly very interested in. You have this great love of
18 flying. You come back to the United States. You say you’re in Sacramento with your
19 brother’s family for the holidays in December of 1967. Then you go to Washington DC
20 to apply to Air American. How did you apply, what was the process?

21 RC: I knew who to call the numbers from my friends in Saigon so as soon as I got
22 back, I called up probably late December and told them who I was, the background and
23 so forth and they said, “Okay, we’ll send you a ticket and you come here, and interview
24 and we’ll decide what we want to do then. If you’re right for us and we’re right for you
25 and stuff like that.” So, I got a ticket very shortly there after and I think early January,
26 sixth or seventh or eighth, something like that, I was on a plane to Washington and I still
27 remember K Street, I guess this pretty famous street. I’ve never been there except for that
28 and just went in there and interviewed and the guy talked to me about who I was, what I
29 did, where I come from, and my background a little bit. But really, having just spent two
30 years over there knowing the country, I was kind of ready made for them. A piece a cake,
31 just plug me right in and I was ready to go. If I went to Saigon—now that wasn’t the

1 given because we had other aircraft throughout Thailand and mostly Laos. The thick
2 swing as well as choppers so there was a possibility of going there, but almost from the
3 outset the thought was I'll probably wind up back in Saigon.

4 KC: Because of your familiarity with Saigon and all of that. Okay, during this
5 interview did anyone tell you about Air America, what their role was? What they were
6 supposed to be doing at their mission?

7 RC: A little bit, but their attitude was just another airline. Now, was it just another
8 airline? Not really, but nobody really talked about it, so it was never brought up. Air
9 America was a company that was incorporated. I believe, was in Delaware and was
10 probably a civilian company, so to speak. The government function wasn't discussed at
11 all. Although, obviously it was out there. If you looked at the surface it was just another
12 flying job. That's the way we looked at it and that's the way we approached it.

13 KC: Were you aware of the government's involvement in Air America when you
14 signed up?

15 RC: Oh, I think to a great extent we knew what was going on, but nobody ever
16 said anything, nobody ever pointed at anything. There was never any real connection, you
17 know. It was Air America. It was Bob Dole, the boss, was a former Pan Am executive as
18 were others. They had great management and a great background, great history. So, on
19 the surface, just another job and that's the way we all approached it.

20 KC: Now, you're back in the States for just a very brief time here between late
21 December of '67 and early '68 before you go back to Vietnam. So, you may not have had
22 enough time back in the United States to be able to offer much of your impressions here,
23 but I'd like to know if you saw any change. You've been gone for two years. Had the
24 American society changed? Had America's attitude toward the Vietnam War changed?
25 Just based on what you saw.

26 RC: Yeah, I think there was definitely a sense of that. I can't think of anything in
27 particular that I could point at or people who have ever said anything to me because most
28 of my friends were, you know, my type of people so to speak. Family and classmates in
29 college and so forth so I never came in contact with the real liberal side of the house so to
30 speak so I didn't run into that and I wasn't accosted by it and didn't really think all that
31 much about it. Although really, it had started—actually, I do think—one of my

1 classmates was living there in the California/San Francisco area and if I remember right,
2 the Height-Ashbury thing has already occurred. Does that make sense or was that later?

3 KC: Well, it was—

4 RC: Was that '66?

5 KC: It was a length of time where things were going on. '66, '67, '68, and '69.

6 RC: Yeah, I think he may have took me on a small tour and told me about where
7 these things had happened a little bit, but at that particular time and date there was
8 nothing really going on, so I didn't have a real sense of how strong the liberal movement
9 was, you know. You, of course, heard all the stories about soldiers coming back, coming
10 through the San Francisco Airport because it was the logical place to go through, process
11 through in Oakland and people get spit on, called baby killers, and stuff like that, but I
12 had never run into that. Did I see flower people? I may have. I can't remember exactly. I
13 don't remember all that much. Like I say, I was only there a little bit more than a month
14 and I was gone again, you know?

15 KC: Right, right. Well, you're headed off on a brand new adventure. You're not
16 going to be bound by U.S. Military; you've got a new job. What was your—what were
17 your feelings toward this, what was your attitude toward this change that you had made?

18 RC: I think excitement, but just getting on with my career so to speak, excitement
19 of something new. I think when you do something new even though it's similarly new
20 that it's very feeling of excitement and you want to get on with it. I had friends back there
21 I was going to see again, you know? It wasn't, really, all that big a deal, Kelly. I was
22 going to do what I had done for the last two years and was I excited? Yeah. Was I really
23 excited? Probably not, but I knew it was interesting, I knew I had to be careful, but I
24 didn't really think, you know, even at that age; thirty or so, you have the feeling that not a
25 bullet made yet that has your name on it, so you think you're going to be moderately
26 invincible and you're just going to keep on going and you'll be fine. So, there was no fear
27 at all, just a little bit of excitement and anticipation.

28 KC: Sure, what was it like being back in Saigon and not being part of the
29 military? I would assume there'd be a greater sense of freedom and autonomy. Was this
30 the case?

1 RC: No, it's kind of like our friends that got out and went with IBM. They said,
2 "You know, Bob? IBM is just like the military, they got the suits you gotta wear, the
3 bright colored suits, the shoes, the tie, and everything. Your hair's got to be cut right."
4 So, Air America it was so military like that there was almost no feeling of any different.
5 Once again, you know, the last year in Saigon flying with MAC-V was not the true
6 military like I had done the first year where you're out in combat situations with
7 helicopters and close proximity with the bad guys. When you're flying a 6-wing you're
8 up at three, four, five thousand feet. Kind of like our Air Force to tell you the truth and
9 you don't have that sense of danger that you do when you're flying a helicopter down
10 low and in and out of the LZs and stuff. In that sense it was still pretty similar.

11 KC: Now you mentioned that it wasn't all that much different, that there were still
12 suits, there was still uniforms, there was still orders, you were still in an organization.
13 Tell me about Air America as it existed in Saigon from what you saw. Whether it's the
14 structure of the organization, the rules, the regulations, the uniforms, the policies, and
15 procedures? Tell me about Air America in Saigon in 1968.

16 RC: Well, it was big. We had a ramp full of huge airplanes. If you've seen the C-
17 46, I don't know, it maybe one of the biggest twin engines in the world. We had a bunch
18 of those C-47s, the bulpars, the C-45s. We just had a huge amount of aircraft. All over to
19 one side, it seemed like a zillion helicopters. So, it was a huge organization, very
20 impressive. I remember seeing a couple notes. Numbers wise, we were the biggest airline
21 in the world. Now, as far as size, money's involved, experienced air craft certainly not,
22 but we had it one time like six hundred and some aircraft. Two of the small ones and
23 some of the big ones, but it was big. It was huge and they had a job to do and we worked
24 for the government in that we carried a lot of embassy people, USAID people, just
25 various VIPs and stuff like that. So, it was big, and we were busy, just everyday, you
26 know, you work six days, and they try to do the six days on one day off which is like
27 what the FAA would like you to do. They try to go by the rules like that and that was also
28 an inherent safety to do that rather than had people worn out. But no, it was busy and big,
29 and I don't want to say a lot of fun, but it certainly you were only concerned about and
30 stressed out about.

1 KC: Tell me about the organizational structure, the command structure within
2 which you worked.

3 RC: Well, it's just like the military, like the Army. We had a chief pilot in the
4 fixed wing, chief pilot in helicopters and then we had various pilots in the smaller birds.
5 Like for example, the T-pilot for the C45, the Bulpars, like that. And then you had the T-
6 pilot for the big birds, C47 to C46s, Caribous, and so forth. And then, of course, on the
7 other side of the fence you had the rotary wing guys. They're basically all one. They were
8 all Huey, so they were just one of those guys. And then that was it. You had the base
9 manager. He ran a bit of strategy and, I guess, reported right to the ambassador to a
10 certain extent, and of course, out of Washington, Dole and those people. You know, you
11 had your basic structure, you know, you knew who the boss was. It's like anything in the
12 business; you know who you work for. Like your boss, he's what Paul?

13 KC: Steve.

14 RC: Steve? Oh, that's right, I gotcha. So, in that regard there was no change. Of
15 course, with my military background, you know, as long as things go decently, let's say,
16 it's yes or no sir three bags full. Just more of the same so to speak.

17 KC: Okay, you get there at Air American in Saigon. You're familiar with the
18 structure; you're familiar with the birds, both the rotary wing and the fixed wing. Take
19 me through the process by which you go out on a mission. When someone gives you your
20 orders to go, how do you prepare for it, where do you go on a typical mission, what do
21 you do?

22 RC: Basically, you get your mission for the next day that evening. So, you know
23 what time you got to report, whether it's five, six, or seven and at that time, of course,
24 when you hire on, you're a co-pilot. So, you do the co-pilot duties. In my case, I would
25 go in and we were allowed to pick up weapons and I forget what we had exactly. I
26 remember we had oozies in Laos and I don't remember if we had Pistols or some people
27 had, some how or another, AK-47s. I was allowed to pick up something like that and that
28 was my job. And then I would go out and inspect the aircraft. The pilot, he would go in,
29 talk to the operations guide, make sure he understood the missions. You know, they
30 weren't all that complex. Also, anything that was different about a flight was this flight to
31 Da Nang and back, fly to Nha Trang and back or whatever. Then we would meet out at

1 the aircraft and he'd just tell me basically what we're going to do, and he wanted to look
2 at the aircraft at all he would do that and then we'd be ready to go. The next year we had
3 our radio frequencies, make sure we had with the small birds, the C-45 and the Bulpars.
4 There was no load master like that. The big birds, of course, the 47s and 46s, they had
5 cargo along with people and they had a load master on board that would take care of all
6 those things. It was pretty routine, you know, you're a team and we got to know who the
7 good captains were and who the other types were. I remember to this day really; my first
8 flight was with a guy named Burt Opitz. You're new to the organization, you're new to
9 everything, you're new to him and right from the outset we went down to Can Tho in the
10 Delta and we flew around there at different small sites. Some of those sites are pretty
11 small and they get a little wet. They're called PSP, pure steel planking, I guess is how it's
12 defined. If it got wet at all, you know, sometimes he had trouble stopping, but he was a
13 really good guy and every other leg was mine, you know? You're sitting on the right
14 hand side of the air craft which is now normal for you. In fact, that's where the IT will sit
15 normally when you were training. But he said, "Okay, your turn." So, we flew out and he
16 turned out to be a real friend and later on after we left, I made contact with him and wrote
17 to him over the years. I remember sending a Christmas card. I forget what year and his
18 daughter sent me a note back that he had passed away a couple of months before so that
19 was very sad. Normally everybody, they were really good people, you know. They were
20 chosen because they were good, and they chose him because they believed in what they
21 were doing. Yeah, it was kind of routine, but at the same time, you know, you had your
22 job, and you did it. The captains were the boss just like in the military; you know? Within
23 reason you did everything they said. Most of them were pretty reasonable.

24 KC: You mentioned that you took weapons with you. Was this standard by 1968
25 for Air America pilots?

26 RC: I think so. There were times when it was brought up and I think we were
27 cautioned to be more careful. In other words, carry them into kind of a bag of some kind
28 and not out in the open. So, we did that, but it was not surreptitiously, you know, almost?
29 You just took it with you and kept it because—now early on, just before I got there, I
30 think this is the reason why things changed a little bit. A C-47 was shot down near Can
31 Tho and they landed successfully, crash landed I guess you could say in the rice paddies,

1 but before they could—and the helicopter got in there within thirty minutes or something
2 like that right near by the Delta. Bad guys went out of the area there out of the—there
3 was no mountains down there, of course, but the waterways, there were always bad guys
4 around and they're not that far from the Mekong itself. So, within minutes there were bad
5 guys there and they just ran into the C-47, shot the coup, and ran away before help could
6 come. The thing was, the pilot said had we had just simple a pistol or two, you know, we
7 could have fired back, and they could have just walked in and blasted away and killed the
8 coup like they did. So, I think after that things changed a little bit.

9 KC: Did they kill the entire crew on this?

10 RC: Well, I think it was just the pilot, co-pilot, and the load master, the three of
11 them. I don't think there were passengers at all as I recall. So, it was just the three of
12 them, you know, three of them or one of them, whatever, you know, you don't want
13 anybody to get killed. There's no reason to kill him. It's just viciousness, but sometimes
14 at the local level you get that, you know? When we're in Laos they said, "If you get
15 caught, don't get caught by the—"

16 KC: The Pathet Lao, probably?

17 RC: Yeah, Pathet Lao because they were—maybe you had to bomb their village a
18 week before or somebody did when they were mad at you. In other words, the NVA were
19 more professional. The regular troops were more professional, and they weren't as quick
20 to kill you as the local guys were perhaps. And that's probably what happened down
21 there in the Delta with that C-47.

22 KC: What planes were you flying early on in your time there at Saigon?

23 RC: Well, pretty much the same thing that Amelia Earhart flew.

24 KC: Is that right?

25 RC: A C45, the same darn thing. They extended the fuse lodge on some of them
26 and they were a little bit larger capacity fuse wise and they were called 10-2s, but they
27 were the same thing clearly. And then you had—they had a tail wheel, so you landed the
28 same old way, you know? Main gear tail wheel. If you don't know, those are the most
29 difficult things to control and take off on landings because they can ground loop in a
30 heartbeat. So later on, they took off the big piston engines and put padded white PT-6s on
31 them and they were stronger and faster and a hell of a lot more fun to fly and they put a

1 nose wheel on it. So, nose wheels are much more easy to land in and also take off, you
2 know. So those three and then, let me see, I guess that was it. I flew the caribou in the
3 Army, but I wasn't senior enough to fly the Caribou there in Saigon, so I was just the low
4 man on the totem pole. So, I flew my C45 and the 10-2s. I think I was telling you that
5 was one of the birds that we carried that dead mountain yards, mountain people that
6 fought for the military and it got all messed up because of the aging process of the body,
7 so to speak. You know, juices raining down into the belly of the aircraft. Not unlike—just
8 real quick, later on my career I was involved with Rosenbaum Aviation and we had a big
9 mission to fly cattle to Hawaii. I don't know why, but we did it and all those cattle, all
10 that urine got down in the belly of that DC8 and we had a hell of a time trying to clean
11 that thing up. I don't know if he ever did.

12 KC: That must have been awful.

13 RC: It was. I still got a little cough here, but I'm surviving.

14 KC: Good, good. What sort of things would you—or what would one of these
15 missions typically entail? I mean, in terms of cargo, in terms of passengers, what would
16 you typically do on a mission out of Saigon?

17 RC: A lot of military. People that wear civilian clothes, but they'll process by
18 operation. So, it was not your job to check each one out individually so I couldn't say
19 what they were, but mostly in civilian clothes they may have been military. They may
20 have been embassy people and USAID people. We had USAID people all over the
21 country trying to help the economy, help the agriculture and stuff like that. We just fly
22 them with our C-45 stuff. A lot of them down to the Delta. We flew all over the Delta
23 picking up people and moving them around. I can't remember anybody specifically.
24 More often than that we'd go to Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, occasionally up to Da Nang
25 because we would fly out over the coast because the middle of the country was controlled
26 by the bad guys and plus, they had pretty high mountains over there and the weather was
27 bad, and you didn't want to get involved in the nasty terrain. Below the clouds and all,
28 but you couldn't get out. There wasn't much in a way of air traffic control. A lot of times
29 we just punch into the clouds, we knew between us and the coast or where we're going,
30 the hills maybe enough to three or four thousand or maybe even less. We'd be safe, but
31 what you didn't know was if somebody coming from the opposite direction. By and large

1 we just went to the bigger bases. Like I say, they try Qui Nhon, Pleiku even, Pleiku, Can
2 Tho, the Da Nang area, Chu Lai up along the coast, south of Da Nang. Sometimes down
3 in the Delta just fly around there four or five different trips. I remember one day I got my
4 flu shot and I was sick as a dog. The same guy, Burt Opitz I was telling you about, he
5 said, "Bob, you look death warmed over. Get out and stay here at Can Tho and I'll take a
6 few legs by myself and I'll pick you up and we'll get to Saigon late in the afternoon." We
7 didn't do much night flying, that was the other thing. He says, "By that time you might
8 feel better."

9 KC: So, your early time here you were largely flying in these smaller planes and
10 weren't flying a lot of cargo.

11 RC: No, not all that much, mostly those people. Cargo was in the 47 and 46s.
12 They might make air drops, you know, stuff like that.

13 KC: Now, did you eventually get to fly these larger planes of cargo?

14 RC: No, because everything was based on seniority. It was just like the military,
15 you know, and my comment about the IBM and so forth. Actually, when I hired on, I
16 may have been one of the highest numbers. We all got a pilot number just like at a
17 regular airline. I remembered my number like six hundred and something. I don't think
18 they ever got higher than that. Slowly over the years I was able to quit or went into
19 something else. Like me, I jumped over to helicopters. The numbers came down and I
20 could never see me making captain in the future at any time because their guys had been
21 with Air America a year more than I did and they'd make you captain at the end of the
22 year and then the beginning of the next year they'd go back to first officer to co-pilot and
23 that was because we tried to follow the FAA rules. One thousand hours per year per pilot.
24 So, when you got to one thousand, they tried to sit you down, if they had the ability, and
25 what they'd do then, some of the senior co-pilots be made captain so they'd sit down with
26 these guys who had their one thousand hours in late October, November. They'd be
27 captain for awhile. I couldn't see that and one day I was flying the same guy that I had
28 talked to way back in January of '68, Red Dawson, and I tell him, I said, "The situation,
29 it doesn't look very bright as far as my future is concerned, but I do have a lot of
30 helicopter time. My understanding is you need people over in Thailand and Laos." He
31 said, "Let me look into it and I'll let you know." And sure, enough within the month he

1 sent me a telegram back to report Udorn. the following month, I think it was June of '69
2 by that time.

3 KC: Hmm, that's very interesting. I definitely want to get to that, your helicopter
4 time especially in Thailand and flying in Laos. Well, let's stay here in Vietnam for the
5 time being. You talked about the topography, you talked about the mountains, you talked
6 a little bit about enemy fire. What was it like flying these Air America planes as
7 compared to the planes in the U.S. Military? What was the Air America flying like? How
8 would it change, or did it change that way you approached your job and your flying?

9 RC: Of course, the second year in Vietnam was the military, I flew 6-wing. Of
10 course, it was the MAC-V flag attachment. To a degree we flew staff people, may or may
11 not be considered VIPs, but you went into bigger bases and was therefore more safe. We
12 did pretty much the same with Air America. We may have gone into some actually some
13 smaller places with Air America. Like I mentioned, going into the Delta and then around
14 Muc Hoa, but it was quite similar. In other words, you did darn little fly in north of
15 Pleiku and Can Tum in that mountain range. If you wanted to go to Da Nang, you went
16 out to the coast because you knew where the sea level was, of course, and you were able
17 to fly as low as 1,500 feet if the weather was bad. So, we would fix a lot of it from Saigon
18 East, pretty much few mountains as long as you're going almost directly east, but as you
19 went more northeast you got into Du Lot and of course there are mountains there and it
20 makes the flight more tricky, but as long as the terrain wasn't that high, you could fly
21 around between the mountains and find your way somehow. Then up north in the Nha
22 Trang area was almost all on the coast. Pleiku had its share of mountains and we lost
23 airplanes. I know, the military lost airplanes going up from the Nha Trang to Pleiku just
24 following in the river. All of a sudden, you know, the clouds go right down to the ground.
25 The weather, the Southern half of Vietnam was bad weather. One, six month period and
26 then it turned good and hot and the northern part of Vietnam, the northern part of South
27 Vietnam was nasty weather and the only way you could get up there was up the coast.
28 You could fly nasty weather up the coast because as long as you're over the water there's
29 no mountains there to smack you.

30 KC: Right, right.

1 RC: But at the same time, we had a C-47 about the time I got there came out of
2 just north of Da Nang and he turned right over the water, but he forgot he was over the
3 bay. Not over the sea itself. So, he turned right to head into Da Nang, guess what? A big
4 old hill there and he smacked right into the top. As a matter fact, he hit so near the top, he
5 bounced over and landed down on the other side and killed himself. He was a
6 professional—I say professional, he was a veteran and had been there many years, but the
7 guy with him was a friend of mine and he was hired on just ahead of me, you know? So,
8 you have to be careful at all times with the weather and the terrain mixture.

9 KC: Did you find that your experience—and so many Air America pilots were
10 experienced in Vietnam flying, did you find that your military flying experience prepared
11 you well for what you did in Air America?

12 RC: Oh, I think so because I was in the same country, same terrain. Similar
13 aircraft with twin engines, you know, going about 150, 175. None of the jets like we have
14 today, of course.

15 KC: Right.

16 RC: It was just stepping from one ramp lane to the other, no problem. The biggest
17 jump, of course, going from Chinooks to the airplane and then going with Air America
18 from the airplanes back to the helicopters and getting transitioned into the H-34 Sikorsky
19 helicopter.

20 KC: Right, right. You were in Vietnam this time, Air America in January of 1968.
21 Of course, the Tet Offensive kicks off in late January of 1968. What did you see about
22 the Tet Offensive? Give me your impressions.

23 RC: I was very lucky. Let me back up a little bit.

24 KC: Okay.

25 RC: You've got your administrative training and uniforms and stuff in Taiwan
26 into our indoctrination, so to speak. And then from Taiwan we went to Hong Kong where
27 they had all our uniforms made. Well, on this particular night, I don't remember the date.
28 It might have been, or whatever it was, it was the date when Air America was part of the
29 situation, but CAT, that rings the bell of course.

30 KC: Yes, Civil Air Transport.

1 RC: Yeah, they ran 880, I'm trying to think. Something 880 was a big four engine
2 jet. They bought one or two, 727s. Well, the 727s came into Taipei that Saturday night,
3 but it came in a little bit short and nobody knows what the hell happened, but I
4 understand it as early on, the 727, which had the center engine. When they came in, they
5 got the nose stuck a little bit too high. There was a problem with air getting into that
6 engine and therefore supplied the right amount of power. And if you didn't catch it or see
7 what was going on quickly enough while we're slow and bringing in the power—jets
8 have a little bit of a problem with getting power instantly as opposed to a piston where
9 you just snap the throttle forward and the power is there. They started to settle or sink and
10 then you run the power forward and it took a few seconds to catch and they landed half a
11 mile short. And that was the same airplane we were supposed to go to Hong Kong the
12 next day and then onto Bangkok for our training and transition into the C-45. So, I had
13 some friends on that. In fact, I still keep in contact named Mike Shields that was on that
14 airplane. He was telling me that he landed, the airplane split, and he was in Seat 12 and
15 he looked up and there was empty space, air. So, he undid his seatbelt, stepped out of the
16 airplane. Of course, he's still in shock and he said, "I got to help these people." So, he
17 woke up out of his shock and he went back in and helped people get out and it did help
18 some. He was quite all right. There were other people that were killed. I don't know how
19 many, maybe half a dozen or something like that. So that was an interesting aspect of my
20 situation. I don't know how he got to Hong Kong, we got another airplane of course, but
21 it turned out that CAT was kind of running a rough shot over CAL, China Airlines there
22 in Taiwan. When that happened, they used that as pressure to pretty much move CAT
23 aside and they were on the downward spiral from then on, and China Airlines became
24 more powerful in representing the country more.

25 KC: Right.

26 RC: Anyway, we went out to Bangkok and then in Bangkok we transitioned into
27 the C-45 because the military hadn't seen the C-45 in what, twenty years? So, we had to
28 get transitioned in that which was okay. We're doing that for about a week and then the
29 picture became clear that Bangkok was just too darn busy, and we had difficulty getting
30 in and out, getting our flights squared away so they sent us up to Bien Jen where we
31 wound up our transition into the C-45 and then from there, there were three or four

1 people in my class, really good people. Then we went our separate ways and I wound up
2 back in Saigon.

3 KC: Okay, I'm glad you mentioned that because that's one of the questions I
4 forgot to ask you about. I understand that it was somewhat difficult to get a license in
5 Taiwan or to be allowed to fly through a CAT. Did you have any sort of difficulties
6 passing the required tests or anything?

7 RC: I'll tell you the truth, I don't remember taking any tests. They did the paper
8 work and we kind of controlled things to a certain extent there and probably couldn't do
9 that today. We did have a Chinese pilot license by them and a six year entry/exit visa. So,
10 we came and went how ever we wanted to there in Taiwan. It was part of the team so to
11 speak.

12 KC: Okay, well let me get back to the question that I raised a moment ago. You
13 may answered this indirectly already. With the Tet Offensive of 1968, were you in-
14 country for any of that or were you still trying to get it straightened out?

15 RC: I knew I would try to make a point there. No, those guys went in the day
16 before—I'm sorry, the guys that were hired out ahead of me. They're training was
17 delayed a little bit, so we were close to them as far as getting into country. Those four or
18 five people went into Saigon the day before the Tet Offensive and we were still sitting in
19 Saigon training, so we missed it. We were together for at least another week, maybe ten
20 days before we got things complicated, we had to finish up our training in Vientiane,
21 Laos. So, they let us know about the heroes they were and also how Vientiane of
22 extremely bad luck because it was pretty hairy there for awhile.

23 KC: Sure, sure. So, you were in Vientiane when all this was taking place then?

24 RC: Yeah, about that time or right after we went off to Vientiane and we delayed
25 up there because they had to move the aircraft, move the pilots, stuff like that. I think it
26 took a lot longer than it probably should have.

27 KC: That brings up another important part of your story that I'm kind of going
28 backward here. You did have a brief period where you were training in Vientiane. Could
29 you tell me about your training there?

30 RC: I had never been in Laos, well, yes, I have. When I went through there with
31 my Chinooks back in early '66, but of course, that was three years later, it was vastly

1 different, you know? That area alone in the river was very low terrain, easy to fly, no
2 problems. A great deal of freedom, we kind of ran things, I guess you could say, and we
3 stayed at a couple of local hotels there. It was nothing fancy. Vientiane is the capitol later
4 on, and Luang Prabang was the old capitol way up north. It wasn't much of a city, very
5 small, restaurants hard to find. You ate at local restaurants and stuff like that or you had a
6 beer at the local establishments and so forth. It was pretty much third world country. It
7 was very slow paced and certainly not like today, a zillion sky scrapers everywhere you
8 look.

9 KC: Now this was a brief period where you were training in Vientiane before you
10 went to Saigon, correct?

11 RC: Mm-hmm.

12 KC: Okay, well let's take you back to your time there in Vietnam before we move
13 you over out of Udorn and, of course, your time flying in Laos. Other than flying, what
14 was your daily routine like? When you were finished with missions for the day, you're
15 going back to Saigon or wherever it is you may have been staying. What was your daily
16 routine? What would you typically do when you weren't flying or doing your American
17 business?

18 RC: Me? I played tennis (laughing). I developed not a very good tennis player,
19 but I was like Westmoreland, they called him enthusiastic and that's probably the way I
20 was. No, I was lucky enough to join the gym center that has a lovely swimming pool and
21 great tennis courts. I developed a lot of friends in Saigon. On my days off I'd be at the
22 tennis courts playing tennis or swimming. You know, our day started—you know, when
23 you're flying you take off at seven, but that's only part of the story. You got to be in the
24 aircraft by six. You have to get through traffic, whatever. So, you're up at four thirty or
25 five. So, you go out and do your thing, and there are seldom any days when you were
26 done within half a day or even most of a day. Most days, you were wound up back at
27 wherever it was you're going. Sometimes we RON'ed at Nha Trang. I did cover that
28 RON'ed and flew out of their missions. Usually, we were back at the base. As I said, we
29 didn't do all that much flying at night because of lack of communications and stuff. So,
30 we'd be back at four or five o'clock, six o'clock and then by the time you got briefed on
31 your mission, turned your stuff in, the captain did his thing. We got transportation back at

1 where it was going to our homes if we were in Saigon or to our hostiles if we are out of
2 country Da Nang and Qui Nhon and Nha Trang and so forth. Then you have supper, have
3 a beer maybe. Of course everybody drank a little bit, others a little bit more. By the time
4 you got back you were tired and dragging butt and that was about it, you know?

5 KC: Where did you stay in Saigon?

6 RC: Oh, I had a really tough assignment, let me see. Oh, with the military I stayed
7 in the second floor of what they call the tax building right there at downtown near Tu Do.
8 It was a beautiful building and the second floor; we just took over the second floor and I
9 flew there. Initially I was in the Chinese section of Saigon which is called Cholon. That
10 was at the far side, maybe west/northwest or something like that. It was where the
11 Chinese pretty much ran things. With Air America, for example, where I stayed, one of
12 the older captains had been there awhile. He ran and leased the building and then we
13 would lease or rent rooms from him. So, I remember having one small room there by
14 myself being single, of course, absolutely no problem. It was not that far from my tennis
15 court situation, so I had it pretty easy there.

16 KC: Tell me about the people that you became acquainted with. The friends, the
17 people that you worked with. I know that in Air America there is a very real tight bond
18 from what I've seen from the reunions I've attended and things that I've read and things
19 that I've seen. Tell me about the people that you encountered there during your time in
20 Air America in Vietnam. We'll get to Thailand later, but what about Vietnam?

21 RC: You talking locals?

22 KC: Locals or other Air America personnel.

23 RC: I don't remember any great friendships in Saigon except for Burt Opitz, he
24 was one of the truly nice gentleman. The guy who's place I lived at, I can't remember his
25 name, he was a decent guy. Everybody else was okay. There's no big bonds, you know,
26 at the end of the day everybody pretty much had their thing whether it was just like me
27 going to play tennis or have supper with a couple friends or had their family. A lot of
28 people had their families there. So, there weren't any lasting bonds. As far as locals, we
29 didn't participate a lot with the local people. Now, if you're an operations manager or
30 something like that—intelligence, you dealt a lot with the locals and you develop more
31 friendships. But with us the crews were almost entirely American. Now, we had a few

1 Chinese crews, but they flew by themselves and pretty much did their own thing and
2 were controlled by operations. I wouldn't even know most of them, but although I do
3 remember one story. When we finished—like at Nha Trang, for example, we'd spend six
4 days up there then what we called "dead head" back to Saigon on an airplane and one of
5 these fixed wings and have your day off then start out the next day going somewhere else
6 or you fly the airplane out of Saigon. They were flying back to Saigon and they were
7 sitting in this 123 and suddenly they fell asleep. All of a sudden, they felt real cold and
8 they looked around, couldn't see much, went up to the cockpit to see why it was so cold
9 and both pilots were asleep. Something like this thing that happened at Cleveland a
10 couple of months ago, those guys that went a hundred miles north of their location, but
11 they said they weren't asleep, but to me there was no other explanation talk or whatever
12 they said they were doing. But looked up and they were passing through like 16,000 feet,
13 a slow climb. They're lucky it was a slow climb instead of a slow decent, you know?

14 KC: Yeah.

15 RC: So anyway, they proceeded to wake them up and got things back to where
16 they should have been. But 16,000 feet is not only cold, but there's not much oxygen.

17 KC: Right.

18 RC: And if you're up there too long, you can eventually pass out. I remember
19 going through an altitude chamber training years and years ago. The tailgate, they put you
20 up to like eighteen thousand. They say, "Okay, take your helmets off and start writing
21 your name on this piece of paper. Well, you start writing and the next thing you know the
22 R for Robert takes up the whole page and then they say, "Okay, you've got these little
23 instruments, little circular pegs. I want you to put them in all these holes." Well, I
24 remember distinctly having this round peg and trying to put it in this square hole. I knew
25 it would fit; I couldn't figure out why I couldn't get it in because you lose consciousness.
26 And they're saying, "Bob, put your helmet on, put your helmet on." And I'm just bagging
27 away at this square hole trying to get this round peg in there. They probably had to come
28 in and open up the door and put my helmet back on for me. It's a funny situation.

29 KC: What about the pay structure in Air America?

30 RC: Co-pilots got crap. I remember distinctly. And I tell all my friends, "What
31 about those big bucks you're making?" "What are you talking about?" I said, "I took a

1 pay cut, I left the Army as a major making so and so and I was a co-pilot, and I made a
2 lot less.” That’s what I said before about my desire to make captain, made—I don’t know
3 if it was twice, but it was at least fifty percent more. And you’ve got what they call
4 hazard pay and the co-pilots got five dollars and the captains got ten. We could never
5 figure out why their butt was more valuable than ours. I remember one guy flying with
6 one of the big bird captains, Clarence Driver. He would go flying along a line waiting for
7 something, I don’t know exactly what, you know? But he kept the airplane so that the co-
8 pilot side, the right side was always kind of towards the bad area. He kept him. I about
9 threw this thing over on the ten dollar side for a little while.

10 KC: (laughing)

11 RC: Hold on, Kelly.

12 KC: Sure.

13 RC: Okay, I’m back. I’m not over this cold yet.

14 KC: Oh, I understand.

15 RC: We laughed at that that was pretty funny.

16 KC: You know, I think that there’s some question about the pay that Air
17 American pilots received. I think it’s partly because of the somewhat shadowy history
18 and a lot of these things weren’t quite as open. There’s a lot of misconception about the
19 amount of money that Air American pilots made. I’ve heard astronomical figures about
20 how much Air American pilots make.

21 RC: Don’t believe it, Kelly.

22 KC: And I’ve heard people from Air America say, “No, that’s not true, that’s
23 simply not true.”

24 RC: Absolutely not true.

25 KC: Do you remember any specifics about what the pay structure was in terms of
26 dollars per month or anything like that?

27 RC: Well, when I left the Army making fifteen hundred a month and at that time,
28 the officers—of course, five hundred of your pay was tax free. When I joined Air
29 America, I was making about eleven hundred a month. Now, later on mostly in Laos, on
30 dangerous missions you go an extra fifty dollars, okay? Now you say, “Well, that’s okay,
31 that’s not okay.” But when you figure, you’re flying out over thirty-seven millimeter anti-

1 aircraft, fifty-nine millimeter. We could blow your butt out of the sky. Fifty dollars ain't
2 squat, you know? But they did make up a little bit. The more you flew—let me see, I'm
3 trying to think, I think we got paid for certain hours. Yeah, we had to because guys are
4 getting over one hundred hours before I got to Udorn. After I got there was much, much
5 less. And then later on we formed a, pardon the expression, a union and we got paid over
6 seventy hours a month. If you didn't make it, if you only got through sixty then you're
7 paid for seventy which is no big thing. But yeah, we made a lot more money then, maybe
8 thirty, forty thousand, but this crap of seventy-five, one hundred thousand I never talked
9 to anybody that made that kind of money. Now, there was some really hairy stuff going
10 on up in the PEJ in Laos, guys in the night, the had night vision goggles and they were
11 landing not that far from 12.7 millimeter guns which are like our fifty, you know? But
12 they were getting a little extra money. I know one person who I heard about that flew
13 with me, junior to me, so I know he never made more money than I did, but he was out
14 with the firefighters in the Midwest or California or wherever it was telling those guys
15 out there he was making a humungous amount of money, you know? I said, I know the
16 guy and I know he couldn't have made that money because everywhere he went, I was
17 senior to him, and I didn't make anywhere near what he says he's making. So, there were
18 people—some people loved to exaggerate, but no, we didn't make all that much money at
19 all. And even in those days, you know, the two triple five tax form, you got twenty
20 thousand tax free which wasn't all that much. I'm trying to think, that may have taken
21 effect after three years or maybe after three years with the twenty-five thousand. But you
22 know, later on in the eighties and nineties that tax free was going up to seventy-five, one
23 hundred thousand for the big boys. But no, we didn't make that much money. If we did it
24 for the money, we would have probably gone somewhere else. When I was back in the
25 States, at the end of '67, took a test for United or American, I forget which and as I was
26 getting on the airplane in San Francisco to go to Taiwan for my training. I said, "What
27 the hell?" That test I took, gave me twenty minutes. I did it in about ten. I'm not
28 bragging, but it was like one and one make two, okay? I mean, it was so extraordinarily
29 simple that I knew I did well on it. So, I called and said, "You know, I know I did well on
30 your test because it was so simple." I said, "Why didn't you guys ever call me or contact
31 me?" "We tried to." "What do you mean?" "We asked the base manager there in

1 Sacramento Airport where they had people to contact you to come in for an interview.” I
2 said, “You never called me.” And they said, “Well, can you get in now?” I said, “Well, to
3 tell you the truth I’m getting on the airplane for another job over there at the far east so
4 maybe I’ll try again later.”

5 KC: Hmm, very interesting. I heard numbers as much from eighty to one hundred
6 thousand tax-free with standard permitting the pilots.

7 RC: Oh no, definitely not.

8 KC: It’s exaggerated.

9 RC: Oh, grossly exaggerated. We had a few guys that did really special stuff and
10 got extra money and I’ve got a few of those myself, but they were normally, in the best
11 situations, five to ten a week, maybe a couple in a day. So that’s what, two of those is one
12 hundred dollars, four is two hundred. You know, you didn’t have that many of those and
13 that was up to what they call the case officer to make a decision whether or not was an
14 extra hazardous or not, you know? I don’t know anybody that made—factually that made
15 over fifty. That could have been some that made a little big more than that, that would
16 have been ahead of me or whatever. Now, there were guys that did some strange stuff in
17 China and I don’t know what they made, but I don’t think they made all that much.
18 They’re from the old school and the old school class. I got second lieutenant, Kelly. I
19 made 222 a month, rich.

20 KC: Yeah (laughing). You mention that some of these people had some strange
21 stuff over in China. What kind of stuff are you talking about?

22 RC: Well, they never told you about it much, but I heard guys—well, you know,
23 they lost an airplane over there, they lost a guy over there, and the Chinese denied it for
24 years and years and the daughter was involved trying to locate it and so forth. The CIA
25 and the people involved probably admitted it later on and they may have even brought a
26 body or two back, but then one of my good friends, Jerry Macintyre who I still maintain
27 contact with, he flew up in Nepal and they were doing stuff, I guess probably the
28 Chinese. He was up there for almost two years, but he would never say one word about
29 what he did, you know? One of my good friends who I worked with up at Rosenbaum
30 Aviation that I talked about before, he was their chief pilot. He would take off at night
31 from; let’s see, over towards India, low level. That means like fifty or one hundred feet,

1 you know? And then fly up into the mainland and drop people off. He never did explain
2 what it was they were doing exactly or doing in great detail, but that was some scary
3 stuff, you know, flying low level terrain. The least little mistake you're into a hill or a
4 tree or a mountain or whatever, but they may have gotten a little more. Whether they
5 were told they could never talk about it or what, but nobody ever really, you know, in like
6 a bragging type attitude. "I did this, I did that, and you guys did nothing and whatever."
7 There was some exciting stuff, but not much is known about it. In fact, I didn't know that
8 Jerry did this in Nepal until just maybe ten years ago.

9 KC: Oh, is that right?

10 RC: I worked with him on almost a daily basis, and he never talked about his
11 background, his Navy background. He was an ex-Army guy. Another good guy, of
12 course.

13 KC: May have been one of those things where they're flying in a place where
14 you're not supposed to be so obviously the powers that be decided they should keep their
15 mouth shut. I don't think there's a question about that. All right, well it sounds like your
16 first year here in Vietnam flying for Air America was pretty standard. You were flying
17 mostly people from place to place, a few other things here and there. You haven't related
18 to me anything, you know, really extraordinary about your experiences flying. Was there
19 anything that really stands out in your mind about your time flying in Vietnam?

20 RC: Not really, it was pretty mundane, is that the right word? As long as you're
21 careful and didn't fly where you weren't supposed to or had bad luck like the C-47. You
22 know, in a big airplane like that, you're climbing out, like a jet fighter goes scooting up to
23 five thousand real quick. It's a slow climb. What we did there and especially in Laos, we
24 climbed around our location up to like two or three thousand feet before we started out
25 going from A to B. And when we'd come in from going to B from A, we'd come in at
26 three thousand feet or so and the chopper just drops collective and spiral down like all the
27 rotate straight down. And airplanes, you just do the slow circle until you got over the
28 point and landed. So, you just have to be careful, I think I mentioned that the Chinese
29 caribou was actually later. They were cautioned not to go there, but the just thought the
30 knew better and they didn't want to fly all the way down another twenty, thirty miles to
31 Can Tho and then circle up back in and come into Saigon from the south, southwest. So,

1 as long as you're careful, it wasn't all that complicated. If they did shoot at you and miss
2 or whatever, they gave away their location, you know? That might turn out bad for him.
3 So, we had to be careful and they didn't always shoot at everybody when they had a
4 chance probably until much later.

5 KC: That brings up another good question, I think. Say you're on a mission;
6 you're flying from point A to point B. As you come under enemy fire, as an Air
7 American pilot, do you radio that in; do you communicate that to the American Air
8 Force, the Army, or whoever may have been in charge of that particular area? Do you
9 report in enemy fire?

10 RC: No, we had no contact with the particular military Army or Navy where we
11 went. The best we could do, really, is contact our operations either at the local place like
12 Nha Trang, Qui Nhon or somewhere or Pleiku. If you're in Saigon, contact and let them
13 know. Now, since it never does really happen, I don't know if they had the ability to
14 contact the Air Force directly and have them go look. Of course, by the time they would
15 get there it's probably thirty minutes to an hour and then locals would be long gone
16 anyway. Speaking of that, I remember back in my Chinook days coming into Vung Tau
17 from the north flying over this little town called Barilla that I mentioned before that we
18 learned later on was heavily communist invested. Somebody came out of the village and
19 started shooting at us, you know? I think we were supposed to get permission before I did
20 anything like that, but in the heat of combat; so, to speak, I just turned that Chinook over
21 on the side the best he could with a big bird like that. We had M-60 machine guns and the
22 side doors, so we just fired at him and descended down a little bit closer to him to get
23 some shooting there. I think we had an M-79 grenade launcher which you fired down into
24 the yard, but we never saw him again and I'm sure he had a tunnel at the bottom of that
25 building that he was in. We tried to call on the emergency channels, 243 and 121.5 and
26 request any help from any Air Force that might have been in the area. Now, had they
27 come and destroyed the building, would I have been in deep Kimchi. It could have been.

28 KC: Right.

29 RC: Probably worked out for the best the way it did.

30 KC: Okay, now you used the word mundane to kind of describe your time there
31 applying for Air America in Vietnam. You're there until sometime in 1969.

1 RC: Yup.

2 KC: You expressed this desire to do something else. What did you want to do
3 differently from what you were doing from your first year with Air America?

4 RC: Make money.

5 KC: Which would involve what?

6 RC: (laughing) that's what I was telling you. I wasn't going anywhere as a co-
7 pilot and the money was less than I made with the military, and it was a little interesting.
8 You know, I wasn't able to save any money or anything. We had heard it was pretty
9 exciting over in Laos and we'd heard it was also very dangerous. Guys who went up
10 there for a month or two would then come back, but at that point, I could do both and if
11 you'd never been a co-pilot, you're always number two. Nothing what you say matters
12 unless you get a nice captain like this guy Fred Opitz, you know? I asked a couple guys
13 that were real jackasses, retired Air Force guy. In fact, I'll tell you the truth. Later on,
14 when we left Air America, came back to the States, and committed suicide. I don't know
15 what went on exactly, although I heard rumors. But no, you get tired of being number
16 two; you want to be number one. It's like when you're quarterback for the Jets or the
17 Colts or somebody, you know, you don't want to sit on the bench. Like when they tried to
18 sit on the bench in Arizona, he said no. "If I can't fight for that number one job or be
19 number one, I ain't coming back to you guys." So, the same way you want to be number
20 one. The only way to do that was to make more money, because they were making
21 double what I was up in Udorn was to switch over and since I was fortunate enough to
22 have that Chinook time, it made me look good on paper.

23 KC: So, who do you approach about getting out of here?

24 RC: The guy I talked to on the airplane, Red Dawson, remember?

25 KC: Okay, right.

26 RC: I flew him to Nha Trang, and I took the opportunity to ask him what the
27 chance of going helicopters since I had probably almost as much helicopter time as I had
28 air time. And that's the reason I got on thick swing was because they needed people more
29 badly than they did the choppers. Although, later on they needed chopper guys more so
30 than thick swing. So, several guys that I knew went into helicopters.

1 KC: And they were pretty pleased with it and, of course, you had all this time in
2 helicopters, and you told me earlier in the interview that you preferred to fly helicopters,
3 you said they were a lot more fun.

4 RC: Yeah, they are, but it's more complicated and you feel like you're more in
5 control and it's just a whole lot better environment, you know? Maybe that doesn't make
6 much sense, but airplanes after awhile, it's like driving a car, you know? You can drive a
7 car in your sleep almost and maybe you've done it. So, with an airplane the most exciting
8 part is landing, the second most exciting time is taking off, and if you haven't heard it,
9 one definition of flying is, "Hours of sheer boredom interrupted by moments of stark
10 panic." So that's what airplane flying is, it's pretty old and that's why those guys flew
11 one hundred miles past Cleveland. The both decided to do the same dumb thing at the
12 same time. But no, choppers are just a hell of a lot more fun. More challenging you can
13 say.

14 KC: And it would mean a change of venue for you. It would mean that you'd be
15 flying out in the morning in Laos.

16 RC: I like choppers, you know. Of course, it meant more money and when you're
17 thirty-five and you're not making much you're looking at—in those days, thirty-five was
18 a little bit old, today, thirty-five is nothing. Of course, I can say that when I'm seventy-
19 five. It was just another challenge. I guess you could look at it that way.

20 KC: When do you leave Vietnam for Udorn?

21 RC: July of '69.

22 KC: In July of 1969, all right. You've made up your mind, you've gotten the
23 okay, you're going to go to Udorn to fly helicopters, rotary wing. Tell me the process by
24 which you left Saigon, made it to Udorn and entered this new phase of this Air America
25 career.

26 RC: Just Air America was really good; they took care of you in a lot of ways.
27 They just gave me a ticket from Saigon to Bangkok and from Bangkok, flew a local flight
28 up to Udorn checked in with the chief pilot. At that time, it was a guy named Wayne
29 Knight and they had a New Zealand guy who was an assistant, Phil somebody, and just
30 found a place to stay and presented my ID and all that other good stuff. Everything else
31 the uniforms were all the same. They said, "Okay, you start your training the next day."

1 Of course, you got ground school along with the actual flight training which is
2 interesting. Ground school is never a lot of fun, you know. I never was into nuts and bolts
3 all that much. And I've never been in a 34. I've been in something similar, which the
4 Army called an H-37. They also called it the BUFS, the big, ugly, fat sucker.

5 KC: Right.

6 RC: Make sure you get that right on the thing. I just said a bad word.

7 KC: Right, yeah, we'll make sure it says that on the transcript.

8 RC: The transition wasn't all that much, but the one thing, the H-34 was an older
9 helicopter and when you're flying and you steer, so to speak with the collective in your
10 right hand and then you bring in the power and so forth with your collective which is that
11 thing along your left leg. As you pull that up and ask for more power, you've got to lead
12 that pull with a rotation to keep your RPM up. Because if he needs to pull up on that
13 collective, your RPM goes to squat and you fall out of the aircraft, out of the air like a
14 rock. So, you've got to lead RPM so that you make sure you don't lose your RPM and
15 you get so far down that you either fall or you can't control it and you've got to drop the
16 collective immediately to survive. So, now the Huey, for example, and later helicopters,
17 that was all integrated into the collective. As you pulled up, it rotated itself to lead with
18 the RPM so to make sure you didn't lose enough that they fell out of the sky. So that was
19 very tricky and that was the same true to all the earlier helicopters. The H-13, H-23, I
20 think the H-37, of course. Now, the Chinook, it had integrated controls in that as you
21 pulled up in the Chinook you had like a pistol grip. The RPM was led along as you put in
22 the demand for power. So that was a little bit tricky. My same token, when you dropped a
23 collective you had to lead by turning off, so to speak, RPM, rotate the thing the other
24 direction. Clockwise, counter-clockwise, depends on how you look at it, I guess. So that
25 was interesting for awhile until I got more comfortable with that. And then after that, then
26 you go out—see, I had spent no time up there and so I had to go out with another captain.
27 The other thing, in helicopters, you're a captain right away. Of course, you don't get to
28 fly as a captain or the captain until much later when you're checked out, but you fly up
29 around all these—you learn the countries and you learn to win these—I mean, we did
30 some terrible stuff. There wasn't that much concern—the word is not safety but being
31 overweight. You might be at the ground, on the ground at Udorn, almost sea level and

1 being able to pick up and hover and handle, what, twelve thousand pounds of gross
2 weight or, what, six or seven people inside the aircraft. You're going to a hilltop at five or
3 six thousand feet. Well, with the thin air up there, you can't do that, you know? If you try
4 to hover you will fall onto the ground. And if you're on the ground, you'll never get up
5 off the ground. So, we were a little bit—as I got to know when things were a little bit
6 sloppy with things like that. I recall it very clearly, we're on this mountain top with this
7 training captain, a good friend of mine, can't think of his name now. He lives here in
8 Florida and I know the RPM was around 2700, 2750. So, when you get a little more
9 RPM, like twenty-eight, twenty-nine hundred and you lift up abruptly on your collective,
10 the helicopter would jump off the ground about a foot or two. Then, of course, you didn't
11 have the power to stay up there so you would lose RPM and you come back to the
12 ground. So, we'd do this about five times. Hoppity, hoppity, hop to the top of the hill off
13 to one side or the other. Of course, you do what you're doing because you knew that hill
14 was there.

15 KC: Right.

16 RC: But then you'd grab a bunch of power like 2900s and you'd jump off into
17 space and as you cleared the hilltop, the cliff, whatever you're on, you'd drop the
18 collective to maintain your RPM. So, you were flying, and you were literally overweight,
19 overgrowth, but by using this tricky technique, cause I asked him, "What were you
20 doing?" He explained it all to me. That's what you had to do when you're over weight.
21 Now, I remember one captain, Tim Wooten, he landed on this hilltop, kicked off one
22 thousand pounds and he still had quite a bit of fuel on board and he couldn't get off the
23 ground.

24 KC: Wow.

25 RC: That means he landed—and you land these really tight little places that are
26 not much bigger than your gear. If you don't land in there perfectly, you're in trouble
27 because you're not going to get out and if you miss, you're probably going to crash. So,
28 he had to sit there and drain off a bunch of fuel so that he could get off the ground.

29 KC: Even after dropping one thousand pounds.

30 RC: I don't know if we ever, ever got where we were smarter than that.
31 Everybody did it so that's what you did.

1 KC: Right, kind of like the culture, I guess, of what you're doing.

2 RC: The environment, yeah.

3 KC: Right, well tell me about the structure there at Udorn. Tell me about Air
4 America's set up at Udorn.

5 RC: Well, we flew out of Udorn and what we did—like I said, I was up there four
6 and a half, almost five years and I think I spent five years flying within Thailand. We
7 leave in the morning with our helicopter, unless the helicopter was in place in which case
8 we would have, as I said before, dead heads and another helicopter and another airplane
9 up to their where we would leave the pilot on sight. Let's say, I took my own helicopter.
10 We free-flighted, of course, to make sure there weren't any problems. One of the things
11 you have to understand about helicopters is you've got the drive shaft and the engine
12 which are two big sources called high frequency vibrations. And if you can feel that,
13 sometimes it's difficult to feel, but you know when you got it because after awhile, let's
14 say, it's where your foot is on the pedal or something like that. Your foot would go to
15 sleep because of that high frequency vibration. And the one rule was, you never left one
16 of those because you couldn't tell what it was. Anyway, once you checked out the
17 chopper it was good. You flew off to where you're going and once you got there you got
18 your briefing from the local guy. Now, this environment was much different, this was
19 paramilitary from the word go. I would carry anything from soldiers with grenades
20 wrapped around with their AK-47s, stuff like that, to a preacher Father Broussard, we
21 took a big old bore to a leper village because their bores head died, you know, so those
22 are the two extremes that I can probably point out. I'd go up there and get my mission for
23 the day, go here, either somebody would go with me or I'd be told exactly where to go,
24 and I'd meet somebody there and I'd do whatever it was I had to do. At the end of the
25 day at four, five o'clock I'd be released, come back to—let's say I went to twenty
26 alternate which was the big headquarters of the agency and the General Vang Pao which
27 I'm sure you've heard of his name. He was the leader of the locals. Our crew chief would
28 check our helicopter down, if there was nothing wrong, we'd be fine, we'd refill it and
29 everything and get ready to get our mission for the next day, so we know what time to
30 come out. So, we'd do that and then we'd go, you know, to some mountaintop. When I
31 first got up there, we were fighting over the PDJ, so we'd bring in soldiers and

1 ammunition, something like that to the PDJ because airplanes couldn't get in, but we'd
2 carry our little old load up there and drop it off. There was a lot of fighting going on. We
3 took the PDJ back from the bad guys and then took it back from them and in late '71, the
4 bad guys took it back and we never did get it back. We'd fly throughout, oh, seventy-five
5 to one hundred miles north of Vientiane was okay. Have you seen the map of Laos?

6 KC: Yes, sir.

7 RC: We'd fly east a little bit and then south. It was quite long from north to south.
8 South down to a place called Savannakhet. We worked with people there, locals trying to
9 fight with the bad guys or get down to Pakse in the southern tip of Laos. They have a
10 bulba planes, I think it was called, a bulba plateau, which was like three, four thousand
11 feet within a few miles of Pakse. Of course, Pakse was right on the Mekong and it was
12 almost sea level. Then if you went the other way, you went up on the CIA heading to the
13 west which was not all that friendly territory. And then you'd turn around and go north to
14 a place called Luang Prabang went to the old capitol and I had some of my more exciting
15 times up there. And then if you didn't go all the way north to the Luang Prabang you
16 would follow the Mekong west and fly up around near the Thai border to a place called
17 Manui Sai and places like that. And we'd be out there for maybe six days, we'd have the
18 seventh day off. If the weather permitted, then we'd fly—if the helicopter was good,
19 you'd call in the code the night before or the operations there at the base would and they
20 would send a replacement up and pile it up on the big airplanes. The caribou, 46, 47,
21 whatever or even the Bulpar and then we'd go back and have our day off and start
22 sending out the next day, you know. You saw them at the same place two trips in a row. I
23 know I started off at Udorn a couple times because I wasn't strong enough for the
24 mountain work yet. You know, it just takes time to fill up your technique and
25 understanding what you do and can't do. Like I said, we were always overweight.
26 Everybody did it and nobody complained. The other nice thing about the H34, it's got
27 wheels. So, I remember landing one time on this road and all of a sudden, my crew chief
28 said, "Holy hell." "What, what, what?" he said, "I didn't know we're landing yet." I had
29 somehow sneaked a power down very carefully and slowly and all of a sudden there the
30 road was and make what we call a running landing. Of course, you weren't supposed to
31 go much more than—it might have been five miles an hour, but shit, I remember doing

1 fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty, and fifty. Whatever it would take you never—what you do,
2 you touch the tail wheel down and then you slowly bring the manger down. By that time,
3 you slowed down quite a bit, but I loved that, the H-34. Golly, it was the best thing I ever
4 flew. I'd always have trouble with it, with the Huey. It's hard to put those damn medal
5 skids down softly on a concrete runway. So that's basically what it was. Pretty routine,
6 something's more dangerous than others, but we did some hot stuff, we earned our
7 money up there.

8 KC: Well, that's a terrific overview of the basic layout and the basic flow of
9 things there to your time in Laos. Why don't we take a break there for today.

Interview with Robert Caron
Session [4] of [5]
Date 3 February 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Robert Caron. Today is February 3, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Caron is joining me again from his home in Fort Walton
4 Beach, Florida. Mr. Caron, when we left off last time, you'd given me a description of
5 the set up and the general routine there at Air America. Today I wanted to start off with
6 operations out of Udorn in Thailand. Can you explain to me the process by which you'd
7 got to Udorn and then the overall setup there?

8 Robert Caron: Okay, well initially I was hired on as a fixed wing pilot into
9 Saigon. As I said, went right back where I was when I was in the Army. So, I was there
10 about a year and a half. As I was saying before, I would never go to make captain
11 because I was pretty far down the roster as a co-pilot. So, when I talked to the personnel
12 guy, Red Dawson who came through Vietnam I asked him about going into helicopters
13 because I heard they needed chopper pilots at Udorn, and I had a lot of chopper time. To
14 make a long story short, he put the move in motion and next thing I know I had
15 instructions to go to Udorn and I took off with a good friend of mine, Hank Edwards. We
16 moved up there together and got there in July of '69 and got transitioned in the H-34
17 which I'd never flown, but flown the similar thing called the H-37, a little bit bigger and
18 a twin engine. But anyway, I got checked out there in the helicopter then went on training
19 flights with the captains and to Laos. The procedure was we were based out of Udorn, but
20 we almost, like ninety-five percent of our flying or even more was in Laos. So, we'd
21 leave Udorn in the morning, go to let's say, a place called Twenty Alternate, and be
22 there—we fly six days. At the end of the sixth day, we tried to kind of go along with the
23 FAA requirements and have a seventh day of rest. So, we'd either fly if that helicopter
24 was not suitable for a country had maintenance problems. We would talk with the chief
25 pilot and we'd either fly it back for repair or we would leave it up there and dead head on
26 another chopper going back or an airplane going back into Udorn and then go back there
27 for our day off and then after that seventh day off then we'd be prepared to go out again.
28 We might go to, you know, all kinds of places within Laos from the Twenty Alternate
29 way down in the Southeast, Twenty Alternate a little bit north, both along the Mekong

1 River and then back up the Twenty Alternate and then further northwest to the old oil
2 capital of Luang Prabang or even up to the area called Manui Sai over near the Thai and
3 Lao border. So basically, we'd be up there five or six days. Rarely when we stayed
4 longer, but the weather was such that the airplane couldn't get in or get out then we
5 would stay longer. The six day thing was not in concrete, but the rule we tried to follow.

6 KC: Just basically what you tried to do if circumstances would allow.

7 RC: Yeah, uh-huh.

8 KC: All right, now tell me about these flights. You're flying in Laos. You're
9 spending, like you say, five or six days there in Laos whether it's Pakse or Vientiane or
10 Luang Prabang or wherever it might be. What would be the purpose of these flights,
11 typically?

12 RC: Well, we were assisting the locals themselves with moving food, moving
13 people. On rare occasions we'd get involved into some of the combative aspects of the
14 goings on in Laos. We've picked up—they had a bunch of Thai soldiers in Laos at one
15 time down near the Pakse area. Mostly Pakse, really. We would move them in and out of
16 their positions a little bit trying, of course, not to put ourselves in harms way.
17 Occasionally would do that if you had to, but the missions were up to us. If we thought
18 the risk was too great, we could turn it down with really no loss of respect or whatever. I
19 know for example the Thais had been pushed back up on the plains. Boulevens, I'm not
20 sure how it's pronounced.

21 KC: Boulevens, I believe.

22 RC: Yeah, the pushed back into a circle and I think the circle was like one
23 hundred meters in diameter, maybe a little more. We were asked to pick up their PAC 75
24 and get it out and then move some of the troops out. Well, when you're talking one
25 hundred yards in diameter, you're talking fifty yards radius and you're talking hovering
26 while crew men hooks up the PAC 75. You pick it up, lift off, slowly move on out
27 because the planes are like four thousand feet. The altitude there is not that great. You
28 know, you were an obvious target for anybody who wants to shoot at you. I remember
29 myself, Tim Woolsey, and a couple others, we talked about it. I said, "Now, this is not
30 something we want to do. You guys let yourself get in this position way too late and, you

1 know, it's just going good people in after bad." So, we turned it down and I don't know if
2 they got it out or not. The PAC 75 was damn near an ancient weapon even then.

3 KC: Right.

4 RC: We could do that, but other times I think maybe I mentioned there was a
5 Catholic priest up in Laos who worked hard throughout his career and he later on there
6 and then Indonesia became very famous, his name is Father Broussard. They had a leper
7 village up there at the corner where Thailand comes to Laos and the Mekong goes east
8 and then the South and then that area was a leper village and I remember we tied up a
9 boar, a male pig and secured him in a helicopter and we had to be careful because had he
10 gotten loose, he could run to the back of the inside the helicopter and such was like a
11 three hundred pound animal like that, but our center of gravity is so far out of position
12 I'm not even sure we could fly. So, we had to make really sure the stake was secured.
13 Anyway, we flew just outside the village and Father Broussard and his people undid the
14 pig and got him into the village. We, of course, waited at the helicopter not wanting to
15 come in contact, not knowing what to expect. But, I mean, that was one thing, you know?
16 And then we'd occasionally move troops. I've had to tell my flight mechanic to make
17 sure that those grenades were properly secured around their belts and when they say
18 down, they didn't sit and knock these darn things off their belts. They're just local people
19 with little or no education or training and so you just had to be real careful. But we did all
20 kinds of things like that I guess from A to Z. Later on, we put some troops up along the
21 Lao, Chinese border to examine the road that the Chinese apparently were building down
22 into Burma. I don't know much about that, it's just that we put the troops in and then later
23 on tried to take them up. So, everything from A to Z from the hard stuff to whatever and
24 we carried a lot of food in and out, you know? Move people here and there. Anything
25 they wanted to do later on even I was involved in dropping off people that were trying to
26 eradicate, I guess, to where it is. Poppy fields, which is the way a lot of the locals made
27 their income.

28 KC: Well, let me back up here a little bit and take you back to the time where you
29 said that you simply had to turn down a particular mission to pick up some of these Thai
30 troops in Pack 75. If you found a mission to be too dangerous, if you said, "Look, I just
31 don't think that we can do this and do this safely and you turned it down. Would someone

1 then turn to someone else in Air America and say, "Look, Caron turned this down, but
2 will you consider coming and doing this?"

3 RC: No, I never called any of that. The trick was, they didn't do that as much as,
4 "Let's go look at it." We used to have a joke, "Let's go look at a mission." You get over
5 there with the troops inside or pick somebody up and you'd have your T-28 cover. A lot
6 of effort went into it. Then it's up to us to say, "Okay, we still think it's bad we're going
7 back, you know?" Once you put yourself in that position or they put you in that position
8 you agreed to that position. The chances of turning it down grew less as you got closer to
9 the mission's site. So, there was no—not that I recall any, say, "Bob won't do it, but go
10 talk to Tim or Tim won't do it they call Bob." Some guys are a little more reckless than
11 others and their guys that took missions and they were watching fifty-nine rounds going
12 off all around them. You only need one round to destroy the helicopters and you're dead
13 meat so to speak. So, there were a lot of risky missions and it wasn't so much if it was
14 risk or not, it was the degree of risk. So that's what I remember in particular that Tim was
15 the senior captain on sight that made the decision and we all back him. As I recall, this
16 time Tim was the senior captain, but was nice enough to talk to me and see what I
17 thought. We pretty much agreed, you know, damn perimeter like that, that was just too
18 small. Sometimes we'd run in low levels and run out low level, but they want you to sit
19 there and hover ten, fifteen feet while you hook up a PAC 75. You're just inviting a
20 disaster, so. I think they knew it because, as I recall, there wasn't much of a problem. We
21 said, "No, we don't think we want to do this."

22 KC: Right, now what do you supposed happened to these Thai troops that were on
23 the ground?

24 RC: Oh, I think they got out. They weren't that far up in the planes. I'm pretty
25 sure they fought their way out, okay? As a matter of fact, if I remember the story right
26 somebody was involved in that and lifting them out, you know, in low level out low
27 level, ran out of fuel. Somebody else went over to pick help from them and they almost
28 ran out of fuel. I recall pretty much they got out.

29 KC: Now, were these Air America lists that came in to try to get him out?

30 RC: Oh yeah.

31 KC: Okay.

1 RC: Other H-34s.

2 KC: Okay, so although you guys turned them down, someone actually finally did
3 relent?

4 RC: Well, they moved and there wasn't a problem. They broke out of that
5 perimeter and it wasn't a problem sitting there, you know, as an inviting target while you
6 hovered and picked up this silly Pack 75.

7 KC: Okay, I've heard, or I've read that when a mission was offered to Air
8 America that sometimes, like you say, the senior captain would say, "Well, we don't
9 want to turn it down. Let's go out and look at it." And go out, fly out and look at it and
10 come up with reasons why they decided it was not worth while and come back and say,
11 "Look, I was out there, I was over this area and there's no way we can do it." Generally,
12 that would be accepted by whoever was asking them if they would actually go out and
13 look at it first.

14 RC: Yeah, I don't recall specifically doing that, but I do recall going out there and
15 then saying, "Well, like I say, so much effort went into the mission." The only reason you
16 went to look anyway that you thought it might be possible, you know? And once you
17 crossed that line it might be possible and got out there. As I said, you got your fighter
18 cover, you know? It might be F-4s or it could be the Lao T28s. Even later on there was a
19 situation where you had A1Es there which were good airplanes because they could hang
20 around longer and go a little slower. I think do a better job than the F-4s who were in and
21 out and seldom hit their target, I don't think.

22 KC: Yeah, from the people I've talked to the A1E was the favored, the preferred
23 tactical support in the area.

24 RC: Oh, absolutely.

25 KC: Because of the loiter time and the weapons they could bring to bear and
26 things like that. Now who would be providing—

27 RC: The F4s come in, strafe, they'd get a bomb damage assessment, and they
28 came up with figures a quarter mile away looking at the same damn thing and I don't see
29 any damage at all so to speak, you know? They got a little nervous because these Laos,
30 they were very courageous. They'd sit on that 12.7 and if you dove in on them, they'd
31 just sit there and if you dive in on them, you're pretty much of a perfect target. They got

1 so the reputation of being tenacious and courageous and off the time. I guess it's like a
2 game of chicken, the F-4 pulled out first, maybe at several thousand feet, you know?
3 What can you do from there?

4 KC: Now, these would be Americans flying, say, the Sky Raider and the F4?

5 RC: Yeah, yeah.

6 KC: Okay, but you said that would be the Lao flying the trainers?

7 RC: The T28.

8 KC: The T28 and it'd be the Royal Lao Air Force I would assume?

9 RC: Yeah.

10 KC: Okay, okay. How would you coordinate with them? How would that work?

11 RC: Of course, when we left, we'd get a briefing on the ground before we left.
12 Frequencies, locations, and call signs and stuff and that was agency people were on the
13 ground; called advisors were on the ground. They would brief us at Pakse and other
14 situations where we—it was close, but we decided to try it when we were briefed, where
15 the bad guys were or were not. So, the best plan was to come in low level from what we
16 thought might be less dangerous avenue and go out another one. "So, they wouldn't come
17 in this way, they'll come out this way, so we'll just sit here with our AK-47s and fly
18 overhead." Because if you get low level, you know, you're on them before they have a
19 chance to fire in a lot of cases. As I recall in this situation, we were briefed. There's
20 nothing in this particular avenue of approach. So, we went in that way—I don't recall if
21 came out the same way or a little different. I think it came out a different way which was
22 the practice, but we were failed. The advisor failed to brief us. That morning an O-1, the
23 Air Force Co-01 the old Army L-19 had taken 12.7 fire. I wrote a nasty letter as I recall,
24 and she probably wasn't happy about sending it up. We may have changed some
25 wordings because I was really livid that we had not been properly briefed. So, what
26 happened, being the lead aircraft, I was able to get out safely, but by the time the second
27 air craft—I think it was Jessie somebody came out. The bad guys were ready for him and
28 they hit him with a couple of 12.7 rounds which are like fifty caliber which are nasty,
29 nasty bullets and hit the flight mechanics right in the head. Make a long story short, his
30 brains were all over the cabin of the helicopter and he was dead, of course, instantly.
31 Then we went back into Pac Sai and landed. We always had debriefing and I remember

1 screaming and yelling, you know, too late then, but I don't know if the guy got fired or
2 not, but I thought he was totally incompetent. I let the acute pilot know, of course, he's
3 the one that has the direct contact with the agency people there at Udon and I don't
4 know how it turned out. These things are going to happen, you don't want them to
5 happen, you certainly don't want them to happen because somebody is stupid or careless
6 or incompetent in their job. So mostly the people were excellent. I remember a guy
7 named green that was a guide of—shoot, internal injury, shoot, I can't think of the word.
8 Your thing breaks and then you get defected internally. I can't think of what the body
9 part is. Anyway, he was picked up out there and he was excellent, excellent and he died
10 in Udon that night. They couldn't get him back fast enough. Most of the guys, I say,
11 were quite good. Rarely were they the problem, I like said, that time.

12 KC: When you're moving people around there in Laos whether it's a refugee,
13 farmer, civilians, or if it is Thai or Lao Military, about how many personnel could the H-
14 34 carry?

15 RC: Like I was saying before, I think, we did some work at the higher altitudes.
16 Actually, that depended on your fuel load, but we would take—the Laos themselves were
17 not big Army military types, two hundred, two hundred and fifty pounds with their gear
18 and everything. They're more like 150. But we would take six, seven, or eight. It just
19 depended; you know. We never—I know one operation, and I can't recall the details, but
20 we moved a bunch of soldiers in. We had probably three or four 34s at one time just
21 rotating for about two hours. I don't remember the full number, but I know we were in
22 and out a lot. Although it was considered quite hazardous, with bad guys everywhere,
23 that was one time that I don't know whether they just decided not to stay and fight or
24 whatever, but we had very little had been enemy fire. Usually often times, you're by
25 yourself. Of course, it'd be a hazard mission like that when you always had what they
26 called SAR birds, search, and rescue. When I had my problem up by the Luang Prabang,
27 two birds were—their job was to get in low-level, get out the same way. The third
28 helicopter would orbit a couple thousand feet in the air and if they ever had a problem, it
29 was mission, and his only mission to drop down there as quickly as you could, pick up
30 the crew and get the devil out of there.

1 KC: Now, were you shot down near Luang Prabang? Tell me about that mission.
2 Tell me about that from start to finish.

3 RC: Well, what happened, as I was saying before, you put teams in to analyze
4 gathered intelligence basically. In this case they were, I guess, supposed to look at the
5 road there just across the Chinese border. Another guy put them in and then what we'd
6 do—in fact, it was a continental, and they're called Cassie, baron, beach baron twin
7 engine. When I got up there on sight two days went out and just flew around. We
8 couldn't fly right over there because it would give away their position to the bad guys
9 because the bad guys were kind of everywhere. We'd talk and we tried to contact him,
10 and we finally did. I remember this the second day of talking, I remember the young
11 beach pilots talking to him and looking at him and saying, "You know, these guys are
12 supposed to be scared to death and on the run, but this guy sounds like he's right next to
13 you in the living room. No fear, no problem at all." So, it just doesn't sound right.
14 Without additional evidence that there was a problem, we elected to do the mission the
15 next day. So, we talked to them briefly that we would be back the next day at such and
16 such a time. We did go back the next day with the three helicopters out of Luang
17 Prabang. As I recall, I was told, I wouldn't know exactly—we were about twenty-five,
18 thirty miles from Dien Bien Phu, just across the border in Laos. So, we went back the
19 next day and as the senior guy, it was up to me to who to do what so to speak. I went in
20 first, that was the plan. The second helicopter went second, and I had a guy named Stirgar
21 who was the search and rescue bird to stand by and help with what's necessary. Well, as I
22 went in, I was just about, oh, maybe one hundred yards out. These people were standing
23 their with their hands in the air, whatever, then all of a sudden there was something in
24 their hands and I could barely make it out because it happens in a split second. Then the
25 small area that they were in that we were supposed to land in was covered with smoke. I
26 remember with my great command English language saying, "Oh shit." There was
27 nothing we could do. In the 34, thank god, the engine is in front and it's a huge engine, a
28 big piston engine as apposed to the Huey engine up above you and behind. So, all that
29 AK-47, which obviously it was, just destroyed the engine and I lost engine and I'd rotate
30 it into the ground. I thought I turned right, but everybody said I turned left which I think
31 you're supposed to do when you lose the engine. I remember keying the mike and saying,

1 “Okay guys, come on down and get us.” For a second there I was cool, but it didn’t last
2 long. What I had forgotten, and, of course, who wouldn’t, when you lose the power like
3 that, you got to switch the battery switch to battery before you can communicate. So, the
4 guys never heard me.

5 KC: Oh no.

6 RC: So, they didn’t know exactly what happened. Myself, I jumped out of my
7 window. The co-captain Freddy Fram jumped out the left side and we gathered round
8 inside the aircraft. I had an oozy, a dropped radio somewhere so we were standing there
9 looking at each other and I remember Fred had blood down on the other side of his face
10 where a bullet had hit his helmet and the shrapnel had broken the skin just slightly above
11 his forehead a little bit. So, then we heard a couple rounds go overhead so we just figured
12 that they would come right for the helicopter, so we took off in the tall grass. Elephant
13 grass is about ten feet high and very sharp. I know at the end of the day my face was all
14 cut up. We just drove through the grass. You can’t run through the grass because it’s so
15 thick you just kind of flop your body forward and knock the grass down and then get up
16 and do the same thing all over again. As I remember clearly, we came across this beaten
17 bath, like a hole in the elephant grass. First, my first thought was, “Holy shit, this is
18 where the bad guys are.”

19 KC: Right.

20 RC: So, I just ran right across the path to the other side, down this hill, and up the
21 other side. Fredrick Fran was right behind me and he turned down the path. I don’t know
22 to this day what he was thinking, but obviously he thought that was the best way to go.
23 Anyway, make a long story short, we stood around, waved our shirts. I took off my shirt
24 and then my t-shirt which I waved in the air after I went to a little hill to one side and
25 tried to get the SAR bird to see because unfortunately, we didn’t have our radios to talk to
26 them, but he said he made an approach. Somebody fired a couple rounds at them, but he
27 was never hit and then he went back up to five thousand feet and orbited and called in
28 A1E support. I think we had T-28 support initially and then later on we got some A1Es in
29 there to help. This guy, he’s dead now so I can talk about him. He would just stay for as
30 long as he could and then he went back to Luang Prabang for—well, he didn’t refuel and
31 come back it was late in the day, but we are up north of Luang Prabang and guys all

1 around the country are hearing this on the radio. Yeah, how Miller was down at Twenty
2 Alternate actually, and Kenny Cash was in the same area and they immediately refueled.
3 Teddy had a Huey and after waiting around, too, the guy picked me up—Pat Millers also
4 passed away. I think he was killed in a car accident. But they dropped down, refueled,
5 and flew one hundred miles across bad guy territory just because they knew it was the
6 right thing to do. To make long story short, they showed up about, oh, three or four ‘o
7 clock in the afternoon and Hal was in Bien Long lives up near me near Fort Rucker. They
8 put down the horse collar with the hoist, you know, picked me up. We picked up—I think
9 we picked up the interpreter because we had four people on our helicopter and then
10 Teddy Cash picked up Fred. The flight mechanic at the time—the flight mechanic, he got
11 a round in the shoulder and unfortunately cut his nerve, so he had a difficult year that
12 took to grow that nerve back. I maintained contact with him for many years. In fact, he
13 just passed away last year. His name was Champ Bonnell, a really, really nice young
14 man. Anyway, we got picked up by those two guys and went back to Luang Prabang and
15 I guess sort of a debriefing, I don’t remember. We all complained bitterly about the other
16 pilots, but he was a good friend with the chief pilot, and nothing ever came of it.
17 Although, I tried to get him fired, he’s the only guy that I knew about the history of
18 America that never shouldered the responsibility for picking up and doing what the SAR
19 bird was supposed to do. As a matter of fact, he did the same think down just north of Pac
20 Sei, it’s called Lima Site 44. They did the same thing to Joe Lopes, an Air America guy.
21 He tried to get thing to fire, but again, it didn’t work. His there was a customer or some
22 guy on board directing the pick-up out at Lima Site 44 and he told not to land. Well,
23 everybody knows when you’re in action like that and doing things in the helicopter, in the
24 air, the guy in charge is the captain, and he makes the decision. His job is to SAR and do
25 it and he’s supposed to go down and not use a lame excuse. “Hey, the customer said I
26 shouldn’t go down.” Anyway, but by enlarge we’ve had some heroic things. I remember
27 Teddy Cash on the PDJ, an Air Force major in a Bird Dog was shot, running out of fuel,
28 and landed on the PDJ and the helicopters were called, and they were on their way up
29 there out of twenty alternate. They just went, you know, up there as fast as that could and
30 then they dived down to the ground. They got up there and they saw the Bird Dog and got
31 up there and couldn’t tell if he was alive or what, but they got down right next to the

1 helicopter and the guy was leaning over the door where he tried to open it and they've
2 been killed and pretty sure he was dead. At about that time a couple locals popped up out
3 of the grass and started shooting at the Huey so at that time they had to turn around and
4 leave. They were sure the guy was already dead, but there's no more instances of that. In
5 fact, Hal Miller wanted to pick me up past Savannakhet Air Force, F4 was shot down and
6 they called for help and north of Savannakhet is not Nakhon Phanom called NKP for
7 short and they had some Johnny Greens, and they went out to him up. The weather's
8 started getting a little bit bad, a little rain and it was starting at dusk. And so, the Johnny
9 Green just told him to hunker down, you know, and they come back and get him in the
10 morning. Hal told him, "Do you want me to get out just to turn his radio on so he could
11 use to key his mike so we could have a needle direction and point at him." So, Hal said,
12 "Turn it on, I'll be there in twenty minutes." So, he did just that, he got them out and he's
13 flying back to Savannakhet, and Johnny Green said, "Okay, we'll meet you back there
14 and pick him up and take him back to NKP." Hal said, "I don't think so." He said, "He's
15 going to stay the night with us." So that's what he did. He said, "If you want to talk to
16 him, fine, but you can come back and pick him up in the morning." So that's what
17 happened.

18 KC: He sounds like a pretty special guy.

19 RC: Yeah, he had unbelievable courage. He had Teddy Cash. Teddy was a marine
20 and a little outspoken sometimes, a little brash maybe, but in combat, in situations like
21 that, you want somebody like that on your team, you know. So, I remember later on we
22 had a similar mission and again, we had pre-aircraft and the co-pilot was Sturgar that
23 didn't pick us up, John somebody. I made damn sure he was in the SAR Bird. After the
24 mission, he came up to me and said, "Bob, I hope I wasn't upset because of what
25 happened before." I said, "Oh no, it's just the way it worked out." You had to know, of
26 course, that was the precise reason. You didn't want anybody whose life you could
27 depend on to be other than what the, you know, you could rely on a thousand percent,
28 you know in a situation like that because you don't have time to think. If you had time to
29 think you might do something stupid like run away.

30 KC: Well, let me take you back to this time where you were shot down near
31 Luang Prabang. Who was it that was shooting at you?

1 RC: I'm sorry, just like I said the day before, I said these guys are too damn calm,
2 they were captured. They were captured and surrounded in the forest to answer the radio.
3 They wanted to get some more people, more Americans.

4 KC: Right.

5 RC: The guys that were shooting at us, it could have been, you know, it happened
6 so quickly in tall grass that the hands I saw in the air waving were the good guys, and the
7 bad guys are kind of on the fringe there because I do remember very clearly all of a
8 sudden, this small area, we were supposed to pick them up from was covered with smoke.
9 Of course, the engine in the 34 is so noisy you can't hear anything. I just knew we were
10 in trouble at that point. At that point you're so low and slow that you can't do much. I
11 was going to say, when the engine shot out, we just landed—we landed just short of them
12 and I don't know whatever happened to them, but they didn't really come after us that
13 hard. Of course, the T28s may have had something to do with that. Then the A1Es and
14 then later on I remember the F4s. As a matter of fact, the senator from somewhere in the
15 Midwest, I can't think of his name now, it may have began with S. His son was a radar
16 guy, a captain there at Udorn and he's the one that called in the other fighters to try and
17 help us out. I always meant to get that tape from him, but I just never did. He or one of
18 his friends told me that the Air Force used that situation to direct the F4s over to take a
19 look over at the Chinese road. And what they saw, what they did, I don't have any idea. I
20 just remember that conversation being told then.

21 KC: Now did you say that you were the second bird in on this?

22 RC: No, first bird.

23 KC: So, you were the first bird? Okay.

24 RC: Yeah, yeah, I was the one who got shot. The second bird, he kind of trails
25 out, comes in slow and positions himself so as I come out, whether I come out the way I
26 went in because of terrain, whatever, he's in there. As soon as I'm out of the way he's in
27 there landing to expedite things if that's what it looks like. I don't even remember who
28 that was anymore, I just remember myself and Freddy and the other SAR bird.

29 KC: Now, since you were shot down, is it safe to assume that this second bird got
30 out of there?

1 RC: Oh yeah, yeah. He never got in close. Now, he was not the SAR and I can't
2 remember why in the hell he didn't help out, but he didn't. He may have gotten back
3 right away, I don't know.

4 KC: Interesting. Now, what is going through your mind when your engine is out
5 and your auto rotating to the ground? What's going through your mind?

6 RC: Nothing, Kelly. Just scared to death, oh shit, like I told you before and you
7 don't have time because to see all that gun fire and you don't know why you're not hit
8 and then you're on the ground. Frankly, I don't recall getting out of the helicopter, I
9 recall standing up, looking at Fred beside the helicopter and my left shoulder hurt like
10 hell. So, I surmised, I jumped out from the—see, in the 34 you climb up the side and
11 you're sitting—have you ever seen the 34?

12 KC: Yes.

13 RC: Okay, so you have an idea. You climb up; you're sitting about, oh, maybe ten
14 feet in the air. So, when you get out you normally just climb down the side. You got foot
15 holes to grab on and so forth. I just must have jumped down and that's what happened.
16 Well, my shoulder hurt, but the instant—and I don't care what they tell you. There's
17 panic, you know. You maybe dead any second, you don't know what to do, where to go.
18 Is your crew going to come pick you up and then the bullets fly over head. The only thing
19 you realize or know is you probably need to get your butt out of there wherever there is.
20 So, I ran down the hill, scared as hell, and that little hill up the other side into some
21 sunlight. As I said, took off my Air America shirt, took off my t-shirt, waved it trying to
22 get the guy's attention, but he's pretty ways up there. He said he never saw anything. The
23 reason he didn't come down was because he didn't know if we were dead or not which is
24 a pretty damn lame excuse. I was telling my pilot group here in Fort Walton about the
25 experience. We have a bunch of Air Force guys who were shot down in World War II
26 and Vietnam and Korea, you know, they exchange war stories. I was saying, "You know,
27 after the period of—"and I know how long, maybe thirty minutes when you're scared like
28 hell, certainly, as I recall, it's just real deep calm, you know? And I had everything
29 figured out. This guy wasn't going to pick me up. I didn't know they could come from
30 anywhere else, I never thought they'd come from one hundred miles away to pick us up.
31 So, I said, "Okay, I'm just going to hunker down here." We're a mile or two south of the

1 Mekong, maybe less. I don't recall exactly. I had it all planned out, I was going to wait
2 till dark and then go down to the river, buy myself a big log, and then just float down the
3 river to freedom. And that was probably; shoot, fifty miles, maybe more. I don't know
4 how the hell I was going to do that, and I knew not that far away, maybe a few miles right
5 out on the river was a village full of bad people. I was thinking, "How could I get by
6 them just holding on the log and drifting by in the night?" I had it all planned out. If I
7 could have done it, hell no, probably in that cold water I wouldn't have survived. The
8 Mekong is a huge powerful river. I mean, they built a bridge across there in Udorn up to
9 Mount Kai and I don't know how they did it. I guess the same way the built the bridge
10 over the Mississippi. It's a mile long, the water's deep. I still don't know how they do it,
11 but they do it of course. So yeah, it was panic, freight, scared, you know, what the hell
12 am I going to do now? And then I asked him, "Is that what you felt? Have you ever had
13 that feeling or were you just busy from the time running and a lot of them that were shot
14 down, like in Europe, met up with locals whether they were French, Greek, or Italian that
15 helped them. So, they got the help right away.

16 KC: So, you weren't going to get any help, you're alone and isolated. You lost
17 Fred, he went down the trail and you're by yourself.

18 RC: Well, yeah, I was by myself and then I don't know what happened exactly.
19 We never really sat down and went through it minute by minute. We got separated. As a
20 matter of fact, the flight mechanic, Champ Bonnell, he started a little fire. So, after Hal
21 Miller and Bill Long picked me up, they saw the smoke and went over there and picked
22 up Champ Bonnell. I don't know if that was stupid or courageous to build that fire, but it
23 helped us identify where he was and picked him up. I don't know where, exactly, Fred
24 got picked up. You know, it's strange, when you look back you think we sat down the
25 next day or a couple days later and talked about what happened and so forth. I remember
26 they wanted me to go to the hospital that night to get checked over, but I turned them
27 down and somehow wonder if I should have done that or not. Of course, it's not a big
28 thing. I know my wife said, "What the hell happened to you?" Of course, to that affect. It
29 was okay.

30 KC: How long were you on the ground? You see that your SAR support—

31 RC: Probably about three to four hours.

1 KC: Three to four hours. How long was it before you realized the crew wasn't
2 going to pick you up?

3 RC: Thirty minutes, well, even less. I mean, he made a half ass approach down
4 maybe two thousand, I don't know, something like that. But then he climbed back up. Of
5 course, running and panting through the elephant grass, I didn't hear anybody shooting at
6 him like you said. It was pretty clear. He went back up to five thousand feet and he
7 wasn't coming down at all and then the T-28s come in. Actually, the Air Force, I was told
8 later on, they loved to bomb, they loved to destroy. So, they wanted to destroy the
9 helicopter so the bad guys wouldn't get the stump in there. Well, there wasn't that much
10 in there that they could use. Radios, I don't know, because they usually put them in
11 another air craft? No idea. There's very little abuse in that, but they wanted to destroy it
12 anyway. Oh, I remember now, I think I went back to the helicopter and that was it. I was
13 thinking you know, if they come in and try to destroy that helicopter; I was pretty damn
14 close by that time. That's right, I did come back from that far hill and come back by the
15 helicopter thinking they'd be looking there because they didn't see me on the hilltop.
16 Why they couldn't see me, I don't know because I'm in the sunlight, there's no big grass
17 around me and I'm waving my white shirt like crazy. So, thank goodness they would
18 never give them permission to destroy the helicopter because I was back near there, yeah.

19 KC: How long was it before you made your way back to the helicopter?

20 RC: Oh, hard to say. I remember sitting on that hill in the sunlight after waving
21 and getting tired and thinking, "Well, you ain't coming down." And I had an oozy with
22 me; we were allowed to carry weapons, especially on ships like this. It didn't look right.
23 I'm looking at the thing, "Why does it look right?" The damn thing is heavy. You're
24 running through that grass, anything over two, three pounds and heavy, I think that may
25 have been five, six, and seven, pounds. As I looked at it, it dawned on me Kelly. There
26 was no magazine in there.

27 KC: Oh no.

28 RC: I was carrying around an empty oozy. I just stood over in the grass thinking,
29 "This thing is no use to me. It's too heavy to carry around." I don't know how it came out
30 or anything else.

31 KC: How long was it before the T-28s showed up to the station?

1 RC: I think, Kelly, as a normal situation like this, they were on sight with them.
2 We talked to them, could get them on the radios and make sure they were there as we
3 made our first approach. So, I would think they were there pretty darn quick which is
4 maybe—of course, they may have been able to see the bad guys which is maybe the
5 reason why they disappeared and didn't come back after us in the course like they could
6 have in a normal situation.

7 KC: So, the T-28s were keeping their heads down then.

8 RC: Yeah, exactly. But they had some awesome guys. They had one T28 guy that
9 had five hundred missions. You know how the Americans say, "Well, you're a hot shit
10 like that." Of course, he picked up the nickname right away, the call side, "Shit hot."

11 KC: (laughing)

12 RC: So, it's a big joke. And I remember going to America, oh, maybe it was the
13 next year, we'd go every year or so for thirty days. I came back and the first think I heard
14 was that he had gone into the spotter plane, 01. As soon as he got in there whether he had
15 too much gut or whatever down low level and they just took him apart with a 12.7. So,
16 there's a wonderful courageous pilot that was no longer with us because they tried to do
17 something, he thought was even more important, I don't know. It's good to see Lao pilots
18 at night surrounding the villages and so forth. They had their 13 on their hip, they were
19 Mr. Cool.

20 KC: How long was it before Hal Miller showed up to pick you up?

21 RC: Around four o'clock. This all happened around 1ish, something like that,
22 12:30/1. We didn't want to do it too late in the day because if something did happen you
23 got the nighttime working against you.

24 KC: Right.

25 RC: So, we were probably near twelve thirty, one o' clock. And then he picked
26 me up, I would say, four o'clock, four thirty something around then. But they arrived
27 both, as I recall, almost at the same time. I don't remember how much difference there
28 was, but they both, as I say, were at the twenty alternate and also a 272 strip just south of
29 twenty alternate which you probably know a lot about. Filled up and then come rickety
30 split. When we fly around Laos, we always try to fly somewhere where the good guys
31 were because you got a single engine, you're the one that's going to quit. But they almost

1 caused all kinds of bad guy territory and so it's not to waste time. So, they were there oh,
2 probably within let's say three hours. Get the message, figure out what the hell to do, go
3 in and land, refuel, get organized, find out where to go. Basically, they just headed out
4 northeast, two great guys.

5 KC: So, they dropped the horseshoe to you on the line?

6 RC: Yeah, yeah on the hoist.

7 KC: On the hoist. What was it like when you saw them come in? What kind of
8 feelings were you experiencing?

9 RC: Oh god, acceleration. Just happiness, unbelievable happiness, you know. I'm
10 a soft-hearted slob, as you probably guessed by now. I was fine until I sat down in the
11 helicopter then Bill Long still kids me, he says, "He cried like a baby." I was just so
12 happy to be back because, you know, you figure you're pretty much done for. Not many
13 guys come out of that. We were just extraordinarily lucky with good T-28 cover, the
14 A1As were good and we had the guys like Hal and Ted come do what they had to do.

15 KC: So, they've got you in the plane, you are, like you said, you're feel
16 exhilarated because of this. As they take off and as they were leaving, they see the smoke
17 from I guess the flight mechanics fire that had started. And you stopped, you dropped
18 another horseshoe to him, I guess on the wench and bring it?

19 RC: I don't remember. I don't think so, I think he was in a position where we
20 could sit down or at least put one wheel on the ground, low enough where Bill Long, he's
21 a big strong American could pull Champ into the helicopter. That's all a little fuzzy right
22 now to tell you the truth. I don't recall him using the hoist at all on the second pick up. Of
23 course, on the Huey, they didn't have a hoist I'm pretty sure. They just put one skid on
24 the ground wherever it was where Fred and the interpreter—he picked up the interpreter
25 along with Fred. Fred now lives in New Zealand, by the way. Got two big handsome
26 boys, they're here in the States here. Last year we talked a little bit. He immigrated to
27 New Zealand.

28 KC: Interesting.

29 RC: Yeah, crazy, but interesting. He said he had a hard time because down there
30 they don't take well to people coming in their country, especially if they're older and
31 taking advantage of their great retirement system. You have to show income and stuff

1 like that. In fact, our chief pilot, Wade Knight, I think he immigrated to Australia. Maybe
2 they did the right thing, I don't know with some of the stuff going on today, Kelly.

3 KC: Yes, indeed. Well, Mr. Caron, they pick you up. Do you go straight back to
4 twenty alternate?

5 RC: No, no. For this we were based out of Luang Prabang so we went straight
6 back there. Once we all got there, I don't even remember any debriefing to tell you the
7 truth. We just probably obviously said a few things, especially the customer there on the
8 ground because he was not known for always telling the truth. You know, they give you
9 the situation and it's up to you to make the decision. As I remember we might have
10 gotten on a 123 called K Model. It has the jet pods, I think we got a 123, but won't swear
11 to it anymore.

12 KC: Okay. Were you ever involved on the other end of any search and rescue
13 missions?

14 RC: Actually, no. I've been close by. I'm trying to think. Never happened, but
15 Hal, you know? He did it twice and Gerry Macandy, he did a couple of pick-ups and I'm
16 try to think—I can't think of anybody else off the top of my head. It didn't happen all that
17 much, you know, but certainly I always felt like had the need been there I would have
18 done it, no questions asked. I know I've gotten into places and guys have told me, I'm not
19 so sure I would have done that, but not a split second thing, but you know, we were
20 younger then, early thirties. Like young people do, you kind of think you're not
21 invincible, but they're not going to get you. You're going to survive; you're going to be
22 all right. The bullet doesn't have your name on it yet. So yeah, you're always optimistic,
23 you know? I think maybe it was such a surprise when the finally got me, you know?

24 KC: Yeah, I guess so. What other types of missions would you fly in terms of
25 what you were taking from place to place? Of course, you've talked about some of the
26 military missions. Did you ever bring in weapons or military supplies to different groups?

27 RC: Oh yeah, there was a lot of that.

28 KC: The hard rice crops?

29 RC: Yeah, exactly, moving the troops around. I was there four and a half years so
30 obviously I did a ton of things like that, but I can't remember anything exactly. The only
31 thing that comes to mind right now was trying to gather some intelligence up by a place

1 called Manui Sai, way up in the Northwest corner near the Thai border. I remember the
2 customer didn't come out from my usual morning briefing. When I get up there, they left
3 a note for me to go somewhere, give me some coordinates. I was doing that and really
4 weird, all of a sudden, I hear gun fire right where I'm supposed to be going or close to it
5 along a huge ridgeline. Of course, you grab as much power as you can with your
6 collective and you turn and get the devil out of there. All of a sudden, right below me I
7 hear more gun fire. I'll tell you the truth, I was scared to death because I couldn't imagine
8 where that fire was coming from and why it was so loud because I was getting away from
9 the terrain, the ridge I'd been close to, you know? So, I called down stairs to the flight
10 mechanic and I say, "What's happened? Where's that fire coming from?" He's a Thai
11 mechanic and he said, "That was me." I said, "What?" and he said, "That was me, firing
12 back." "You fired back?" he said, "Yes." I said, "Gee, you scared me to death." I said, "I
13 didn't even know you—I know you had a weapon down there, but I didn't know you had
14 it loaded because the kid in second was returning fire." So, I remember that time being
15 scared to death. No so much from the fire from the ground because you get the
16 occasionally. Of course, you can imagine he's what, ten feet away out that big cabin door
17 shooting down there or something and I thought, somehow, I screwed up and I was flying
18 over a piece of land that I hadn't seen or whatever. It was going to get me because he was
19 that close. I said, "Don't you ever do that again. If you tell me you're going to shoot,
20 please give me some warning because, you know, I about had a heart attack." So yeah, a
21 Thai mechanic and he was quick. He did it in seconds, you know?

22 KC: I guess your first clue should have been when the customer didn't show you
23 up or didn't show up in person to give you the note to let you know.

24 RC: He's the boss, what the hell are you going to do, you know? Again, I
25 probably wrote a report to the chief pilot. Oh, I have a story to tell you.

26 KC: Oh, please do.

27 RC: We were up there, same place, Manui Sai, called 118 Alpha. And Freddy
28 Fram, again, we might have three crews up there with ten, fifteen people. Freddy was
29 telling me—and we had a rate problem or a mouse problem whatever you want to call it.
30 It's probably a rat problem over there. Fred woke up in the middle of the night and there
31 was a rat sitting on his stomach looking at him. It scared him to death. He shooed the rat

1 away, but when I got back to Udon, we'd always right up trip reports, Cav reports to let
2 him know if anything happened unusual. In fact, I still got it somewhere. I wrote a
3 captain's report and at the end of it I said, "Good news and bad news. The bad news is that
4 the rats had their Olympic festival at Manui Sai on such and such a day. The good news
5 is, they all didn't get the word and come up." In the report. They got the word, but did
6 they care? Hell, I don't know.

7 KC: (laughing) Tell me about the relations with or your exposure to the media
8 while you were flying in Laos. Did you—

9 RC: Damn little, Kelly, damn little. I do remember a girl from "We Magazine."
10 As you can guess it's French or whatever. She came up and she was talking to one of our
11 pilots, she took a shine to him or whatever. He was a bit more perusable than the rest of
12 us. I don't think she traveled, but I don't think we allowed that. At nights, when she came
13 back—she was in Vientiane, she would try to talk to people and try to find out what was
14 going on. She got a little bit of a story. I don't remember ever reading it, I just remember
15 it was "We Magazine," it was sort of a new magazine. I don't know if it even survived or
16 what have you, but really, let me see, the hot place, of course is still in Vietnam. We're
17 talking '69, '70, '71, '72. March of '73 we did the peace treaty and we slowly moved
18 people out. This thing I just told you about were the mechanic flyers from inside of the
19 helicopter scared me to death. That was near the end of '73 and it wasn't supposed to be
20 that much going on, but still, you had to stay clear of the bad guys because the locals
21 didn't know. Peace Treaty, what the hell is that? This guy had been bothering me for four
22 or five years and he comes by me close enough I'm going to shoot at him.

23 KC: Of course, when the United States Military leaves completely mostly in
24 1973, Air America is still there and they're still flying.

25 RC: Yes.

26 KC: Like you say, regardless of who it is it's one of those damn helicopters who's
27 harassing me again.

28 RC: Actually, my last flight was in early December of '73 and I was the last
29 American on the line. Miller was still there because he was assistant key pilot for the
30 Chinook for a while. So, he was still there, and I think we went from there back to the
31 States. He didn't go to Saigon. They let people go to Saigon and I don't know how they

1 made that decision. I had come from there, so I knew the country very well so maybe that
2 was part of their thought process. When they took him off going to Saigon, others elected
3 not to go because they thought it was pretty hot. But by that time, it wasn't much. I think
4 I told you before that the ICCS International Control of Civil Commission, whatever it is.

5 KC: Right, and National Control Commission. Yeah, they had a bird shot down I
6 think in late '73. So, things like that disturbed some of the guys still up in Udorn. I think
7 others maybe just wanted a change in life. Others maybe, were smart enough to realize
8 that they got out a little bit early, they could take advantage of any flights jobs that might
9 be available, especially in Alaska or throughout the gulf and throughout the States. Some
10 of them went with airlines. Saudi Airlines hired a few, JAL hired a few. That was a little
11 earlier, actually. And then a lot of them went up to Alaska. A couple that got on was a
12 particular Stan Bosinski flew Saudi Airlines for a little while and then he got out with
13 America West out of Phoenix which is a small airline, but they were hiring older guys
14 that couldn't get on somewhere else. But they got ten good years out of them, maybe
15 fifteen.

16 KC: While you're in Laos or flying out of Udorn, but you're flying into Laos or
17 predominantly as you mentioned. Two things come to mind when I think of Air America
18 flying in Laos. One is weather and the other is terrain. Tell me about the weather and
19 terrain and how it affected you flying in Laos.

20 RC: Well, the terrain is a terrain and there's nothing you can do about it. You can't
21 say, "Oh shit, its bad terrain today or bad terrain tomorrow or whatever. It is what it is,
22 and you get used to it and some of those costs over there, stolen structures that went
23 straight up in the air. Actually, when you have time to think about it, it's pretty damn
24 beautiful. And that was never a problem. I'll tell you what, I had forgotten about it, but
25 the nasty, worst thing I had and flying in Laos was, in the spring, they burned the fields. I
26 don't know if there were poppy fields or what they had, but the smoke was so bad, I was
27 flying over the Mekong, one hundred feet in the air and couldn't see the damn ground, or
28 in this case, the water, just absolutely bummed. Again, up in Manui Sai, I had a lot of fun
29 up there. I was going from hilltop—a lot of it was hilltop to hilltop. That's where the
30 people were. The locals that helped—they lived on the mountain tops as you may have
31 heard the stories, after we had left, the communists drove the hill people off the mountain

1 tops, down to the valley where they controlled them and they couldn't survive in the
2 valley, they weren't used to the wet humidity. Anyway, going from mountain top to
3 mountain top, you're flying along, and you can't even see crap. Most of the birds had,
4 what it was called, ASE, automatic stabilizing equipment which was like an autopilot as
5 far as going straightened level and allowed you to relax and look outside a little more. I
6 was going from hilltop to hilltop and what I was doing was getting up a thousand feet or
7 so above where I wanted to go and then when I thought I was there I let down. Well, you
8 can't see squat and that's kind of dangerous. Then a guy told me, "Bob, what you got to
9 do—"And I was very happy to hear this because it proved to be right. You flew about the
10 altitude that you wanted to go, maybe even a few feet less. Then, as you got there, you
11 slowed down, of course, and you could see the hill in front of you as you got within a
12 couple hundred yards or so or one hundred yards. So that nailed me to do or at least get
13 what the heck I was trying to go. But yeah, when I came back, I complained bitterly to
14 the chief pilot. I said, "You know, it is so bad, it is so much stress. First, you give me
15 birds without ASE so I can, you know, just relax a little bit." I said, "Really, up there you
16 need two pilots. One to help you look every now and then because it is really, really
17 nasty. The visibility was just crap." Other than that, you had rain storms and we were
18 never under any pressure to get somewhere in a big hurry, you know? If we had a
19 problem with weather we'd settle down and go somewhere and wait. That's the
20 wonderful thing about helicopters; you go sit down in the field somewhere and wait till it
21 passes by. There wasn't heavy rain monsoon-type stuff up there like there was in
22 Vietnam; either the north or the south you always had nasty weather. But no, the weather
23 wasn't all that bad. Like I say, not fog, haze. It wasn't fog; it was haze. And there was
24 a—I guess February to mid march or end of March, something like that and it was just
25 nasty. There was nothing you could do about it.

26 KC: With the tribes people burning their slash and burn agricultures that take
27 practice.

28 RC: You didn't see it burning all that much, but there it was, you know?

29 KC: You may have mentioned briefly a moment ago that you had a lot of fun at
30 Manui Sai, tell me about that.

31 RC: I had a lot of fun?

1 KC: Yes, that's what you said.

2 RC: Oh, I just talked about that report.

3 KC: Oh, okay. Just that one report, okay. I thought there was something else
4 going on there.

5 RC: Well, actually there were a few other problems. Let me tell you about one. A
6 guy named Ben Venen, called Burma Ben for obvious reasons. He got up above the
7 clouds, it was going somewhere trying to let down and there weren't no hole to let down
8 through in whatever. So, he moved off to the side a little bit to the west and let down
9 through this hole. Oh, I'm okay because countries run together, you can't tell whether
10 you're in Thailand, Laos, Burma, or whatever. So, he lands and out of the woods come
11 these soldiers. And Ben's a little outspoken, can be a little obnoxious and he demands to
12 be American. Once he finds out he's in Burma, "I'm American and I demand to be taken
13 as a U.S. consulate." So, they just said, "Okay, shut down your helicopter and we're
14 going to go somewhere and wait while we talk about this American consulate stuff." It
15 turned out if he'd just kept his mouth shut the Thai chief boss just a few miles away in
16 Thailand, knew everybody over there and his father was a two star general and he could
17 have gotten Ben out in a couple hours if he just played it cool. But all that rambunctious
18 noise about going to the consulate and, "I'm an American." They didn't want to play his
19 game. So, he was over there for about three days. Later on, of course, they got it all
20 squared away, and he's allowed to leave and what he did, no problem. From then on, he's
21 known as "Burma Ben." So, there was occasional weather. When I was up at Manui Sai, I
22 don't know why I keep talking about Manui Sai, I was helping a Thai fighting force fight
23 the bad guys and I was relieved, but the man couldn't get up there because of the weather
24 because when you followed the valleys and the safe valleys because if you're low, you
25 know, you don't want to be with the bad guys were and you never quite knew where they
26 were. So, Jim Roushe was two days late coming up to relieve me. So, one day I went
27 down, I left the morning and he left Udorn in the morning and he replaced me and then I
28 got back to Vientiane later that evening. Unfortunately, the next day or the day after that
29 Jim was lifting Thais out of a confined area and got shot and killed. I often wonder, you
30 know, had he not been up there a couple days later would that have been me? But he was
31 killed almost instantly. And as co-pilot, he grabbed the helicopter and saved everybody.

1 But I often wonder what he did to the engine because, you know, you're not flying it, the
2 guy's got it, he falls against the cyclic, you know, he let the collected drop. You got to
3 grab that thing and you got to grab it and pull it and twist in such a manner that you don't
4 let it get too slow in which case you'll crash and die. Or if it gets too fast, you know, you
5 could almost break the engine. But he successfully did it and I always wondered about
6 how much they checked that engine. The Thai guy saved everybody's life that day. He's
7 a pretty good friend of mine and we played tennis together a lot there at Udorn. I
8 remember the next time I saw him on the Tennis courts he had about three new Buddha's
9 because Thai's are very superstitious and if they get something like that, Buddha must be
10 looking out after him.

11 KC: I see, yeah, I can imagine. Well, you're talking about these—we may made
12 mention of these cities throughout Laos, Laung Prabang, Manui Sai, and Pakse, and all of
13 these. Tell me about some of these cities, about the way they looked, about how business
14 was conducted there. What was going on in these cities?

15 RC: Well, I think city may be a misnomer, Kelly.

16 KC: Big cities in a relative sense.

17 RC: Yeah, they're little villages, most of them. It boards nail to rain. The rain gets
18 through, the sun gets through, and the roads—I guess there's one paved road down the
19 middle and that's about it. They had little local bars where after flying we'd go eat and
20 relax and have a beer or two or something like that. Vientiane was pretty much the same
21 a Pakse—I'm sorry—Savannakhet. The only big city was, of course, Vientiane. A lot of
22 people, a lot of embassies and stuff like that. So, it was a little better, had a few clubs,
23 restaurants, gold stores. People would buy gold up there all the time. Luang Prabang was
24 an older city. Bigger buildings, more permanent buildings, and fairly nice, but then
25 Manui Sai was once again your basic, not shacks, but almost shacks and very limited
26 construction. Even like a lot of your houses in Thailand today, you know. You walk by
27 and you look through the cracks in the wood and see and of course, they can see out and
28 stuff like that. If you'd never been there it's hard to describe, but it's certainly not modern
29 day sense of word. Of course, back then places like Bangkok were nothing like they are
30 today. Have you been to Bangkok at all, Kelly?

31 KC: No, I have not.

1 RC: Oh god, guys who go there today do not recognize it. There was scarcely a
2 building more than five, six, or seven stories back in the mid-late sixties, but now you've
3 got buildings eighty-five stories high. Thirty-five, forty stories is nothing. And they got
4 highways going out and overpasses going out into the airport. They've got a brand new
5 airport over on the coast to the southeast a little bit. Just immense construction, you
6 know. And there's a lot of money over there. I don't know where the hell it all comes
7 from, but there's a lot of money over there and they had a lot of ex-pats whether they're
8 American, a lot of Brits, a lot of French, building the highway out the overpass out to the
9 airport. They have a high speed rail, inside town that goes—oh, I don't know—three,
10 four, or five miles. You walk up these stairs and this overhead tram goes right through the
11 city. At one point, it curves around the street over there on one of the more popular
12 streets called Say-La and I'll tell you what, the huge structure is maybe two yards from
13 the side of this huge department store. You say, "How in the hell could they do something
14 like that?" But they do it. In the States you probably could never get something like that
15 done ever. A lot of construction, but once again, back to the villages. They were pretty
16 much very primitive.

17 KC: One of the things, I don't believe I've asked you about this before, but one of
18 the things that is indelibly imprinted in the mind of modern Americans when it comes to
19 Air America, in Laos, is flying drugs, opium. It's a drug trade and the supposed
20 affiliation Air America had with that illicit drug trade in Laos. What is your opinion on
21 this?

22 RC: For the most part, crap. Hold on one second.

23 KC: Sure.

24 RC: Can you hear me?

25 KC: Yes.

26 RC: I never ever saw anything like that when that stupid Air American movie
27 came out, I couldn't believe it, nobody I talked to couldn't believe it. But, on the other
28 side of that same coin, we would carry things, okay? Whether they were soldiers with
29 grenades around their waste or a person with clothes on that would dress nice. He'd have
30 some boxers and stuff and he wanted to take it to somewhere. Our job was not to inspect,
31 to interrogate the people what they were carrying. We took them at their word when

1 something had to be done and we did it. So, we could have unknowingly carried stuff in a
2 box, but nobody I knew even knows of carrying anything, okay? Now, was it on the big
3 bird? Yeah, we had Caribous, 123s, 47s, 46s. Did they ever carry anything? I don't know,
4 nobody I ever talked to ever admits to doing anything like that or even seeing anything
5 like that. So, from my part it was there. Like I said, they burned the poppy fields in the
6 spring. And then in '73 as we were winding down, I was involved in carrying troops
7 around these various locations and trying to burn or confiscate any heroine that we saw.
8 Now, on the opposite side of that coin, is there drug traffic over there? Hell yes. I think
9 some of the Thai generals, that's why they're so rich, they're involved with the drug
10 traffic. But then we saw traffic right in the middle of the golden triangle. There was a lot
11 going on, I never saw any and nobody I know ever was involved in any way, shape, or
12 form and that's why today I'm not a Mel Gibson fan.

13 KC: Well, you bring up a good point here and that is this movie that was made
14 back in the late 1980s I guess it was called Air America. It was based somewhat off of
15 Christopher Robin's book on Air America.

16 RC: Yes.

17 KC: Give me your impression of that book and that movie. Tell me what you
18 think you liked, if anything, and the things that you disliked about it.

19 RC: I don't remember reading the book to tell you the truth.

20 KC: Okay.

21 RC: As I said before, one word that best describes that movie is crap. One of our
22 guys, Jack somebody, Jack had worked security in Hollywood for some movie and got to
23 know some people. When that movie came out or the information came out and they
24 started to do it, he contacted the people he knew and tried to get them to make it more
25 realistic and not so much that we were drug running idiots as the movie seemed to portray
26 more realistic, you know? You saw Mel Gibson jump from 123, the helicopter back and
27 forth, that was never done. You flew choppers or you flew fixed wing. You didn't go
28 back and forth because, you know, that's not normally done. It puts a lot of stress on
29 people. I hate the movie. I've never seen it. I've just seen pieces of it here and there and
30 my friends hate it. It's so untrue, but Hollywood doesn't care about the truth. All they
31 care about, "Can I make any money?"

1 KC: Right.

2 RC: They got the girls in there, a little sex, a little violence and that's it. So, the
3 book I'm not so sure about. I did read the *Khaki Mafia* which kind of broke my heart
4 because one of the main bad guys in the whole damn thing was the sergeant major of the
5 Army, Woolridge. He started off doing slots in Europe with a guy named Cole who later
6 on made one star, but he was involved in the gambling stuff, kickback. Not kickback, but
7 just plain thievery. And I met him, I flew him one time: another quick story.

8 KC: Sure.

9 RC: The girl that took me to Vietnam in 1965, can't remember her name, got to
10 know her real well. When she had the chance, flew over there, and had time to let me
11 know, she would write me, and I would meet her in Saigon, and we'd have a cup of
12 coffee there at the airport. I was able to do that because now it seems like ridiculous thing
13 to do in the middle of a war but were able to do that. She met this guy General Cole, one
14 star Cole. He offered her a job to quit Pan America and come work for him. She did what
15 I thought. I said, "Well, you probably have an idea of what he's after." I said, "I wouldn't
16 trust a guy as far as I could throw him. If you leave Pan Am you've got many, many
17 years there and probably too soon to talk about retirement." This is 1965, '66, but I just
18 don't talk with this guy and like him then later on, I think it was later on, that I heard he
19 was so heavy involved in the drug stuff and kickbacks he and Sergeant Woolridge were
20 buddies and he should have been court martialed, but as it turned out I was, you know,
21 like all politics, too much of a fire there so it pushed him back to Colonel and let him
22 retire. That was a disgrace to the Army and anybody who's ever made general.

23 KC: Getting back to the movie again, they portray a group of people, Air America
24 pilots and their families and the people who worked for the company as hard drinking,
25 hard partying a lot. Was that the case?

26 RC: Oh, I'm sure there were a few. This guy, Tim Woolsey that—let me see, that
27 was involved in that thing at Pakse with the Pack 75. I never actually flew with him. The
28 only time I was there, but he was known as a man that could drink. But he's also known
29 as the best damn helicopter pilot Air America had. As I say, I always regret not flying
30 with him because, you know, although you're secretly envious perhaps, you always think
31 about maybe there's something I could learn, some little technique that he knows that I

1 don't that he can be a better pilot. Do we have guys that broke the twelve hour rule?
2 Yeah. They did in front of one of the big bosses from Taipei and guess what? The next
3 day he got his walking papers. I don't remember his name now, but I remember his story
4 very well. He did in front of the guy so brazenly, and the guy had really no choice. I
5 mean, it was total stupidity. A lot of good people, a little wild? Hell yes, because if they
6 weren't wild, they wouldn't have been there in the first place.

7 KC: That's a very good point.

8 RC: That's the kind of people you go into attract. Dwain Keel, great little pilot, I
9 loved the guy. He could drink from the best of him and get into fights. He's only about 5
10 '7", but he attacked a guy six foot no problem.

11 KC: I know Dwain as a matter of fact.

12 RC: Do you?

13 KC: Yeah.

14 RC: His first wife died, she was a character, than his second wife passed away. In
15 fact, they were here a few years ago and I guess since the Fall that she passed away. I
16 haven't seen Dwain in quite awhile now, but he was one of the good guys. No, it's true to
17 an extent, but, you know, I don't think anymore so than some of the stories you here
18 about the Air Force guys in Da Nang, you know?

19 KC: Sure, and I think that's a good point. Say, were they wild? Hell yeah, you're
20 a little wild, you'd have to be a little wild to do this. Well, it doesn't necessarily separate
21 them from jet pilots or forward air controllers or Army forward observers or anyone else.
22 If you're a pilot than that's going to kind of attract that kind of lifestyle I think or vice
23 versa. And the hard drinking lifestyle was something that was endemic in the service and
24 has been for forever, I guess.

25 RC: Yeah, when I was in Friday night was the big go to the club and have drinks.
26 I never remember anything bad coming out, but now, shit, there's almost none of that,
27 okay? If you get caught drinking and driving, you're out of the military. It's so restricted
28 now, not that that's wrong, but I've been a couple places and try to go to the Oak Club
29 and basically, it's nonexistent you know? There is no Friday night go out with your pals
30 and eat and drink and have a good time or whatever.

1 KC: Yeah, it certainly changes in our society and in our culture and what is and is
2 not acceptable. It definitely filters its way into the military, no doubt about that. What
3 about when you would come back you have one day of rest here. You've been out six
4 days flying these various missions around all over Laos. When you go back to Udorn,
5 what would you do?

6 RC: By that time, I had a daughter and a wife.

7 KC: So, you had started your family by now then?

8 RC: Yeah, uh-huh.

9 KC: Okay, well tell me that. How did you meet your wife, who was she, and how
10 did that all work out?

11 RC: I met her in Saigon in '74 when I went back. Her father had ran a business
12 and I bumped into him somehow, I don't recall the details, but she kind of worked for
13 him like a secretary. Come to find out, she was dating me and was also dating an agency
14 guy. When I got information, I was supposed to go to Udorn, that kind of slowed
15 everything down and I thought she would get more serious about this agency guy and
16 then he suddenly departed the sea and went to Europe. He got a change in assignment.
17 She sort of—she got a ticket to go around the world, so she went with me to America and
18 then we were going to go onto Europe. Although, I didn't really understand this until
19 later, and maybe visit with him a little bit before returning to Saigon. To make a long
20 story short, we suddenly hit it off better than we did before. Everybody loved her and she
21 loved America so what the hell. We were in Sacramento and we went over to Reno and
22 got married. Of course, that made the embassy people in Saigon very mad because she
23 had a tourist visa. So, when she came back with new paper work they were pretty upset
24 with her. But yeah, that worked out okay and then we had a little baby, Michelle. There
25 are a lot of Vietnamese—I think some of them were from the North in Udorn, a little
26 Vietnamese area, so to speak. A little shopping, we'd go down to Bangkok sometimes.
27 Every month we got six days off, like a little R&R. We'd go to Hong Kong maybe,
28 Bangkok a little bit, and did a little bit of traveling and then about once a year we took off
29 for Europe, we met our embassy friends over there, Paul Rapa pour in Italy and back to
30 America and then back to Udorn. On the seventh day you just relaxed. Pretty much, if I
31 could, I played tennis because I still played tennis today because it was good exercise. Up

1 country we used to jog at night sometimes, but there wasn't much exercise up there.
2 Certainly nothing like the tennis or whatever like that. It was just a usual day off. Maybe
3 you slept in a little bit, maybe we were busy with some friends. For one day off you
4 couldn't go very far obviously so a little of that and just catch up on things. It sounds a
5 little odd, you know, to be gone five days, six days, then back home for one day, two
6 nights. How could we live like that, but you get so used to it that it's the normal.

7 KC: Right.

8 RC: I almost couldn't fathom being home every night. Was that wrong? Hell, I
9 don't know. I don't think it was wrong, but this is the way we were. And she was able
10 to—she was okay, smart enough that she was able to get along well without me taking
11 care of the daughter and things like that. We rented a big house there in Udorn, so we
12 were okay.

13 KC: Tell me about that community of the Air America families in Udorn.

14 RC: Like I say, I wasn't that much of a mixer. Some people had quite a few
15 parties and back and forth. I wasn't that big about mixing and so forth. Probably the
16 biggest thing I did was every year I tried in some way to throw her a surprise birthday
17 party, which we did with friends with thirty, forty people renting some restaurant and
18 doing that, but I think some of them got along or visited back and forth a lot more than
19 we did. I'm not a big social animal so to speak.

20 KC: Sure. Tell me about any other of these incidents or any particular missions or
21 any particular people. Tell me about anything else that you haven't covered so far for
22 your four and a half years; I guess it was, flying out of Udorn in Laos. Any other of those
23 interesting stories that come to mind?

24 RC: No, we talked about the Pack 75 down there. The PDJ was exciting.

25 KC: Tell me about that. That's one of those most hotly contested parts of the War.

26 RC: Have you ever seen those jars, Kelly?

27 KC: I've seen them on different television shows.

28 RC: Okay, they stand five, six feet. I've got two or three pictures lying around the
29 house that my friend Tony Colson took with his wife four, five years ago. She has since
30 passed away. It's an awesome deed. There were a couple of dirt strips up there. It's quite
31 huge. It may be as much as a mile in diameter, just a low, flat area. I don't know what

1 was there before, but all these jars are sitting around, huge stone things. I don't know
2 how they carved them. I know they were—when I got there it was called it the *Plain des*
3 *Jarres* which, of course, is French for plain of jars. Where they originated from? I don't
4 know. Also, about that time these drums were very popular that they found around Laos.
5 They were going for as much as two or three hundred dollars. In fact, every year Playboy
6 has a Christmas issue, and they have things that might make really neat Christmas gifts.
7 The cow drums are made and several hundred years old. Of course, as it became more
8 popular, the locals would manufacture them more then and the secret was trying to
9 discern which the real old ones were, and which were the new ones. They were quite
10 popular. When I got there, we had control of the PDJ, called it the PDJ. And then the bad
11 guys slowly encroached from the north and put a bunch of 122 millimeter mortar shells in
12 there and slowly drove the good guys out. The Mung people fighting did a lot of fighting
13 for the agency, I guess. It's been like they did for the Army and mountain yards and
14 Vietnam. Then, at the end of '69 they took control and about early '70 we got it back
15 again and moved them out. We flew in and out of there mostly moving troops and
16 supplies and hard rice and stuff like that. Then, oh, maybe—a lot depended by the season.
17 If the weather got a little bit nasty, a little bit more cloudy and rainy than usual, then we'd
18 have the air support. You know, a lot like it was in Vietnam to work with the people on
19 the ground. So, they moved back in and moved us out. The next thing I know we owned
20 the land just a little bit north of twenty alternate area and we never got back to the PDJ
21 again, probably the end of '71, '72, and then of course the peace treaty in '73, March of
22 '73. But I can't think of anything else that was all that exciting. Well, we had people—I
23 remember one horrendous scene. These guys were flying, I think the 123 from just north
24 of Vientiane there's a small strip, I can't think of the name now. They're moving—I
25 don't know if it was hard rice or what the heck it was. From there, just a few miles north
26 to Vientiane, they were back and forth all day long. Then all of a sudden in the afternoon
27 a couple clouds came up—although they had done it all day long, they elected to go
28 through this cloud. Well, the damn cloud had a rock in it and after this day I don't know
29 what they were thinking, but they smashed in that cloud and killed everybody on board.
30 One of the guys, the co-pilot, was a brand new guy out of what we call the small birds,
31 the porters, the Helios. I guess that's about it. That night, we were in the bar and

1 restaurant there on the air field at Vientiane I happened to stay there that night. We didn't
2 stay in Vientiane all that much, but I was there that night and I don't know how it
3 developed, but we were in the restaurant and somebody heard this terrible scream from
4 the bar area. When we found out later on, the wife had come in to pick up her co-pilot
5 husband, and the idiot base manager, I don't know who the hell he was now, he chose
6 that time to tell her that her husband had been killed in that crash. It was a terrible,
7 terrible sound. I don't know how he could have done it like that. That's one thing I
8 remember very clearly. Another thing that happened, I'm just trying to think of one of
9 them made me think of the other. I can't remember now. No, that was a painful scene, but
10 there wasn't as much of that as you might think. I don't know how many guys are killed
11 over there, over the years. You know, Air America has been around from, I guess,
12 technically speaking from the late '40s in China, CAT and Air America. I can't think of
13 anymore stories. You know, pretty much it was I want to say mundane, but, you know, it
14 was just great fun. What I really liked about it was, all right, you go up to Tuon Yon often
15 or you go to Pakse. You meet with the customer and say, "Okay, this is what I need you
16 to do. Maybe go to this village, take some people over there, then meet with the locals
17 and try to figure out what they want to do for support. Wait there and then take them over
18 to the next village and the next village and then come back three or four o'clock in the
19 afternoon. We didn't do a lot of night stuff. There wasn't that requirement, we did that
20 obviously to steer away from it because the bad guys owned the night time and then come
21 back at three, four o'clock and park the helicopter, take a look at it and make sure there's
22 nothing wrong with it. The crew chief would do his daily maintenance, oil this and oil
23 that and refuel necessary and find out the next day's mission. So, if you want less or more
24 fuel depending on what the missions were.

25 KC: Right.

26 RC: And that was pretty much it. It was, I guess routine as it were. For the most
27 part, pretty much routine.

28 KC: All right, why don't we stop there for today, Mr. Caron?

Interview with Robert Caron

Session [5] of [5]

Date 11 March 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Robert Caron. Today is March 11, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Caron is joining me by telephone from his home again in
4 Fort Walton Beach, Florida. All right, Mr. Caron, when we left off last time you had
5 pretty much covered the time that you had there in Udorn and you're going to make this
6 move to Saigon, this would have been 1973 as I recall.

7 Robert Caron: Yeah, end of '73.

8 KC: End of 1973 so it was after the Peace of Cords, the Paris Peace of Cords had
9 been signed. What was your opinion on being moved to Saigon? What was that like for
10 you?

11 RC: Oh, I had been there before.

12 KC: Right.

13 RC: In fact, I've been there in Vietnam from '65 and Vung Tau in '66 then MAC-
14 V in Saigon, '66 and seven, then back with Air America '68 and nine. So, it was almost
15 like coming home. I wasn't really concerned. The war had sort of slowed down a little
16 bit, but there was still some activity. As a matter of fact, as I recall when I got there, there
17 was still a lot of talk about the Air America chopper that had strayed off course a little
18 bit, even with a communist advisor on board and they shot that sucker down with an SA-
19 7. So, it was dangerous for both sides. There was a lot of concern over that, but it was
20 kind of like that Korean airline that got shot down by that hot rod MiG a few years ago or
21 quite some time ago. So, I think people settled down and as long as you stayed where
22 you're supposed to, there wasn't that much danger involved with the—it was for the
23 ICCS people.

24 KC: Right, describe Saigon as you saw it in '73 as compared to the Saigon you
25 saw during your earlier time with Air America and even when you were with the U.S.
26 Army.

27 RC: You know what, there wasn't, I don't think a big difference. I think a little bit
28 there was more desperation in the air. People didn't have jobs and so forth. I think I
29 mentioned before, Kelly, the people there in Saigon, the government and high ranking

1 militaries, they never, I don't think—I think they lost the War along with our congress.
2 Authorities never really got on a war-time footing. It was like one big game, you know,
3 and there was night clubs roaring going on, a lot of money going on, a lot of running
4 around. Sometimes you didn't realize you in a war, but then later, in later '74 I will admit
5 there was a lot of firing and you could hear guns going off not that far away. So, it was a
6 change, but not as dramatic as you might think.

7 KC: Okay, I mentioned the Paris Peace Accords previously. What was your
8 opinion at that time of the Peace Accords?

9 RC: Total give away. Congress and whoever back in the States had forced the
10 president's hand and Kissinger, Kissinger wanted—I think he wanted to be remembered
11 as a big peace guy or something, I'm not sure. I also think he thought he was the smartest
12 man in the world, but that's neither here nor there. As I have remembered, they basically
13 forced the president to sign that thing. There were rumors of a three million dollar
14 kickback or whatever, but of course, we wouldn't know about that, any facts about that. It
15 basically gave the communists a foothold to do whatever the heck they wanted and there
16 was no—I don't think any attempt to follow up and make sure they followed the Peace
17 Accords or not. Just basically it was step one in the give up and fold up of the American
18 support.

19 KC: What was your new job going to be here with Air America in Saigon from
20 '73 until the end of the War?

21 RC: Pretty much the same as we did before. Moved people around, embassy
22 people, USAID people, American officials, generals. I think I told you when the chief of
23 staff in the Army came over, General Weyand, I flew him around. He came over to
24 evaluate the process there and this now would be in '75. There's nothing he could have
25 done, even I realized that and so forth is we were there more for show than anything else.
26 We just flew people around, we just had ICCS on the doors instead of Air America.

27 KC: Okay, so you're flying for the International Control Commission at this time,
28 I guess.

29 RC: Yeah.

30 KC: What would be your daily routine flying for this group, for this outfit?

1 RC: Oh, pretty much flying officials of the ICCS people around. I think by that
2 time it was the Iranians and—who was the other group there? Do you remember?

3 KC: I believe the Pols were involved, were they not?

4 RC: Well, the Pols and the Hungarians were involved, but we never flew them,
5 but I remember. I'm not sure how they got around. Maybe we did, but I just don't
6 remember them flying them. It was the Iranians and—the Canadians are always left.
7 Indonesians, I thought maybe they replaced the Canadians, but I'm not sure. I remember
8 one time we were flying out of Da Nang and we flew this Iranian two star general up to
9 the Wei area for some kind of inspection slash evaluation. You know, I think they did
10 more vacationing than anything else to tell you the truth. It was difficult to investigate
11 any mishaps. Back to this story, we were up there around ten or eleven probably over a
12 lunch thing for him. I was supposed to return about three, four o'clock and we didn't get
13 back until early night, seven o'clock. The rule then was, you know, be down before dark
14 because of any problems that might arise. Darkness would increase the difficulties by one
15 thousand percent or whatever. Pretty much we just flew dignitaries. You'd see embassy
16 people around much like we did before. There wasn't a whole lot of difference. We never
17 really got into carrying troops and so forth in the Vietnam area. That was totally mostly
18 in Laos.

19 KC: Sure. Now, what would you be flying here? Were you in a helicopter?

20 RC: Oh, yeah. Basically, in Air America you flew one or the other. Not like that
21 idiot Air America movie where Gibson jumped from airplane to helicopter in the same
22 breathe almost.

23 KC: Right.

24 RC: Now, once you were in one, you stayed there. Much like the military, you
25 were in one thing or the other, but you rarely jumped back and forth. The fact that you
26 didn't jump back and forth between airplanes all that much.

27 KC: So, is this the Huey that you were flying here?

28 RC: Oh yeah.

29 KC: Okay.

30 RC: We had bailed Hueys from the Army H models and D models, and then I
31 forget the C models, I guess. I don't remember all of them, but we had a number of them.

1 Huey was a great helicopter, probably the backbone of the U.S. Army's fleet there for a
2 long, long time.

3 KC: Oh, absolutely. You would have been in a position when you're flying these
4 dignitaries around, you're flying people, the observers around to see different parts of
5 Vietnam, South Vietnam that is. Were you able to discern any sort of pattern in terms of
6 where the troops were, where the front lines were, how the progress of the War was going
7 for both the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese at this time?

8 RC: I would say not really. We were kind of more like a side show to the combat.
9 I mean, we heard of great battles, but lucky for us, never close enough where we could
10 see anybody or hear anything or see bullets flying around. It was kind of a—what's the
11 word I'm after? I think they were surreal, but I'm still not sure what that word means. In
12 an environment we were off to one side like we were, you know, observers of this
13 concept going on and never got really down involved in the nuts and bolts and the itty
14 gritty of the combat, you know? We heard stories, but fortunately we were never in
15 position where we got a closed hand view of that. We were kind of off to one side almost
16 in the whole thing and rarely got involved, that I know of in anything like that. It's not till
17 the very end and then everywhere you flew you were concerned about bullets and firing
18 and machine guns and SA-7s.

19 KC: Sure. What was your sense of how the War was progressing at this point?

20 RC: I'm a glass half full guy, Kelly. And I always felt like we would hold out and
21 we would do all right, and we would help them win providing we supported them. Now, I
22 think the whole world knew that the corruption of the South Vietnamese forces higher up
23 was such an extent that it made the combat fighting of the bad guys difficult. If you read
24 Bob Sorely's book, *A Better War*, about General Abrahams and so forth, he is of the
25 opinion that the South Vietnamese Army was incorrectly bad mouth as basically sorry,
26 you know? No leadership, no courage, no nothing. In fact, the story was the colors of the
27 Vietnamese flag were the blood of our soldiers and the yellow was the yellow streak
28 down the Vietnamese people's back. But I don't think that was entirely true. And Bob
29 was whole heartedly, real name is Lewis, but we've known him as Bob all through that
30 year. He thought they fought bravely and I'm sure at the end they had a great last great
31 battle was at a place called Xuan Loc, just east of Saigon. As a matter of fact, Xuan Loc

1 was where in the Chinooks got our first taste of combat when we supported offense in
2 there in the Xuan Loc area bringing in troops and guns and so forth. But yeah, they
3 fought very, very well. There was a rubber plantation over there, I believe, and the tactics
4 of the enemy was, I think, quite a bit superior to ours and by that time they had more
5 troops. They kind of sucked the South Vietnamese Army into a battle in the wooded
6 Rubber plantation. It's like one of Hannibal's great battles with Caesar, his people, we let
7 the South Vietnamese Army follow them into the vegetation area and then just encircle
8 him from the north and south and completely wipe them out. They fought bravely, but it
9 was far gone in conclusion that they were going to get their butt whipped and killed. So,
10 the troops fought bravely higher up. I don't have a lot of great things to say about them,
11 but I've heard stories. In fact, Bob told of one and I've heard other stories of great
12 leaders. In fact, one of their best generals died recently and had a big ceremony for him
13 up, I think, in the Washington, Alexandria area. So, there were great examples of
14 leadership and courage, but it wasn't the case a lot of the time.

15 KC: Did you expect the United States to provide more support for the South
16 Vietnamese Government and military forces than they did?

17 RC: I'm sorry, say that again, Kelly.

18 KC: I said, did you expect the United States to provide more support for the South
19 Vietnamese Government and military than they did?

20 RC: Oh yeah, oh yeah especially at the end. I mean, when we moved out, we left
21 airplanes, fuel, and stuff like that, but one thing I've noticed about Vietnamese ties and
22 others over there, their maintenance thought is not great. For brakes, they'll fix it, but
23 repair deadly maintenance is not something they're strong in. So that would be one
24 problem, but yeah, the money stopped. Any kind of moral encouragement stopped.
25 People like Jane Fonda made sure that the enemy got their encouragement. That's a bitter
26 thought for every veteran from Vietnam is Hanoi Jane just broke the spirit of a lot of
27 people. Went up there and to the U.S. people that our prisoners lied and they weren't
28 being tortured. Hell, I've got two people down here that belong to a pilot group. Bud Day
29 who won the Medal of Honor up there at Hanoi Hilton and Ron Webb, another fine
30 soldier. They don't talk about it, but I know they went through some horrendous stuff.
31 Yeah, almost complete stoppage of support militarily and politically near the end I think

1 encouraged to leave. As a matter of fact, he left; I think it was around the middle of April.
2 He went out in the middle of the night and the U.S. 130 with gobs and gobs of stuff. I
3 think you probably know or maybe I even mentioned he took out eleven tons of gold. I
4 know later that fall I saw that write up that he had sold all that gold to a big gold
5 company. I forget the name at the top of my head. BK something rings a bell, but I'm not
6 sure. He looted the palace and ran off so there wasn't much left for the troops, you know?
7 When your leader's gone, that's it. I will say one thing about Key, I never was a big fan
8 of Keys, you know, he was kind of a Bandit so to speak, but he stayed till the bitter end.
9 He wasn't the political power that he was before, but he was up in the Trang area and had
10 his own farm up there and he stayed till the bitter end. He was there, I told you, I think he
11 was on the same boat I was at the end, the Blue Ridge and so I gave him courage to do
12 that because they could have captured him and lined him up against the wall or whatever,
13 you know? I made him think that he would sing any tune that they wanted him to sing.

14 KC: Right. Now, you mentioned Jane Fonda and the overall larger anti-war
15 movement in the United States. What was your opinion of the anti-war movement at the
16 time and what kind of credit do you give for its efforts or for its influence in ending the
17 War?

18 RC: Well, you know, I could only have one posture on that, Kelly. We hated it; I
19 never was completely came in contact with it. In other words, I came back to the States a
20 few times on leave and so forth. I never ran into the baby killer stuff and stuff like that.
21 And we're deeply involved in what we're doing over there so it's not like we had our
22 head in the sand, but I know a lot of it I never really heard of until later on and I read
23 about it and so forth. We had people running up to Canada to get out of the draft as
24 opposed to when Pearl Harbor was attacked, people dropped out of school, left their work
25 to run down to the places to sign up to go in the military and protect their country. At this
26 time, because of the vague philosophy of the domino theory, people didn't always buy
27 into that. So, they weren't sure what they were fighting for and hence they didn't want to
28 fight, and it wasn't like when Pearl Harbor was attack. It was like, you know, remember
29 the Alamo, remember Pearl Harbor stuff. Drugs had something to do with it, I guess?
30 Somehow, they got so powerful, way stronger than they should have been. You know, the
31 old theory that squeaky hands get the oil, and the noisy and outspoken people got the

1 attention of the media and the media was against the War. I believe was, the great our
2 father. He told people, when they asked about a particular story he was doing, he was
3 going to not so much tell the truth, but make sure that people knew of the horrors of war
4 and that we were wrong. So, they slanted everything, and it was just too much media over
5 there. I mean, they had TV cameras everywhere and reporters everywhere. They want to
6 get the truth out, but a lot of times the truth as they saw it, you know how that goes. So
7 yeah, they had a tremendous influence. And the fact that Jane never went to jail, that's it
8 in a nut shell, you know? Why was she not in jail? The definition of treason, aiding and
9 abetting the enemy and that's exactly what she did. We don't know how many people,
10 soldiers, and airmen were killed or maimed, whatever, because of the encouragement she
11 gave the enemy to fight to the bitter end and they're clever people and they could see the
12 building of the American backbone. They thought, anyway, and they were right, that if
13 they could hold in there a little longer, a little longer everyday that they would
14 eventually—we would give up and withdrawal which is exactly what happened. And it
15 wasn't just Jane Fonda. There was another high ranking politician, I can't remember his
16 name. You might remember it. He might have been some kind of a secretary of
17 something or other. I don't think it was state, but I don't know what it was, but very
18 influential in government. He was over there doing the same thing Jane was, you know? I
19 don't think they have a picture of her/him behind a 12.7 millimeter gun, but he was
20 basically doing what she was. Anyway, did I answer that okay?

21 KC: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. When did you begin to get the feeling that the
22 tide was turning in this war? When do you begin to think, "Uh-oh, there's no way that the
23 South Vietnamese are going to hold out?"

24 RC: I'll tell you the truth, all through '74 us guys, pilots, we talked back and forth
25 and discussed it a little bit. We thought we could help them win, okay? At least in some
26 stalemates, get the guys out of the South and so forth. Not until probably early '75 was
27 there a sense of, you know—but before that the Air American guy said, "We'll be here
28 forever." We love the flying we love the environment and excitement and everything.
29 There was never a thought about we were going to get killed or shot or anything, we
30 thought we—we never thought about it, we just knew we were going to be all ranked. I
31 think starting in early '75, I can't pinpoint anything at all, any conversation or whatever,

1 but I remember talking to Tony Coleson and he said this is the greatest job he's ever had,
2 and he wanted to be here another ten years. Could we have been? Could the ITC have
3 done a better job and been there longer? Who knows but starting in '75 I think there was
4 a sense of maybe the ending we thought was going to occur might not occur.

5 KC: You mentioned that if the ICC had done a better job. Can you explain what
6 you saw of the ICC, of the work they were doing there and what maybe they could have
7 done to improve what they were doing?

8 RC: Well, I didn't see much because the communist countries basically kept out
9 of sight. The big flaw in the whole darn thing was, it was set up to investigate mishaps.
10 Who was wrong, who was right and corrected or at least an action investigation and you
11 weren't going to try and fall. You try to find out how to prevent it from happening in the
12 future. It required all four nations, two communist, two good guys to evaluate the
13 problem and come up with recommendations. Well, I don't think anything ever started
14 with the good guys doing anything; it's always the bad guys. I mean, they never held to
15 their word. They never did what they said they were going to do which I guess is the
16 same thing. But they were difficult to the point that no mishap was ever properly
17 evaluated by the four countries. So right away any findings done by the two good guys
18 were worthless. They didn't mean anything because they weren't signed by all four of the
19 participants. So right away it was impossible to do their job, what I'm trying to say. They
20 hit out and I think they're mostly the party. I don't think they did hardly anything so there
21 was no communist countries out in the field, doing their job that as we understood, they
22 were supposed to do. So yeah, they were there, but the job was not being done at all and I
23 don't think it was ever done and it was never going to be done.

24 KC: Well, as you say, if you have two on one side and two on another you can
25 guarantee there's going to be a stalemate.

26 RC: Exactly. The stalemate would have at least covered some of the facts, you
27 know. But by not participating, anything that—a stalemate would have been some factual
28 evidence of what happened perhaps, but by them not participating it just wasn't worth the
29 papers written on.

30 KC: Now you eluded to some of these individuals partying. Did you see any
31 evidence of this?

1 RC: No, no, but I know there's a lot of partying going on. I took advantage of a
2 situation perhaps of the people who are in need of money or whatever. I think there was
3 an element on that. Perhaps, I'm overboard I'm saying a lot of partying. If they're not
4 doing their job and flying out to these mishap places and evaluating what occurred, then
5 what were they doing?

6 KC: Right. Now as the War continues to turn against South Vietnam in 1975,
7 were you involved in any effort to evacuate other parts? And this is before the evacuation
8 of Saigon, of course. But were you involved in evacuation of any other cities or any other
9 areas?

10 RC: I was not at Da Nang where a lot of that went on. Tony Coles was up there.
11 I'm trying to think of any others. I can't think of any that I want to even name for sure.
12 John C. Collard perhaps. I was mostly over in Nha Trang area for some reason. Just the
13 way it turned out, you know? You went to a place for a week and then you came back,
14 got a day off, and then went somewhere else. I spent a lot of time in Nha Trang and then
15 when things started going to hell, we're moving people out in Nha Trang and also Pleiku
16 which is near the middle and of course is where they won the big thrusts by the
17 communists to cut the country in half occurred. Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku now they're in
18 Can Tho. Then I was also down in the Delta, which was pretty, pretty exciting, but as far
19 as lifting anybody out, I do remember flying some agency people out of Nha Trang.
20 They're looking for one or two of their people or it might have been an agent that they
21 had in the most locals, the good people locals left Pleiku where there was a pretty big
22 group of people heading down toward Tuy Hoa to the coast along the river, valley in the
23 river and into Nha Trang, but they were stopped by the river and they were ambushed by
24 the communist company behind him which may have been a little bit later. I remember
25 the people on the radio talking to one of the agency people in, I think it was Ban Me
26 Thuot, that the bad guys were coming into town. I think they mentioned a tank or two,
27 which of course is always a bad sign. He was told to hunker down, and they would try to
28 get him out the next day or something like that, but not to get himself killed if he could
29 help it. That was about it, you know? Never involved where there's actual fighting on the
30 ground and in our area there. It was just—we just kind of—we kept one step ahead of the

1 bad guys approach. Whether it was in the Delta or down through the middle of the
2 country to Pleiku and Nha Trang when the coastal cities or where.

3 KC: You mentioned a moment ago that it was pretty exciting down in the Delta at
4 this time. What do you mean by that, what sort of things were exciting for you?

5 RC: Well, they were fighting skirmishes in a lot of areas where there hadn't been
6 people before. I may be talking more about later on. The council down there—it was big
7 enough that they would wire the council was a guy named Kennedy and he was very
8 vociferous and doing what he wanted to do. One of the things he wanted to do was get on
9 his boat with the big American flag and charge down the Mekong and out to the ocean to
10 meet the U.S. Navy that was parked out there. Well, I think he got us in position where he
11 didn't go out with the last few Air America helicopters that were going from Can Tho
12 back up to Saigon. He went out by boat and the word has that he did it during a storm, a
13 rainstorm and he was, indeed attacked as he was told by a couple Air America pilots
14 directly that it was the most dangerous thing to do because they controlled the big canals
15 in the river. By that time, it was just no contest, but they aimed a B-40 rocket at the boat
16 and barely missed him and then in the rainstorm and so forth were able to get on by that
17 particular ambush place and get out to the river. Of course, I think Kennedy wound up on
18 board one of those ships, I didn't see him, carrying this American flag like a local hero
19 when actually he was a jerk that got lucky. He and all his group that he lead up and
20 forced to come with him basically, they could have been killed in that boat accident and
21 nobody would have ever known because it was just some local little ambush team that
22 would have wiped him out and that would have been it. But fortunately, they did get
23 lucky getting through there and then the others that went out by chopper did get back up
24 with Air America birds and maybe some of the local helicopters.

25 KC: Now, as things are starting to get a little worse, as you start to get the feeling
26 of, "Well, maybe this isn't the best place in the world to be." What about your family?
27 Did you have any concerns for them? I assume they were with you there in Saigon.

28 RC: Yeah, they were with us. As it turned out, there was a feeling by that time
29 because I remember New Years of '75 I was in Thai Pei and was able to buy some
30 furniture. I'm not sure how I knew, but I talked to my personnel people about shipping
31 stuff home out of Vietnam. I said I'd like to get more weight out of this other place. Like

1 three or four thousand pounds or whatever it was. I don't know what the total was
2 anymore, but they said sure. So, had I had more stuff in Saigon, I would have had leave it
3 anyway. As it turned out, we left all of it, we couldn't get it out. What we did—well, let
4 me finish up this other story. We bought a bunch of fine antique furniture. In fact, I still
5 got my gun cabinet in my desk and a couple other things that we purchased at that point.
6 So, there was a feeling, I'm trying to say, of yeah, the end is near because why else would
7 I have thought about that idea. As it turned out it was great because without that I would
8 have had to do all that chipping at my own expense out of Taipei back to the States. A
9 few things, smaller things that they did was we just took it into this military complex
10 right on the base there, postal complex. Addressed it, sealed it up best we could and put a
11 stamp on it. And god bless him, I don't know whose idea it was, but it was great. They
12 shipped that stuff to the destination. We head on there and at this far end is like COD,
13 they paid the bill when it got there.

14 KC: Oh, very cool.

15 RC: So that was one of the neater things.

16 KC: Yeah.

17 RC: I remember—as a matter of fact I still have sunglasses I bought within the
18 last couple of weeks of before the fall and I was in the PX buying a few things and things
19 were sold at a small discount. I said, “Are you crazy?” I talked to one of the managers,
20 “You crazy?” I said, “The bad guys are going to be in here in no time looting this place,
21 stealing it all. You should be selling this stuff at least half off whatever you can get for
22 it.” He says, “I can't do that without authorization on the home front.” So, there you have
23 it. The tail wagging the dog completely, why he couldn't—it's not like today where you
24 e-mail back and forth or whatever there is, they do, tweet and so forth. But he couldn't
25 get it or was too dumb or something to do his job which would mean, “Lets get what I
26 can out of this stuff because the end is obviously near.” And I still remember talking to
27 him and saying, “I don't understand what is wrong with you, why you can't see this.”
28 You go to the PX today, a lot of the prices and so forth they come out of wherever the
29 headquarters is to San Antonio or Houston or somewhere. Sometimes you wonder how
30 these prices can be like they are. Anyway, I'm going a stray here.

1 KC: No, that's fine, that's fine. What about your family? Did you have concerns
2 about the safety of your family?

3 RC: Yeah, right after that sometime late January maybe? I don't remember the
4 date, early February? All of Air America requested that everybody ship their family out
5 as soon as they could, somewhere safe. Bangkok was the nearest place that was safe, and
6 my family went to Bangkok. A lot of people sent their wives back to the States. I'm
7 pretty sure Tony Culson did that, I think, and a few others. So yeah, they were good
8 about that and they saw the situation as it really was, and they provided assistance getting
9 family out and so forth. So, I had a wife and daughter and then they went to Bangkok and
10 waited. We kept in contact by phone and then eventually met up with them in Bangkok.

11 KC: What was it like to send your wife and daughter away like that knowing that
12 you're still going to be there and that something bad could still happen to you?

13 RC: Once again, the glass is half full. I mean, we were concerned for their safety.
14 You know, who knows, a bomb could have been dropped inadvertently, a mortar shell come
15 in, you know, weird things like that happened in the fog of war as they say. No, it was
16 mostly just relief to get them out of there because, like I say, we'd go flying. The ritual
17 was, as it was throughout all of Air America, Laos and Cambodia and so forth we were
18 out of sight for six days, back that night had the seventh day off probably. I think near the
19 end we kind of did away with that, so we weren't there most of the time as it was. So,
20 there was really just a relief that they were out safely and didn't have to be concerned
21 about them.

22 KC: Okay.

23 RC: We always felt like, you know, worst comes to worst, jump on a fixed wing
24 and fly to Bangkok or fly to Hong Kong or somewhere, you know? We always—you
25 know, in combat there's a great feeling of optimism. I don't know how to explain it other
26 than that, that unless you're riding the front lines where you're ducking bullets all the
27 time and you don't know one minute to the next. Well, we were a little further on back
28 from the actual combat. We actually felt like we we're going to be all right.

29 KC: Did you see any preparations in South Vietnam or what would eventually be
30 the fall? Did you see people trying to get their families out early? You mentioned this one

1 business that wasn't quite ready to sell at discount prices yet. Did you see any sort of
2 preparations throughout '75?

3 RC: I remember being—a lot of friends, when it came to an end could I help them
4 get out? I told them pretty much like it was, you know, that there wasn't a whole heck of
5 a lot I could do. I said near close to the end when we got the rooftops designated and so
6 forth, and I was actually at one of them in a place called the first hotel which was right
7 outside the Tan Son Nhut base there. I said, "If you can get to those places, then maybe I
8 can do something." But I wasn't sure I'd have my own helicopter and I wasn't sure what
9 I could do. For example, during the actual last day, I had a Vietnamese crew chief and I
10 dropped him off back at the first hotel rooftop and I told him I'd be back in like two or
11 three hours. We set a time and I said, "If I don't land, I will fly by and you be on the
12 rooftop with your family and I will pick you up." I flew by several times the first hotel in
13 and out going to other places because it was between the embassy area and the base itself
14 where we used the PX commissary parking lot because it was quite large for landing with
15 the Hueys dropping off the people than the big birds from the Navy would carry them out
16 to the ships. But I flew by there several times and looked, never saw them again. Yeah,
17 there were many, many questions. Could I help, could I do this, could I do that, did I
18 know anything? At that time, nobody knew anything for sure, but we all know it didn't
19 look good. There were people leaving days before because it didn't take long for them to
20 find out that the U.S. Navy was out there, and the word got back the Navy was indeed
21 picking up people. As a matter of fact, what I was told, I don't know how accurate it was,
22 there were as many as three thousand Vietnamese on all the ships, especially the aircraft
23 carrier. I always tell everybody the Navy did an absolute fantastic job. They took care of
24 them, fed them, and defended them, just a wonderful, wonderful job. The Admiral and
25 these people did a great job and I tell everybody that despite the idiot Graham Martin
26 trying to get the Admiral fired for not doing as he was told or not doing things at a timely
27 manner when he did exactly what he's going to do. Have I told you a little bit about that
28 at all?

29 KC: No, you've not.

30 RC: Okay, we'll maybe come to that later, but yeah, there was a lot of people
31 asking, "Could I help, what could I do, what did I know." And basically, I told them,

1 “There’s not much I can do, there’s not much I know. Only that it does look like we’re
2 going to be out of here.”

3 KC: Right. You mention that you had friends who were asking you for this kind
4 of help. Now, when you say friends are you talking about Vietnamese friends?

5 RC: Yeah, oh yeah. All Vietnamese friends because all the Americans that were
6 there, they had their own relationship with what’s going on. They were guaranteed to get
7 out some way or another. I played a lot of tennis with my tennis friends. And then the
8 owners of the hotel, they wanted to know if I could help them. They had plenty of money,
9 obviously, since they owned a hotel and I think they got out by a boat or something,
10 maybe even airplane. My wife’s cousin was looking to get out and the real sad story there
11 is, I got her out to the base, got her an Air American ticket, showed it to the guard at the
12 base, he let us on. She was to wait out there until things came to a head which we
13 couldn’t predict exactly what would happen, just mass confusion. Just hang around out
14 there, you know. Living food, food you could find or take with you and water, but then
15 her cousin, her sister, I forget which said, “I’m not sure what’s going on and I’m not sure
16 this is the way to do it. You need to bring my sister back here to talk to me so that we can
17 figure out the best way to go.” I told her, I said, “Look, it was tough getting her out, the
18 guards at the gate are shaky, they got weapons, we don’t know what the hell they are
19 going to do. So why bring her out, I cannot guarantee getting you guys back on.” So sure,
20 enough that’s exactly what happened. I brought her out, deliver her to her cousin.
21 Apparently, this cousin had quite a bit of money and she was like the power behind the
22 evacuation. The other cousin they had on the base has a little two or three year old son
23 with her, her husband who was airborne soldier, knee soldier had been killed in one of the
24 battles. Anyway, they came off and then just a day or two before the evacuation
25 somebody stole—what was it—a 105 was it? Or the T-39, a little fighter aircraft and
26 bombed the palace and so the immediate martial law and anybody on the streets was shot,
27 especially if you were a foreigner. So, the last two days I couldn’t find her or anybody
28 else to do what I promised to do. Yeah, there was a lot of sadness, a lot of heartbreak
29 going on there at the end. And I don’t know to this day if she got out. Because you know,
30 about three hundred thousand left by boat of whom probably one hundred thousand,
31 maybe even more were robbed, killed, abused by the Malaysian fishermen who became

1 the Malaysian pirates. It started with Cambodia, of course. Cambodia, as they proceeded
2 west to try to survive and get away and then they had to run the gauntlet of the
3 Cambodian fishermen and then the Thai fishermen and then the Malaysian fishermen
4 trying to get over there to Singapore. Someone got into Thailand and they had camps
5 over there. Some got into Singapore to get by the Malaysians. You know, the fishermen
6 slash pirates, they found out pretty quickly that people weren't leaving without
7 something. So, they had popular means of saving for the future or whatever was by those
8 little one ounce gold little—like a stamp, not a stamp, but about one ounce. So, they
9 could seal those on their body so as they were captured by the bad fishermen, they were
10 stripped and so forth and every place checked for possible hiding gold. The same was
11 true of people as I have said from Da Nang. The soldiers would stop them and rob them
12 and beat them and take what they had. It was pretty tough there.

13 KC: Well, maybe now's a good time to ask you if you can provide me with what
14 you saw there in late April. Take me through what you saw of the fall and the evacuation
15 of Saigon. Feel free to provide as much detail as you can. This is absolutely fascinating
16 stuff.

17 RC: Well, I'll tell you what, a lot of confusion and excitement and the memory
18 ain't what it used to be as they say. The last few days—I remember the last week or so
19 we got a call from ops, we had to go down to a place near Vung Tau called Barilla. As I
20 mentioned, I was at my first station in Vietnam was Vung Tau where I served with the
21 Chinook company for a year. Anyway, I got the word, a guy down there was trapped by
22 the bad guys in Barilla and we would go down and try to make radio contact with him
23 and pick him up. So, it was myself and Dave Kendall, the same guy that picked me up off
24 of the first hotel rooftop that last morning. So, we were flying around down there trying
25 to make contact and then it turned out another guy came down, a guy named Burt and he
26 was down there, and we had no radio contact with him. And so, we were flying around
27 just north of Vung Tao, he was to the south of us and we were trying to savage contact
28 with this agent on the ground and never did. But the one thing about there that I will
29 probably never forget is we had our lights off because we didn't want to get anybody to
30 shoot at us. I remember this guy Burt was south of us like one thousand feet above us.
31 Like we were maybe a two thousand or something like that. He was a three thousand. It

1 may have been three thousand, four thousand. The next thing I know, he called and got
2 on the same frequency and called and he was north of us a thousand feet below us. I
3 remember talking to Dave, I said, “How in the hell did he do that? We never saw him,
4 you know? He might have gone right through our flight path, right through our
5 helicopters.” That concerned us a little bit.

6 KC: Sure.

7 RC: Of course, at that time wasn't any time to be talking about that. We're just
8 happy he missed us, whatever he did. It turned out we never did get to pick up the guy.
9 You know why? He left by vehicle hours before. So just a case of miscommunication
10 there. That was one of the exciting things. Can Tho, nothing ordinary there, basically we
11 just moved people back and forth from the—we had some other smaller areas where
12 soldiers and advisors with people in Canto and then from Canto they could go out by
13 thick swing. Much easier than choppers. And back up in Saigon I can't remember
14 anything except, you know, we checked out a few rooftops. Nicky, as I mentioned, was
15 one of the instructor pilots and hard working and he established a lot of the rooftop sights
16 and checked them out and made sure there were obstacles like the rooftop in the picture
17 that I was involved in there, the rooftop there at the end. There were actually pipes along
18 the rooftop that you had to sit on, straddle or whatever as well as be concerned with the
19 strength of the rooftop itself. In other words, as you settled reduced power on the
20 helicopter, you didn't reduce it all the way you kept some lift in the blades so maybe we
21 weighed two to three thousand pounds or something like that. All the weight wasn't on
22 the rooftop, things like that you had to be careful of, but other than that, nothing. On the
23 last day a couple of things that still stand out in my memory is looking around the rooftop
24 horizons flying about. I think maybe I saw it before I left the first hotel rooftop. There
25 was a South Vietnamese Air Force Huey sitting on a rooftop half off and half on. In other
26 words, he had not quite made it or didn't have the center of gravity over on the roof itself.
27 And as it reduced power, the thing just slid back off the edge, almost. What happened,
28 and I never could get close enough to see, but obviously the skids caught in the railing or
29 something, so he was half off and half on at a forty-five degree angle. I'm thinking, “My
30 god, to scare that guy must have had thinking he was going down and he's obviously
31 going to die because there's no other way around it.” I would guess since it never moved

1 from the time, I first saw it till the last time that it was stabilized and somehow able to
2 crawl out of the helicopter and down onto the rooftop to get away. Another thing was the
3 bad guys, South Vietnamese Air Force pilots tried to steal one of our helicopters. Got out
4 there early in the morning and it was part of our ramp was dusty. If you pull in the power,
5 it's like trying to hover in a dust storm or a snow storm. You can't see anything and
6 unless you do it quickly and aware of what you're doing, the problems that you've got,
7 you sit there for a second and you can't see and you're IFR, you can't see squat unless
8 you do it exactly right. You're going to settle back to earth or get one way or the other.
9 As it turned out, he lifted up and something happened, he lost control anyway because of
10 the dust. He settled back to the ground and broke the gear he hit it so darn hard. Anyway,
11 he's sitting there, he turns the power, and the power is almost off, it's called idle, of
12 course. You're familiar with that. For four hours, from that time to get out to Tan Son
13 Nhut 'til we left, that plane is sitting there, and the blades are going around and around
14 and around. You hear this *swish, swish, and swish*. It was the most eerie damn thing I've
15 ever heard, but it hadn't damaged the blades and the blades were in position where they
16 were hitting everything, so it became idol and being full of fuel for hours and hours and
17 hours. So that was weird. We did have trucks out there for refueling, and Nicky actually
18 had established where the trucks would be and so forth had that all set up. Some idiot
19 safety guy came out the day before and said, "We can't have a fuel truck sitting here, it's
20 unsafe." So, this idiot, we never found out who it was made him move the fuel truck. And
21 come the next day, the day of evacuation, there was no fuel truck and no fuel. We never
22 did find the darn thing and we don't know who did it, but Nicky found out the people that
23 were supposed to be with the trucks some safety guy came back and forced them to
24 move. So, other than that there wasn't a lot of going on. The last day or the day before the
25 last day we just sat in the hotel because we had the Marshall Law, we didn't get to go out.
26 We just stayed there and wondered and hoped for the best. We had a radio that we had
27 gotten from somewhere. The only American with me was a kicker from a bird airways
28 fixed wing, whatever it was; 46, 47 or something like that. He was with me in the hotel
29 and we went out together. We just waited and talked and waited and talked and waited
30 and talked to figure out what we could do. There was nothing we could do because we
31 didn't know anything because nobody told us anything and just one mess after another.

1 Of course, by that time, the 28th, there are all sorts of bombs being dropped, mortars and
2 so forth. I mean, we hear one big loud boom. They said the Air Force had dropped a—
3 that might have been before when the big ten thousand pound bomb off to the north. But
4 now, there was not a lot of specific stuff, just a lot of tension, a lot of waiting, a lot of
5 anxiety to know what the hells going to happen. Are we really going to get out, are we
6 not going to get out? Are the good guys going to let us go once they saw we're leaving or
7 is it their aim to make sure we don't get out at all. We don't know. Some people say,
8 "Well, what we think is there's been a sure of an agreement among the leadership that
9 once we start the evacuation to let us go." I don't know if anybody got shot knowingly
10 the last couple of days, but that's about it. I can't think of anything else, Kelly.

11 KC: Well, let me ask you this, and you may not be able to offer much of an
12 impression on this. Just like you said, you were held up in a hotel because of the Marshal
13 Law, etcetera. What was your impression of Saigon on the eve of evacuation? Saigon is
14 under fire when all of this is taken place. What was your impression of what it was like
15 on the streets of Saigon, what was it like for the average person there?

16 RC: Some people were resigned to the fact that it was going to fall, it had to
17 survive. I know, as a matter of fact, I don't if she was a secretary or clerk or what. I saw
18 her somewhere near the hotel a few days before and she was standing on the street with a
19 little stand selling cigarettes like one of the really poor people. She was already trying to
20 establish her position as a local who did nothing, knew nothing, or whatever. Especially
21 had not ever worked for the bad Americans. So, I'm sure she represented a certain
22 amount of people who tried to blend in with the real common folks. Soldiers ripped off
23 their uniforms and just wore whatever they had and could grab so they weren't part of the
24 enemy so to speak. Others were trying to get into the embassy trying to communicate
25 back and forth, trying to get out to Tan Son Nhut. Others going down—I didn't realize
26 that the docks were such a mess, but I'm sure they were because they were all trying to
27 get out to the ships because like I say, the grapevine was just great. They knew no time
28 that the ships were out there and what they were there for. So, there was a lot of terror
29 involved, a lot of real freighting moments that they knew the end was near, you know?
30 The good people, the rich people—a lot of them probably flew out earlier. (audio cuts).
31 Yeah, I did go down—oh, with one of the ladies, I forget her now, her name was White.

1 One of the leaders—I can't think of a position. I think she was a secretary for one of the
2 big bosses there in Saigon. I'm not sure she stayed there, or she was on a visit, but
3 somehow, he wound up in Taxi together going downtown. I'll tell you; shopping was a
4 pleasure then because everything was next to nothing. I remember buying a picture, so to
5 speak, of a fisherman casting a large net, the way the fished like they do in the Orient, but
6 it was gold foil and gold plates. I don't know what it was worth, but I got it for next to
7 nothing because the guy wanted to get money and get the devil out. This may have been
8 three or four days before the end. So, there was still some shopping going on, stores are
9 open. Then I think within a day or two or three is when everything just came to a stop and
10 the only concern was if you had an idea that you could get out, how you would
11 accomplish that fact, you know? Run out, buy a boat, get out to Tan Son Nhut, were there
12 any Air America friends? Oh, I've forgotten about my wife's brothers. I took them out to
13 Tan Son Nhut like a week before and just got them up the military/USAID embassy and
14 things set up and the gymnasium and you just lined up and told them who you were and
15 who this person was, and they took it all down and they got you in line to get on the
16 airplane and get out of there. And then they went over to the two cousins or two brothers
17 that wound up in Guam and then he went on from there. There's a lot of that going on
18 and I don't know how many thousands got out of there, but we must have gotten a ton
19 out. I have no idea how many until the mortars damaged the runway and the fixed wing
20 could no longer maneuver in and out. And then the rest of them had to go out by ship.
21 The two brothers went out by fixed wing. I don't know whether to Bangkok initially and
22 then to Guam, I'm not sure. It may have been the way they went. It was pretty hectic,
23 pretty scary. I think by that time there was no hope of anybody or the good guys winning,
24 pulling it out I mean.

25 KC: Right.

26 RC: And that the end was near, what the end was depending upon how well you
27 could camouflage who you were, what you were, and to that end when the ambassador
28 did give the green light until the eleven o'clock that morning, the people in the embassy
29 were not able to destroy all the documents and so forth that identified who the people
30 were that worked directly for our CIA. They were probably number one of the bad guys
31 list of, "We're going to get these people." Along with who the officers were in the

1 military and stuff like that. Soldiers, you know, they could come later. Depending upon if
2 you could blend in with the locals and so forth and the others, well, I'm sure just ran
3 down to the docks and got on what everybody could. I know there were boats that were
4 out to the ships. When I was out there, there was like a barge or some small boat, kind of
5 flat looking that was out there with a couple hundred people on it and they were trying to
6 get them on board of one of the ships out there, probably the carrier, I don't know. I don't
7 know how they would have done that because the carrier sits so high in the water. There
8 was an idiot, for lack of a better nomenclature, who was flying a Huey that didn't want to
9 land in the water because he was afraid to. Obviously, because as you settle in the water
10 the blades are coming around and hit the water and, of course, it's the old law of physics,
11 opposite reaction going the other way. The blade hit the water and that forced the
12 transmitter back to the transmission and the transmission literally jumps out of the
13 helicopter and it made it land right on your head there in the cockpit. So, he was going to
14 land on that barge, whatever it was. A nice flat place and he didn't give a damn about the
15 people underneath them, but they started screaming and everything else. Finally, he
16 figured out he couldn't do that in the final analysis, so he pulled off to one side and
17 landed in the water. Some of them did okay and a couple of them didn't. In fact, the guy
18 that saved, David Kendal, again, he was the guy flying one of the Air America
19 helicopters that the Navy guy on board said, "Ditch that sucker." And by that time, David
20 was probably shell shocked and confused and he didn't argue with him because he
21 wouldn't have won anyway. Of course, what's happening, the decks were so full that
22 they couldn't land anymore helicopters just to get the people off. So, David ditched it and
23 what happened was he trimmed it up to fly by itself, as he released the door and jumped
24 out. He was telling me later on, he says, "Bob, I never thought about when I positioned
25 the switch to hover." That when I jump, the center of gravity is moved back, and the
26 helicopter was there for moving that direction, so I jumped out to the right rear of the
27 helicopter and it starts to move back. I'm looking up and the blades are coming right at
28 me.

29 KC: Oh, no.

30 RC: I was so scared, but suddenly it tipped a little bit to the left. As I said, the
31 blades are turning that way and hit the water and the transmission and so forth was

1 yanked out and the momentum of the stuff went forward so he was able to survive okay.
2 There was a similar thing that happened to a Vietnamese pilot and a Vietnamese
3 helicopter and of course a Huey, but he got too close to the carrier—carrier or a blue
4 ridge, I'm not sure and he jumped, but the helicopter hit into the structure of the ship. Of
5 course, it's so big and powerful it literally almost bounced and just literally bounced off
6 and bounced right back on that poor pilot, so he was killed immediately. So, it was a
7 pretty nasty scene there at the end going out.

8 KC: Were you able to—

9 RC: I've forgotten the question already.

10 KC: No, no that's fine. That's exactly what I wanted to hear, that was a great
11 description. Now, were you able to correspond with your family at all? Did you have any
12 sort of communication with them while all this was going down?

13 RC: Oh yeah, I think I mentioned maybe that were able to phone call. It wasn't
14 easy always, but at least a couple times a week. Of course, when I'm out in the middle up
15 in Nha Trang and Da Nang and down in the Delta, we didn't. When I got back into
16 Saigon it was fairly easy to call, but as I remember, the landlord where she stayed, there
17 was some difficulty—he wasn't always there to answer the phone because there wasn't
18 phones in the room. It wasn't like a hotel; it was like a homeless shelter and I forget the
19 details now. You know, there's never any—well, there may have been a concern was I all
20 right, you know, but by large we were not as engaged in the War, so we were going to be
21 okay unless something sill happened.

22 KC: Okay, now tell me if you could about the system. And the system may be too
23 strong of a word for Air America's efforts to evacuate Saigon there on the last day. You
24 talked about Nicky Fallippi and I know that he was instrumental in finding these places,
25 rooftops, etcetera for helicopters to land. He was instrumental in providing refueling
26 areas, trucks, and things like that like you mentioned. Tell me about the process or the
27 procedure or the system that Air America had set up to affect their part of the evacuation?

28 RC: I don't know, maybe a couple of weeks, maybe three weeks before he was
29 pretty obvious and in fact, I flew out to the helicopter earlier in the month. Let me just
30 look at something. What time is it? Time to go?

31 KC: No, we have ten after eleven here central time.

1 RC: Oh, looking at something else here. Oh yeah, on the nineteenth and twentieth
2 I flew out to Blue Ridge with a guy named Tadula, another pilot and we took somebody
3 out to coordinate the evacuation. I remember I got my fake Uzis here, I had to call Ice
4 Pack and Quebec. Oh, on Barilla where we tried to pick up that agent—oh, it wasn't an
5 agent necessarily. It was a guy named Cliff Nun, he worked for USAID, he got trapped
6 down there and he got out by vehicle. An Loc was a hot place up to the north. Then on
7 the sixteenth of April—David and I flew there a lot, I guess. We're back at Vung Tao
8 trying to pick up somebody. I can't even remember who it was, you know? And then
9 back in the ninth of April I'm out there on the Blue Ridge coordinating with people to a
10 ship called the CTS 76. I guess that's part of the Navy nomenclature before. The carrier
11 named after Ronald Reagan has another name so—I forget it. I don't have it in front of
12 me now. Yeah, I'm trying to think—oh, back to the question. So anyway, three weeks
13 before Nick and a couple others were busy looking around what looked like a good
14 rooftop and what turned out to be a good rooftop then come back later on and put a big H
15 on it for Helipad and get the word out to all the people that these places, Marked with that
16 big H had been checked and were found strong enough to support helicopter, but they
17 also make sure that you didn't, you know, reduce power completely to maintain so many
18 weights on the blades. It was obvious the big Jolly Greens Air Force, damn Air Force,
19 Navy people—pardon that Air Force. The Navy guys, big birds couldn't even think about
20 landing any place, but the rooftop at the embassy which was quite big. Their only
21 problem was a near by tree that had they cut it down would have made—they could have
22 landed it in the embassy yard and made that even easier. But there again, Graham Martin
23 and his omnipotence said, "That tree's not coming down because I'm going to come back
24 here in a few years and we're going to have a democratic Vietnam and I'm going to see it
25 in action." I mean, the guy was—his brain was completely gone. I mean, I don't think he
26 made one right decision the last period of time that petered down to my level where I
27 could see something positive about whatever it was, he did. So, the decision then was,
28 okay, Air America birds, because of their small skid size, would fly around all these
29 small places, and pick up people. Some of that was local, some of that were Americans,
30 you know? Not just Air America people, but U.S. Aid people and agency people and so
31 forth fly them either right to the PX commissary parking lot or to the embassy and then

1 the big birds from the Navy would come in the embassy because they had much more
2 space there to get more than one or two birds on the ground at a time. So even it was just
3 one, they, you know, could take out fifty or sixty people at a time. They had tremendous
4 power compared to our Huey. That was the logical thing to do and it was pretty well set
5 up and well organized and I think went off pretty much darn good, you know? I don't
6 know of anybody that got hurt or injured or anything toward happened there that last day
7 because of some silly mistake or accident or crash or whatever. So, it was a really great
8 job. Nick did a great job. I tell Nick to this day that I know he did a great job and like I
9 say, there right to the end. Of course, radios went out. I remember going out to my first
10 trip to the carrier, I had to follow a guy named Izzy Friedman because his idea worked
11 and mine didn't, I think may have been HF was out, high frequency as opposed to FM.
12 So, he was able to lead me out there and get me on board and everything. So, we refueled
13 at that time and then went back to Saigon to do some more of that local enlisting and then
14 at the end of the day, go back out to the ships. We were told that in the darkness, we
15 wouldn't be flying anymore. But we had primarily with just some cases just the pilot and
16 the crew chief. We didn't always have the crew chief so, you know, it was kind of hairy
17 doing everything by yourself. As it got dark you couldn't see anything and some of our
18 radios were on the blink. It just made life very difficult. So, I think that decision probably
19 saved a lot of lives. The Navy, they got a full crew, you know? Two pilots, maybe even
20 three for all night operations, crew chiefs, all kinds of radio, so you know, just a totally
21 different environment.

22 KC: So, the Navy was able to fly people out at night time as well?

23 RC: Oh yeah, they flew right up to like eight o'clock in the morning.

24 KC: Okay.

25 RC: And I believe they were the last guys out. In fact, the guy stayed to the end, I
26 think he was commander of the year, pilot of the year or some such award. I think there
27 may have been a marine—I think there was a marine killed late in the night, but I'm not
28 just sure if I remember it correctly. The last person killed; American killed over there I
29 think was a marine. The Marines did a good job, they always do a great job.

1 KC: On that last day of the evacuation is an incredibly hectic time. Where do you
2 go, where do you report to work that day? Who is in charge, what are they telling you to
3 do? Where do you go?

4 RC: There weren't no reporting. I was in a hotel for three days, okay? Waiting on
5 a pick up or I don't remember at least a day or two days before I just stayed in a hotel.
6 I'm not sure if I had the radio the whole time, but I must have because there was no way
7 to get it to me after that three day period so I must have had it. We were there all that day
8 of the martial law not daring to go out just eating and have the beer and just look around
9 and trying to figure out that that was going on and there was little radio communication
10 that I recall at all. So, there was no going anywhere. The only thing done really well was,
11 okay, they knew where all the guys were, and they had a crew or two or three that slept
12 on Tan Son Nhut. We rotate that around and as it turned out I got to the hotel and then
13 after that, of course, we couldn't exchange and so the guys on the base stayed there and
14 their only mission in life at that time was to wait for the call of evacuation which by that
15 time we knew had to come. We all expected it early on that next morning, the 29th, but it
16 didn't. As I say, we sat around the until eleven o'clock before we finally got the word.
17 No, there was no reporting, no talking, no nothing, we were all on our own, but we've
18 been briefed. The plan was such that everybody knew what they had to do. Like I said,
19 Dave Kendall was one of the guys out there at Tan Son Nhut and the next thing I knew—
20 I think he called and let me know he was on the way or I heard him on the rooftop, I'm
21 not sure which because I was on the probably second or third floor. We had located stairs
22 up to the rooftop, so it wasn't a problem. As soon as he got there the other—I'll tell you
23 the kicker, the American kicker, I forget his name now. We just ran up there and got out.
24 At that time, I remember thinking about, "I wonder where the hotel owners were, but I
25 hadn't seen them for a couple days. Maybe because they had already gotten out or maybe
26 because of the martial law, I don't know which. But when I left, the only people around
27 the hotel were what we'd call the others. I think we had a cook because I remember
28 getting some breakfast that morning before we left. I don't know if we told you, I don't
29 know why, but I had a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator. So that morning about
30 nine o'clock we realized it was going to be awhile. Kicker and I, we opened up the
31 champagne and had some eggs and so forth and had a classic ex-pat breakfast I guess you

1 could say. I'm not sure how much we drank. I don't think it was too much because he
2 wanted to make sure we were sober if and when the Ward ever came. As I say, came
3 around eleven o'clock which means we lost what? Five hours of day light, five to six
4 hours of ability by the agency people who destroy records so that when the bad guys
5 walked in, they didn't walk in and they were presented with a list of every damn person
6 that worked with the agency or use aid or whom ever, you know? They just probably—
7 what I heard, of course, I don't know for sure except these papers and so forth and just
8 went out to every location and every home and knocked on the door and say, "We're
9 here, slick and we know who you are so lets go to our reeducation camps and he will
10 teach you guys." They didn't call them prisoners, they called it reeducation camps.

11 KC: Right. All right, here you are on this last day. You're out of the hotel. When
12 do you get to your Huey? When do you report to fly?

13 RC: Well, if you call reporting running around—David dropped me off, they went
14 onto do something else and I'm running around in the helicopters around the nearest one
15 and I've got to look at it and make sure—there was mortars flying around during the
16 night and make sure nothing was damaged, but I didn't give it a very good look. Mostly I
17 walked around, looked at the blades and the holes in the blades and then cranked it up
18 and had fuel. At that point, I don't remember what I did first, okay? I don't remember
19 talking to anybody, we just went out and I didn't get a briefing until, like, two or three
20 o'clock that afternoon from our chief pilot because we were pretty well briefed, we went
21 there. I don't know whether we went to the embassy right away or rooftops, but I'm sure
22 I went to rooftops because that was the only thing to do. And then took people to the PX
23 commissary parking lot and then other times went to the embassy rooftop and then a little
24 later on, noonish or so—no, before that. I got a little low on fuel about one o'clock or so
25 and I went in and landed and started to refuel and that's when I looked at my helicopter a
26 little more closely and the engine, of course, you know where an engine is in the aircraft.
27 It drives to a long fifteen foot drive shaft back to the tail router to give you the control
28 that's necessary and so forth when you lift up and what not. Lifted it up, looked at that
29 drive shaft, what did I see, Kelly? A big old hole right through the middle of it.

30 KC: Oh no.

1 RC: But it didn't vibrate, I didn't hear any high frequency vibrations or anything,
2 so I had no inkling that that was back there and was strong enough so that it was fine. But
3 of course, I looked around and said, "Well, look what's around you." I looked around and
4 saw another helicopter off to one side. It turned out to be the one from the rooftop
5 picture, 004. I went over and looked at it real quick and it had fuel, so I jumped in it and
6 then that's when I went to the rooftop and that's why I started my little walk down
7 whatever you want to call it, the walk of fame is when I bumped into the Obi Harnage
8 who passed away almost two years ago. He told me he was something special. I said,
9 "Who are you?" and he went from there and identified himself. So, we went to pick up
10 what he called the prime minister and his family, the deputy prime minister and his
11 family. Actually, this guy Izzy Freidman who'd escorted me out to the ship later on that
12 afternoon, he turned down the mission in front of me. He said, "I'm here to do something
13 else, you know?" So, the guy said okay. He was a good guy. We became really good
14 friends later on and when I went to Bangkok, I got a couple of pictures painted of the
15 rooftop photo, from that rooftop photo and it gave him one back in two thousand. But
16 anyway, he identified himself and said, "Okay." I said, "Sure, fine get on board." So, he
17 got on board and told us where to go and then that rooftop picture that you've probably
18 seen a hundred times or a thousand times. He gets out and he bends over that ladder and
19 helps him up the ladder. By that time, I picked up another pilot, a guy named Pogo
20 Hunter. His real name is Jack Hunter, but I never knew his first name I think all the time I
21 was with Air America. He was Pogo to everybody and how he got the name, I have no
22 idea. He was a good guy, I think he was the Navy or marine pilot, but a good pilot
23 because I remember flying with him up in Laos and they put me as the new guy with
24 coming to the older hands that were really hot pilots. I remember, he'd make that H-34
25 talk, you know. I remember thinking, "Golly, I'll never be able to do fly the same way he
26 does, you know." But after awhile you get to where you can do pretty much the same as
27 everybody else. But anyway, picked up Pogo and then we went to rooftop pictures. I
28 remember turning to Pogo and saying, "Damn, Pogo. That prime minister has a pretty big
29 family." There were at least forty, fifty people lined up to get that thing. So, we did that. I
30 think we went back one more time and then I dropped the Obi off of the rooftop at the
31 embassy and then at the time picked up some more people I think from there or from the

1 parking lot there at the commissary PX. I went out to the ship, dropped off a load,
2 refueled. Oh, no, before that we had our briefing.

3 KC: Tell me about that.

4 RC: And that's when it really was a few pilots briefed us on what to do. Lots of
5 the ships would do what we had to do as far as radio frequencies, calling in, you know,
6 the Navy makes a big thing up of landing on helicopters, you know, you got to be trained,
7 you got to be qualified and all this stuff. As I said, I went out a couple weeks prior to this
8 and just went out there. The land, you know, you can move around a little bit. You just
9 had to be careful. You just can't drop the helicopter in hard in case it's not enough from
10 the swells or whatever, but there was never any big deal. Anyway, Reid gave us a
11 briefing and he gave me a new co-pilot. Now here's where Mr. Stress stepped in big time.
12 The co-pilot is a guy named Stergar who has since passed away so I can talk bad about
13 him.

14 KC: You've spoken about him before.

15 RC: Yeah, he's the guy that left me to die in Laos. He wanted to know if I could
16 handle that and of course I said I could. I did not know if I could or not, but I took him
17 out there and went off the ship, dropped off the passengers. The whole time I'm thinking,
18 "I probably need to do something, but I don't know what I need to do." But guess what, I
19 think I told you—well I told you already. Undid his belt, got out of the helicopter, walked
20 up, never saw him again. And once again, his true colors showed. That was the third time
21 he did something like that; once with me, once to a guy named Joe something. Anyway,
22 as far as leaving him to the bad guys and then this time. Anyway, filled up with fuel and
23 went back up to Saigon, which is about, I guess, forty, forty-five minutes from where the
24 boats were. The boats were almost twenty miles off the coast and stuff. We flew back
25 into Vung Tao and then up the river to Saigon. There's a couple more of the same things.
26 Then about, oh, five or six—it wasn't dark yet, I think it got dark around eight o'clock, I
27 don't remember now. We did a couple more things up there and then made sure I had
28 enough fuel. I think by that time it was getting a little low and flew back to the ship and
29 then we just parked it and found a place to stay on the carrier. And then the next day, I
30 don't know how it happened exactly, but I went to the Blue Ridge, the command ship, the
31 admiral ship. There were two of my old Army buddies from Fort Benning Georgia. A

1 guy named Bob Brown who's a major and Jim Clinton, another major, but he's on list for
2 Lieutenant Colonel and I haven't seen them since, but they got a picture of us having a
3 good old picnic on board the Blue Ridge the next day or whatever it was. Like I said,
4 Navy just did extraordinary job. I'm so proud of our Navy.

5 KC: Well, let me take you back to this day in Saigon during the evacuation. How
6 many trips would you say you made during that day? Evacuation trips out to the ships.

7 RC: Just the two.

8 KC: Just the two?

9 RC: Going around after the briefing three o'clock, I think we went right out after
10 that so I got there around four, came back, did one or two more small loads and then I
11 may have talked to Ed Reid, by then I'm not sure, but obviously someone told me to take
12 one more load out than ships than that would be it for the rest of us Air America birds.
13 Then a couple more birds flew out a little later on. I don't remember who exactly, but that
14 was my last ship. Mostly in and around Saigon were the small birds able to handle things
15 as apposed to talking about Jim and Bob, I said, "I can't believe you guys are here. What
16 are you doing on board a Navy ship?" Well, they were both great officers, they had
17 worked—they were in the battalion at Fort Benning, Georgia, and I was in one of the
18 companies, which, of course, is smaller flying Caribous and they were battalion level and
19 we worked them and got to know them. They're good people. And so good people
20 sometimes fine jobs and other services like Navy and the Air Force. They're the ones that
21 told me about all the difficulties with the admiral. Their job that whole day was to run
22 down cables and communications stuff that proved to them—oh, let me back up. Martin,
23 Graham Martin had already contacted his bosses. He was, of course, the ambassador.
24 Whether he contacted Washington, I don't know how the hell he did it, but he already
25 charged admiral with basically derelicts of duty and not doing what he's supposed to
26 have done and what he said he would do. Their job was to find anything to back up the
27 outermost position, which was I told the ambassador we needed four hours from the time
28 he said go to brief my people, get the bike chopper into meet with my chief pilot, Ed
29 Reid, and anybody else involved, which they did. They got up there. I don't know what
30 time was it, of course. And then I guess they needed air cover also. Maybe they needed to
31 move their ships in position or a little closer to shore, to Vung Tao, I don't know, but he

1 told them he needed four hours and then the ambassador gave them eleven. At three
2 o'clock they were ready to go. So, they did exactly what they were supposed to have
3 done, what the admiral said they'd do, but Martin was great for killing any—he passed a
4 buck so fast you couldn't believe it. He killed anybody that got in his way. He was
5 famous for ruining careers of colonels and general, anybody that crossed him in the
6 embassy. That deal with the tree, I think some colonel finally had to cut down when he
7 wasn't looking or something, I don't know.

8 KC: I believe that's right.

9 RC: He was a blue man dictator, and nobody had a good thing to say about them.
10 I think I told you that years later he was discovered in the woods of some kind. It won the
11 Carolinas, north or south with a trunk full of top secret documents from the Vietnam
12 days. The reason he didn't get into trouble I think is because they were so old, they were
13 like almost automatically downgraded do something, I don't know. So, he didn't get into
14 the trouble he probably should have gotten in. But why he was allowed to stay there to
15 run an operation when he couldn't, apparently, make any kind of decent decision, I don't
16 know. I mean, I told you I think that my good friend Paul Cachicas was the agent in
17 charge down at Canto in the Delta. He tried to get his partner shipped out a couple
18 months earlier and the master said no. Hell no because why? The Vietnamese will take
19 them or leave them. Well, you know, I think as we've talked about before, Kelly, the
20 whole world knows we're leaving by that time. I mean, it was no secret to anybody. Of
21 course, the higher authorities in Saigon, they knew everything we knew almost. So, yeah,
22 and he also put out the word that there will be no servants taken out, no animals, no
23 things like that. So, I'm out there one evening talking to Bob and Jim on Blue Ridge and
24 who walks by with two dogs, the ambassador's butler. Brought out the butler and his wife
25 who was a cook or something and, "You can't do it because I can because I'm the
26 ambassador." It was god awful. And why Kissinger couldn't replace him before, I have
27 no idea. I mean, he did more harm—the thing could have gone off, I think, pretty darn
28 good had he made a decision, you know, either late at night or earlier in the morning it
29 was still dark so people could still make their preparations, you know, and then fly up—
30 the at most people fly up to Tan Son Nhut and through a lesson of coordinating and his

1 people within the staff could have started destroying appropriate documents, you know.
2 Obviously at the sore spot with me.

3 KC: Yeah, and not with just you, I'm sure. What was it like for you Mr. Caron
4 knowing that you were leaving Vietnam and that there were thousands and thousands of
5 Vietnamese who had worked for the U.S. who had friends with the Americans who were
6 leaving? What was it like to know that you were leaving these people behind?

7 RC: Well, it was just an awful, awful feeling. Once the adrenaline, you know,
8 why you're doing all this, you don't think about anything, you're just doing what you
9 have to do and hoping you can do it okay and hope you don't get shot down and hoping
10 you can do this, hoping you can do that, hope the rooftop doesn't fall in, hoping you find
11 the damn ships out there off the coast because they're not very visible, because they're
12 not very visible why you first leave the land, but, you know, initially there was great
13 concern about all that's going on, you know? And then probably a great deal of sadness
14 and regret that was actually going on, you know? Then as it developed, and things
15 occurred the way they did. For example, maybe the biggest to me is the late calls for the
16 departure. By the time you're so damn angry you can't see straight, and then pretty much
17 disgusted the way the Americas handled it and so forth. Probably the last thing if that was
18 a great deal of shame that we had promised these people to move and didn't give them
19 the time of day. So, there was a great mixture of feelings, one, like I say, all those mixed
20 up together. And then, of course, another thing is finally you think "What about me?
21 What about us?" We thought we had a job, a really good job. I guess we're strange
22 people, Kelly. We're not like the average people that they think, "Well, how can you be
23 away from the home five days a week? How can you live like that in a farm land and
24 farm foods and flying all day and getting shot at and getting killed." We just enjoyed it
25 and I'm not sure of the logic of it all, but we then realized, "Hey, this is over. We got to
26 go out and find ourselves a real job."

27 KC: What was that like for you? That would have been completely—

28 RC: You know what, when I toured the Army Chief of Staff, I said, "Sir, I got ten
29 years in the Army, maybe this is all over I'd like to come back in, how can I do that?"

30 KC: He said, "Just see so and so and so and so and he'll tell you what to do." And
31 I think I saw him later and he came me some form number which turned out to be a form

1 that everybody signed. Here I saw us in combat with the chief of staff I get something
2 special. This form that's going to cut through all the red tape? Shoot, I just got you basic
3 average form, but I did go back in the military and got my twenty and for that I'm happy
4 so I can't complain. But yeah, there was a great void of expectations and what the devil
5 the future's going through and compass. The guy that probably did the best was this guy,
6 Tony Coleson? Well, initially he got a job up with a big chopper company in Canada. If
7 you call it a job, it was up on the Arctic Circle practically doing some survey work. I was
8 freezing to death that night and I was trying to warm up the chopper and so forth so that
9 he could get a start in the morning, but all of a sudden, they came to him one day after he
10 was with him, about six months. We got this job in Bangkok, Thailand. "If you've been
11 over there, would you like to go?" He couldn't contain his excitement going from the
12 Arctic Circle to a place that he really enjoyed over there in Bangkok. He said, "How soon
13 can I go?" So, he did really good and I think he was over there for a number of years, but
14 a lot of guys went to Alaska. Izzy Friedman, the guy that let me out the chopper because
15 the carrier was radio helped that first trip, he wound up in Africa and he was not happy.
16 He said it was—you never felt comfortable, you always felt like, "Is this guy my friend or
17 not? What's going to happen tomorrow?" One of the first things they come and did was
18 when you walked in the country, they grabbed your passport. And nobody's ever done
19 that to us before at Air America. We had a passport and basically you always had the
20 feeling if things went to pot, grab your passport and go, you know? But these guys over
21 there in Africa, they were bad. In fact, I got invited to ask what I would consider going
22 over there with a guy named Bill something or other two Hueys in '76 and I said, "Yeah,
23 I could probably do that." "Okay, we'll call you back." Well, I don't know whether it fell
24 through or what, but they never called back. After hearing Izzy's story, I wasn't that
25 unhappy that they didn't call back. So yeah, there was a huge void and I talked to Tony
26 on several occasions, Tony Coleson and he said he thought he was there forever. Tony
27 got—oh, Tony went into fixed wing after that, that's what it was. He was flying in Saudi
28 for awhile. He did that until he was almost, oh, I guess fifty-fivish, you know. By that
29 time, he saved a bunch of money, but he did all right.

1 KC: Let me ask you about your time on Blue Ridge. Once your flying is over, the
2 evacuation is taking place. Tell me what the scene was like there on Blue Ridge with all
3 of these people and everything going on.

4 RC: Well, the Blue Ridge was a command ship and there weren't that many
5 people up there. I was lucky because I knew these two guys, but Key was there, the
6 ambassador was there and so it was kind of like the VIP ship almost. But on the carrier,
7 itself, I feel like three thousand, it was kind of like—not a mess, but very, very crowded
8 conditions and I can imagine the bathrooms and so forth were just overwhelmed with
9 those additional people. I'm not sure—I know the big carriers today have five thousand
10 people. What they had back then, I don't know, but three more times must put a hell of a
11 strain on them. All the reports I heard were excellent and nobody complained because
12 how can you complain when just had your life saved, you know?

13 KC: Right.

14 RC: But I thought they did an excellent job and nobody I heard of had one bad
15 thing to say about treatment, the care, whatever that they got. I know we went into
16 Manila and the carrier. I don't know where it discharged their people. Whether it went on
17 to Guam and had the big camp set up there or just how they did that. Sometimes these
18 people had names of people in America that the agency, Red Cross, government, USAID,
19 whatever and, "All right, we've got these people here, do you agree to sponsor them and
20 how we're going to do it? And where are you exactly?" and stuff like that. So, as far as I
21 know, it was a big deal because they had this extra food. And maybe they didn't like the
22 America food, but maybe here, never here nor there. But it obviously put a strain on
23 everybody, but I think a situation like that everybody's happy to see the other people
24 happy because, you know, I've been misrescued from possible imprisonment, death, or
25 whatever. They're extremely happy so the crew on board the ship I'm sure were happy to
26 be part of that success.

27 KC: Now, you went to the Philippines, when did you get reunited with your
28 family?

29 RC: We went to Manila, we stayed there two days and then we were put up in a
30 hotel there and then the next day we flew to Hong Kong and there we met at the
31 Peninsula hotel which used to be an Air America hotspot, so to speak. Now it's probably

1 five star, four star place and only the very, very, very rich go there, but who were out
2 processed, and this was like the third and fourth of May and we were given tickets home
3 and finally I went to Bangkok then I got tickets back to stay to myself and my family. We
4 were paid through August, it wasn't a lot of money because we just got our base pay, a
5 couple thousand dollars it may have been a month. June, July, August; Three months so
6 you're talking six thousand, but six thousand bucks and no future to connect to right
7 away wasn't as nice as it may sound, you know. We stayed in Bangkok for about a month
8 and then went back to the States and then tried to figure out what the hell to do next.

9 KC: And what did you go next?

10 RC: Well, I remember going back to Singapore and people said they had jobs
11 there. It was the oil companies, but by the time the word got to me and I got my ticket
12 over there, which was like a day or two after the countries over there told the oil
13 companies, "Okay, our agreement is no longer ninety ten." Ten for the locals.

14 KC: Right.

15 RC: It's going to be ten, ninety. I don't know how it happened or anything else
16 because it was no condition to what the hell's going on in the rest of the world. As far as
17 I'm concerned there was nothing going on. So, the companies just parked the oil rigs. The
18 rigs were lined up for miles, I guess. All the oil expiration came to a halt along with my
19 job prospects. As a matter of fact, the only reason I remember that, that was the weekend
20 of the thriller in Manila.

21 KC: Oh, is that right?

22 RC: Remember that?

23 KC: Yes.

24 RC: Joe Frasier and Ali. I loved Joe, I wanted Joe to win and it turned out that I
25 guess Ali staggered out for the fifteenth round and Joe couldn't quite make it, so Ali won
26 by default. But all credit to Ali, he was a hell of a fighter. Not doing well now, but
27 sometimes fighters do that.

28 KC: Right, right for that life. What did you do after your time there in Singapore?
29 What did you decide to do from that point?

30 RC: Well, I went back to—I had the gentleman that helped me get into West Point
31 was Senator Wicks, was the New Your state senator and at one time lieutenant governor

1 under Dewey. Really a wonderful, wonderful person and leader—some back talk to him
2 and spent a few months in Fort Lauderdale. He lives in Pompano Beach just up the road a
3 few miles and stayed there and try to figure what to do. I thought about law school,
4 thought about a lot of things and then someone told me that the Army, which had, after
5 Vietnam, discharged thousands of people including thousands of pilots because they had
6 so many after Vietnam that they had overdone it, of course, as the military will do. And
7 they're looking badly for pilots. So, I put a call in and talked to a few people. I guess I
8 filled out that form the general told me about. I remember the details and it turned out one
9 of my friends up in Washington who this guy I had flown with in MAC-V in Saigon in
10 '67, I can't remember his name now. So, they said, "Okay, do this, this, and this and
11 we'll get you back in." So that's what happened, and I wound up, in '77, going into Fort
12 Bragg and returned to the old military.

13 KC: And what was that like to go back to the military after this much more free
14 kind of life with Air America?

15 RC: You know, I've known the military since the week after high school, so it
16 was almost like going home, you know? In fact, Air America, it was a lot alike the
17 military, you know? You got a chain of command, you got a boss, you got a job. Of
18 course, unless you knew what Air America was, in the morning they give you a briefing
19 and say, "Okay, do this, this, this and this. And you went and did it. Once you left
20 wherever it was you were at, you were the man, you were in charge. You did what you
21 had to do, you did it the best way you could. So, a lot of independence, but a feeling of
22 accomplishment each day when you got it done, you didn't look at it like that, but you
23 were able to get done what you had to do. Some days it was more difficult than others,
24 but good. So, I really felt like, you know, it's back where I belong is the best way to put
25 it.

26 KC: And again, like you said, you got your twenty years and you're retired.

27 RC: And now with medical costs the way they are and stuff like that, I'll tell you
28 what, Kelly, I'm so happy I did it, you know?

29 KC: Sure.

1 RC: A few guys got good flying jobs and were able to save money and they're in
2 good shape now. Others had difficulty and I think I wound up pretty lucky with the way
3 things did.

4 KC: Mr. Caron, as you look back on all this, all this time that you spent both in
5 the Army and with Air America, I mean, a lot of your career was in Southeast Asia. I
6 mean, to some degree this defined you, you're always going to be the pilot of the Huey in
7 the picture of the Pippen building evacuating Vietnamese. As you look back on your
8 experiences there both in the Army and Air America in Southeast Asia, how have these
9 experiences most affected your life?

10 RC: I don't know. Well, I really enjoyed it and despite a couple of tours like my
11 Korean tour—my first Korean tour which was a bit of a fiasco. I really enjoyed all of it, I
12 enjoyed getting into the far east until '63. The far east was, you know, a distant fog to me,
13 a distant land that I didn't care about, didn't know about, didn't care if I ever did know
14 about it, you know? My first tour in the military had been in Germany so I was, you
15 know, as far as preference, I preferred to go to Europe for my assignments or in the
16 America. Other than that, I don't know. After awhile, I think you're saying a little bit is
17 that, that kind of defined who I was, what I was, where I was at mentally and physically
18 and, you know, that the whole experience except for that rooftop picture is the same
19 experience thousands of other guys had. You know, just no different what so ever. A lot
20 of them like the Medal of Honor Winner, the helicopter guy, the dust off guy, I can't
21 think of his name now. He passed away PW4, just a tremendous hero in everybody's eyes
22 did just a fantastic job and saved maybe hundreds of people under fire and so forth. I had
23 a great time, Kelly, I think. I really had a great time doing everything. Flew fixed wings,
24 flew airplanes, flew with a great company, you know. There are some folks that don't
25 have a lot of good things to say about Air America. I think maybe I told you when I heard
26 about our staff committee that was trying to get that rooftop photo as a stamp. When I
27 call up the West Point guy from the class of '48 to ask him was there something he could
28 do? Was it worth while projects so I might get involved with a committee or not? First
29 words out of his mouth, "Well, Air America's kind of—the thought of Air America, the
30 thought that comes to your mind was a loser in Vietnam and the Vietnam War, part of our
31 loss." And that tells you what some people think about Air America, but to me, Air

1 America is a great company, I loved it, loved the Army, had some great people in the
2 Army. It couldn't have turned out any better I don't think, you know? I got a wonderful
3 wife from Thailand and I had some great experiences and good experiences, some life
4 and death experiences, but all in all, I wouldn't trade it for anything, Kelly. I got a little
5 prostate problem, but I haven't had any problems with the Agent Orange that a lot of
6 people have had on the ground, maybe more so than I was. So, nothing to explain
7 about—it was a great forty years? How many, '63—thirty-seven or forty-seven, wow.
8 Almost forty-seven years in and out of the orient. Have you ever been over there, Kelly?

9 KC: No, I have not.

10 RC: You need to go.

11 KC: I certainly hope to.

12 RC: I can't think of anything else.

13 KC: Okay, I was going to ask you if you had anything else, you'd like to add.

14 RC: No, I'm proud that I was in the West Point class of '56, I would like to say
15 that. We had some great, great classmates, probably the most notable of whom is Norm
16 Schwarzkopf. As a matter of fact, the class of raising a fund to have a bus created and
17 presented to the academy at our next reunion in 2011, which will be our 55th and a bus of
18 Norm and we had Bob Sorely who's a great author, wrote that book I mentioned, *A Better*
19 *War*. Oh, a couple other four star generals, I can't name the name right now. Great, great
20 classmates, a wonderful school, and I don't think it gets enough recognition of the quality
21 of education there and the good people that come out of there. So, I've been pretty lucky.
22 I think I started off by telling you was a foster child for a number of years.

23 KC: Right.

24 RC: But that's what enabled me to meet this Senator Wicks that I mentioned
25 before and get into West Point. Had I not gone there, who knows where the heck I would
26 have wound up.

27 KC: Sure.

28 RC: Maybe I did somewhere. I was never going to be a bad kid, but I maybe not
29 would have had the luck and success that I've had over the years. And I'm still alive,
30 seventy-six. Still hanging in there, Kelly.

31 KC: That's my boy.

1 RC: You want to tell me how old you are?
2 KC: I'm forty-one.
3 RC: Oh, nobody's forty-one.
4 KC: (laughing)
5 RC: I was forty-two when I left Saigon.
6 KC: Oh, wow.
7 RC: So that says something, doesn't it?
8 KC: Sure does.
9 RC: Well, you're doing good though.
10 KC: Oh, well thank you. Why don't we stop the interview right there.