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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Donald Pepe
Conducted by Kelly Crager
Date: 9 February 2010
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. Donald Pepe. Today is 9 February 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Pepe is joining me from his home in Jacksonville,
4 Florida. I am interviewing Mr. Pepe today in order to record his reminiscences of his
5 experiences in Vietnam. Mr. Pepe served with the 220th Recon Airplane Company, The
6 Cat Killers, from December 1967 until August of 1969. Mr. Pepe, to begin this interview
7 I'd like to ask you some biographical information if I could. Can you tell me when you
8 were born and where?

9 Donald Pepe: Born July 27, 1944 in Owensboro, Kentucky, Davis County
10 Hospital.

11 KC: What were your parent's names?

12 DP: My father's name was Stephen; my mother's name was Mary, Mary Alma.

13 KC: What did your parents do for a living?

14 DP: Well, at the time my parents—my father was in the military. I am a product
15 of World War II. My father was actually from Connecticut and was stationed in
16 Kentucky, northern Kentucky; place called Camp Breckinridge and met with my mother
17 then. And she, I think was a telephone operator. She had a couple of jobs during the war,
18 World War II. And then he went off I guess to Burma or whatever. Later they both

1 worked. We subsequent to that moved into Southern Indiana right across the river from
2 Northern Kentucky in a place called Evansville. They took employment there, basically
3 factory work, manufacturing work. There's a big manufacturing sector in that area of the
4 country. Well, I guess over a lot of the country back then, back in the fifties. My father
5 was a technician at the Whirlpool Corporation.

6 KC: Okay, did you have any brothers or sisters?

7 DP: Yes, I have two sisters and they're still alive. I have a sister Rita who's five
8 years younger than me and a sister Gloria who is seven years younger than me.

9 KC: Okay. Describe for me your childhood. You moved around a little bit. What
10 was it like growing up in the Pepe family?

11 DP: Well, I was more prepared to talk about Vietnam, but we were on the west
12 side of Evansville, Indiana. I guess you would say that's the proletariat side. That's where
13 the farmers and the factory workers' kids lived. I went to Pearl Hill School; I went to
14 Sacred Heart Grade School, Mater Dei High School. I played sports. It was, you know, I
15 guess it was nothing really outstanding about my childhood. There wasn't a lot going on
16 in the physical world, but radio was strong then. As a very young child. I remember first,
17 second, third grade we'd listen to the radio a lot. Sky King and Bobby Benson and the
18 BRB and stuff like that. Later on, of course, the television came along. You know,
19 Evansville was not exactly a small town, but it's certainly a small city. It became aware
20 of a bigger world out there. I supposed that a lot of the same things with adolescence, is
21 nothing spectacular, I was a fairly good student in school. I did win some scholarships to
22 go to college. I guess I was a better than average athlete, but we didn't have particularly
23 good teams. We played basketball primarily. I didn't go on any athletic scholarships, but
24 I did have a couple of academic scholarships. We're right on the edge of the city versus
25 out in the country so I'm a younger child. You would ride your bicycle and go out in the
26 field in the ditches. There were some cliffs, woods close by and so I don't think I got
27 shortchanged at all in my childhood. I was always a very curious kid and adventurous. By
28 the time I got to adolescence, maybe a little—not particularly good with authority figures.
29 Other than that, I mean, it's been hard for me to capulate a childhood.

30 KC: Sure, sure. That's terrific.

31 DP: Any specific or prods that you have?

1 KC: No, that's terrific. Can you tell me when you graduated high school?

2 DP: 1962.

3 KC: 1962, alright. Now, as you're working your way through the school there,
4 what was it that you hoped to do when you graduated high school? When you grew up,
5 what did you want to do?

6 DP: I didn't have really a goal. I just was interested. I knew there was a big world
7 out there and I knew that I probably could get a big chunk of it. Like I said, I did fairly
8 well in school. I tested very well in the various standardized tests and things like that. I
9 had this idea, but actually, I didn't want to necessarily be a doctor. I really did not know
10 when I was going to college; I didn't have a specific goal. Neither on of my parents were
11 in a profession and they weren't in business so I didn't have a direct unit and maybe in
12 some way maybe I should have. But then I would have probably missed out on a lot of
13 curiosities I enjoyed in life if I locked in on something early. I actually chose business to
14 major in because I figured that whatever it is I wanted to do would have a business
15 element to it. And so, I could move into that area. I mean, if you were talking about
16 entertainment or sports or if you were talking about aviation at the time, I didn't think too
17 much about aviation. It looked interesting. You know, when I was a young kid, I wanted
18 to be a jet pilot and things like that. I didn't have a clear vision of what I wanted to do or
19 what I was going to do after I got through college. And that's still true today as a matter
20 of fact. I am not sure what I want to be when I grow up.

21 KC: (Laughing) Well good, keep searching is what I would say. Well let me ask
22 you this, growing up there in Southern Indiana and again, you graduated high school in
23 1962. One of the major or not really events or developments, but parts of American
24 history at that time was the Kennedy Administration, John Kennedy elected in 1960 and
25 then his very turbulent presidency with the things that were going on in terms of the Cold
26 War and domestic politics as well. What do you remember about the Kennedy
27 Administration?

28 DP: The Kennedy Administration, I don't remember a lot. I was not very
29 politically aware. In fact, I didn't get politically aware until I was well into adulthood.
30 You know, I was a Catholic, going to Catholic high school and so obviously the whole
31 Kennedy election, the candidacy, all of that was a big deal. In my school and a lot of my

1 circle, but I didn't quite appreciate the magnitude of it. You're young, you know, "He's a
2 Catholic." Everybody I know is a Catholic, what's the big deal? And then I remember the
3 Von Meters album on the 1st Family that was kind of a spoof of the administration, but it
4 was in good humor. "The Rubber Swan is mine" (imitating a section from the album).
5 Like I say, I'm embarrassed to say now, but I guess it's just realistic to say that I wasn't
6 that necessarily involved or inspired by, you know, the Kennedy thing. I didn't appreciate
7 at the time what was going on.

8 KC: Sure, sure. Now, I believe in your records it says you went to school at the
9 University of Indiana?

10 DP: Indiana University.

11 KC: Indiana University, right.

12 DP: I'll go correct you on that.

13 KC: Yes, absolutely. And you said you wanted to go into business, or something
14 related to business I should say. Was it foreordained that you were certainly going to go
15 to college?

16 DP: Um, it's kind of was by me by virtue of the fact that I could say on the
17 standardized achievement tests and, you know, numbers and stuff I was at the top of my
18 class. I'm an under achiever in life, but I sure do good on those standardized tests. And
19 so, you know, I got good grades and tested well and was in math contests and stuff like
20 that. It was assumed that I would go into college in some way. Perhaps play basketball,
21 perhaps not.

22 KC: Right, and of course basketball's a big part of life up there in that part of the
23 world.

24 DP: Yes, it is, yes, it is.

25 KC: So, you find yourself in college in '62, '63, would have been your first year
26 there. Again, to bring you back to the Kennedy Administration, what do you remember
27 about the assassination of JFK?

28 DP: Yeah, everybody who was alive that day remembers it. Was in my dorm,
29 sitting in the dorm and I heard somebody talking about something and somebody's
30 standing outside say, "The President's been shot." And I didn't know what they were
31 talking about. I thought they meant the President of the University. At the time I thought,

1 “What was that?” So, I guess we turn on the radio at the time and everybody piled into
2 my room and I’d just gotten cookies from home. And when mommy sent me cookies
3 from home it was Oreos. She didn’t cook too good; she wasn’t too good on that stuff. So,
4 it was Oreos and that was fine by me. And so, we opened it up and of course, the Oreos
5 were gone by the end. We sat there for the whole afternoon. There was kind of a payao
6 on the whole campus. There wasn’t, obviously on the whole country. And classes were
7 cancelled. Again, like I say I felt really badly. I thought this was a bad thing going on, but
8 I didn’t think of the magnitude of it. I did not appreciate it until much later what had
9 happened. I knew our president wasn’t supposed to be shot, but I didn’t know anything. It
10 just didn’t make sense to me. Of course, we still don’t know what happened. We only
11 have a declarative and there’s still a lot of speculation about what happened.

12 KC: Absolutely.

13 DP: Like I say, I remember that and in the selfish end of it I think it happened on
14 a Friday, I believe, and classes were cancelled on Monday and I was very glad because
15 there was something I didn’t have prepared. But I had been given a reprieve, that’s a
16 terrible thing to note, but I remember that being part of the mix. Yeah, I think anyone you
17 ask, obviously that was old enough to tell time, they’ll know exactly where they were on
18 that day when they heard the news. I was sitting in my dorm and I heard somebody
19 talking outside. It took a few minutes and people coming in and asking to determine this
20 was the President of the United States that was shot. Of course, I followed it and I
21 followed it on TV like everybody else did.

22 KC: What kind of affect do you think that it had on the country?

23 DP: You know, in retrospect now, at the time, I did not know. In retrospect, I
24 think it had a huge affect. I think this would have been a much different country with
25 Kennedy in charge. Obviously, Kennedy got us involved in Vietnam. I think that the
26 mentality there would have been for him to realize and be able to admit a mistake. We
27 went into a very, very macho direction after that. And we didn’t really—I don’t know, we
28 kind of lost some judgment. I really believe—and because if you think of all those people
29 that got gunned down in a short period of time, they were people who you would, I guess
30 you would now call progressives or liberals. I would call them people who were thinkers.
31 And we ended up going at a much more hostile direction after that. And because I think a

1 lot of the leadership that would have taken us in a more intelligent direction got wiped
2 out, it got gunned down. And you know, you do that, and the barbarians win. I really—
3 and obviously it's speculation because we don't know what would have happened, you
4 can't know. I really believe that a direction that this country would have had. You know,
5 these guys—Kennedy was elected, he was popular, and his brother was popular.
6 Actually, I was kind of against them at the time. I mean, I was pro-war. Not because I had
7 made any collective judgments, it's just that I was of the opinion that war was something
8 that males went and did, particularly proper males. Growing up working-class, my father
9 went to war, my uncles went to war. That was my job, you're supposed to go to war. And
10 with that mentality I didn't bother to question and accept what I was told, and everybody
11 knew that what's the next question, and I don't know. So, when these people were
12 gunned down, it didn't mean as much to me at the time as it later did when I came to
13 realize that there was a whole direction, there was a whole personality for this country
14 that just got totally changed. And from that we went from that to a very, I don't know, a
15 very conservative, a very defensive position where we just didn't use a lot of good
16 judgment and a lot of our decisions. I think that had Kennedy stayed around. I think if
17 that era had stayed around there certainly would have been something to balance, you
18 know, the other tendencies, the pro-militaristic tendencies. I mean the idea that I had in
19 my mind and I think that many people did by then and still by that time because that was
20 only what, fifteen years after World War II; fifteen to seventeen years and eighteen when
21 he died. That war was inevitable. It wasn't a big deal because you had to do it all the
22 time. Which is just something, it was there. And it may or may not have been the smartest
23 thing to do or certainly how you went about it. There was some adjustment that could end
24 around there. Like I said, at the time it didn't mean that much to me. It certainly in years
25 since, you know, come to become more politically aware or historically aware. I think
26 that you can't knock out leadership of that quality as we did for a short period of time
27 from '63 to about '68. You can't knock that caliber of leadership out and expect it not to
28 have an affect. I mean, it affected the direction of the country, but I can't tell you how
29 exactly.

30 KC: Well, I think your views are pretty commonly held, I think, overall, but
31 there's certainly this shift through these moments that were extreme and very stark in

1 comparison to what had taken place in the past. Of course, a lot of things that were
2 bubbling up to the surface by that time really began to take on a different shape because
3 of that. Both domestically and in terms of American foreign policy as well.

4 DP: Yeah, yeah. Well, there was the split in the country between the war and the
5 anti-war. I mean, that just split it right down the middle. Probably a lot of other aspects
6 was contained in that. In other words, you know, they call it blue and red now or
7 something or whatever, but there was the whole lifestyle thing. I mean, in the sixties, you
8 know, the most turbulent era I think certainly socially and probably the more turbulent
9 era even though over this last decade was very severe and we had a lot of controversy
10 over the war in Iraq and the Middle East. Iraq is about four thousand dead now? Forty-
11 two hundred something? There was fifty-eight thousand people dead in Vietnam,
12 whatever the latest number is. I mean, it was ten times that. So, the controversy and what
13 was taken place in the streets. For a long time, I was kind of in the middle because I was
14 in Vietnam knowing that this is stupid. You know, I was saying that was stupid because
15 of the way in which we executed the war. And like all the guys that were there flying,
16 particularly where we were in the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) because the rules about
17 where you could fly changed. If you were with the bombing, you couldn't go north of the
18 river. What we did, we nudged that a little bit. And it just seemed like it was so arbitrary,
19 and it was such a game. "What are we doing, this is dumb?" But at the same time I
20 definitely resented those protestors and those people saying that, you know, "We
21 shouldn't be fighting this war." It may sound strange, but I had both of those things at
22 one time.

23 KC: You know, I don't think that's strange at all. I think it's a pretty common in
24 people that look back on it because there's conflict there. You're trying to wrap your
25 head around what was going on.

26 DP: For sure.

27 KC: Let me take you back to your time there at Indiana (University). I believe you
28 also joined the ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps), is that correct?

29 DP: Yes, I did. ROTC and let me tell you why I did, because it was mandatory for
30 the first two years. IU (Indiana University) was not a land grant college, but that was not
31 unusual for state schools I think at that time. And it was mandatory, so I took it no big

1 deal. Of course, while you're in it for the first couple years, the Vietnam War was going.
2 It was pretty painful to me or pretty obvious to me that I was going to be drafted upon
3 graduation because I was helping; my old man was poor so that was my turn. It became,
4 you know, it was a financial decision. "Hey, you make more money when you're an
5 officer." "Okay, I'll do that." So, I signed up for the last two years. And then they said,
6 "Well, do you want to learn to fly, we'll get flying lessons while you're still in school."
7 Well, that's extra money, too, isn't it? "Sign right here." So, I did that and there was no
8 long-range plan. It just seemed as if they were expedients at each step along the way
9 which seemed to be the decision to be made. So, four years of ROTC and I signed up for
10 the flight program while I was still in the program, in ROTC.

11 KC: What was ROTC like there at the University of Indiana?

12 DP: Well, it wasn't necessarily my favorite class. You did military stuff, you
13 marched. I don't recall it being particularly good or bad, it was just a requirement, one of
14 my classes and it was one that required certain clothes you had to wear. Like the ones that
15 had to complete the first couple years and then once I committed, you know, I had to
16 complete after that. I really don't have hardly any—yeah, that was probably my authority
17 figure problem come to think of it. I've always—starting probably in high school always
18 had this thing that, I don't know, never really been able to suffer gladly and perhaps was
19 not wise always in choosing my fights. I know my battle with my college coach—high
20 school basketball coach which is, you know, we weren't doing well, and I didn't consider
21 him that competent and he didn't like me, but that was— and I had a fair amount of that
22 throughout my life. In college, I had a problem in ROTC. You know, I certainly did my
23 lessons and performed well, but I think I gave the wrong image. I had a '54 Ford with no
24 top. Well, that I rolled, or I fell asleep when I fell asleep, and it rolled over and bashed it
25 all up. Just to have some fun I took the car and cut the top off with a cutting charge, or
26 had it cut off. When I did that, the rocker pounds are rotten the backdoor close and fell
27 out and took the back doors with them. That didn't make any sense. I just took the front
28 doors off, too. So, I had a '54 Ford with no top and no doors and then I painted it orange.
29 I put a horn on it and that was my vehicle around campus.

30 KC: Very subtle.

1 DP: And all the glass in it was broken except for the rear windows, but I turned
2 that upside down and set it on the dash and lashed it onto the motor steering cable. And it
3 had a windshield wiper and that was it. You know, I drove a car around campus and
4 sometimes I would drive over to class or ROTC. And if it rained, I had to have an
5 umbrella. So, it was reported to someone in SA (Service Academy) ROTC that I was
6 seen driving this vehicle in uniform with an umbrella, I believe. And then I was called
7 and advised that this was not a proper image. I don't know, I forget the exact resolution
8 now, but that was a common typical incident. I kind of went my own way and if I had to
9 do it all over again, I probably would have, again, picked my fights a lot better.

10 KC: We can all say that over the years. Now, you went in for the two additional
11 years for your junior and senior year. So, you're definitely going to go full board. You're
12 going to go into the U.S. Army and you're going to come out as an officer. Did that give
13 you any reason to pause, to reflect on what the state of the world was for the United
14 States and what might be your fate where you might wind up going? Was Vietnam part of
15 this?

16 DP: Well, certainly thinking of Vietnam, yes. You know, because of the war
17 going on, but actually at the time I was thinking, "Well, you could have gotten out of it."
18 At that time, you could get out of the draft by being married. That later changed, but I
19 thought, that's a hell of a way to beat the draft and I don't want any part of that. Now, I
20 thought, "Well, what the heck?" I mean, I could say I was going to go in anyway. I mean,
21 I didn't see much way I could get out, the draft was on and I was helping. And I didn't
22 have, you know, my father's name wasn't Quail, you know, I wasn't going to get to the
23 guard. I said—it was strictly a selfish thing, or self interest, but as far as once I did that, I
24 looked at it and maybe this was just rationalization. "Aw heck, that thing will be over one
25 way or another by then anyway." Well, I graduated in 1966; I think I missed that one.

26 KC: Yeah, you were off a little there.

27 DP: Yeah. You know, as time went on it kind of became obvious, but I thought,
28 "Well, most of the people go over there to live, I think." Again, you gotta look at the
29 context. Everybody, all the males in my family had gone off to war. So, you know, the
30 ones that I interacted with. So, this was just not anything to really regard as being unusual
31 or significant, it's just the way it was. So later on, as we got closer to it, I had more

1 concerns because I really didn't want to die. I thought it would be a tremendous loss for
2 the world if I had snuck out that early.

3 KC: You also mentioned flying. When did you get your first interest in flying?

4 DP: I always wanted to fly. I thought it would be fun. I mean, it was class. Like I
5 say, when I was a kid, you know, I had Balsawood Airplanes and those things. You know
6 and watching the old movies on TV. They even had a World War II movies and World
7 War I movies. You know, "Badadada." The by-planes and then a lot of the World War II
8 footage and at that time an F-86 came out in the Jet age. You know, as a young kid seeing
9 all this stuff. That was good stuff and I just seemed to be a pilot which is the notch up on
10 the other work. Yeah, I always wanted to learn to fly. You know, I don't come from a
11 well-to-do family. I wasn't going to be able to afford my own lessons. So, they actually,
12 the flight program gives you like thirty-two hours as a civilian. When I was still in school
13 then they just write you off as being, "Okay, you're accepted, but if you bust it out." I
14 guess if you did terribly than you wouldn't get in the program. It was sort of like a
15 screeching operation, but in the meanwhile you got just about enough fires to get your
16 license, but I didn't, I just went. You know, the training was nothing compared to the
17 training once you got in the Army. That was excellent training.

18 KC: Well, tell me about that. When you graduate in 1966, where did you go after
19 that step? Was it infantry school?

20 DP: I graduated in '66, but I had put off my summer camp because I worked in
21 the summers basically to pay off my extravagances during that school year. I also worked
22 in the school year. I worked three jobs. I was a dishwasher at the Theta House, at a
23 sorority house there for my meals and I refereed intramural sports, and then I also was a
24 busboy at the Elks Club on the weekends. So, I mean I had money coming in and I did
25 have some scholarships. I'm going to switch phones here, hold on. I need to keep both
26 phones fully charged before you call again. Where was I?

27 KC: You were talking about getting ready to go to summer camp. You said you
28 put it off because you worked—

29 DP: Oh yeah, I put it off because I worked during the—I made a lot of money
30 during the school year and then I'd buy a car or something. Anyway, I worked, and I
31 basically paid my way through—well, I did pay my way through school along with

1 scholarships. And then I got to—I still went to ROTC summer camp, the summer after.
2 And then after that I went to, that fall, I went to Ft. Benning for my infantry officer basic
3 course.

4 KC: Now take some time and tell me about this stage.

5 DP: What, the infantry officer basic course?

6 KC: Yes, sir.

7 DP: Well, interesting. That's when you're an ROTC officer when you come out
8 of ROTC, depending on your branch you then go to—I think it's like a two-month course
9 as I recall or like the artillery school would have one and probably quartermaster and
10 everybody, armor. I was infantry. I volunteered for the infantry branch. I thought that
11 would be, I don't know, that would be a good thing to—if I was going to be Army, I
12 wanted to be infantry. That was, hmm, that was an interesting time in Columbus,
13 Georgia. I met a lot of interesting people and it was also interesting that in the infantry at
14 the time, people in the intelligence corps had to take the infantry officer basic course. So,
15 we had people who are more suited to do intelligence than infantry, let's put it that way.
16 So, I mean, I met a good cross section of people and there were National Guard people
17 who were there and have gotten in there. I don't know where everybody came from, but
18 that was my first exercise with being, you know, being in the active military. It wasn't all
19 that regimented. I'm trying to think of what all we did. We learned—I mean, there were
20 those—it was in the fall, all the necessary skills. It was R&R (Rest and Recuperation).
21 We got to go out and run around in the red clay hills of Georgia, trying to escape. It's a
22 lot of fun-filled afternoons in the hand-to-hand pit and on the bayonet fields. We had—I
23 learned some interesting stuff, you know, camouflage, night vision.

24 KC: Things like small infantry unit tactics and things like that? Classroom as well
25 as field drills and things like that?

26 DP: Yeah, yeah, just the basics of preparing you to be a 2nd Lieutenant in an
27 infantry platoon, what all that entails and trying to inculcate you, I think, with some of
28 the basic values. Basically, accomplish the mission and take care of your troops. Now it's
29 hard to complain. I've been trying to live by that motto my whole life. I'm trying to
30 think of other specifics. I met some, you know, fun people. Not too many people I'm still
31 in contact with from there. Yeah, no, probably not. One fellow, a National Guard guy I

1 met down at Portland that stayed in and I guess still active in Special Forces in some way.
2 I went from there and I remember it was over in the end of February now that I think
3 about it. We were there in the winter because I had some party crowd. I was still pretty
4 much in touch with my party crowd up in Indiana University. My girlfriend and a bunch
5 of revelers came down. I remember they crashed in the barracks that night before we left.
6 I mean, a little bending the rules a little bit. And then we took off to Mardi Gras after
7 completing the course I remember that now.

8 KC: When you look back on your training there at Ft. Benning, do you feel that
9 you were adequately training or as adequately trained as you could be?

10 DP: Yeah, I thought the training was good, I did. I had no complaints about
11 training. At the time, to tell you the truth, because I knew I was going to flight school, I
12 knew I was going to be flying. I didn't pay as much attention to it as I should. You know,
13 I was twenty-two years old or something. And how stupid can you be? When you're
14 twenty-two you'll be pretty stupid. I should have—it was good, I mean I didn't create a
15 real big mess. I only had a couple of months to really mess things up, so I didn't have
16 enough time. It did prepare you pretty well. Probably, if I look back on it now, I probably
17 could have been oriented more toward the action in Vietnam. Like you say, it was a very
18 general kind of thing. But probably not oriented as it could be toward the training in
19 Vietnam.

20 KC: Did you have any instructors there at Ft. Benning who had been to Vietnam?

21 DP: Yeah, all through my training. I don't—like I say, I don't remember that so
22 much because that was just—to me, that was a stop on the way to what I was going to
23 actually do. That's just the way I looked at it. It was interesting and I learned some skills.
24 If I ever get by myself in a bayonet fight, I'll be really prepared.

25 KC: Where did you go after you finished your time there at Ft. Benning? Flight
26 training, I assume?

27 DP: Well, the next assignment was flight school. And I started that very soon,
28 within a month or two. I don't remember exactly where the orders fell. I could go back
29 and look, but it was spring, let's say, so it would have been in March, April, May of
30 1967. Yeah, I think I went in '67, so probably about April and then from there went to Ft.
31 Stewart, Georgia, for the initial phases. And it was interesting because our orders came

1 down while we were of course, there at Ft. Benning to go to flight school. At that time, I
2 did not know if I was going to be rotary or fixed wing.

3 KC: Did you have a preference?

4 DP: You could put down a preference and it was very interesting because most of
5 the guys put down fixed wing because, well, a couple reasons. I mean, rotary, for one
6 thing, the job opportunities were better for fixed wing when you got out. Not as many
7 helicopter jobs. And then somehow made it considered safer, you know, because the idea
8 of helicopter in combat. As it turned out I ended up getting shot more in the fixed wing,
9 but that was sort of the idea. And I thought, "Well, a helicopter, it'd be kind of
10 interesting." I don't know, I just put no preference. And so, the orders came down and the
11 guys that all requested fix wing, they got helicopters and I got fixed wing.

12 KC: Huh.

13 DP: But I learned later it has to do with your branch. What your branch needs at
14 that particular point in time. You know, in infantry branch they may have been, you
15 know, somebody was artillery or armor something and maybe their particular
16 headquarters needed helicopter pilots. I would have thought infantry would have needed
17 more helicopters than anything. Anyway, so fine, that's alright, I liked that, too. At that
18 time, I didn't—I was ready to go either way. And there were about—like I say, we went
19 to Stewart. You've probably talked to people in the aviation program before, right?

20 KC: Mm-hmm.

21 DP: Yeah, so you know about Ft. Stewart and Ft. Walters.

22 KC: Sure.

23 DP: So, went to Stewart there in Savannah (Georgia) and then my unfortunate
24 social tendencies bit me right away. I started picking up my DUIs then. I was going down
25 to put some money down on applying for the mail off to my bank for a loan for a
26 motorcycle, but somewhere along the line I guess I'd had a few drinks or something and
27 got pulled over. And instead of me living off campus—no, we weren't off campus, off
28 base because everybody wanted to live off base because you got the TDY (Temporary
29 Duty Travel), got the extra money. I mean, I was living in Savannah TDY and I was very
30 fortunate, but then that didn't last very long and then less than a month they had the
31 duty—anyway, yeah, I got picked up and then I got moved on base, so I had to live on

1 base after that. There's no class at all when your duty officers come down and bail you
2 out. And that hurts you. That's not good for your performance rating.

3 KC: How did that affect your career you think?

4 DP: My military career?

5 KC: Yeah, I had no military career. I knew that from the beginning, so I didn't
6 care. I treated it as a job. Like I say, I was not mature in any way. Well, in some ways,
7 but my attitude was not good. So, I was immature in that regard, and I drank way too
8 much. Probably not unique among pilots in that regard. And so, I didn't think of it in
9 terms of that because I had not planned to make the military career ever. It wouldn't had
10 been a bad career, again, as I look at it in retrospect and I certainly could have. You
11 know, if I thought of it at the time, but at the time, I was just kind of young and doing my
12 things and doing my patriotic chore and get it over with. Anyway, and I got picked up
13 two other times. That was just kind of a bad period there, but it didn't affect my flying. I
14 read through flight school. I got the four months at Ft. Stewart and I enjoyed that. I
15 learned a lot; we flew the T-41, and I did okay in them and got out in my prescribed time
16 and I didn't get in anymore trouble. And then we went to Ft. Stewart and from there to Ft.
17 Rutger. Let's see, I got one DUI there and then one more up in—and see, this is a
18 different time we're in back then. Nowadays I probably wouldn't see the light of day for
19 years. But back then, you know, especially if you were going to Vietnam which kind of
20 assumed everybody in the military was, especially that area in the south and you paid
21 your money. You know, then you kind of went on your way. I was in Enterprise, but the
22 military didn't get involved with that. They probably didn't even know about those. I just
23 paid my money and went on back home. So, I didn't get into any additional trouble as far
24 as the military. Nowadays again, probably check the police monitor every day. Of course,
25 again, it was kind of a different time. People looked the other way a lot more than they do
26 now. And I think it's better now. Obviously, it was pretty irresponsible, but it was a
27 different time. Again, I did my job and performed well at the last four months of flight
28 school. I used to go down to—from there, we used to go down and party down in Panama
29 City Beach on the gulf in Florida. And that was a big deal. We had some pretty wild
30 weekends down there and getting back late to make it to the flight line. And I had a great
31 time, and I learned a lot. It is a tremendous—I assume it's still going on. I don't know

1 what they're doing now. They're probably training people to fly drones or something. I
2 read in a magazine somewhere about the U.S. Army flight school is the best flight
3 airplane school in the world, and it is, it was. We learned to fly, you know, using ground
4 markers, dead reckoning, falling tree lines, land in little clearings, land at night. I had a
5 little trouble with my night landings, a little trouble with that and I found out years later
6 that I did have a little bit of an eye problem that didn't become apparent unless I was real
7 tired or drank too much. I've always relied on monocular cues. Rather than different
8 depths over my depth perception so I did have some problem. And the guy took me up
9 and my instructor took me up and we had to go a special remedial session at night to do
10 this. And down there they basically turn these cheap lights on and just hit this little
11 reflector, so you got to put the little plane down in there. But he taught me how to keep
12 the reflectors from a constant distance and how basically I just used monocular cues in
13 order to be able to guide the plane in. And so, that was my only real difficulty there, but I
14 got through that.

15 KC: What did you want to fly? Was there a particular plane that you wanted to
16 fly?

17 DP: No, because we knew—well, fixed wing we knew we would be flying Byrd
18 Dogs.

19 KC: Okay, you knew this already then?

20 DP: Yeah, yeah. What we were trained in. The first four months were T-41s, dual
21 7th with pieced up nose gear. And then the last four months were the Byrd Dogs.

22 KC: Tell me about the Byrd Dog. What was your experience with that?

23 DP: A Byrd Dog is a remarkable airplane. Like we used to say, you have to either
24 hit the engine or the pilot to bring it down because there's not a lot of sophisticated
25 hydraulics and electrical systems and things like that to keep it knocked out. You could
26 knock out a cable, I guess. You could hit a cable, and of course you have to pilot.
27 Basically, I thought it was a joke when I first got the whole thing. Oh, I don't know want
28 this old rickety old airplane, but I really came to appreciate that device. We were the last
29 to fly with the windows open. You know, with the things you could do with it and you
30 could stay airborne for three or four hours. If you had to, you weren't supposed to. You
31 could maintain your position over target. It'd take a lot of holes, a lot of holes. Just a

1 good, durable aircraft that would take a beating. They'd have some rough landings and all
2 sorts of things, but it's a conventional gear. You know, tail wheel in the back and tail
3 dragger. So that's a little different than of course the T-41 with nose gear. I had a lot of
4 respect for the plane. Well, of course I haven't flown one since I left the military. Of
5 course, there is an International Byrd Dog Association. I kind of wish I had of bought one
6 a long time ago when they were throwing them away. They're worth a lot of money, a
7 very good airplane. And for the mission, really hard to beat for the mission as far as being
8 a forward air controller or a TACA (Tactical Aircraft Controller Airborne) or whatever
9 they want to call it. It's just a very mission appropriate aircraft.

10 KC: When do you finish your training there at Ft. Rucker on the 01?

11 DP: Let's see, I believe that it would have been like September. I'm trying to
12 think, September, October. My dates are just a tad fuzzy, but I know it was in the fall of
13 1967.

14 KC: Now, at this time you know almost certainly that you're going to go to
15 Vietnam.

16 DP: I'm going to Vietnam to fly Byrd Dogs. We knew that all while we were in
17 because all of our instructors were there, well just about all of them who were in the
18 military, we had civilian instructors on contract, but all of them had come back to
19 Vietnam.

20 KC: What did they have to say about it? Did they offer any sort of advice or did
21 they give you sort of understanding of what it was going to be like over there?

22 DP: Yes, certainly they did, yeah. Another thing, I almost forgot to mention that
23 we did lose two guys in flight school. They were doing a message drop, and this was in
24 the middle of summer in Alabama. I guess we used to have some pretty hot weak air and
25 a guy got it too slow. Of course, we had two guys; a pilot in the backseat of the aircraft
26 down at fifty feet or so to drop a message. That was one of the things you practiced and
27 (the airplane) just stalled out. So, I remembered thinking at the time that we went out of
28 service, but this was the first time in my young life that I was tending the service to
29 somebody that got killed doing the same job I'm doing. It wasn't going to be my last.
30 And some of the pilots, some of the trainees were from Vietnam. They had gone over in
31 Vietnam and had been there and wanted to learn to fly so they volunteered for flight

1 school and they came back. There was a training company leader. I'm not sure if he was
2 company leader or platoon leader. A guy named Captain Stanco; he was a West Point
3 grad. He had gone over. I think he was infantry and came back and so he obviously
4 outranked the rest of us. He was the training class leader or something. Whatever the
5 particular rank, whatever the particular designation was, but he was interesting. I
6 remember him talking about that. I still, to this day, talking about how you know when
7 people—at that incident as a matter of fact, you know, he said, "It's interesting that when
8 people die, you're sitting there saying, "Boy, it sure is a shame about old so and so.""
9 You know life goes on, you just deal with it and it's too bad and then you keep on going.
10 That sort of stuck in my mind because later on I definitely came to appreciate what he
11 was saying. We had inklings, we had people telling us, but nobody in my training or none
12 of my instructors were from the Cat Killers, were from Northern I Corps. Which was
13 entirely different from what a lot of them experienced so I didn't have, in that sense, the
14 warnings I could have gotten. Certainly, they share that. And they wanted us to pass
15 because that's the way it works with pilots back then. You flew in over there and then
16 you came back and trained people to go over there and then it was your turn again to go
17 over there. So, anybody they busted out, that's just that much sooner their turn comes up,
18 you know? Like I say, I had a fun time. Partied hard, I had energy, was young, and
19 knowing I was going to Vietnam. Knowing, you know, got the orders, and dates, but we
20 all knew we were going to Vietnam. Stanco wasn't too happy he was going to Vietnam.
21 He was hoping since he'd already been to Vietnam that he would get South Korea or
22 Germany or something. So anyway, getting ahead of myself, but we had a good time. We
23 were just like any, you know, group of young guys, really college-age guys that are just
24 out of college. You know, there were two kinds of trainees or cadets or whatever the hell
25 we were. They were the married ones and the single ones. On Monday morning it was no
26 mistake at which ones were which. The married guys that show up are in nice, pressed
27 fatigues and little brown bags and little sharp eyes. And the single guys show up blood
28 shot, dragging ass, crumpled. It was an interesting contrast. I was in the singles guys and
29 we had a good time. And things happened so fast back then. Like I say, all the stuff we
30 talked about happened when we graduated college. At the beginning of '67, less than a
31 year to eighteen months I went from a senior in college to I was flying over Vietnam. I'm

1 in flight school and all of that. But that's the way it was back then all the time.
2 Everything was condensed, everything was compressed. Things changed fast. So that
3 reality, flight school reality was over, and I went and stayed there until I got my orders. I
4 think I stayed. I might have had a little leave time in between. I'm sure I did have a little
5 leave time. I flew back and forth up to Indiana and partied with my friends, checked out
6 airplanes and trained to go up to Indiana or you'd come back. I weighted my orders
7 which were December 3, 1967, Travis Air Force Base. I don't know anything else on
8 flight school?

9 KC: No, that's perfectly fine. We've got you there at Travis now. Tell me what it
10 was like knowing that you're going to go into this war zone. Here you are a young man.
11 You admittedly haven't been paying a whole lot of attention to what's going on over
12 there. You're very busy with your time in flight school and social life and all of this. Did
13 you ever have time to pause and reflect about, "Here I am, I'm twenty-two, twenty-three
14 years old. I'm going to be in the middle of a war zone flying low and slow."

15 DP: Didn't dwell on it much. Like I say, you know, your kind of immortal when
16 you're young. And I already knew guys that had done that in flight school, and they were
17 alive so I'm as good as them. You make your bets, and you take your chances. You see,
18 you're in a different realm there because everybody else is just like you. Everybody you
19 know is in the same situation. Not everybody, but a whole bunch of people. All of your
20 peers are in the same situation and then there are people who have been and people who
21 are going to be and people who are both and that's a good part of your universe, your
22 social universe at that point.

23 KC: Sure.

24 DP: And I'm going over there and yeah, I'm sure it crosses your mind that, you
25 know, its risk, but it depends a lot on the exact job that I got when I was in Vietnam. You
26 know, where I flew and I figured (sneezing) the majority of the people that went over
27 there came back and I figured, you know, my rules were 50/50 and my chances were
28 better than 50/50 than I had no right to bitch. At that point though, a couple of buddies of
29 mine who were from flight school, they had the orders on the same day, so we met there.
30 I guess we were at the old club at Travis and had a lot to drink and partied and we went
31 over together. I guess there was about three or four of us. I started doing that initial

1 processing thing. At that point in time, we were still partying and you certainly, if you
2 had any doubts, you didn't express them to the other guys. That wouldn't be macho.

3 KC: Tell me about the trip over to Vietnam.

4 DP: It's just a long brutal flight, you know? You just sit there, and I think we laid
5 over in Hawaii. There wasn't any—you didn't have MP3 then. I don't remember too
6 much about it. Of course, the plane wasn't exactly for business class or first (class). All
7 the seats were just kind of lined up there and just warmed up a lot of warm bodies. As
8 many warm bodies as they could fit in and run them over there. That was an amazing
9 transportation exercise. I'm sure some historians are probably just focusing on that. All of
10 those airlines that just sprung into being, charter lines. Just to get all those troops, up to
11 five hundred thousand at a time over there and back. The flight was just long, brutal,
12 boring. And I guess we landed—did we land at Cam Ranh? I guess at Cam Ranh Bay we
13 landed at.

14 KC: Now let me ask you this, did you have any—many pilots wind up in a
15 survival school in the Philippines. Did you do this as well?

16 DP: Yeah, not before I got there, but later. I went to jungle and environmental
17 survival training, JAS, they call it.

18 KC: But this was after?

19 DP: Yeah, this was after I got to it.

20 KC: Okay, now you came into, what was either Cam Ranh Bay, would Da Nang
21 have been a possibility for you?

22 DP: It wasn't De Nang for sure. There was Cam Ranh, there was another one. Oh
23 shoot, I need my map here. It was Tan Son Nhut, wasn't there? I'm trying anyway; I
24 think it's probably Cam Ranh.

25 KC: Well, that would make more sense since you were going to be up North.

26 DP: Yeah, it was definitely not—no, what was Bien Hoa? What was the one
27 down—there was one south of there. Because what happened is where we came in, they
28 kept moving me north. I may even have that on my—

29 KC: It's not all that important, I guess.

30 DP: After I think there were—anyway, we came in and I don't think it was Cam
31 Ranh. I think it was one further south. And in each stage along the way we kept getting

1 sent—we split up finally. You know, you sign in and go to a barracks somewhere and go
2 over and look on the wall and see if your orders have been posted and where you were
3 going. You go back and you come back later in the day or the next day you come back.
4 And my buddies, they got some place at II Corps, I believe, II Corps or III Corps. I think
5 it was III Corps. And I kept going up and all of my orders—you know, I had this thing,
6 you know, I didn't want to be on the front. So, I kept looking at—I'd go up in my orders
7 and every time I looked at my orders I'd say, "Well where's that?" "That's north." Okay,
8 go to my next place and I found the orders to get posted up. "Where's that?" "That's
9 north." And so, I kept getting put north and of course I ended up on the DMZ. And that's
10 where I would say concern started weighing on me. By this time, my buddies had peeled
11 off and they went west. I just continue to go north, and you know, I said, "Where's this
12 next place?" And every time I looked up it was farther off. I said, "This looks so far north
13 they can just kind of reach over the border and hit you." Man, they can shoot you from
14 their country. So, at that point in time, I became—that's when I first started getting a little
15 aware of what was going on. And then I was in Da Nang because I'd been assigned to the
16 20th and they had a very nice facility. At that time, they had four platoons. One of them
17 flew out of Dong Ha which is the northern most airstrips in South Vietnam, just below
18 the DMZ. Phu Bai was the headquarters of the company and then for the 2nd—well the
19 second platoon, that was the headquarters of the company. The 2nd Platoon flew out of
20 Hue, the Hue Citadel. The third platoon flew out of Da Nang and they had a very nice
21 facility there. It's not too far from the beach and basketball courts and sidewalks. You
22 know, that was considered a resort platoon. And then Quang Ngai was south of there. So
23 those were the four platoons when I showed up. I went into Da Nang because that's
24 where the major airport is. So, from Da Nang it was overcast, it was December, and it
25 was very cloudy. So, we got a helicopter ride. I'm sitting in this helicopter and it takes off
26 heading for Phu Bai. And I mean, we're right on the toss of the water because the clouds
27 are such, you know, this is below any kind of minimums I've ever known. Normally I'd
28 say that if somebody flew with them like this back in the states, you know, they would
29 get their ass reamed by the battalion commander, but at this particular flight, the pilots
30 with the battalion commander. So, we're going along and dipping in and out of these
31 clouds and I've got these old rocky, craggy cliffs off to the side and I'm thinking,

1 “Jesus.” And across from me sitting here, there’s this guy sitting there. It’s kind of this
2 old red-haired guy, red headed crew cut guy with kind of round cheeks. They had this
3 brown leather, marine leather aviator jacket on. You know, he looked like he stepped out
4 of a World War II movie or something. And we’re zipping in and out of the clouds and
5 I’m just starting to get a feel for what I’ve gotten myself into here. So, I thought, I think
6 we’re going to ditch this thing. Well, we did. We got up there and of course, you know,
7 you just learn. I probably wouldn’t have thought anything of it. I have probably flown a
8 Byrd Dog at that height by the time I left. So, we went in and I signed in, I checked in
9 and they said, “Yeah, you can stay. I guess it’s Captain Johnson’s bunk tonight. He’s
10 down in Saigon.” I said, “Is he on R&R?” and he said, “No, he’s accompanying Warrant
11 Officer Kemsey’s remains to Saigon.” “Okay.” By that time, I had a very good idea what
12 I got myself into. And then I had the orientation that day and I met up with a guy named
13 Captain Colodge, John Colodge. He’s the guy who had served in Vietnam. I think he was
14 transportation and then volunteered because he wanted to fly—he volunteered to fly
15 helicopters and got fixed wing school. And then he was back over there, and he wasn’t
16 really happy about it. He was freshly married— very recently married and had a kid on
17 the way and being sent right back over. So, he and I ride at the same time. I don’t
18 remember, we had the orientation, and I didn’t hit it off too good, but the XO (Executive
19 Officer)—I managed to endear myself to a lot of folks in my first couple of months. It
20 just turned out I had a very positive experience with the 220th and I made a lot of friends
21 and everything’s positive. I like to get off to a bad start if I can.

22 KC: What was this bad start?

23 DP: Well, you know, we checked out all our gear and stuff and go to the flight
24 assertion and get clearance and the things. It was raining, it was the middle of monsoon
25 season and again, the good major who was the XO at the time, and I’d rather not use their
26 name. He says, “Well, we’re gonna march us out of here. We’re going to go do a
27 preflight on a bird. Well, you know, we’re going to talk about how we preflight and
28 everything here”, but it’s out there and it’s raining. There’s a light rain. Why do we have
29 to do this in the rain? I just thought that to myself. And so, we’re walking around and it’s
30 just pouring down rain. And then later on, I mean, it was like a scene—to me it’s like a
31 scene out of M*A*S*H even though M*A*S*H hadn’t been made yet. And so finally it

1 just starts pouring down, just driving rain. And we're standing out there and he says,
2 "Well, I guess we better take it in." I said, "Good idea." "What do you say, Lieutenant
3 Pepe" And so I'd made friends with him already and it cost me later down the line. Then
4 later on, after I started flying the C, I finally got, what it amounts to, it aided the longest
5 checkout in the problem. It's certainly in the 220th's history, probably in Cat Killer
6 History. It took a long time before where I had cleared to fly. And after I got cleared to
7 fly, I went down to Da Nang; I was assigned to Da Nang platoon. It was a nice, soft
8 thing, but then I was there about, oh, I guess about a month. And then the rockets hit.
9 Basically, from Tet, I was there for Tet. The rockets came in at Tet and there was a lot of
10 things going on there. Of course, they had taken over Hue. And we were then in the
11 middle of a lot of things going on. Now, at that time that I was there, I was considered a
12 rookie pilot so to speak. I was fairly new. And there's a qualification for running
13 airstrikes. I'm using the present tense. I do not know because we kind of put ourselves
14 back in that time, but I don't know what the situation is now. When you're flying the
15 Byrd Dog—in fact, you know, directing forward air control, telling jets where to drop
16 their bombs and how to adjust and all that. The Air Force calls those FACs, forward air
17 controller. Now, the Marines call those TACAs, tactical aircraft controller airborne. But
18 they essentially perform the same mission. Now, the Army doesn't have such a
19 designation because the army doesn't have any jets. The Army is not, by definition, back
20 then, was really not allowed to run jets right. You know, high performance air strikes.
21 However, in the other areas of Vietnam, II Corps and all the other types. If you were
22 assigned to an Army unit, you basically flew around and performed your reconnaissance
23 mission, and you couldn't direct artillery fire. But if you found a hot target for an
24 airstrike, you had to call an Air Force back and then he would come over and then he
25 would do it. It's kind of goofy because, you know, obviously the more time off target,
26 people get away. That's the interservice, you know, cat fight. Everybody has their
27 territory. A territory outing is various services. However, in the case of the Cat Killers,
28 because they were not assigned to a military unit, to an army unit, they were instead, in
29 the middle of I Corps where there were no Army units at that time. There were Marine
30 units and then the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, ARVN units. So, we flew in support
31 off those organizations. We always either had a Marine or an ARVN in the backseat. And

1 since we flew with Marines, the Marine backseat would be the TACA, but in time, then
2 the pilots, the Army pilots of the aircraft would get certified to be TACAs. So, we were
3 about the—I think we were the only army pilots that actually ran airstrikes in Vietnam.
4 And in fact, from Northern I Corps, we were the primary TAC, the primary runners of
5 airstrikes for that whole area for at least a couple years, a year or two anyway. As the
6 Army moved—eventually the Marines—the Marines moved out and the Army replaced
7 them, and the Army would come in units the 111st or 1st of the 5th and different ones. You
8 know, as that happened then, we were the only TACAs. We'd have Army Artillery
9 Observers. A guy from a ground unit in the backseat that we would be the ones to
10 actually ram the airstrikes and ram most of the air show and make it until the Marines
11 moved out all together. Well anyway, a long digression. When I went up to or down in
12 Da Nang, all of a sudden Tet's going on. We have a meeting that night and we're sitting
13 there and we're saying, "Okay." Because we thought we were going to get hit. We
14 thought we were going to get hit again and we're probably going to get rocketed. We
15 were assigning aircraft and where we were going to fly down to, I don't know, Bien Hoa?
16 Maybe to Bien Hoa—no, that would have been too far down.

17 KC: That's very far south, yeah.

18 DP: Yeah, we were going to fly south and so they assigned a crew chief and a
19 pilot and a plane and a pavement header instruction and so I'm in. I'm kind of worried
20 about this. I'm looking out here. It's only one air; this is the Marble Mountain Airfield.
21 There's only one airstrip. So, I went out and I walked off the ramp. You know, how much
22 ramp do I have here? If I got a wind coming off the ocean, can I just take off or do I need
23 to get the runway? Because you've got all these planes trying to get the runway at one
24 time and rockets landing. So, I mean, I stepped it off and I went back to my room. I'll
25 never forget, my roommate there was a guy named Henry Milam and he was from Ninety
26 Six, South Carolina. I said, "How do you think we're going to get out of here?" He said,
27 "Well, I didn't tell my crew chief. If he wants to get out of here, he better be on the first
28 helicopter pulling pitch cause that's where I'm going to be sitting." I said, "Well, okay,
29 that makes sense." We didn't get rocketed and so Henry didn't have to jump on a
30 helicopter, and I didn't have to take off the ramp. But the schedules got all messed up and
31 the whole story began, I was a relatively new pilot, and I wasn't trusted as a TACA or

1 anything at that point. In the disruption, I ended up, you know, they sent a relatively new
2 observer over to me and we got out when I was out flying and there were shit sandwiches
3 going on everywhere. I mean, during Tet there were troops in contact everywhere, so I
4 ended up flying over to the scene and called over to the scene and there were troops in
5 contact and, you know, the guy behind me said, “You know, I’d rather have you do it.”
6 “You got it.” And I lost my little card. There was a little card there that you check list of
7 all your items that you’re supposed to do. I dropped it, of course, it was under the seat.
8 So, I had to do it from memory. And I got diverts and it didn’t give them a whole flight to
9 get stuff that was left over from other missions and stuff. So, we got them out of the jam
10 and then went back. So, from that point forward, then, I could run air. I mean, you know,
11 I guess eventually the orders would have caught up to me.

12 KC: So, you didn’t have to go through any sort of real certification process to be
13 certified as a TACA.

14 DP: No, because normally I say what to work with is you would work with, if it
15 was a backseat, he would work with an experienced front seat and vice versa because
16 he’d go up and it wouldn’t be your first—I was the first airstrike. I mean, I had flown
17 with guys in my backseat running airstrikes, so I knew the drill. Trust me, we trained for
18 it somewhat in flight school. But I think there it was mostly artillery. I think we directed
19 artillery from there.

20 KC: Well, that would stand reason since you were Army, and you were going to
21 call in jetfighters or anything like that.

22 DP: Like I say, we had a backseat man and I’d flown with some experienced guys
23 before that so I kind of knew what was going on. And that’s the way it was done. In the
24 Marines—we flew the Marines out of there. And the Marines were very, very
25 professional group. These guys, they weren’t pilots. They were aerial observers, and they
26 were very qualified. They were, you know, they were top notch and then we learned a
27 great deal and a great deal of camaraderie between the Army pilots and Marine
28 Observers. They preferred to fly with us, actually. Because we were better pilots of the
29 Byrd Dog. The Marine Pilots that flew the Marine Byrd dogs in that mission, they were
30 primarily fighter jocks or other aircraft so that wasn’t their primary aircraft. You know,
31 they were maybe not quite as smooth the way they were flying them and how they treated

1 them. So, ours was considered a little safer to fly with us. I guess I can say that now after
2 forty years. Yeah, and in fact, the Marine Observers actually lived with the Cat Killers.
3 They were part of—in Phu Bai they had their own billet and they stayed there and
4 clubbed with us and we were all—one guy at the bar had an Army and the next was
5 Marine and we were doing the same mission, or the same thing so there really wasn't
6 much separation there. They're you know, good guys. So, you learned a lot from them. I
7 appreciated everything that they did and taught and real professional guys. And then
8 when we flew up to Dong Ha, that was a Marine base at III Corps. And we flew up to
9 Dong Ha and then we stayed in their billets. There was kind of a dusty old hardback up
10 there that we stayed at. Again, this stuff changed over time. We would overnight up
11 there. We took turns overnighing up there. Anyway, like I say I was in Da Nang and
12 while I was there, a couple helicopter pilots came in or the Black Hawks, 283rd helicopter
13 company, but they were there at Da Nang. They were neighbors of ours. We were all next
14 door. And they had come in, they had lost, they had lost a Byrd and a couple pilots at a
15 place called Que Son the same day. And I mean they'd lost the atom and the rocket did
16 and a whole complexion of things changed that couple days. Then about a month later,
17 about a month later I was assigned up to the DMZ platoon. I was moved and the same
18 thing, I wasn't real thrilled with the idea because he didn't mention it even after I was
19 down at Da Nang. You know, when you go by a flight operation office and you see a
20 bunch of people huddled around a radio, that's not a good sign. And we had lost another
21 guy, a warrant officer. Luke Keevan was his name. I'm trying to think, Keevan and
22 Kemsey were the two warrant officers that we lost the first two months I was there. I'm
23 trying to think which one was first and which one was second, but they had gone up and
24 he'd gone up into—we weren't supposed to go north of the river at that point, but he had
25 gone up there. At the urging of Marine CO (Commanding Officer) that probably didn't
26 want to get himself the CMH (Congressional Medal of Honor) or something, kind of play
27 the role. And who it was, it was the guy in the brown leather jacket that I saw sitting
28 across from me at the helicopter.

29 KC: Really?

30 DP: Yeah, he was actually one of the Marine Observers. He and the pilot went up
31 and were not heard from again up the river. So, we lost them so now this is the third

1 month coming on and that was in January. I sat there December and January and while I
2 was there, there was the guy that came through and I only alluded to it, but I had a real
3 long check out and I would sit around, and it was just really my additional month or three
4 or four weeks there was not pleasant. It didn't feel like I belonged, almost. And so, when
5 I was in Da Nang, the next guys came through who were signed in. I made it my point to
6 go out, speak out of hand and say, "Hey, here's what you want to do and here's the maps
7 you need." Just to make them welcomed. Then after Tet, one of the guys was a young-
8 looking kid named Lt. Bozard, Terry Bozard. You know, nice guy and he went out and
9 then I guess there was about a month, three or four weeks later and there's a bunch of
10 guys huddling around the radio in the flight ops again and they said, "trajecular 2-8."
11 Whose 2-8? Nobody even knew who it was. He was too new; he was the new guy. And
12 he'd got it over Hue because we were trying to take Hue back. So, then, like I say, shortly
13 after that then I got assigned up to Phu Bai. And by now we had cleaned out of Quang
14 Ngai. We were moving operations and aircraft to the north. Eventually, they actually
15 cleared out of Da Nang, but there was nothing in Quang Ngai. That it was moved all the
16 way up to, again, Phu Bai. The 1st and 4th platoons were in Phu Bai. They altered, rotated
17 from Phu Bai to Dong Ha. With that two or three pilots on the ground that spent the night
18 at Dong Ha. So, those were the DMZ platoons. They were later merged and then later
19 split or whatever, but that was the DMZ element. So, I mean, I go up there and I'm
20 assigned to the DMZ platoons, the DMZ platoons. And by that time, they're losing a pilot
21 a month and there's only like ten of us doing this job. You know, I'm thinking this is not.
22 I'm still going to lose my 50/50 now, but I guess there was nothing to do. Like I say, all
23 your peers are doing the same thing and that's the key to all this. So, I went up and I did a
24 little trip and the captain, the leader of the 1st platoon to which I'd been assigned was this
25 guy John Cobatch I mentioned earlier that actually signed in the day I did to the unit. Of
26 course, he was a captain and senior, he had been to Vietnam before. And, I had in my
27 assistant platoon leader, the guy that was under my old section was a guy named Gary
28 Shields, nicknamed Spear. I went up and did my rotation, went up to Dong Ha. Oh no, on
29 my first trip I had managed to—I was supposed to follow a captain, a guy named Mike
30 Sharky. An aircraft sergeant got up and we flew up and he said, "Alright, okay, come up
31 simple nickel after we get out of triple nickel." "Okay." So, we got up there and I don't

1 know exactly what was going on. We got up and I got my radio, and he sees 5-0-5-5-5 so
2 we didn't make contact. We flew around and finally came back and landed and he was
3 pissed. Because I remember him standing there and walked up and he was flapping his
4 gloves in the palm of his other. And I've only seen that in the movies before. You know,
5 "What's wrong?" I said, "I don't know man, I can't get contact." "Well get your radio
6 fixed." And he stormed off. "Goddamn, what an ass." But, you know, my first impression
7 was totally wrong. He's the best guy in the world and we had a really great time together
8 there in Europe and still is the most pleasant person. At that point in time, I had managed
9 to piss him off. And then when we assigned to —after I managed to make it up there, I
10 did a little mission and had an experienced backseat showing me around and came back
11 and they had the next day off. I noticed that there was an aircraft there that was heading
12 toward was it Qui Nhon, Qui Nhon I think it was. I think I had a good friend of mine
13 from college, working as a clerk typist down at Qui Nhon. You know, I think I'll go
14 down and visit him. So, I kind of woke up my platoon leader and say, "Hey listen, I'm
15 going to go down to Qui Nhon, I'll be back." And I guess you weren't supposed to do
16 that. So, I caught my flight down there, grabbed my helmet because I thought it might
17 come in handy. I went down there, we had a chat and then coming back, had a problem.
18 You know, because there weren't any direct flights and I got onto an Air America
19 helicopter and I got up there and I got as far as Da Nang. We had a company there at Da
20 Nang, a platoon and the platoon leader wouldn't give me ride back up to Phu Bai. I
21 thought, "My god, that really hacked me off." So, I have to go over to Da Nang main and
22 just sign on, invoice. Anyway, a manifest and wait for when the planes are gone, it's
23 getting late. So, I said well, what am I going to do here? So, all the pasture planes had
24 gone so I went onto the flight line, I grabbed my helmet and went onto flight line and
25 started asking around with my helmet I could get on the flight line and find out the pilots
26 who were flying the cargo plane and as a professional courtesy, so to speak, I got on.

27 KC: Right.

28 DP: I got in and when I got in it was late, it was like ten or eleven o'clock or
29 something like that. We walked in and god, the shit had hit the fan. They assumed when
30 the last plane came in, I wasn't going to make it back. And so, they had already meted up
31 a punishment for me any everything. I had Sharkey with the Calvary, fledted the 4th

1 platoon, and Cobatch is the leader of 1st so I must have had all of my direct superior
2 officers pissed off at me at the same time. And you know, in a matter of like two or three
3 days.

4 KC: That's not a very good track record that early on.

5 DP: Hey, that was amazing. You know, that was quite an accomplishment I
6 thought. You know, so my punishment was to stay up at Dong Hoa because people didn't
7 like it up there with a dusty old hooch and you had these sleeping bags. It was just not
8 very pleasant. You slept on a cot on a sleeping bag and there was a lot of incoming. Like
9 I say, that was just south of the river and they get a lot of incoming. You know, you jump
10 up and run out and get in the trench. So, it was dirty and there was a lot of fire and stuff,
11 so people didn't like staying up there. You had to take your turn so what they did is they
12 said, "Okay, well you're going to go up there for a week." That was my punishment.
13 Which was okay to me, I got an ammo box, I got me a radio. I just held corps; it was fine.
14 And really probably I'm much better off when I'm somewhere away from where the
15 leadership is. So, I got back and eventually, like I say, those people are my best of friends
16 now. I mean, I can't say enough nice things about them, and I love to spend time with
17 them. Sharkey ended up going over it when he was stationed over Germany and hanging
18 out with him. So, that was my inauspicious beginning and I eventually—it was kind of a
19 situation there because it was combat and because if you were willing to do shitty jobs
20 and take big risks. People, you know, some of the military formalities were overlooked.
21 There wasn't a lot of—the term is chicken shit. It sounds a little too derogatory to look at,
22 but it was a situation I don't think that I probably could have made it my full time if I
23 would have been state-side. If I had been in like a regular, just a military stand ready spit
24 and polished type of unit, but that was such informal, really, other than the combat
25 because it was an aviation unit. We didn't have, you know, we didn't have a unit that we
26 belonged to. We supported different units. We were sort of like, I don't know,
27 subcontract consultants or something. Like if the boss calls, get his name. And in that
28 setting, I was able to really to flourish. I did well.

29 KC: That's very interesting. Why don't we take a break there for today, Mr.
30 Pepe?

31 DP: Very good.

Interview with Donald Pepe

Session [2] of [3]

Date 22 February 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Don Pepe. Today is February 22, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas
3 Tech University and Mr. Pepe is joining me from his home in Jacksonville, Florida. Mr.
4 Pepe, as I mentioned a moment ago, we left off with you at Dong Hoa and you're
5 describing the work that you were doing there with the 220th Reconnaissance Airplane
6 Company, the Cat Killers, and that you were working with the Marine Corps. You were
7 not a TACA qualified at this point, but you were giving me the basic rundown.

8 Donald Pepe: I was.

9 KC: Oh, you were at this point, okay.

10 DP: I was, yeah. I got that taken care of down at Da Nang.

11 KC: Okay, well why don't you go ahead and tell me about the everyday workings
12 of the 220th. What your routine would be, what sort of things you would be going through
13 from day to day.

14 DP: Well, there were—at this time, the reason that I came up—I think I described
15 previously that there were four platoons in the 220th Aviation Company. And each
16 platoon, roughly ten pilots to an aircraft. Actually, a fewer than that, probably between
17 eight and ten, I would say. The 1st platoon was stationed or flew out of Dong Hoa, which
18 is the northernmost airstrip in South Vietnam at the time. Just below the DMZ. The next
19 platoon flew out of Hue, the Hue Citadel. The 3rd platoon was in Da Nang and the 4th
20 Platoon was down in a place called Quang Ngai. Now, that was when I first came into
21 country. In the matter of three months time, the fourth platoon at Quang Ngai, that was
22 moved up to fly the DMZ. I'm sorry; I kind of got that wrong. I think the 4th platoon was
23 originally on the DMZ and the 1st platoon was in Quang Ngai; that was a mistake.

24 KC: Okay.

25 DP: The 1st Platoon was in Quang Ngai. It makes no difference because by the
26 time I got there, both the 1st platoon and the 4th platoon were flying out of Dong Hoa.
27 Those were the DMZ platoons. This is post-Tet. The Tet Offensive had hit, Que Son was
28 engaged, and all the 220th pilots, our whole operation shifted northward. So, our
29 southernmost platoon was now Da Nang. That was sort of our civilization basically

1 afterwards. The company was stationed out of Phu Bai. The pilots, of course, post-Tet we
2 no longer flew out of Hue. Prior to Tet, the pilots flew off of an airstrip that was in the
3 Hue Citadel and they stayed at the MAC-V (Military Assistance Command- Vietnam)
4 compound which was just south of the river from the Hue Citadel. You're probably
5 familiar with Vietnam. (Phone ringing in the background). Can you hold on just a
6 second?

7 KC: Sure.

8 DP: Okay, sorry bunch of things going. Okay, where was I? Oh, you're talking
9 about the situation at Hue. The Hue Citadel, the airfield—I don't know if you know, if
10 you look at a map of that or an aerial shot, actually within the walls of the Hue Citadel
11 there was an airfield. It was a short one, obviously, but we had the small planes. You
12 know, enough for us to land on. And so, the 2nd Platoon flew out of there and we actually,
13 it was just kind of a side bar story, but we had a pilot, his name was Herald Vale, and
14 they flew like mortar watch at night and things like that. I think Hue kicked off at—was it
15 1am or 2am? I'll have to go back and look at my notes here. Anyway, Herald completed
16 his mission. He was flying the night watch and landed his aircraft. A little—you know,
17 probably about twenty till one (12:40AM), something like that. You know, got the jeep,
18 drove through Hue, crossed the bridge, and into the MAC-V compound. Was taking off
19 his boots when the first rounds of Tet hit. Of course, when Tet hit, the NVA (North
20 Vietnamese Army) occupied Hue. They already had Hue occupied. They didn't take it,
21 they just stood up. They were already there. So clearly, they had been watching him. You
22 know, he was driven through their midst all the way over, but the discipline was such,
23 nobody fired or did a round until he got to the compound. He then actually got trapped in
24 the compound. Of course, you know Hue was one of the classic battles of the war. They
25 were trapped in the compound and the pilots were manning the defenses or the walls with
26 rifles. And nobody was allowed out by helicopter or anything else unless somebody else
27 was brought in because they needed the warm bodies there. And that went on for several
28 days. So, we had pilots caught in the MAC-V compound. That's just a little digression
29 there. Anyway, at the time that I then came up to Phu Bai, everyone, the whole company
30 was now, except for the third platoon, which was in Da Nang, and very nice quarters in
31 Da Nang. Da Nang was very nice. Played basketball and go to China Beach and

1 restaurants and stuff. That was the R&R platoon. Everybody else actually lived at Phu
2 Bai. They had their primary, they had their bunk there. And then the two DMZ platoons,
3 the 1st and the 4th, would fly up to Dong Ha and do their missions to come back. It
4 depended on some of the missions you stayed over night. At least two pilots had to stay at
5 Dong Hoa overnight in case anything came up there. So, you would stay up and guys
6 didn't like it—pilots from each platoon or just two pilots all together—so nobody liked it
7 up there because the dusty hooch and it was a lot more primitive than Phu Bai. The
8 showers were an iffy situation. If you got there with a lock down and everything so
9 nobody liked it. When I created—when I had an indiscretion, I managed to piss
10 everybody off. Everybody above me in the chain of command, all at one time. That was a
11 pretty great accomplishment. My platoon leader who's this guy John Cobatch, that I'd
12 mentioned earlier, the fellow that when I came into the 220th, he and I were together there
13 at the same time. We went out and preflighted the aircraft together and everything, the
14 orientation so-to-speak. He was a captain and like I say, he was on his second tour. He
15 was not a pilot at 1st tour, so he was quite senior, so he was the platoon leader. He was the
16 1st platoon leader. You know, he took me. And that sort of—I later spoke with him and
17 that solved some problems for him because, you know, he had a lot of complaints about
18 people staying up there. I didn't mind it, I liked it. I nailed up an ammo box and put my
19 radio on there and it was just kind of a nice camp out and had a lot of people coming in
20 and out to fly the planes. Like I say, I was away from headquarters which is probably the
21 right thing for me.

22 KC: Right.

23 DP: So, I did my penance and then was, you know, came back down. I was still
24 new guy in a sense. Especially up in the DMZ because that was considered to have
25 names. There's a lot of action up there. I mean, you got shot at all the damn time and
26 there was a lot of activity and airstrikes. At that time, all of our missions were in support
27 of the 3rd Marine Division. They had AO's (Aviation Ordnanceman) and their AO
28 backseats were guys who had served in the ground. They weren't pilots, they weren't
29 aviators, but they were good, they were very good and very professional. Like I said, they
30 had experience on the ground, and they were qualified as TACAs and so I mean they
31 were good at their job and the usual procedure is you had an inexperienced pilot and went

1 with the experienced observer and vice versa. And over a period of time, over the time
2 that I was there during the year 1968, the Army started moving into I corps. Even up into
3 northern I corps and the 1st of the 5th, 101st, and I think the big red one came in. I have to
4 go back into my notes. At that time, then, we started getting Army Observers as the area
5 of responsibility shifted from Marine to Army, but primarily Marine at that time. So, I
6 would say it was March. What had happened, like I say, it's the 1st of March, I see
7 December, January, and February. The three months that I had been there. We'd lost a
8 pilot each month. A guy, a kid that I befriended when he first came in, the first guy that
9 came in after me, the first new guy. Since I had several horrible times as the new guy, I
10 tried to be friendly to him. I was in Da Nang when he came in. I befriended him and told
11 him what he'd expect and everything. He was on one of his first missions and it was over
12 Hue during Tet and he got killed. And so, at that point in time—I think we talked
13 yesterday about concern about your life and all that sort of thing. Yeah, nobody wants to
14 die. And I guess in secret moments, but actually there's kind of a gulp moment here, but I
15 try to be rational on everything. I started looking at, you know, 50/50, if I had at least a
16 50/50. Above that, then I'm wondering if I'm in the right place or not. Now, that's kind
17 of silly. You know, you say 50/50 over long term on a given mission or what, but you've
18 got to have something to hang your head on. So, this is a pilot of month, we're starting to
19 eat into that percentage a little bit. So, I guess we had—of course, that was from both the
20 DMZ platoon and the Hue platoon. So, it was a little tense probably during that time. And
21 I flew, I flew my missions, but I was still kind of a new guy. You know, I was TACA, I
22 could run airstrikes, but I didn't because the guys up there were more experienced than I.
23 And then knew the area better than I did, at least initially. So, then I guess I'd been up
24 there about three weeks. I got my handwritten notes here, where'd I set them down? God,
25 it's terrible to get old, but it sure beats the alternative.

26 KC: Yes.

27 DP: On top of the box, DD-2-14. Yeah, I got almost six-hundred pages of
28 handwritten notes from the time I was there. I thought I had them transcribed. Anyway, it
29 was something like three weeks into it we were doing— I had this guy, Southern Charlie,
30 his proper name I thought I knew what it was and southern was the call sign. We were the
31 Cat Killers, that was our call sign. The Cat Killers, and I was Cat Killer 1-5. We had a

1 Marine AO, an older guy. I say older, he's probably late twenties or early thirties. Charlie
2 was in the backseat and we got a call to go out for a recon team. The Marines had done
3 courses, you know, eight men and a dog out somewhere in the middle of Boondocks. And
4 this place was strangely not very far from Dong Ha. It's a few miles, but of course it
5 might as well be in Antarctica as far as accessibility. So, we're out there and we got this
6 call. Let's see, I think we were doing a convoy cover. I don't know, maybe not. Convoy
7 covers were brutal, I hated those. Well, we'll just get back to those later. Anyway, on this
8 particular mission, these guys were known as a shit sandwich. So, Charlie made contact
9 and I was a fairly new guy, and we were flying around and we're trying to get him out of
10 there. It was a very, very close situation. So, we called there and then Shelly ran the air
11 and I had to go down and mark the target and there was just jungle down there. You
12 know, there was a small clearing and let's go off the sides and the Byrd Dogs did not
13 have really any kind of laser guidance system. What you did is you had a grease pencil
14 mark that you put up on the windshield and you just kind of went in and that was your
15 most vulnerable time because you had to get it steady on your glide in. And they're
16 already in and you're bearing in on the target at the line at the grease pencil mark and
17 punch it off, that was what we had. There was a very close situation there where they had
18 probably fifty meters separated them. The good guys and the bad guys and it was in the
19 jungle. I mean, it was clearing, and I was asking where people were from certain
20 landmarks. And so, I'm thinking, "I'm a new guy; I'm going to put this light rocket in the
21 back of a friendly." That's not cool. You know, you do what you got to do and there ain't
22 nothing else to do so we got it in there and Charlie ran the air and all of a sudden, I said,
23 "Alright, lift off." There was a problem, and it went to hell and we thought we'd hit the
24 friendlies. So, a lot of chatter back and forth and come to find out, what had happened,
25 the thing was so close that the napalm canister had hit. They hadn't gotten hit by napalm,
26 but the canister bounced over and broke one of our friendly's arms.

27 KC That was close.

28 DP: That close you know? Again, the alternative was, you know, they lose. So,
29 we got the air going, the helicopters are coming out there and the marines didn't have the
30 world's best helicopters, that's just a fact, the 46s. In fact, the 46s and the 34s. So, the
31 46's were their primary medivac's or their extraction helicopters. So, they're circling.

1 Actually, I noticed while this is all going on, I'm looking off to the west and I'm seeing
2 these clouds come up. I see it's really getting dark out here, you know, just getting this
3 really bad weather. And then sure enough, before we can get an extraction or get this
4 thing done, this weather hits. One by one everybody else starts peeling away because they
5 can't find anyone and it's just like it's raining, it's sideways and its really strange kind of
6 weather. I'm not sure what I'm going to do here. I didn't want to leave because we were
7 it. There were the friendlies, the enemies, and us.

8 KC: And they're still in contact.

9 DP: Yeah. And so, we can't direct anything, but at least we're there. And if we
10 leave and come back, are we going to find anything. It was a minute-by-minute thing. I
11 know Charlie wasn't sure. I mean, I know that if I had said, "Hey, we're taking it in." He
12 said, "Fine." I didn't say it and so we stayed there and I'm thinking, "If thing gets up a
13 street metal taco down in the street somewhere, it's not going to be cool, and I really
14 haven't helped the mission. But we stayed it out until the weather cleared then the
15 helicopters came back. By this time, when the aircraft returned, we actually just went off
16 station briefly, went back, gassed up, and came back. Because it was not dark, and we
17 were probably the only people that knew where everybody was. So, we had a flare ship
18 going and I was running the flares and we had the medivac went into the zone. What
19 happened, and I guess I left this out initially, was that before the weather hit, they went
20 into pick him up and the helicopters got shot out of the zone and one of them got it and
21 they had to take off before they could get— and one of the helicopters that got shot down,
22 he got far enough away, he set it down in the road and the crew was okay. You know, the
23 helicopter and everything were back, and they had two sets. They had an extraction force,
24 they had reinforcement. They either were going to pull these guys out or put more guys
25 in. So, you know, everybody's making a decision and talking on the radios and I'm
26 talking— basketball was the name of the flare ship. The flare ship's going and dropping
27 flares. And flares are kind of tough to view a countryside with flares, especially a jungle
28 terrain because it's all trees and it's all various shades of gray, really. And as the flares
29 come down, the shadows obviously move. The ray changes, but it still beats total
30 darkness. So, they made the decision they're going to make it. They're going to do one
31 more try at getting them out. So, we went around, we went in and just as they touched

1 down the zone the flares go out. And I'm thinking god. You know, I'm screaming, "Kick
2 out those flares, no more flares." So, it's totally darkness for a few seconds and there's
3 silence on the radio and then finally it comes back up and Charlie's in contact and I heard
4 him say, "You got him, you got him all?" So, they got everybody out and they took off.
5 So, we went back and by this time it was almost midnight. We moved in very late, way
6 after dark. We went in and the medical facility is right there by the airstrip, on the other
7 side of the airstrip from us in Dong Hoa and I went and saw the guy, a real fine marine, a
8 real fine soldier. So, we went in and unbeknownst to us, I guess the general there at Dong
9 Hoa and everybody was listening on the radio all the stuff going on. So, I sort of got my
10 wings there and that sort of thing. I went from new guy to old pro. I got my—I could tell
11 my war stories to the others. And then from that point on things got interesting. There
12 were a lot of missions like that.

13 KC: Now how many soldiers were on the ground; Marines were on the ground
14 here?

15 DP: It was a recon team, and I could give you that exact number probably if I
16 could find my notebook that I just had in my hand.

17 KC: That's okay.

18 DP: But it'd be at least ten guys. It might have been a larger force. I'll find that
19 thing and then I'll be so angry at myself. I don't have the exact number, but maybe later
20 on—

21 KC: No, that's perfectly fine. I was just curious what size force this was. If it were
22 a recon unit you would think between probably eight and twelve or something like that.

23 DP: Yeah, I'm sure that's probably the numbers. We had two helicopters; I
24 remember that. Though, I'm not sure why we would have had two. We could have picked
25 them up. It might have been a different force, but anyway it's a good question and I've
26 got that somewhere. We'll come back to that.

27 KC: Now, what do you do when you get back? If you can make it back to Dong
28 Ha and its mid night and you've got these guys safely extracted. Like you said, this was
29 where you became an old pro at this now. You're going to be accepted. What is your
30 process? From when you get in you land your 01. I would assume you'd have to debrief
31 and then—tell me about the debriefing and what else you do.

1 DP: Well, we don't debrief with anybody, we write it up. I've got to fill in the
2 flight record in the aircraft and put in the number of hours. There are shot at reports you
3 can fill in. I used to do those, but we got to where we just didn't bother. I mean, if you
4 flew you got shot at. It was pretty much the name of it. In that case, we landed. We
5 walked across the runway to the med place. I mean, usually we don't normally do that.
6 Normally when you would land after a mission you would either—if it was early in the
7 day, you probably had two missions. Usually, you were scheduled for two missions a
8 day. You would land early in the day and then you would kind of hang around. You
9 might go up for lunch and I'd go up to get a jeep ride or up to the mess hall and that's sort
10 of the main building area. Most of the time you just kind of sit around the line shack
11 waiting for the next mission and ate C-rats and old magazines and just kill time. Then
12 after your last mission, then you would usually either be a G-4 unit. It would take you
13 back to the building where there were these hard back hooches, these marine hardback
14 hooches. There was one that was sort of designated for the observers and the pilots. The
15 cardinal rule was you never zipped up you're sleeping bag. We slept in sleeping bags on
16 top of cots.

17 KC: Why was that the rule?

18 DP: Because when the incoming came in, you wanted to get out of it real quick
19 and run into the trench.

20 KC: Now, were you rocketed or mortared up there at Dong Hoa often?

21 DP: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was pretty regularly. Yeah, we were actually in reach of
22 big guns from north of the river. Of course, you're always in reach of mortars. You could
23 drive by mortars. So, they were getting a lot of rounds of incoming. I don't know exactly
24 how many per day and not as bad as Que Son obviously, but it was regularly during the
25 day, maybe not every day. You know, "BOOM!" And I've got some pictures. They hit
26 the water buffalo out in front of the line shack. Did that in and some holes in the tarmac,
27 the PSP. It's not eve PSP, it's just steel plating, so you have to run away. So, they'd hit
28 that. I remember—I remember one time and your kind of used to it and it's funny how
29 adaptable the human species is. I remember sitting in the mess hall in the mornings and at
30 dinner and just sitting there. Of course, you hear the "BOOM!" you know, everybody hits
31 the floor. I'm sitting there eating this bowl of cherries because they didn't have cherries

1 very often, you know, I'm really digging these cherries and then all of a sudden,
2 "BOOM!" And now you're under the table. I don't know exactly how people know this
3 or whatever, so you wait until the rounds hit and then they stop. Somebody gets up and
4 there's no "all clear", there's no whistle or something. Everybody just gets up and
5 everybody just goes back to what they were doing. I'm getting back up and I had dirt and
6 shit in my cherries, and I just picked them out. I went ahead and just finished eating them.
7 I remember thinking at the time how that works. How it's just somebody decides," Okay,
8 it's time to get up." And somebody else agrees and then you go on about your business.
9 And that eventually, our mission became to go north of the river and take on those guns
10 with our 01s.

11 KC: Okay, now tell me about that. That's one of the things I wanted to get to
12 today. Tell me about going north to the river.

13 DP: Yeah, there's a lot of good stuff about, you know, troops in contact and stuff
14 that's south of the river. You won't be talking to any other Byrd Dog outfits. Well,
15 actually you could. I think the Marines flew up there with their finger paints earlier on,
16 but not after I got the flag. July 1st, I think is when they kicked that off and it was
17 operation, oh, leave that blank. Let me come back because it's blank in my head. It's
18 something like Thunderbolt or something like that. Anyway, Thor, Operation Thor?
19 Anyway, basically it was an experimental thing or test to send us up north to the river and
20 direct counter battery fire onto these guns and airstrikes and stuff that were shooting
21 south of the river. And it was only going to be like ten days, a week or ten days and they
22 had their acceptable loss ratio. It was pretty high. We figured that they didn't lose
23 anymore than, oh, two planes or three planes that would be a success and they could do it
24 and we didn't lose any. And so, our fate was sealed. So basically, that became one of our
25 mission. We had the other missions as well, but the missions north of the river were the
26 two-ship missions. They were always two-ship missions and when I say north of the
27 river, we flew the DMZ. The DMZ extended about five clicks, roughly three miles each
28 side of the river. Theoretically we were supposed to be south of the river at all times, but
29 we flew over it and we'd obviously wander up into it and if we had a target of
30 opportunity up there, we would do that. You weren't supposed to really suppose to be up
31 there. And again, a lot of that depended on the bombing halts. I mean, there'd be

1 bombing halts in the area we flew yesterday, we can't fly in today. It's kind of silly
2 because it's all right there. You don't go up to Haiphong, but obviously if there are guns
3 shooting, we're going to go after them if they're flying south of the river. There were
4 two-ship missions. High ship would be around five thousand feet; a low ship would be
5 around 3,500. Yeah, the high ship was to keep track of where everybody was and keep an
6 eye out for fire and things like that and low ship actually ran the show and ran the
7 ordinance. They either directed the artillery fire or —usually the backseats would run the
8 artillery fire if we had the airstrikes, ran airstrikes, pilots, the Cat Killers who were the
9 TACAs would run those. And because those missions were not Marine missions, those
10 were Army missions. We had Army pilots and I'll get the units for you. I apologize; I
11 should have had these units and all this stuff ready for you.

12 KC: No, no that's perfectly fine.

13 DP: Because I know it as American Beauty was their call sign. That mission only
14 lasted from the 1st of July to I guess the end of October or was it the end of November? I
15 think it was the end of November at which time there was a bombing halt again and we
16 never officially flew north of the river again. It was an assigned mission. Of course, we
17 ended up there a lot. But for most of the 1st six months I spent on the DMZ, those tours
18 were limited at the company level. They just made the decision to limit those to six-
19 month tours. Anyway, if you flew the Z for six months, then you could come off the Z
20 because a lot of guys didn't like to fly the Z, particularly the married ones. So, I did, I
21 mean I enjoyed it and I didn't want to leave the Z. I mean, I thought, this is where a guy
22 like me belongs. The CO at the time, a guy named Whisby, he told me about how he had
23 to show everybody that the system works, and you can keep off of it and I thought that
24 was a bunch of BS. I mean, you're in the Army, what can you do? Now, what I did
25 after that is that when there was an opening slot, somebody was out up on the Z then I
26 would fill in anytime there was an opportunity to fly, I would go up and do those and I
27 kept my finger into things. We'd only lost—we lost one plane for both the pilot and the
28 observer and that was at the end of the bombing halt. I'll get the exact date for you later
29 and I should know it by heart by now, but it was like the day before or two days before
30 the bombing that mission ended. It was just north of the river and the last call was, you
31 know, from the backseat. "We're hit, we're going down. I don't think we're going to

1 make it.” So, the backseat’s named Steve Bose and the front seat, Donald Harrison,
2 Donald Lee Harrison. I believe he was a very popular guy, one of the good guys at the
3 220th. But there was, like I say, we went pretty far north and, you know, up north of the
4 DMZ. I have one of the accounts in the stories that I read of me taken under fire by some
5 quad fifties up in, I guess it was June. Anyway, this is for history, I’ve got to get these
6 dates right. This is not good. Anyway, I’ll fill in some of these on the dates and I’ll e-mail
7 you with it.

8 KC: And there’s plenty of opportunity for the transcript and things like that later.

9 DP: Yeah, yeah.

10 KC: Let’s get back to these flights you were going after these North Vietnamese
11 guns here. What sized guns were you going after to begin with?

12 DP: Well, I don’t know, obviously heavy artillery. I’m not sure what their
13 designation was. I mean, I know from our side of it, you know, we could hit them with 1-
14 5-5s or 1-7-5s from down at Dong Ha. For them to reach Dong Ha it would have to be a
15 gun of that size, a 1-7-5 or so.

16 KC: What sort of resistance would you find? Did you encounter any double A,
17 triple A? What were you being shot at with?

18 DP: Yeah, yeah. You were always said to get shot up there. You never flew in a
19 straight line. I mean, you always kind of tried to be turning, climbing. For street level,
20 you were asking for it.

21 KC: Yeah, the FACs call it jinking I believe that they use.

22 DP: What they would do is the type of stuff that we encountered mostly was 37
23 millimeter and 57-millimeter radar-controlled flacks. And it was kind of funny because
24 we went up there and they get at us a lot. They would shoot at us a lot; it would come
25 around us. They didn’t knock anybody down until right there at the end when I
26 mentioned that was the flack. It would hit all around us and we didn’t know exactly what
27 was going on. And, of course, it’d make little holes on your airplane. There was an
28 Australian anti-aircraft major, and I don’t know what he was doing. I mean, he was there,
29 and he showed up at the line check, that happens sometimes. And somebody said, “I’ll
30 give him a ride.” So, I took him up and I said, “I’ll give him a ride.” And sure, enough we
31 got some troops in contact and we made a low-level. I let him drop some smoke to mark

1 the positions. We gave him a good jolly ride and he's a good guy. We went up north the
2 river and got shot at with the flack and stuff. And he told me about it because he was anti-
3 aircraft. And he said, "Well, yeah, that's radar control, it couldn't have gotten that close
4 otherwise." And he said—and he told me and then I told everybody how to deal with it.
5 Nobody had to that point that basically the way to do it is either climb or dive for a
6 distance in the case of a Byrd Dog that meant dive. So, we dive for a few hundred feet,
7 several hundred feet and then pop it out and then go the other direction and just stop from
8 diving because what will happen is as you go to dive, it'll go off over top of you, and it'll
9 follow you. And then it'll over adjust, and it could go off underneath you and then
10 they've lost their bead and usually will stop. And be damned if it didn't work.

11 KC: That's kind of fortunate to have that guy there with you I'd say.

12 DP: I mean, you know, it was just by chance he was wondering through there. So,
13 I got shot out flack a lot and flack didn't bother me as much. I mean, anytime there's all
14 of a sudden, a big boom and big puffs of smoke going off around your plane, that
15 obviously gets your attention. Somehow, I don't know, everything's psychological so I
16 would just go up and sometimes I would go and try to draw the flack because I would see
17 the guns. I was trying to locate the guns. You could see them flashes in the guns. They
18 were trying to knock out the guns and the only way you could really get them is to get
19 them to shoot at you. And I'm trying to point out the locations. I could go in and as soon
20 as I saw the muzzle flash, I'd just flip it over and drop it. You know, I didn't really get
21 knocked down. I know what scared the living hell out of me always was .50 cal or 12.7,
22 which is the Russian equivalent. I just called it all .50 cal and it just terrified me. I mean,
23 you know when you're getting shot at, if it's small arms fire, .30 caliber or so it sounds
24 like popcorn going off. If it's a machine gun, an automatic weapon it'll be a stream of,
25 pop, pop, pop, pop. Now .50 cal, it thunks, it thuds, it booms. When those things go
26 whistling by, they're so large. And that, more than any other type of ordinance just gave
27 me thoughts of it all going black. So, I respected that. And it was affective up to about
28 five thousand feet.

29 KC: I was going to ask you what the range was, basically.

30 DP: That's about five thousand feet with the air and the aircraft sights and all.

31 KC: So, it can reach up there and get you.

1 DP: Huh?

2 KC: They could reach up and get you then.

3 DP: Yeah, yeah. The small arms probably fade out around three thousand or
4 something like that. Again, you know, it depends on a lot of factors and how much of it
5 they're throwing up there. Like I say, it was just thumps. So that was my biggest concern.
6 We did this one story I was writing about. They opened up—we were just up north of the
7 river looking around at the first early morning dawn patrol kind of thing and I was the
8 high ship. I'm just kind of staring at the ground and I saw these big four puffs of smoke. I
9 said, "What the hell's that?" Of course, free fall off. Then all of a sudden, these fiery
10 streak things go streaking by your airplane off the nose of the plane. These things come
11 going by and you can't hear them at that point because they broke the sound barrier, the
12 sound's still behind them. And so, I went to kick it off the left and there was a streak or
13 stream over there. I said, "Oh damn." I turned off the right and there was a stream over
14 there. I said, "These guys got me bragging it." And about that time the sound gets there.
15 "Thump, thump, thump." Oh boy, and then you just jump and jive. You know, you think
16 that maybe I'm real skillful on dodging, but it's not true. All you're trying to do is give
17 them a bad target. You're hoping that you jump around enough they'll stop shooting
18 because you have no way of knowing when you turn that airplane and whether or not
19 you're moving into a place where this guy aimed four, five seconds earlier. So, you try to
20 give them a bad target while moving out of range. That's all you can do and praying. So
21 got that and then I call Lee, Lee Harrison. He was a low pilot. I said, "Hey, you see that?"
22 And I told him about where it was, and he goes down and sure enough they do the same
23 thing to him. Then they hosed each other twice and we didn't get us so actually that one
24 we ran some airstrikes and we got them. We got every last one of them. The last pilot, the
25 last flight was an Air Force flight named Dallas. We don't normally run those. They must
26 have been divers from up north, I don't know, with a flight of three. They were good. I
27 got one of the guns with a Hellborn flight. Hellborn was the Marine A-4s and they were
28 out at Chu Lai and they were all bread and butter they were on daily; those were our
29 guys. When we had troops in contact, you know, hot target, that's what we scrambled and
30 then we'd get Hellborn to fly the A-4s, but these guys, I forget what they were. They
31 must have been F-4s that Lee ran on the last, it was a flight, the last passes and a couple

1 of them dead center. And we flew around and watched the cook off for a few minutes and
2 then went on home. They were—yeah, .50 Cals were extremely, (buzzing sound in audio)
3 like I say—I mean, I was concerned and there was a whole lot of stuff going on and the
4 sound factor is the one because even though you see the tracers you kind of understand
5 that there's something psychologically about the sound going off and the vibration it
6 causes. And then there's this rush when you get out when it is soft. It's just really hard to
7 explain. It's just I'm alive and then there's the feeling of invincibility. It's easy to see
8 why people continue and do irrational things and want to go into combat. It's an
9 adrenaline rush; it's just, you know, it's just no better feeling in the world. You know, at
10 least for awhile I'm alive. So, anyway it was a fun period, and the fire was pretty heavy
11 and of course, if you went down, you were up on their ground and not ours. So, we got a
12 lot of guns. I don't know what the final tally on that was. I mean, that would be
13 something I could probably research at your facility.

14 KC: Likely so.

15 DP: But we got a lot of guns and, like I say, the complexion of the war was
16 changing then and most of the Army was starting to move in. It was a good mission and
17 then after that we went back and after that I was off the Z. I was officially off the Z like
18 the end of August. So, I was only up there part-time for the last half of that period. I later
19 came back; I extended and later came back so I got another six months in up on the Z.
20 During that period, we didn't fly. At least it's an official mission, we didn't fly north of
21 the river.

22 KC: Right, and this is when you extended, taking you into '69 or so.

23 DP: End of '69, yeah. Things pretty much changed then.

24 KC: Well, tell me about some of these troops in contact missions south of the
25 river in the DMZ area flying out of whether it was Hue or Dong Ha or Da Nang or
26 wherever it may have been.

27 DP: Well, yeah, most of the—this is my mission, but earlier on with the Cat
28 Killers, the Cat Killers, by the way, the 220th aviation company was the very first Byrd
29 Dog company, at least an Army Byrd Dog Company to go over to Vietnam. And it was
30 the last one to stand down at the end of Vietnam. And prior to me getting there, they had
31 done a—they'd work the National Valley a lot and area west. When I got there, all the

1 action was in—most of the action was up in the DMZ. Leatherneck Square the prairie
2 between Dong Ha and what they called the Trace which was the southern edge of the
3 DMZ. Con Thien, Gio Linh, places like that. Now Que Son was—now like I say, Que
4 Son sort of kicked off at the same time Tet did and it was in our general area, but we did
5 not—the Marines took that over and what happened is, the Marines actually flew the
6 missions prior to me getting on the Z. The Marines flew some of the missions in that
7 same area. They had Marine Byrd Dogs, little green Byrd Dogs. And they flew out of
8 Quang Tri, which is the airfield just below Dong Ha. It was just south of it. It was Quang
9 Tri and Dong Ha. But, once Que Son kicked off, all of the Marine resources were
10 diverted to that. And so, the Marines flew Que Son and that left openings in the DMZ and
11 that's why I came up and that's why I came up there was to fill those slots so that we kept
12 the troop level up there. And our observers, backseat observers that I told you about, the
13 Marine Observers, they actually flew with both Marines and us. Sometimes they'd fly at
14 Que Son at those missions, and they'd fly DMZ with us, so they got all the fun. So, the
15 troops in contact that were still reconnaissance, the recon extractions, those were very
16 typical. You'd get a few of those a month. And then sometimes there were campaigns.
17 They were active sweeps, engagements, and troops trying to take area. I remember the
18 summer of '68 there was—and I have names and stuff, but not with me, but it was an
19 operation. Leatherneck Square, the NVA were moving south, actually, occupying a lot of
20 that area and the Marines were trying to pry them out. It was so close to Dong Ha that we
21 were—we would run airstrikes that would go through the flight pattern, the landing
22 pattern at Dong Ha.

23 KC: Oh wow.

24 DP: And it was like a mile or two off the runway. And those were, you know,
25 those were really, I guess, complicated. All of those when you're working with the
26 ground are complicated engagement, you're in the middle. So, you're the only one that
27 could really see and have anything. And you're in touch with everybody and all the
28 resources. You know what they need down there, you know what the fixed wing is
29 capable of in the ordinance. You got to, you know, you mismake a lot of decisions and
30 you got to keep a lot of things in mind. You ran, you always found, where are the
31 friendlies? That's the first thing you found out, where are the friendlies, where are the

1 bad guys? Okay, that's absolutely essential because I never— other than that incident
2 with a guy, you know, got his arm busted from an air and napalm canister. To my
3 knowledge I never harmed a friendly. I certainly never killed a friendly. When you're
4 running stuff that close, some of it's just luck. I could have probably done everything
5 right and still gotten somebody. You know, you learn everything that you could learn
6 about the mission, where everybody is, first of all, and then when you go to run the
7 airstrike—I'm sure you talked backs before. You know, you kind of keep your wind
8 direction, but the main thing you got to do is run that napalm. Because napalm is what
9 you ran when you had troops in contact. Napalm and what they call Snake and Nape,
10 Napalm and two hundred- and fifty-pound bombs off of A-4s preferably, attack aircraft.
11 Because they were designed for that mission and that ordinance. I mean, you can't put a
12 five-hundred-pound bomb, or you'll blow everybody up. So, the Nape was almost
13 surgical, and you send those guys in. Of course, you had to run parallel to the friendly
14 lines, you wouldn't run over the friendly lines or into the friendly lines. You know, for
15 obvious reasons. And your next consideration is what happens when the pilot takes a hit?
16 So, you'd try to run them feet wet, you run them toward the ocean, you run them toward
17 friendly ground if you couldn't do that. So, they had to punch you out where they
18 wouldn't be a problem. You know, other factors, is there terrain that you've got to deal
19 with and where is the ground fire coming from? That's consideration also. So, all those
20 things get weighed in and then you come up and run your airstrikes and the set procedure
21 and number of steps that you go through. Then after it's over you go down and give them
22 a BDA (Bomb Damage Assessment). You go down and see if you can find some bodies
23 if any weapons or trenched line or whatever, bunkers or whatever they might have done.
24 Very hard to do usually, especially in a combat situation. You're down there in the jungle
25 terrain. You can't see a whole lot that's down there. Like I say, it's hard to see, but you
26 give them what you can. Later if they rolled through the area and pick up some dead
27 people you could report that. Like I say, it's a high stress game and again, it's heavy
28 stuff. I mean, I was probably—I don't think I was twenty-five when I started that. A
29 pretty young game and you really kind of —man, it's life and death and all these things
30 going on. You got a multi-million-dollar aircraft over here and ordinance and good guys
31 and bad guys and life and death decisions and you're in the middle of it and you got to do

1 it. You know, use your judgment and you come back and play cards. I didn't play cards, a
2 lot of guys did. I listened to Armed Forces Radio and drank a lot. So, it was an interesting
3 mission, and it was certainly a hazardous mission. Everybody did their job, some better
4 than others. And I'm not sure if bravery had as much to do with it. I'm not sure the
5 people who took the most chances did their job any better than anybody else. You know,
6 it may be that you're just trying to satisfy something that they needed to do. If you screw
7 up and you become part of the problem, you really haven't done a very good job.

8 KC: Right.

9 DP: You know, we had guys that took their chances. Some of the ones that
10 arrived after I did, or arrived after say, March. Because we went for a whole period of
11 several months where we didn't lose anybody and not until Lee got in. You know, it's
12 just so easy to think, "Well, it's not really that dangerous." Some of the guys got a little
13 risky. I'm sure all of the old timers would always think the new guys are taking too many
14 chances. True in every war, but it was kind of like that to me because I've seen movies
15 and, you know, all the combat. These guys didn't look like that. They were just kind of
16 average looking people and some are old and scrawny, and they come from all walks of
17 life. Just pretty much normal folks or regular folks you meet, anyway, but then they got
18 this really strange job. And they just do this really strange job because everybody around
19 them is doing it and they're doing it the best way they can. Sticking to merriments they
20 try to do it in a way that kept them alive. You know, it was just an interesting thing for
21 me, you know, to watch the human nature side of it. What people do; what ordinary
22 people do when thrown into extraordinary situations which is kind of what it was.

23 KC: What did you find as you observed that?

24 DP: Well, they respond. They do a pretty good job and they treated it is as though
25 it's an ordinary situation because for us it was. And that's a human condition response.
26 And it's so funny because the fact that you're going to go out and you're going to fly a
27 single-engine Cessna at low altitude while people shoot at you for a few hours a day, but
28 that's not a big deal. If you come back and let's, say the O Club runs out of cokes or beer,
29 now there you got a problem. There you got insurrection. People are not happy with that.
30 So, it's like I say, I just keep coming back to how adaptable we are as a species to
31 whatever situation we happen to be in. You know that. I mean people that have been in

1 disasters or people who have fallen on hard times or, you know, climate changes and
2 things that really disrupt lives and people adapt to it. But there was just a collective—you
3 think, “This is insane, this is just nuts. Nobody wants to do this.” Nobody should do this,
4 but they do it. Some of the guys are married, they were still fairly young males which is a
5 group, you know, is such you could do that sort of thing. They would do things like that
6 anyway to prove their mettle, but they were back home. “Hold my beer and watch this.”
7 You know? I still think of the guys who were just sort of—who weren’t like that. They
8 were just normal guys, but they just go and get in an airplane and do the preflight, take
9 off, run the airstrikes, do whatever they got to do. Not go out of their way to hit missions,
10 but it was an interesting observation I thought. I don’t know, I moved on from there, but
11 it stuck with me that people can just adapt to just about anything. And a lot of people
12 have a hard time understanding combat. I’d tell them that it’s not like you’re just sitting
13 there watching television. It’s like, “Hey, I’m going to go run some napalm on some
14 people tomorrow and I’m going to let them shoot at me, too.” You go to training; you’re
15 around other people for whom that is the norm. And therefore, it becomes your norm and
16 like I say, you go to flight school and you go to military, your military training, your
17 flight school training. By the time you get there, I mean, yeah, I want to hurry up and do
18 my job. You’re wanting to go ahead and do it because everybody else is. You want full
19 membership in this thing you belong to. I don’t know, it’s just the human institutions and
20 obviously that’s the way we’ve been getting people to do wars forever. I mean, I’m sure
21 your historians do a lot of philosophical contemplation on how people act and why. I’m
22 probably not much different than, well, Mesopotamia and wars.

23 KC: Now you’ve spoken earlier about the kind of pressure that’s on the young
24 man. There you are, twenty-five. You are literally handling life and death situations. You
25 want to protect the American’s friendlies on the ground; you want to bring death on the
26 enemies. You’re trying to work with what’s on the ground and trying to make that
27 translate to these multi-million-dollar pieces of equipment which other friendlies are
28 operating them and you’re trying to coordinate this whole thing. For a young man, that
29 would be an awful lot of pressure, I would think, and awful stressful. How do you deal
30 with the everyday pressures and stress once you’re done for the day? You alluded to
31 some things earlier, but what do you do to kind of decompress after a day?

1 DP: You know, it's interesting that you say that. I later talked to some of these
2 guys that I went with. At the time, I didn't know anything, but particularly, you know,
3 after I got shot up or something, but just said that he went back and just sat on his bed
4 and just started shaking and just shook for several minutes and couldn't stop. You know,
5 I didn't have anything like that. And I never had any PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress
6 Disorder) to my knowledge. I was always in trouble, a troublemaker, I didn't need that.
7 In my case, I'm sure it had a lot to do with the drinking because I drank very heavily. I
8 went back to the O Club and it's facilitated by the military because well, I don't know, it
9 just is. You have your O Clubs, your enlisted men clubs. I'd go to the O-Club and the
10 booze, the beer, and the alcohol, everything was very cheap relatively speaking. So, I'd
11 just get rip-roaring drunk just about every night. In fact, when I was going back and
12 reading my notes, you know, of course as a much older man and I'm looking and, you
13 know, I'm basically a third person at this point and I'm thinking, "Well yeah, I went out
14 and got smashed and had a hangover and all this." I'm thinking, "Wow, you did that two
15 nights in a row." And all of a sudden, I'm saying, "Okay, now surely he turned in early
16 and surely, dammit, he did it again." And so, I don't know. I'm not a saint by any means
17 and I tend to suspect though that maybe because of that, because I had the tendency to
18 party and drink a lot that that may have numbed me somewhat to the realities. And again,
19 I think that's so individual. Like I say, I wish I had the key, I wish I had the answer to
20 that. How do you deal with that? Or do you? Is it a big deal to you? For some people,
21 maybe not. It seems like it would almost have to be for reasons you stated, but if it's the
22 norm and everyone's doing it, you're punching the clock. You again, you make some
23 kind of an adaptation, and you go with it. In my case, but I have to say alcohol was very
24 much involved. I got, yeah, but I got into it really heavy. By the time when I extended
25 and I had my leave in between times, it was not unusual to have a water glass and gin for
26 breakfast.

27 KC: Oh wow.

28 DP: So, I put on a lot of weight which I later—I stopped drinking to lose weight
29 and then I realized what I got myself into and I realize, "Hey!" and for a couple of weeks
30 things looked different. Like I say, I think everybody deals with it individually. I mean,
31 what do you bring to it, what do you think about it. I personally never had what I

1 considered stress or PTSD symptoms. Of course, some people may disagree with that. I
2 might be, might tell you otherwise. I don't think I had any more problems that I would
3 have had otherwise. Right, but it is an element, though that I had thought about for other
4 people, a lot. You know, because of the way Vietnam was conducted. And I was actually
5 more mature than a lot of those guys. At least I was a college graduate, and I was in my
6 twenties or something. A lot of those kids were in their teens, late teens. It particularly
7 was a draftee war. They were plucked out of some place in Iowa or kind of like William
8 Kelly's out of Clearwater, Florida. They're thrown into these situations and a lot of the
9 draftees were at the ground level where they saw a lot of horrendous things. And then
10 they were gone, and I think the idea—and then of course, we're not doing wars like this
11 anymore. The MAC-V was like a big employment agency. See, I came over there and I
12 mentioned this, I guess earlier. I came over with just one person. You might go two or
13 three out of your flight class or something, but people had their own individual DEROS
14 (Date Estimated Return From Overseas) dates. So, they were in it on their own, they were
15 just like tractors or, I don't know, temporary employees or something. You didn't go over
16 as a unit; you didn't come back as a unit. There wasn't that cohesion. And so individually
17 you observed some horrible things and then you did some horrible things. And then you
18 come back and you're on the street and it's just you to deal with it. You don't have that
19 collective, I don't know, support. So, it was without question a mistake, a bad mistake.
20 They did it for a good purpose, but it was not a good thing. I think a lot of people, you
21 know, had a lot of adjustment problems for people as a result. And it didn't help the fact
22 that the unpopularity of the war translated to unpopularity for the warriors unfortunately
23 in a lot of quarters. And it wasn't, I found, it wasn't just the protestors or anything like
24 that. It was established from America. I considered for a long time afterwards. I went into
25 business to work for myself and pretty much self-employed most of the time. The period
26 where I wanted to be employed by somebody, Vietnam was just a big hole in my resume.
27 I mean, you told people you're a Vietnam Vet was not good to have looking for a job.
28 That changed, that changed. Anyway, that was kind of a rambling answer.

29 KC: No, no, no, that's terrific. That's quite a point of view that you have there and
30 one that's not uncommon I don't think.

1 DP: I would think not. I mean, well I'm sure the Department of Defense would
2 tell you the same thing in hindsight that, that was just not a way to run a war. And it
3 probably wasn't the greatest war to run. So, anyway, I finished out my time up there. I
4 don't know if there's anything. You know, a lot of interesting little stories and things that
5 people did.

6 KC: Well, do any of them come into mind right now that you care to share?

7 DP: Well, here's something that I'll tell you that I did really stupid.

8 KC: Okay.

9 DP: And I thought I was the only one. There was a little boy one day and there
10 wasn't much happening. We were out up on the northern part near the foothills. The
11 foothills toward the west side of the trace. There were some troops up there on an outpost
12 and they're camping out their position and heading out there. And a backseat was talking
13 to him and so I started doing some tricks with the airplane and I went into a spin, I went
14 ahead and took it out, stalled it out, kicked it over, and started spinning. And I started
15 going down, down, down, and then I went to kick it out and it wouldn't come out. You
16 know, so I tried to kick it out and pull it up and it wouldn't do it and I wouldn't know.
17 I'm thinking, "God, what am I doing?" The ground was coming up fast. I remembered in
18 flight school if all else fails, let it go. No other plane wants to fly so I let it go. I took my
19 hands off and, "Thump." It had hit and I caught the lift and I pulled out about three
20 hundred feet above the ground, if that much. And so, the guy in the back, he says, "Wow,
21 that was something." He had no idea. I thought, "Man, Pepe, that was really stupid, that
22 was just really dumb." You know, later on talking to the other guys, it's almost to a man,
23 every one of them has a story something like that where they just did something that was
24 just, you know, screwing around and they thought they'd bought it. It was really
25 interesting. We had this one guy, well Charlie. Charlie's a book of his own, but some of
26 the guys took it to start flying under bridges. They thought that was a fun thing to do.
27 Those aren't the biggest bridges in the world over there. So, the guy just took a lot of
28 chances, he was the luckiest guy I've ever met. So, he's going there flying under bridges.
29 Of course, we got two tanks. There's a tank on each wing and you threw a little switch as
30 to which tank you're on. And what you want to do is you want to run an hour in one tank
31 and an hour in the other tank. So that you have a little bit left in each tank in case one of

1 them gets hit. Plus, it flies a lot better and you're not all one-sided. But you got to
2 remember to switch that tank over. So, he's out there and he's flying under a bridge and
3 he runs out of gas on one tank. You know, so he's switching it and he said, "And the
4 wheels are just picking the water, so you immediately go into your emergency procedures
5 switch and you flip on the fuel pump." So, it's barely turning around and he's just really
6 skipping over the top of the water and he finally gets enough propellant that he's able to,
7 you know, continue flying and get it going. I mean, that was just one of Charlie's
8 moments, I'm sure. Yeah, running out of gas is interesting, too, but I did this, I think
9 other people have done it and I've got all these stories coming to mind now. This
10 happened to Charlie and it also happened to one other person before I got there. They
11 encountered an enemy position just north of the river that it was basically almost like a
12 fuel ammunition dock. It had a lot of stuff, so I know the pilot went in and just squeezed
13 off of a Willy Pete right in the middle of it. It touched it off and there was this huge
14 mushroom explosion with the Byrd Dog in the middle of it and it was just smoke and
15 black all around. Stuff hitting the plane and everything, but they got out of it both times
16 that happened. I, one time, I was up a long time with a marine, a pilot in the backseat and
17 we found some stuff up north of the river. We had missions in a couple of places and then
18 we had a long mission up north of the river. I got some bad people as I recall, and I think
19 there was some—it looked like there was some buildings supplies that we got pretty well
20 taken care of. The problem was—I know what it was, there were guns north of the river.
21 We had gone up and taken out some guns that had been firing on Dong Ha. And then
22 instead of coming straight back, we found something else and then I did the building
23 supplies or whatever. By this time, I am way down on gas. I'm down to it and I'm
24 thinking, "Well, I guess I got enough to get to Dong Ha." Well, as I'm coming to Dong
25 Ha, I'm heading in that area and I'm seeing this huge mound of smoke. I mean, it's just
26 billowing and one of those rounds that hit the ammo dump at Dong Ha. I mean, it's just
27 like every Fourth of July you've ever seen all loaded into one. There's stuff going off up
28 in the air and, you know, we're not landing. I called the tower, I said, "Be advised
29 because there's stuff blowing across the runway and stuff they were not landing well." I
30 can't land at Dong Ha. I mean, I definitely had enough gas to go around. The next stop is

1 Quang Tri. If this phone goes out call me back. Hold on, it's about to do that. I got two
2 phones.

3 KC: Let me pause it and you can see if you can find another phone.

4 DP: Yeah, pause it, I've got the other phone. Anyway, I'm heading down to
5 Quang Tri, but this time, the needles are bouncing off empty, but I've completely drained
6 one tank. I've run one out and just the other one is resting on empty. Fortunately, Quang
7 Tri is fairly short, and I'd call the tower and say, "I'm coming in, got the landing
8 instructions?" I pulled it around and, you know I touched it down on the runway and on
9 the rollout, you know, the propeller stops. So, I managed to coast it off to the side of the
10 runway, off the taxi way. I said, "Kecker 15, such and such ramp. Advise to bring a fuel
11 truck." I actually could have flown just a little bit more when you settle into a landing
12 attitude, you know, some of the gas, you know, reshifts to the back, but I don't think they
13 had more than a few minutes left. Again, because of the extenuating circumstances you
14 ended up pushing limits like that. So, you end up with the stories like that. Yeah, running
15 out of gas stories.

16 KC: You know, you mentioned earlier something about the convoy cover. You
17 said that you did not like to fly convoy cover. Can you tell me about that?

18 DP: Oh, that was a bitch. That was the worst. Because that was in the flat land,
19 they would go to Dong Ha out to when they were building, where they would go out
20 toward Que Son or Camp Evans, I guess. That was out west of Dong Ha between Dong
21 Ha and halfway to Laos or Que Son there and it was in a valley. I'm getting my stuff
22 mixed up here, we'll figure that out. At Camp Carroll—yeah that was Camp Carroll. So
23 anyway, they'd have these huge—I guess initially they didn't have a runway there so
24 they'd have these huge, long convoys that would go out along with the Cua Viet River,
25 that was in Hue anyway. They'd go out to drive out there and we would fly over top of
26 them just to keep an eye out for mortars or things like that and it was just kind of hard to
27 see anyway. There's so much cover up there. So much ground, you know, trees and
28 things and shrubs and stuff. The air was always real bumpy, and you just flew along in a
29 straight because it was flat lands, it was in the summer, it was hot and it was bumpy and
30 you'd just fly in a straight line. The chatter on the radio was just constant. The guys in the
31 back and the guys in the front and this guy up here is broken down. Oh, let the backside

1 turn it off and let the backseat do it and just fly around and there was never any action,
2 just never anything going on. Occasionally there's somebody getting around somewhere,
3 but you'd go see it and, you know, you never really found anything. We were there as a
4 deterrent more than anything. So, I pulled my share of those and if they had troops and
5 contact or recon and something. Oh man, "yes sir, I'll take that one." You know, it was
6 really bad. Yeah, there was another one. I've written this stuff up on the extractions.
7 There was an operation where they swept up the DMZ right to the southern edge of—
8 right to the southern bank of the river about the middle of the Z. The middle of the
9 flatland part of the Z there. There was a Marine operation and I covered it and they were
10 giving a lot of directions and a lot of stuff kind of in the open and they were the pickup
11 area. They hadn't encountered that much fight, but the pickup area was just—right at a
12 crossing, a stream crossing and pictures of this you could see all kinds of troops. It's a
13 shallow place in the river where people go by, so it was a well-known place. So, they
14 are—I'm over top of this while they're picking these guys up, again, 46 is in there. And
15 all of a sudden there's a round that hits right next to the helicopter and knocks it down
16 and shuts the helicopter off. And so, I'm thinking, "Good god, where'd that come from?"
17 I looked around and I thought, "Wait a minute, that's too close, that's direct fire." So, I'm
18 going back and I'm looking back at that helicopter and another helicopter has pulled in
19 behind them to pick everybody up. No, the mortar round wasn't, but the helicopter comes
20 behind and he instantly, not instantly, but a second or two after it touched down becomes
21 a fireball. I mean it's just completely gone and of course everybody in it. It blows me
22 away and I know that's got to be direct fire. One of the few times I really lost my cool. I
23 just went bizurk and I was just flying the guy behind this guy. And I was flying low level
24 and right up at the Z and just like a mad man and I never got the guy, I never found him. I
25 started calling artillery fire and running airstrikes north of the river and blowing up
26 everything I could find. The guys ended up staying the night and I went back. I went back
27 and I stayed, and I slept lightly. I might have slept till lunch, you know, because I figured
28 I'd be back out there sometime in the night and didn't happen. That would often be the
29 case. There'd be a very, very heavy action and the NVA would slip away at night so you
30 wouldn't be followed up. I wasn't as professional as I could have been there, but I was
31 just so blown away. It's not your fault, but it happened on your watch. Yeah, I got tons of

1 those little vignettes that I could think of. And like I said, I'm glad I wrote it down
2 because it's not something that people experience. I would never probably have another
3 experience that would be quite as unusual in my life as this one was, which it was. Yeah,
4 I'm not sure. I'm just trying to think from historical standpoint what points do we need to
5 cover, what is available. What can I contribute that you can't get from other sources?

6 KC: And that's one of the points of these oral history interviews is every bit of
7 your experience is valuable for researchers and for future generations to understand or to
8 better understand what the war was about, what the war was about for one particular
9 person. In this case, obviously with Don Pepe. So, if there are any of these stories that
10 you would continue to contribute or there are other things that come to your mind, please
11 feel free. One of the questions that I have for you that may spur some memories and
12 things has to do with your decision to stay longer. You wanted additional time in
13 Vietnam. You got there in December of 1967, went through the Tet Offensive, the
14 incredibly busy year that you flew up there in I Corps throughout 1968 and yet, when it's
15 over, you want more of them. Why did you decide to re-up? Why did you want another
16 six months there?

17 DP: Now that's kind of convoluted. Actually, I extended to fly U-21s. And I still
18 use some of this stuff, but you know, it was a good deal. It got good money, got good
19 pay. You got combat pay; flight pay. And it was a good life in a lot of ways if you're
20 single. And going back there on a military base didn't appeal to me. I specifically—the
21 U-21s were a twin, king airs; beach king airs a military version with twin turbo props.
22 They were sort of a VIP aircraft that flew around, flew Army people around place to
23 place in Vietnam. I extended to fly those, and I got extended like six months. I kind of
24 wanted to fly with the outfit that was there in Phu Bai. I was assigned to the Red Barron's
25 down in Nha Trang and I was not a good fit there. I didn't work out, I didn't really, again,
26 get into that tail, but my lack of appreciation for pomp and circumstance. It didn't serve
27 me well in that setting. I didn't get off on the right foot with the company commander,
28 Major Young.

29 KC: Again.

30 DP: You know, you can't do that. I mean, because when I went in, my first
31 interview with him is always this and that and then left and he concludes the thing saying,

1 “Who washes your fatigues?” Meaning to say, they weren’t starched. You know, I didn’t
2 respond, but it was going to be difficult. You know, I didn’t hit it off with him, he busted
3 me out basically. So, they said, “Well, you can stay around here.” And I said, “No, I want
4 to go back to the 220th.” I felt like a fish out of water the whole time. And I talked to
5 some other guys that had been in a situation where they were in Hue and you know, I did
6 spend enough time there to kind of get a feel for—you flew these people around in this
7 whole different world. They got aboard the plane and they’d fly from point A to point B
8 and have meetings and everything. Of course, there really wasn’t much action going on in
9 Nha Trang as in Northern I Corps. So, I didn’t—I had a hard time with that, I really did.
10 Thinking that all that stuff seemed to me to be invalid. It just was unnecessary. It was just
11 a people going around and playing big shot. They weren’t fighting a war. Now, I’m sure
12 some of it was necessary. Well actually, (laughing) none of it was necessary, but, you
13 know, in terms given that you were going to have a war there and all. I guess that also
14 brings up a contrast. “There’s a Vietnam Vet.” Well does that ever cover a multitude of
15 sins.

16 KC: Sure.

17 DP: I don’t know, you may know it more accurate, but there’s only like twenty
18 percent or so of people who went to Vietnam were actually in combat.

19 KC: If that.

20 DP: Sounds right. I mean, boy, if the planes got a single round shot at them,
21 somewhere going into one of these strips. I mean, that was the talk of the day. Nobody
22 talks without getting shot at unless you really get hosed. I mean, very exceptional then. I
23 don’t know, it just kind of drove that home to me that there were a lot of different wars
24 going on. This one was a whole lot different than the other ones and I liked the other one
25 better. So, I could have stayed in Nha Trang. What it did is, “Well no, you can’t fly for
26 us.” But they knew I could write. “You can work here at the PIO (Public Information
27 Office) office.” There was a guy there. He said, “Can I see some samples of your
28 writing?” And he said something about my hair. Otherwise, I didn’t look—I mean, I’d
29 probably been wearing a flight helmet or something like that. I wrote him something
30 alright. He just read it and said, “Yeah, okay. I’ll sign your papers.” Basically, was kind
31 of an insult. I told him that I was a wise ass. The exact wording, I could probably find it

1 somewhere. Something the fact about how I got to here and where I found out I needed
2 aircraft. So, I was relieved to get back and it was kind of like home. I guess that was in
3 early '69. By August of '69—then I extended for another couple of weeks after that or
4 just for timing purposes. It'd probably work out fortuitously that I finally went for good
5 in August of '69. You'd think about it the way I can't live the rest of my life here. I think
6 things changed with the mission there when the Air Force moved in. I mean, the Marines
7 moved out in like October. The Marines cleared I Corps. And so, then we no longer had
8 Marine, I guess Marine aircraft. We were no longer supporting Marines and so all the
9 FACs became Air Force. I think the guys were no long TACA or lone running airstrikes.
10 And the airstrikes are the heart of our mission. I mean, that's what we did. That was our
11 bread and butter so I would have been pretty frustrated, I think in that role. The timing
12 worked out pretty well and it was a whole different set of—there's a different set of
13 people. And it was interesting to watch because I came in as a new guy and then a lot of
14 rookies came in while I was there and then now when I got back in after a couple of
15 months, a couple three months and to see all the rookies and all the newbie's now being
16 the old, hard guys and the cycle goes on. They were the veterans and the seasoned pros.
17 Oh yeah, the hospital had moved in, 85th EVAC hospital had moved in next door so there
18 were nurses, round eyes.

19 KC: What did that mean for you?

20 DP: Well, for being a mid-twenties American male we went over there and
21 partied and drank hard. And then there was our going away parties. I guess I hadn't
22 mentioned those. Those were pretty—everybody has them.

23 KC: Well, tell me about the ones that you experienced?

24 DP: I mean, whoever's DEROS-ing can go and put their money on a bar and—
25 there was plenty of steak in Vietnam, lots of steak, way too much steak. We'd be out of
26 hamburger sometimes. So, you could only get steaks and you'd get steaks and grill and
27 money on a bar and people would party and sing raunchy songs and have fun and throw
28 up most of the time when it was all over, just a heavy party. I was able to pull some
29 nurses in from the 85th EVAC. My first going away party was back at the end of '68 and
30 this fellow John Kovach that I came in with, he and I, we had a combined party. We had
31 a great one. I mean, it was lots of raunchy stuff. I've got some of it taped on tape

1 recorder. Oh, by the way, I got the envelope from the fellow and I haven't had time to
2 even open it yet. I want to try to get these card materials to him. And maybe you can see
3 if you can salvage some of these recording tapes. So, we had a great time and, I don't
4 know, just any excuse to have a party. There were always big parties. The mission was
5 pretty much the same in '69 for the period that I was there. We didn't have any form of
6 flight north of the river. It was more; we still had troops in contact. We still had
7 occasional recon extraction and of course, a lot of VR. So that much wasn't too much
8 different. I got shot at a lot. Yeah, my plane got hit probably, gosh, eight to ten times I
9 had hold, but the one time I remember that I got—we were out pretty far west and there
10 was a strong wind from the east. It got kind of low level or something and all of a sudden,
11 I get this, BAM! There was a big flash of light out off to my left. I wondered what the
12 heck it was. You know, and I realized some kind of round had gone off over there. I
13 looked behind me and I was thinking, and I had smudge marks on my window, and I was
14 thinking the guy in the backseat, his window was open, so I was thinking, "Oh shit." So, I
15 looked back to see and he's fine and he's totally pale, but he didn't take any slack or
16 anything. I looked back and up over my head, just behind my head in the cockpit is this
17 huge hole. And a round had come through probably going through the wing strut, the
18 edge of the wing strut and then gone behind the first aid kit hanging off to my left side
19 above my head, you know, this big hole there. And there was some wiring in there.
20 Maybe some radio wiring, I don't know. Anyway, I didn't know what. So, I decided to
21 go ahead and take it on in. And then I'm trying to fly back and I'm out in the boonies and
22 there's a strong headwind. I'm not making any ground here and then I've lost radio
23 contact. I think somewhere in the round was maybe knocked out, so I don't have radio
24 contact and I'm not getting anywhere. I'm just flying in a circle and I'm thinking, "Gosh,
25 I wonder if maybe I actually got it back there and this is my hell. Fly forever over
26 Vietnam jungle with no radio contact." I eventually got back in and I got a hold, but it
27 just popped into my head. I think that was on that second tour. Yeah, I didn't take
28 extensive notes on that second tour. I have other things. I certainly have a lot of slides
29 and things, but I don't have as many notes. Like I say, the mission wasn't perceptively
30 different other than the DMZ, the north of the river missions. Those were unique to the
31 first tour and pretty much unique period. I made some friends; I shaved my head. That

1 was another thing I did when I went back for the second tour. Because when I—I didn't
2 adjust very well in the brief period during what they call a leave, a thirty day leave
3 between when you extend and then you go back.

4 KC: And you came back home to the states for that?

5 DP: Yeah, thirty days. I actually ended up with about forty-five. I kind of played a
6 game there and pushed it off. I ran into the lady at the airport in Seattle, but that's another
7 story—oh no, in Washington, Ft. Lewis. Anyway, when I got back—like I say, I was
8 drinking a lot and it was hard to understand what was going on in the states.

9 KC: Tell me about that.

10 DP: Yeah, I think it was hard to understand the people who were in the states.
11 There's probably no period in which—in history in which so much has changed so fast.
12 The culture changed. Baby Boom, Vietnam War, the pill, rock and roll, and acid rock. I
13 mean, all of these elements, but I guess the war was the biggest catalyst that maybe
14 brought all those things together. And not just talk about the protest movement, but a guy
15 could go away over to Vietnam. Like I say, you're living in pretty much of a time capsule
16 there. I mean, you know, there's a bunch of guys and you're hanging out at the club and
17 you're drinking. And then you come back and the country you come back to is a different
18 one than the one you left. You know, let like say if you space travel. If you leave here and
19 you travel something approaching the speed of light or a high rate of speed and you come
20 back, you know, and you're twenty years older and everybody you know has already died
21 because the time differential. The time that passed over here was so much faster than the
22 time that passed over there. You know—oh yeah, I went there December of '67 and in
23 January of 1968, there was a mid-season replacement, a television show called *Laugh In*.
24 All of a sudden about, oh, March or April or something when people started showing up
25 in the outfit. All of a sudden, they were saying things like, "Here come the judge, or
26 Sweet Dippy." Or you know, phrases from that show that became part of the country's
27 vernacular. Well, you know, you're completely not even in on that. I may have talked
28 about this before, but the movie, *Coming Home*. Did we discuss that on the first tour?

29 KC: I don't remember if we did or not.

30 DP: That was one of the better shows; I mean movies that I've seen afterwards.
31 There were some good ones. I thought that one was good because it captured both sides

1 of the water pretty damn well. Of course, in that movie Jane Fonda starts the movie as a
2 very conventional, very submissive military wife and her husband goes overseas and
3 then, by virtue of volunteering for the hospital, falls in and gets more or less radicalized
4 and comes to have some very different views about the war and about the treatment of the
5 military; the patients and all the different things. She changes her hair, she gets a new
6 convertible, and then her husband comes back home. You're watching all this happen in
7 the movie. And then this guy, I guess wounded or something and so he comes back home
8 and she's waiting for him out there and then he's walking and getting off the plane and he
9 says, "Your hair, it's different." And then it kind of hits you. You say, "You poor fool."
10 Her hair is the only thing this guy notices, but she's a different person than the person
11 you left. This person's not going to say, "Well, if the marines wanted him to have a wife
12 they would have issued him one." And I think that just the change in the country and its
13 sensitivity and its priorities that took place particularly sixties probably starting around
14 '68 and I guess during the latter half of the sixties. To me, I find that fascinating from a
15 historical standpoint. I just don't think that kind of dynamics—I mean, I'm sure it's
16 happened at different times in history, but not in my lifetime. So, being away for a year
17 was like being away for a decade in some ways. Like I say, you had a loving family, and
18 you were accepted back. Again, where they had some adjustment problems and the fact
19 that soldiers weren't really appreciated. The country's learned it's lesson in that regard, I
20 think. I mean, it's just tons of stuff, you know, that you could go on, but I'm trying to get
21 some sort of a priority to it, some sort of structure to it.

22 KC: Well, why don't we stop there for today, Mr. Pepe?

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Interview with Donald Pepe

Session [3] of [3]

Date 24 March 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Don Pepe. Today is March 24, 2010, I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas
3 Tech University and Mr. Pepe is joining me again by telephone from his home in
4 Jacksonville, Florida. Mr. Pepe, as we were discussing a moment ago, we got you
5 through your first tour and the extended tour that you have there in 1969. I believe it's
6 August of 1969 when you start to make the trip home, when your career begins to make
7 that turn back to the United States. Tell me about the process by which you leave
8 Vietnam. From the time that you leave the unit and the way that you make your back to
9 the states.

10 Donald Pepe: The process—you know, I don't remember anything as being
11 extraordinary about it. I thought about extending again. In fact, I did extend for a couple
12 of weeks, only a couple weeks where I just put it back a little bit. It was a tough call
13 because it was quite a womb. I mean, I think I discussed that on a previous session. It was
14 the devil I knew and what had meaning in my life at that time and all. There was just
15 something that told me that I probably ought to go. You know, you couldn't keep taking
16 the dare forever. You know, do it in enough times and eventually your luck will run out. I
17 don't know, it's hard to explain, but you just decide, "Well, it's time to go do something
18 else." I think it worked out pretty good because there were some changes in the mission a
19 few months after I left. It probably would have made it a lot less satisfying for me.

20 KC: Now what were those changes as you find out?

21 DP: I think we mentioned those earlier also. At the time that I left, the Cat Killers
22 were the primary runners of fixed wing primary forward air control pilots. We ran most
23 of the airstrikes because there was Marine and then the Marines with the Hellborn A-4s
24 that were out of Chu Lai and then the gun fighters were the Air Force F4s out of Da
25 Nang. We did all of that and as I mentioned before, that's contrary to what the normal
26 Byrd Dog pilot's mission is, Army Byrd Dog Pilot. You know, normally the Air Force
27 gets to run the airstrikes. They run their airstrikes and then the army is not allowed in on
28 that. It was only because of our affiliation with the Marines. We became qualified under
29 sort of the Marine wing and the Marines don't call it FAC, they call it TACA, tactical

1 aircraft controller airborne. So, our TACA designations, but the Marines pulled out
2 shortly after, you know, the time that I left. So, the marines actually left I Corps by the
3 time the Army had taken over, you know, and certainly it had been many years and you
4 couldn't consider it an invasion force anymore, you got to consider it occupation. So, the
5 Army took over and I guess the airstrikes were run by the Air Force and as I understand
6 it, you know, the Cat Killers lost that aspect of their mission being able to run the
7 airstrikes and that was our bread and butter. I mean, that was when you had troops in
8 contact, when you had a hot target, and you scrambled that air and you got it on there.
9 Once the process changed then you had to go scramble a FAC who came and decided,
10 "Yeah, he would run it." And then he scrambled the air, you know, then that game would
11 have been over. I'm glad I went. There was no real angst or anything; it was just
12 something I knew to do. I threw a big party, another one. You always have a big going
13 away party. By that time, we met at the 85th EVAC and moved in, it was a hospital. It
14 moved in next door and then when I went back to that second tour in the Cat Killers,
15 some of the guys, they started hanging out with the nurses over there. I kind of got
16 involved with that. I got the nurses over for my going away party. It was almost getting
17 civilized by the time I left. That was late '69. So, I left from there and nothing really
18 spectacular. I bought a motorcycle. I stopped in Portland, Oregon; we flew in what must
19 have been to Ft. Lewis. We would have been up there, and I got off in Ft. Lewis and went
20 to visit a guy that I had met. His name is Mike Foss. He was in the Army Special Forces,
21 but he was in the Guard or the Reserves, but I met him at Ft. Benning several years
22 before we were both going through our infantry officer basic course at the same time. So
23 anyway, he was a friend and I stopped and visited him, and he rides motorcycles. I
24 bought a Kawasaki 500, two-stroke, three-cylinder, not a very good touring bike. I got
25 five hundred miles on it and took off across the country with it. And I rode it back to
26 Evansville, making a couple stops along the way to my hometown and then there to
27 Augusta, Georgia, to my next duty station. Luckily, when I got to Augusta, I got a job in
28 the flight detachment. I went out there first and sort of put some points in, otherwise I
29 might have ended up as company commander of a basic training outfit or something.
30 That improves my branch. The flying part was a lot better because you know, I was living
31 in town and I just drove. It was not even a nine to five job because when I was scheduled,

1 I'd go out and fly the airplane somewhere. Usually after Ft. Bragg and back. And that
2 would be that. And I finished out my last—I guess I came in there, what September,
3 October. September, I guess. And then I extended a couple of months in the Army. I
4 could have gotten out in December and I think I stayed until the first of February and left
5 the Army from Ft. Gordon, Georgia, in Augusta, Georgia, is where I was stationed. I left
6 there in February and packed everything up and rode home. I rode up to Evansville and
7 from there I decided I wanted to go travel a little bit and got out of the Army then and
8 then in the spring—I guess it was May, June, I'm not sure which, May, I suppose. I went
9 to Europe and bummed around on a Eurail pass over in Europe for about two to three
10 months on the continent. And then I went to the British Isles, went to London, and bought
11 a 750 Honda, which at the time was new and was big and really the badass bike to have.
12 A four-cylinder bend sounds like a Porsche. And so, I bought one of those in London and
13 I rode around and ran into a young lady named Maureen Divined. She was like nineteen;
14 she was the petrel pumper at the Hyde Park shell station and also an ex-convict, I am not
15 making this up.

16 KC: (Laughing). This sounds like it came straight from Central Casting here.

17 DP: I am not making a bit of this up. Well, I ran into a guy, we're at the
18 motorcycle shop where I got it. I ran into a guy named Jim Parks. Jim Parks was a big,
19 obnoxious American guy who had sort of made a name for himself riding motorcycles
20 around the world. And I remembered reading about this guy in Cycle World Magazine.
21 Anyway, I met him, and he was—the article that I read about was that he'd ridden from
22 Cape Town to Moscow. They actually had to let him into Russia, you know, the distance
23 of—he'd ridden from the tip of South America back to the United States and he'd ridden
24 through South America and Africa and from Cape Town across the African continent.
25 And he had all these stories he would write and all that, that was interesting. He was an
26 interesting guy so we're both Americans and I fell in with him and he was staying over
27 the Hammersmith section of London. So, I went over and crashed with him a couple of
28 days and his roommates who were British, some British guys, you know, people with
29 bikes. And there, like I say, ran into Maureen there in the neighborhood and she was
30 walking by from the store and I helped her carry her loaf of bread home. So, I had a great
31 summer just riding the streets of London and tearing around. Jim actually had a deal

1 because he had sponsors to do these things. Duckham's Oil, Champion's Spark Plugs,
2 and there was a tire. Anyway, Champion's Spark Plugs was the big deal because he had a
3 three-cylinder motorcycle, and I had a four. We would have gotten sponsorship to travel
4 around the world. We could have ridden from, you know, from London and then go
5 across an Asian continent and then come in on the other side. Man, that sounded like a
6 gig. It was either that or come back to go to graduate school. Jim was kind of too
7 unstable. I mean, he really was. I just kind of reasoned that on a gig like that, stuck with
8 that guy from a month at a time and he was capable of getting us into more trouble than I
9 was capable of getting us out of. So, I made the decision, "No, I'll just head back." I
10 guess it was in that following August, yeah, a year later, I killed the tide that I headed
11 back to the states that had my bike shift back, got it in New York or wherever at the time.
12 Waited a couple days to get it out of customs and then rode it over to Chicago back down
13 to my hometown. From there, went down to University of Florida to go to Graduate
14 School to start my MBA. You know, I wanted to go someplace where the weather was
15 warm year-round, and I could ride the bike all year round. I looked at Florida, Florida
16 State, Louisiana State, Texas Austin, and San Diego State. Basically, everything across
17 the southern tier of the country. Well, I ended up there and it was an interesting place. So,
18 I had my first year. I finished up grad school there. I think it was '71. It must have been
19 in; '70, '71 or something like that. That's how I met a lady that lives in Jacksonville,
20 Florida, which is where I am now, so I moved up here after that and basically got more or
21 less involved in anti-war stuff at that point.

22 KC: Now that's one of the things I wanted to ask you about today. You were
23 involved in part of the anti-war protests. Tell me how that came about.

24 DP: Well, I was down in Gainesville. You've probably heard of the Gainesville
25 conspiracy trial, haven't you? The Gainesville Eight? Scott Camil and those guys? See, it
26 was '72, '73. I have to go and click that in, but I believe I was still in the Vietnam
27 Veterans Against the War, the VVAW. That was the organization that I found interesting.
28 Again, I thought the war was dumber than hell, but I didn't identify with the people who
29 were protesting it, either. So, I just didn't regard them as the kind of people to have beer
30 with or something, to party with. Anyway, going to college and I was still pretty straight
31 up in graduate business school after all, but I was different from the other graduate

1 business schools, the other guys there because they didn't show up on a motorcycle in a
2 black leather jacket. There was a couple of guys in there who were basically hippie types.
3 They weren't anti-war; they were just kind of drug type people that were actually in the
4 class. They lasted a semester or part of one, I think. Other than that, everybody was
5 pretty, you know, straight clothes on and doing a business career. I still didn't know what
6 I wanted to be when I grew up. I chose business because I figured whatever I want to be
7 would have a business aspect to it so I could slip into it that way. So, I was a little bit
8 different there and I was an establishment, and I wasn't protesting, but I think, you know,
9 they started getting active there in Gainesville and then I started learning more about
10 what was going on and getting more involved and kind of starting to feel like I'm maybe
11 a little bit taken advantage of. Although, I wouldn't trade my time in the military for
12 anything, it's one of those love-hate things. By the time I got to Jacksonville—when
13 you're out of the military, and by this time it's 1972, '73, I guess, and there aren't too
14 many people who think this war is a good idea at that point. You know, you kind of
15 realize it's part of the game where they're saying, "Well, this is important, and this is
16 important and then the next day it's not important." And then we have a bombing halt
17 and then you can fly to here, but tomorrow you can only fly to here. It just seemed like a
18 lot of silly rules. I knew there was something not going right here. And then it just kind of
19 came to me that these people really don't know what the hell they're doing. I was a
20 Midwestern boy, blind trust in leadership, and you've got to go into it a little bit deeper
21 than that. Just because somebody's in charge doesn't mean they know what they're
22 doing. Just a lot of hubris got us into that. I'm not sure—you just kept getting different
23 stories and things. It was a gradual thing, but then when the Gainesville Eight, the
24 government came down on them, a conspiracy trial. I decided that that's not right. Right
25 or wrong, if you went, you had the right to say what you wanted to say. You know, I
26 wouldn't have joined any other—I wouldn't have gotten involved because of any other
27 organization, but these guys were veterans, and they had their say and they'd earned a
28 right to say. If you went over and put your ass on the line you had to write a say and
29 somebody who's set over here who got out of it for whatever reason, you know, daddy
30 got him in a guard or he skipped someway, that's alright that's fine; that's smart. But then
31 you don't have the right to say, "Hey, this is a really great thing, everybody should fight

1 it and you shouldn't complain about it" You forfeit that right when you do that. Whereas
2 the guys who went, they can say it was a piece of shit or they can say it was a great deal,
3 they earned that right. And so, I got a kind of indignity, I guess indignation. No, the
4 government cannot come down on these guys for what they're saying because they did
5 their part, they did what was asked of them. So, I really got involved in that. Once I got
6 involved with that, I'm afraid our government didn't do—there was a government
7 informer named Jean Thrasher, tri-state carpet cleaners that had kind of gotten into an
8 infiltrated—I say infiltrated, but this is the local group here. I think that winter solider
9 movie, which I'm sure you're familiar with. I think that's what it was. There was some
10 sort of a movie that Gainesville VVAW had given to a guy up here. Thrasher stole it, but
11 it was just really a weird thing. You know, I used to say if there is a just God, I'll get ten
12 minutes alone in a room with Thrasher before I die. I'm not that bitter anymore, I can say
13 it, but, I mean, just sort of the underhandedness and the ridiculousness of how the
14 government pursued that case. It changed my view on a whole lot of things.

15 KC: What was your level of involvement in this?

16 DP: Basically, I knew the guys and I'd go down there in of support and I think I
17 gave them some money and that was funny, too. And then this was an ancillary case,
18 because the guy had ripped off the movie. Oh, another guy named Dave Sedel, was from
19 up here in Jacksonville was testifying. He had a run in with this Thrasher, this informant
20 guy. And they were out in the hall afterwards. Sedel may have made some nasty words at
21 him there. And so, then the government tried to come at Tony for intimidating a witness.
22 By that time, our attorney asked me to testify on Dave's behalf because I had gone with
23 Dave to serve the papers, to subpoena Thrasher in the case. It took me in a pretty
24 involved deal. So, whenever I had to drive over to Pensacola because they were
25 scheduling around different court rooms around the state. Basically, it was just to testify
26 the fact that, you know, we'd served it and that we definitely—we weren't trying to scare
27 him off from testifying. We in fact went to serve the subpoena so he would testify. I
28 mean, my name's on the books in there somewhere. It's funny because I did give them—
29 you know, wrote a check, not a lot. Last time I had a business here I had an educational
30 childcare centers and there's another long story I fell into, I fought into and couldn't fight
31 my way out of. So, I wrote a check and then about, oh, it wasn't three weeks later I had

1 an IRS man in my office with his badge out. I said, "Well, I'll be darn." That was sort of,
2 that trial I guess was, what, '74 or something and then of course then eventually we
3 pulled out and that went on about things. The only thing there, of course, I had a business
4 of my own, you know, for my livelihood I could run. I just basically, at that time, in
5 Vietnam for anybody my age was not a good thing to have on your resume. I mean, it
6 was just about a two, three-year hole in my resume and it didn't make any difference.
7 They say that there's a lot of talk about how the protestors spit on the guys and gave them
8 grief. I never experienced any of that. The prejudice and the disrespect I and what I all
9 experienced were basically from business owners and people that hire. There was always
10 a bad rep on Vietnam vets that they were crazy and wild and stuff. There were some
11 incidents, like I say, there's probably no group of citizens. There's certainly soldiers that
12 had it rougher than Vietnam soldiers had it. We had a year tour, maybe two. There, you
13 didn't live in the brush the whole time. I mean, even if you were a grunt, you actually had
14 a roof over your head most of the time. But as far as the psychological administration of
15 the war, we had to deal when the soldiers went over one at a time and they came back one
16 at a time and there was not that cohesiveness. And that was just really poorly handled,
17 and they learned their lesson. Also at the time, the less influential you were, the more
18 likely you were to get drafted and the more likely you were to end up in a combat unit.
19 I'm sorry, but that's just the way life was run at the time. That did change once the lottery
20 was put into affect and I think that was sort of the beginning of the end of the war
21 because at that point in time, influential people had to risk their children going. And just
22 the fact that it dragged on for so damn long. I think the fact that it just, you know, the
23 wealth was being spread. Certainly initially, particularly the combat arms, there weren't
24 too many people from wealthy families serving in those. So, you know, you get a young
25 guy drafted, late teens, but probably this time, early twenties, he's been in a stressful
26 combat situation and next thing you know, he's out on the streets a few weeks later. If
27 you're in a combat arm, you know, you don't have really marketable skills to speak of
28 that you can go out and immediately get a job with. So, it was just poorly, poorly handled
29 in terms of how we shuffled people into and out of that war. And as a result, there were
30 some incidents, but they weren't, you know, by far the vast, you know, ninety-nine
31 percent of Vietnam vets came back, you know, picked up where they left off and then

1 went on about your business and didn't bother anybody, but we had a bad rep. It took
2 many, many years before it was something you even talked about, you brought up. I'd
3 say for the most part the stigma's gone. Anyway, by the time, yeah, I remember reading
4 the paper here, the last helicopters pulling out. I'm just sort of scratching my head. What
5 was it all about? I don't know, I thought for a very long time, if nothing else, we learned
6 a great lesson and with my service and all of that would be that would be the legacy. It
7 would be that those fifty-eight thousand guys' names on the wall and guys that got hurt
8 and much less the millions from over there that were killed or maimed. We would not do
9 anything this foolish again. If we were going to war, it'd be for a sound reason and we
10 would have it all figured out. We wouldn't get bought down in something like again.

11 KC: Do you think that's been the case?

12 DP: Oh god, yes. I mean, you know—well no, I don't think, we didn't learn the
13 lesson. We did for years, but now then we repeat it again a few years ago. It's probably
14 for some of the same reasons. I think it's some of the jock mentality, the arrogance. I may
15 be wrong, I'm maybe a cocky guy myself and I suffer from maybe some of that jock
16 arrogance. But there's also something call intellect. You got to go about these things a lot
17 smarter. If you can't do it in a way where it benefits you than you don't do it. I mean, I'm
18 not an anti-war person per say, but I'm an anti-stupid war. I just think the idea that you
19 invest, you know, great sums of blood and treasure you got to have a return on that
20 investment somewhere. And certainly, in World War II, pretty clear cut. First World War,
21 pretty clear cut. Things would make me remarkably different, but we look at marginally.
22 If we had not gone to Vietnam versus if we had, what would be the difference? How
23 much better off are we? Of course, the same is true for a rock, but this is not an interview
24 about a rock. I would mention it and I was probably—I'm in the minority in terms of my
25 fellow pilots. We do get together and they're still as gung-ho, go attack, you know,
26 whatever. Us versus them, the bad guys. Any problem is solvable if you hit them with
27 enough firepower. So, I'm one of the few thinkers all together, but I'm a minority
28 democrat, let's put it that way. Yeah, I mean it was a long, strange trip and it was an
29 interesting time. That whole dynamic of the Vietnam War, like I say, the impact it had
30 over here, and the way things were changing over here and all the massive changes that
31 took place. I think I discussed that just in the culture. Our culture changed in the sixties.

1 A lot of things and, you know, you could be going for a year and come back, and it'd be
2 like a different culture. So, I don't think there were times where there's that much change
3 in that short of period of time. And there was an awful lot of disillusionment that took
4 place. You know, we were on top of things, and everything was going our way. (Buzzing
5 in background audio). Vietnam was, in many ways, sort of symbolic in fortunes. All
6 potential was infinite after World War II. We were in charge. We had the energy, we had
7 the industrial capacity, we had the military, we had the streets paved with gold. And
8 everything we want to do, we could do. The Vietnam thing really, really caused us to
9 kind of put the brakes on that. At the same time, in 1971, we reached peak oil in the
10 United States possession or land so that from 1971 forward, oil production within the
11 United States went down. So, from that point forward, the dependence on the rest of the
12 world for energy became inevitable. So just a whole bunch of things at the end of the
13 sixties, early part of the seventies. Of course, the war, you know, put us in the hole
14 financially along with the great society programs. So, there was just a real turning point
15 there. You could say in some ways good, some ways bad, but that whole sky's the limit
16 thing that was an unquestioned dominance thing. That got rung out over about an eight-
17 to-ten-year period. I think we were a much sober country after that in terms of our
18 expectations. I could simply say I enjoyed the time that I had there. I mean, any other
19 questions?

20 KC: Yeah sure. One is you were talking about the adjustment of the combat
21 soldier coming home to the United States. He's got no marketable skills, and there was a
22 stigma and so often times it was difficult for them to find jobs because of their service
23 and public perception and anti-war and all the things that were going on there. What
24 about you? What about the post-war adjustment for you when you came home?

25 DP: It took a little while, but since I had things to do, I did a few crazy things. I
26 think at the last time I told you in between my breaks I was drinking very heavily on my
27 leave between—my extension between my first year and then extension I was drinking
28 very heavily because I ballooned up so much in weight, I stopped drinking and kind of
29 sobered up a little bit, sobered up a lot. I had a lot better, and this is something to mention
30 also, I'll get the pictures so you can see. I shaved my head toward the end of my tour. Our
31 flight sergeant there, Doc Branches, he had a shaved head. Of course, he had a shaved

1 head because he didn't have much hair anyway. I decided, I don't know, I just decided
2 that. Because at that time, hair meant a lot. There was a movie called *Hair*. I mean, you
3 could look at a person and tell kind of where they stood on political issues and almost,
4 you know, they made statements by the hair they had. When I shaved my head
5 completely, every morning I'd get up and I lathered, and I shaved my head. You know,
6 because I realized I didn't know what side I was on. I mean, I didn't know what positions
7 I should take. I just didn't know how to react. I knew that—the thing is, with a shaved
8 head people really don't know where you stand. I mean, I tricked them, I wasn't playing
9 the game. I could be just a military, you know, hard charging rigid kind of guy that gets
10 up or I could be some free chippy with a shaved head, Shell Silverstein or somebody.
11 You know, they just didn't and of course then I had a motorcycle and came in. So, you
12 know, when you're six by with a shaved head and a leather jacket people don't come up
13 and give you a hard time usually. And that's what I needed. I needed nobody, you know,
14 they didn't know how to relate to me, so they didn't try. I needed it, it was very good for
15 me to kind put people off or to make them wonder or not try to stereotype me because
16 they really couldn't at that point.

17 KC: What I hear you saying is this was a way to help you gain space and
18 therefore time from those who were around you on one side or the other. Does that sound
19 about right?

20 DP: Yeah, that's very much it. Basically, didn't require me to react or think
21 through something or decide exactly where I stood on any of this. You know, there were
22 people, you know, at that point in time then who were my friends on different sides of all
23 these issues. I could just have my own way that way. I went back to Indiana University
24 and I was partying with the crowd and had a big party there and it was kind of a wild
25 party and streaking was pretty big back at that time. Do you remember? I'm just sitting
26 there thinking everybody's probably yelling and stuff. I was just kind of sitting there and
27 I don't know why, I just got up and started shedding my clothes, walked out stark naked
28 and got on a motorcycle, kicked it over and took off. You know, this other clown, Gordy,
29 he jumps on the back because he couldn't get out done, that kind of guy. So, "Alright
30 man, get on, let's go." So, we went roaring through Bloomington, Indiana. I believe it
31 was about eleven o'clock, you know, and a couple cars chased me and run through the

1 streets. Bob, my buddy Bob who was in law school started collecting money for bail.
2 That didn't happen. I rode around and the cops didn't get me, and I came back, rode
3 back, parked the bike, went in, and sat back down. I don't know why I did that, but it's
4 just been three or four months and I hadn't risked anything in three or four weeks, I
5 guess. I just made sense to me at the time. I never did it again, you know.

6 KC: Did you find yourself doing something not exactly like this, like you say, but
7 taking these kinds of risks just because you had been used to taking a risk throughout
8 your military career?

9 DP: I think there's a little something to that. I don't know to what extent. I think
10 that was definitely what motivated me for that. Because there is an adjustment, period
11 and people are not—what seems important to people here is just not important to you.
12 You've got to pretend because you're going to be alive whether you get the job you want
13 or the car you want or the class you want or the girlfriend you want or whatever. It's not
14 that big of a deal. Yeah, I don't know what cause and affect there is. I mean, it maybe
15 that some people are just more prone to take chances and they end up in places like
16 Vietnam. I have, yeah; I used to say that—I don't know what it is, but every once in
17 awhile there's something in that nature that once in a while, I just got to hang it out. I say
18 that less since I've gotten over, but that was it for a time. In one way or another to take a
19 risk. Like I say, I guess all of the risks including going to jail or something pale in
20 comparison to the ones that you add a .50 caliber with past you. I don't think that's
21 something you can probably generalize to people because I think everybody had their
22 own experience and they came back and I'm sure there many people that wouldn't think
23 of taking a change, to. I think you got of your own personality; your own DNA goes into
24 that. For me, I did miss that, the adrenaline. It took a little while and you know, that's like
25 living in that sort of fantasy, isolated world where not too many people came around.
26 You know, I would initiate contact usually. And that served me well during that period.
27 Like I say, when I sort of reacclimated or is it acclimated? I don't know, got back into
28 society.

29 KC: How do you think the war, your experiences in Vietnam; how do you think
30 they most affected your life?

1 DP: Well, that's a good one. Most affected my life. Well, I think it gave me a
2 certain level of confidence. I think that if I had not gone, I would have always sort of felt
3 that I had fully done my part. One thing it's enabled me to do is not have to suffer
4 loudmouth bullshitters if I don't want to. During the times when I have an opinion, I say,
5 "Well, America love it or leave it and this and that." I don't have to take that shit to
6 anybody. Look, here's my views and you tell me if you're such a badass. I do like a
7 pretty thoughtful approach to this and I'm not always the one who's going to charge out
8 and go to war. There are those, you know, most of them who serve themselves, who
9 would come out and claim that they're the good Americans. That used to really be the
10 case a lot more than it is now. I don't really have to take a back seat to anybody; I don't
11 have to say, "well concede some sort of moral or courage high ground to somebody".
12 You know, I hung my ass out, I gotta do them, they didn't get me, so this is what I had to
13 say, and it's been worth that to me. In terms of what it meant beyond that, I'm glad that I
14 had the experience. I think it probably has given me some confidence. It's probably also
15 given me some cynicism as if I needed anymore.

16 KC: How did it create a sense of cynicism?

17 DP: Well, there's a lot of dead people over there. You know, I could have died.
18 And it was all, you know, if I didn't do this—it was hyped. I mean, we really didn't have
19 to do that, we didn't have to do that. We were made to believe that we did. So, I'm going
20 to judge things on my own. And the thing is, while I was there and I saw what was
21 happening, I thought, "I don't know if it was right or wrong, I know it's real stupid." If
22 this thing is absolutely necessary what they're telling us, then we need to be fighting it
23 different then we are. I don't take for granted what my authority figure tells me. Like I
24 say, again, I had some tendencies in that direction anyway. I think I'm much more prone
25 to research things and checked things out on my own. If it sounds like somebody's
26 bullshitting me, by gosh, he probably is. I'm quicker to cut to the chase. I don't
27 necessarily believe something because of a politician or a governor or somebody that's
28 told me that it's the case. I mean, I learned through other experiences also. I got involved
29 with some environmental activism and things, but I think that's probably started me on
30 that path. You can't get much more wrong than a wrong that makes a lot of people die.
31 That's a wrong. So, I think maybe a little more of a cynic, again. I did go through life, I

1 think it's probably felt like less of a need to be macho to do things. I am freer to take a
2 position that I thought was right, not because I had to worry about my image or anything
3 like that. Let's see, I've paid my dues now I don't have anything else to prove. That's
4 what I have to say. I don't know that it's contributed to, you know, career advancement
5 or a happy home life or any of those kinds of things one way or the other personally
6 because I never did need much of those anyway.

7 KC: My last question to you, Mr. Pepe is—or I'd like to ask you to do this. Give
8 to me what you think, tell me what you believe is the legacy of the Vietnam War?

9 DP: The legacy?

10 KC: The legacy according to Don Pepe is what?

11 DP: Well, the legacy for our country or legacy for—

12 KC: How ever you choose to interpret that question.

13 DP: Gosh, I bet you get a lot of different answers on that one.

14 KC: Yeah, I generally do, yes sir.

15 DP: Well, I touched on that briefly what I thought the legacy was for our country.
16 That it had been a very bitter, but very valuable lesson about how we should approach
17 situations on the rest of the world and particularly how we should utilize our combat
18 potential, but that lesson wasn't learned. I don't believe lessons like that can ever be
19 learned. I think each generation has to do it themselves, wipe themselves out. So, I don't
20 know, the legacy, like I say, I had a legacy, I had it for years, but it was in fact very sober
21 and a valuable lesson for the country. That isn't the legacy. Now, you take that away and
22 I'll tell you the truth, that's really hard to come up with something positive. I would
23 think—you know, I look at it now and it's considered history. On the website talking to
24 the other guys, younger guys than me and they saw something they read about in school.
25 You know, I think the legacy, maybe I touched on that earlier with the fact that it was the
26 end of innocence, it was the end of innocent arrogance. Let's put it that way, the end of
27 innocent arrogance for our country. It was the post-war vitality and exuberance. You
28 know, it came and got bogged down in the muddy, muddy patties of Southeast Asia; I'll
29 leave it at that.

30 KC: That's very well put. Well Mr. Pepe, is there anything else you'd like to add
31 to this interview before we bring it to a close?

1 DP: Well, no, I'm sure I will after I hang up because that's the only time you do. I
2 mean, I'm not even going to try it right now other than I got all my stuff out. I've got my
3 materials that I got to inventory them and send them in, tapes. Now, I'm going to put this
4 slideshow up probably on YouTube and then have my chapters up on a website just to
5 read. I'll send you a link. Anything there you want to download and use you can.

6 KC: I really appreciate that.