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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Christopher Hicks
Conducted by Kelly Crager
Date 9 April 2010
Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

The transcription of this interview was paid for by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History interview with Mr.
2 Christopher Hicks. Today is 9 April 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Hicks is joining me via telephone from his office in Long
4 Beach, California. Mr. Hicks, to begin this interview, I'd like to ask you some
5 biographical questions if I may.

6 Christopher Hicks: Alright.

7 KC: Can you tell me when you were born and where?

8 CH: I was born February 27th, 1949, in Palo Alto, California.

9 KC: Palo Alto. What were your parent's names?

10 CH: Harry J. Hicks and Marcel Prudel Hicks.

11 KC: Okay, now what did your parents do for a living?

12 CH: Well, when I was born, my father was an officer in the United States Navy
13 and my mother was a housewife. They met during World War II, both of them were
14 officers. My father spent four years in the Pacific and my mother, I'm a little shady about
15 where she spent her time in the Navy. She was a WAVE (Women Accepted for
16 Volunteer Service), but they met—and to be quite frank, I don't even know where they
17 met. My mom was married to a fella who went to Germany or went to France and was
18 killed over there. Then my mom and dad met.

19 KC: What do you know about your dad's experiences in the Pacific War? Did he
20 talk to you about any of that?

1 CH: A little bit, he was in Pearl Harbor. The family lore, so to speak, goes that on
2 the day Pearl Harbor happened, my grandmother, Agnes Hicks' hair went all white. Now,
3 whether that's true or not I have no idea. That's the family lore. My father spent four
4 years on a sub tender bobbing around in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Basically, the
5 sub tender of course, in the middle of the ocean the subs came up to get fixed and
6 refueled and resupplied and stuff like that. Other than that, I don't have much knowledge
7 about what my father did.

8 KC: Sure. Did he ever talk to you about what happened at Pearl Harbor while he
9 was there?

10 CH: Did not.

11 KC: Did not.

12 CH: Did not.

13 KC: Okay, very good. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

14 CH: I am the third oldest of fourteen children.

15 KC: Fourteen, holy smokes.

16 CH: Fourteen. I have seven brothers and six sisters. I was born in Palo Alto,
17 California. My older brother was born in Virginia and my oldest sister was born in
18 Detroit. My sister Mary and myself were born in Palo Alto, California. After two years or
19 three years in Palo Alto we moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, where Peter and Patricia
20 were born. A couple years later we moved to Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania, where
21 Bernadette and Philomena were born. A couple years later we moved to Guam, this was
22 in the mid-fifties I believe and that's where my two brothers Anthony and Timothy were
23 born. After that, my father was transferred. My father was in the Navy, by the way. He
24 was a supply officer at this time. After Guam we moved to La Cañada, California, where
25 the remainder of—where Philip, Francis, Andrew, and Thomas were born. And then after
26 that we moved to Pasadena, California. Growing up, we literally moved around every two
27 and a half, three years with my father. And it seems like every two and a half, three years
28 we picked up a couple more brothers and sisters.

29 KC: Yeah, I certainly see a pattern that developed there from one Navy duty
30 station to the next and a couple of children being born along the way. Well, what was life

1 like for you with this large and growing family being so mobile? Going from place to
2 place around the country and even around the world even. What was that like?

3 CH: Well, you know, as a child growing up—as an adult actually, many people
4 have asked, “Well, was it that difficult as a child growing up?” You know, as an adult the
5 only thing I can answer is that no because as a child, that’s what we’re used to. We we’re
6 used to picking up and packing up every two and a half, three years moving. With a large
7 family, we really weren’t wanting for any friends or anything because we had so many
8 brothers and sisters to play with. You know, I remember a little bit about Drexel Hill,
9 Pennsylvania, I remember more about Guam. I was in the first, second, third grade in
10 Guam. Actually, halfway through the third grade we packed up and moved to La Cañada.
11 Then in La Cañada, I was in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. In eighth grade we
12 moved to Pasadena, California where I attended St. Andrews Grammar School and then
13 of course high school I went to St. Gabriel Mission High School. Little story I like to tell
14 about Guam. This was, you know, ten, eleven years after the war in the Pacific. In the
15 second or third grade, I can’t remember which one it was, we were at school one day and
16 somebody came in and ushered us children out of the classrooms and sent us home and
17 we were off school for a week. When we came back, in the playground—what we found
18 out was in the playground of this particular school that we were in, a five-hundred-pound
19 bomb from World War II, which back then had burrowed its way underground, was
20 discovered. They had to bring in a bomb disposal squad to diffuse it. So we got a week
21 off for that, which was okay.

22 KC: (Laughs) I’m sure it would have been. It could have been tragic of course, if
23 they hadn’t discovered that.

24 CH: It could have been. We used to, you know, our little Guamanian friends we
25 used to run around in what we called the boondocks and we used to find all kinds of live
26 and spent ammunition. Of course, we were cautioned by our parents never to touch it or
27 pick it up or anything like that, which we did not do. It was still, you know—Guam was
28 still getting over the ravages of the war while we were there.

29 KC: It seems like you have some pretty clear and vivid and fond memories of
30 your time there in Guam. Go into that in a little more detail if you can. Just what life was

1 like growing up with other kids and school and growing up in this Navy officer family
2 environment.

3 CH: Well, like I said, we didn't really need or want for friends now that you're
4 asking me. You know, this is off of the cuff type thing.

5 KC: Sure.

6 CH: You know, our brothers and sisters, we used to play a lot together. I think
7 part of the reason for that was that we really didn't have any long-term friendships
8 throughout our growing up years because we were packing up and moving every couple
9 of years. I guess we just learned to rely upon each other for friendships and getting along.
10 Guam was particularly nice for children because it was—well, for me it was anyway,
11 because of all the beautiful beaches that we used to go to and pick up all the shells and
12 run around in the boondocks with our friends and stuff like that. Of course, we went to
13 school and all that. You know, that's where I started having more of my childhood
14 memories of any place. So I don't know, does that answer your question?

15 KC: Sure, sure. What about school? How well did you do in school going from
16 place to place and your grades and your interests and things like that?

17 CH: Well, I was born in February and usually the cut off for school entrance in
18 the first grade was, I'm guessing it was November of the previous year. And anybody
19 who was born after that generally was held back a year. My parents, when we were living
20 in Drexel Hill, put me into the first grade in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania. I actually tell my
21 children now and everybody, I actually flunked out of the first grade. I was probably the
22 youngest child in the first grade and just, you know, being a guy, I guess I couldn't
23 handle it. So first, second, and third grade I went to Guam and like I said, in La Cañada,
24 fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh grade, and eighth grade. I was not an A student. I didn't flunk
25 out though. I was a B, C student for the most part that I recall. I do know that in high
26 school I was not an A student, nor did I flunk out. You know, I was the middle of the
27 road, getting B's and C's. My mother was a very educated person. She spoke German and
28 Latin. In high school back then, Latin was a required subject, and it was a Catholic
29 School anyway, but Latin was a required subject. And because my mother's, you know,
30 knowledge of Latin, she helped me ace two years of Latin, so I'm very proud of that.

1 KC: Growing up during this time, following the Second World War and being
2 part of the Navy family, how aware were you of larger global events?

3 CH: Not at all.

4 KC: Not at all?

5 CH: Nothing, not at all.

6 KC: What do you think explains that? Just being a kid and doing your own thing
7 and not caring about the rest?

8 CH: Probably, yeah. I had no knowledge of nothing. As a matter of fact, when we
9 were in Guam—well, I mean on Guam I guess we knew there was a war that had been
10 there because of all the ammunition and bombs that were found, but I don't think—you
11 know, at the time I was in the first, second, and third grade, so how much do you pay
12 attention to stuff like that?

13 KC: Now when did you graduate high school?

14 CH: Uh, June of 1967.

15 KC: Okay, June of '67. Now, when you graduate high school, all of the moving
16 and worldly experience and things that you have gained so far, what did you hope to do
17 with your life when you got out of high school?

18 CH: Didn't have a clue, my friend. Didn't have a clue. I do remember—and I
19 guess this is part of the purpose of this. I do remember watching—when we were
20 growing up, I think we got our first television in La Cañada, California, which was a
21 hand-me-down from a lady across the street who got a brand-new color television. But
22 we had an old black and white hand-me-down and we thought that was just great. My
23 mother did not let us watch a lot of television, but I do remember watching the news and
24 seeing in the sixties—in the mid-sixties I remember particularly that famous news story,
25 if you will, of the monk in Saigon dousing himself with gasoline and burning himself to
26 death. In protest—I think it was in protests of the United States being over in Vietnam or
27 maybe because of corruption. I don't really remember, you know, what he was
28 protesting. But I do remember that. When I graduated from high school, my parents, like
29 I said were both very highly educated. My father got a degree at Harvard and the reason
30 why I was born in Palo Alto after the war was because the United States Navy sent him to
31 Stanford to get another degree in what, I don't know. But they're both very highly

1 educated, and they had beat into us all their lives that you need to get a college education.
2 So when I graduated from high school I enrolled in Pasadena City College, which is a
3 junior college out here in California. I signed up just for general education classes. I
4 really had no idea what I wanted to do when I grew up. Anyway, so I enrolled in
5 Pasadena City College and how the story goes is by the time mid to late October of 1967
6 came around, I was going to more parties than I was classes, and I was actually flunking
7 out of one of the classes. One night we were at Bob's Big Boy. A friend of mine and I
8 were at Bob's Big Boy on Colorado Boulevard, and he was having problems at home,
9 and it was a Friday night in October of 1967, and he said, "Hey, Christopher, let's go join
10 the Navy." I was eighteen, I think I was. Yeah, no I was eighteen. I was eighteen years
11 old. I guess I thought about it for a while and I said, "Okay, let's go join the Navy." One
12 of the reasons why I remembered that is because my older brother, Gregory, who was in
13 Pasadena City College in his second year getting straight A's had gotten his, "Greetings
14 from Uncle Sam" letter.

15 KC: He'd been drafted.

16 CH: (Laughs) He got the letter. Unfortunately—I'm sorry.

17 KC: It's okay. Would you like to pause for a moment?

18 CH: You know, yeah. Go ahead. (Audio cuts)

19 KC: Joined the Navy, okay.

20 CH: Okay, is it on?

21 KC: Yes.

22 CH: Okay, my brother had gotten his draft notice from Uncle Sam, and he was
23 getting straight A's. One of the reasons why—and to this day I can't remember the name
24 of my friend, but it's when I went to high school. Well, I don't know if I went to high
25 school with him. When he said, "Well let's go join the Navy," I thought of my brother
26 getting his draft notice and I thought, "Well, here's my brother getting straight A's, he's
27 getting his greetings from Uncle Sam letter and here I am going to more parties than
28 classes. Mine's going to be right behind me, coming in the mail whenever." Actually, that
29 weekend I went home, and I told my parents that I was going to join the Navy. This is
30 like a real spur of the moment thing, but I went home, and I told them I was going to join
31 the Navy and I think it shocked them. My older brother, at the time, I said, "Hey Greg,

1 why don't we go in and we can go join the Navy together on the buddy system, where we
2 can at least go to boot camp together?" He said, "Well okay, but I'm going to finish this
3 semester in college before I do that. So if you want to go in the buddy system, you'll have
4 to wait until January, February of 1968 before we join." I said, "Okay, well that's fine."
5 And so from October, November, December, and January I had officially dropped out of
6 school. Went down to the Navy recruiters, and we were assured that we could go through
7 at least boot camp together on the buddy system. So it was my brother, myself, and my
8 friend, we could go through boot camp on the buddy system. So we signed on the dotted
9 line to go in on—I was looking at my DD214 today. It was February 1st, 1968, I was
10 sworn in. Ironically, the guy that said, "Hey Christopher, let's go join the Navy." He was
11 having more and more problems at home, and he couldn't wait. So in November,
12 December of '67 he actually signed up and went down to bootcamp in San Diego. So
13 that's how I thought, you know, "Let's join the Navy". Not so much because of my
14 father, but because I didn't want to become fodder the Army or in the Marine Corps over
15 in Vietnam at the time. So I joined the Navy.

16 KC: Let me ask you this Mr. Hicks, what did you know about Vietnam at this
17 time? In late 1967 the US had a military presence there long before that, but officially, I
18 guess in a real combat sense in 1965. What did you know about what was going on over
19 there?

20 CH: Well, at the time I knew that the United States was fighting communism and
21 I knew that some of our—actually, a fellow two years older than me who was class
22 president, David Zimmerman, he was class president, senior class president at St Gabriel
23 Mission High School had joined the army and had gone to Vietnam and was killed
24 shortly thereafter. That was a big deal at our high school. I knew that, you know—I knew
25 we were over there fighting communism. To be quite frank with you, I don't think I
26 really gave it much thought.

27 KC: Now, you and your brother go into the Navy.

28 CH: That is correct.

29 KC: At the same time. You go to boot camp. Tell me about this initial phase of
30 your training in the Navy?

1 CH: Well, first of all my father who was a military officer, he was retired at the
2 time, and he was an agent for the New York Life Insurance Company at the time.
3 Actually, donned his old uniform and actually swore us into the Navy.

4 KC: Really?

5 CH: Yeah.

6 KC: That must have been pretty special for him.

7 CH: Well, it was. But fast forward here fifteen, twenty years after he did that. I'm
8 going through some of my mother's stuff who had passed away and there is a picture on
9 the front of the *NYLIC Review*, which is the New York Life Insurance Company monthly
10 publication. May 1968 is a picture of my father swearing both my older brother and
11 myself into the Navy. And little did I know that '68, '78, you know—little did I know
12 that fifteen years later I would actually become an agent for the New York Life Insurance
13 Company. So he swore us in in Los Angeles. The whole family was there, of course
14 watching. We got on the bus, board down to Naval training center, NTC San Diego and
15 my brother Gregory and I, if you recall we're going in on the buddy system. We got
16 down to San Diego and it was nighttime, it was dark. It could have been seven o'clock, it
17 could have been twelve o'clock, I don't know. It was in winter, but we get off the bus and
18 somebody's standing there and he goes, "Hicks, Gregory. This side." And then, "Hicks,
19 Christopher. This side." So we made it down on the buddy system on the bus from Los
20 Angeles to San Diego, where we were split up and we were put in different companies. I
21 remember the second day when we were still in civilian clothes—actually, they started
22 processing us that night and you know, it was probably midnight or two o'clock in the
23 morning that we got into our bunks all in civilian clothes and we're all going, "What the
24 heck's going on", etc. That morning, about four o'clock in the morning Chief Butts—no,
25 BM2 (Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class) Butts was his name. He was our company
26 commander. He comes in at four o'clock in the morning, and this is after a very long day
27 on our first day and he picks up this metal—what they called in the navy shit can, which
28 is a trashcan. We're all sleeping of course, and he picked up this empty shit can and
29 threw it up in the air, and it come crashing down on the floor. And you never saw fifty
30 young guys get out of bed so quick in their life. That day, I recall it was a very sunny day
31 in sunny Southern California. It was a very sunny and warm day. That day we were

1 marching around, and I recall feeling that this is a nightmare and I'm going to wake up
2 soon. That was a very distinct feeling I shall never forget. I thought I was having a
3 nightmare when this was going on. Anyway, boot camp, we were initially assigned to
4 separate squads and looking back on it, I know that the most confident ones were made
5 squad leaders. Initially, in a couple of weeks, a month into boot camp, BM2 Butts called
6 me into the office, and he said, "Hicks, I want you to become a squad leader." So
7 apparently, I had shown that I was competent or otherwise, "Why pick on me?" type
8 thing. So I did and I think I was squad leader for a couple of weeks or maybe a—yeah,
9 probably a couple weeks and then I come down with the chicken pox. So I'm pulled off
10 and pulled out and sent over to the sick bay until I'm healed, which puts me back a week
11 or so. And so my older brother Gregory continued on and he graduated from boot camp,
12 you know, two or three weeks before I did and then I graduated from boot camp two or
13 three weeks after him. My family, of course, being from Pasadena they came down both
14 times to watch us parade around on the parade grounds of boot camp. So anyway, after
15 boot camp they sent me to BEEP School, Base Electricity and Electronic Preparatory
16 School.

17 KC: Now why were you chosen for that? Did you show an aptitude for it?

18 CH: I don't know. They gave us tests and apparently, I had an aptitude. I certainly
19 was not knowledgeable about electricity or electronics or anything, but apparently based
20 upon the aptitude test that we took when I was in boot camp, I guess they thought I'd be
21 good at electronics. So I went there. When I got out of that school, they assigned me to
22 Radioman C School to become a radioman. After Radioman C School, they sent me to
23 Radioman—No, no, it was Radioman A School they sent me to initially to become a
24 radioman. Then, after Radioman A School they sent to Radioman C School, which was
25 how to learn Morse code. So by the time I got out of naval training, I was as a radioman
26 and I was also a Morse code operator.

27 KC: How did you take to that training? How well did you do?

28 CH: I guess I did pretty good. You know, looking back on my life Kelly, most
29 things I've started I found out I've done pretty well at. You know, apparently I did okay
30 because, you know, I went to the BEEP School and then I went to Radioman A School
31 and then I went to Radioman C School, so apparently I did, you know. I was always

1 taught by my parents to do the best you can. I think that's been my philosophy then and
2 now in life.

3 KC: Describe some of this more advanced training. What sort of equipment were
4 you working on? What sort of training was taking place? What were you doing?

5 CH: Well, BEEP School, as we call it—BEEP School was learning about
6 electricity and schematics and diagrams of electronic equipment, etcetera. It was a
7 basic—I guess it would be considered a basic school if you're going to become
8 electrician or something like that. Radioman A School taught us how to use the various
9 "advanced" communications equipment that the Navy had at the time. We had a teletype
10 machine that we were taught on. We were taught on the various voicemail
11 communication equipment that they had. Many of them, the old ones that you had to dial
12 up certain frequencies in order to correspond with, you know, whoever you were trying to
13 correspond with or communicate with. Radioman A School is basically just learning the
14 naval equipment. Then of course Radioman C School was just learning Morse code and
15 how to operate the Morse code. The key and then become proficient at Morse code.

16 KC: When do you finish all of this electronics and radio training?

17 CH: You know, I'm guessing probably September—probably September, October
18 1968. Probably September, October 1968.

19 KC: Now, at this time when you finished with this—

20 CH: Probably October, November of '68.

21 KC: Okay. When you finish with all this training, what sort of hopes or
22 aspirations did you have through all of this? Where your next duty station would be,
23 where would you be next?

24 CH: Didn't have any. You know, Kelly there's a philosophy of, "one day at a
25 time" and I don't think I really had any aspirations. I was just, you know, I was just doing
26 what I was told to do and going where I was told to go.

27 KC: Well, the next question inevitably then is, where did you go?

28 CH: Well, after all my training I was given a thirty day leave of absence—well,
29 thirty-day leave, you know. I was assigned—my first orders were to the USS *Winston*
30 AKA-94. I was assigned to USS *Winston* as a radio operator. By the way, during boot
31 camp—or not during boot camp, but during training I had met, who had become a very

1 dear friend of mine, a marine corporal—a lance corporal by the name of Time Leonard,
2 who was from Des Moines, Iowa. He and another friend of his from Des Moines, Iowa,
3 that I can't remember his name at this point in time—he used to come up to our house all
4 the time on weekends and spend the weekend with our family and we'd travel back and
5 forth from Pasadena down to San Diego. The reason why I'm saying this is because when
6 I got my orders to go to the USS *Winston*, we were—my parents drove me from Pasadena
7 and I'm thinking they took me up to Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, which is
8 kind of on the central coast of California. I was to fly to Japan and so after thirty days
9 leave, my father and my mother drove me up to Vandenberg Air Force Base where I
10 boarded Braniff Airlines to fly into Tokyo. And of course, here I am, a young—first time
11 away from home by myself basically because I, you know—in thinking about this, all my
12 duty stations that I went to, I was always by myself. I never went with a unit. I was by
13 myself. Of course, there was other Navy guys there and we land in Japan, in Tokyo. I
14 remember being transferred on bus to the local naval station. It was the middle of the
15 night and in Japan they drive on the wrong side of the road. Of course, the Japanese
16 probably think we drive on the wrong side of the road. As a nineteen-year-old and all the
17 lights in Tokyo were just dazzling, just absolutely dazzling. You know, to a young wet
18 behind the ears nineteen-year-old, first time away from home in a foreign country. I
19 remember—I forget whatever time at night it was, getting in the bunk and three or four
20 o'clock in the morning somebody comes and wakes me up and says, "Hicks, you got to
21 get up because you got to get to the airport. We're flying you to Okinawa." Actually, I
22 know I wasn't in Japan 24 hours and here I am boarding a plane to Okinawa. When I
23 landed in Okinawa—this was in mid-December 1968. When I landed in Okinawa, they
24 said I was going to be there at least a week to two weeks, possibly longer. I guess for
25 whatever reason they couldn't find my ship. You know, there's more to it than that. I was
26 in Okinawa for two weeks and we had, you know, T-80, temp reassigned duty, pardon
27 my French, shit details that we were assigned to do. So finally, after about two weeks
28 they said, "Hicks, get your stuff ready. We're flying you to Da Nang." So I'm in
29 Okinawa, I am in the airport waiting around to board a plane to fly to Da Nang and I'm
30 sitting there by myself. Of course, I'm by myself because I'm not going with the unit type
31 thing. Standing there in formation is a unit of Marines. I'm looking at them and I'm

1 looking at them and by God, there's my friend Time Leonard standing in line at attention
2 in that unit of Marines in that Okinawa Airport.

3 KC: Really? That's incredible.

4 CH: Isn't it? Yeah.

5 KC: Now let me ask you here, if I may Mr. Hicks. You're assigned to the USS
6 *Winston*, you know it's overseas in the Pacific somewhere. You're in Tokyo briefly,
7 you're in Okinawa for a little while and then they say your orders are for Da Nang. Now,
8 you got to know Da Nang is in Vietnam. What's going through your head? Didn't you
9 join the Navy to avoid service in Vietnam? And now all of a sudden, it's Da Nang.

10 CH: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah, you're right.

11 KC: Tell me about that. What's going through your mind?

12 CH: You know, Kelly—you know, to be quite frank with you, it was an adventure
13 for me. It was a downright, it was an adventure for me. I really did not know what I was
14 getting into, or I really did not know what I had gotten myself into. Again, like I said, I'm
15 in the United States Navy, I'm in the United States Military and they tell you what to do
16 and where to go and what to wear and all that sort of stuff. I was just following my
17 orders. I had no—I really didn't think about anything, the consequences of it. I really
18 didn't think about the consequences of it.

19 KC: So there was never any, "Oh hell" kind of moment for you?

20 CH: No, no, no, no. Not really. So anyway, I'm in the airport and there's Tim
21 Leonard and I get up and I'm standing front behind his squad leader waving at him and
22 his face lights up like a Christmas light when he sees me. He requested his squad leader if
23 he could fall out and come and visit me, and it was granted. And we spent, I don't know,
24 an hour or so together there in the Okinawa Airport. He was attached with the 1st Marine
25 Air Wing out of Da Nang.

26 KC: Okay.

27 CH: And so that's where he was going too. So we actually flew on the plane
28 together from Okinawa to Da Nang. And then when we got to Da Nang, of course we
29 were split up. You know, there I am in the middle of a city, in the middle of a war. Well,
30 in the middle of the Pacific on a bright, you know, sunny Vietnam day. Not ironically, it
31 was winter in California and it's summer in Vietnam when I arrived there. So I got my

1 dress blues on, which are all wool, sweating the dickens. Feeling like an idiot for coming
2 over to a tropical—well, you know, an Asian country with my dress blues on, carrying
3 my duffle bag. You know, what the heck. You get over it.

4 KC: Describe what Da Nang was like for you there in late 1968. What did you
5 see, what were the sights like? The smells, the sounds, the activity? What was Da Nang
6 like?

7 CH: Well, Da Nang—we were actually at the naval air base in Da Nang, not Da
8 Nang proper itself. It was a military base. It had all the barbed wire around it, and it had
9 all the watch towers and it had all of the sandbags. You know, bunkers. It had all the
10 military jeeps and tanks and, you know, soldiers going here and soldiers going there. At
11 first, you know, my first thoughts were—I might have thought, “Oh shit.” (Chuckles) But
12 I’m not sure if I did or not. I immediately went from the airport to the docks, and it was a
13 very brief time in Da Nang. That time it was a very brief time in Da Nang because they
14 had—USS *Winston* AKA-94 was a supply ship.

15 KC: Okay.

16 CH: We also had a contingent of Marines on board. Excuse me, I believe it was
17 called—well, I don’t believe it was what they called. We had Mike Boats on there. And
18 the Mike Boats are the ones that if you watch *Saving Private Ryan*, they’re the ones that
19 go up in the shallow water and the front drops down and all the soldiers and marines and
20 tanks and everything roll out onto the ground. We had, I believe about sixteen of those on
21 there. There was a Mike Boat sitting there waiting for me. You know, like I said, it was
22 an adventure. We get on the Mike Boat, and we got out to the USS *Winston* and there I
23 am bobbing up and down in the middle of Da Nang Harbor on the USS *Winston*. And
24 there’s a lot of naval vessels at the time. Ironically—actually, I don’t know if it’s ironic
25 or not, but the day I stepped in Da Nang the first time was Christmas Day. It was
26 December 25th, 1968.

27 KC: Describe the USS *Winston* for me. I know that you said was a supply ship but
28 describe the ship as much as you can.

29 CH: It was a supply ship, yeah. It had big cargo holes full of supplies. What we
30 would do is—it had two purposes. One was the supply ship, and one was a support ship.
31 They had cargo, a big cargo base full of supplies and stuff like that. Actually, the first

1 night that we were out to sea, being the junior guy on board ship—or, yeah. Being the
2 junior guy on ship, which I was because, you know, I was a seaman which was an E2 or
3 E3. I believe it was E3. The first night out, really the first night out to sea. Again, you
4 know, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock at night I'm woken up and we're having a resupply
5 mission where two ships, *Winston* and another ship would be cruising out in the Pacific
6 Ocean. Side by side, and they would shoot lines across from one ship to the other and
7 then they'd pull cables across, and they would go in at—you know, ten, fifteen knots
8 cruising in the Pacific Ocean. We would put these big cargo nets full of supplies and they
9 would pull them over to the ship on the cables. Anyway, we supplied ships moving—
10 sailing side by side across, you know, cables that each ship had hooked up to each other.
11 Quite a, I guess an exciting little thing. I mean, it was a lot of work and being the junior
12 guy on board ship, I was one of the grunts. Not only would they pass cargo back and
13 forth, but they would bring mail back and forth. Also, they would bring personnel on
14 these little buckets that they would, you know, go from one ship to the other. They would
15 transfer personnel on and off the ship as well.

16 KC: Now, what types of ships would you be supplying?

17 CH: Any type.

18 KC: Any type.

19 CH: Destroyers, I mean you name it. LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks), you know. Any
20 type of ship that—not so much aircraft carriers, but smaller types of support ships and
21 stuff like that.

22 KC: Say, destroyer size on down, things like that?

23 CH: Yeah.

24 KC: Okay. Now you said that you were essentially the lone man on the totem pole
25 here.

26 CH: Right.

27 KC: What would be your job in all of this?

28 CH: You know, all physical labor, helping move cargo nets. You know, Kelly,
29 you're making me go back a couple years. (Chuckles)

30 KC: (Chuckles) I understand.

31 CH: It was all what we call grunt work.

1 KC: Right.

2 CH: It was all grunt work.

3 KC: But you were a trained radio operator, what happened there?

4 CH: Well, that's what they do.

5 KC: Yeah?

6 CH: That's what they do.

7 KC: Okay.

8 CH: Shortly after I arrived on the *Winston*, we had to put in what they called mess
9 duty. So for a month, I was a "steward" for the officers, you know, during their meal
10 times. You know, I suppose—I can't remember, but I suppose on off times I would go
11 into the radio shack and watch or learn or reacquaint myself with the communications
12 equipment. So I mean, that's how the Military operates.

13 KC: What was it like for you personally, to come aboard this new ship, on this
14 new mission, in this new part of the world for you? Like you said, you're pretty low in
15 grade here. What was it like to get to know the men? What was it like to get to know the
16 ship and your place in all of this? What was the comradery like? What was the
17 environment like as a human being on the *Winston*?

18 CH: You know, obviously you're in a constrained environment cause you can't
19 go anywhere. Our bunks were close together. We had a—you know, a little locker that
20 we would put all our stuff in. The comradery was good. I don't recall ever being on the
21 outs with anybody. I did make some friends. You know, obviously I made some friends
22 on board the *Winston*. When we went to port, we all piled around together. It was, you
23 know—and you had to get along. You had to get along because you were stuck there.

24 KC: Right. Well, you talked about going to port. Tell me about some of the things
25 that you would do when you would go from one port to the next or go back into Da Nang
26 to pick up supplies or whatever it might be. What sort of off duty activities were you
27 involved in?

28 CH: We were at sea most of the time. We were in and out of Da Nang all the
29 time. We did, and I found out later that being in a combat zone, we got sixty dollars extra
30 a month combat pay which was, you know, I guess that was big money back then.

1 KC: Yeah, that would have been pretty significant I think, for a single man who
2 all of his bills were being paid.

3 CH: Well yeah, I was able to save quite a bit. We had a captain who—the longest
4 we were out to sea was sixty days, which is a long, long time with a bunch of guys
5 around and no land or anything like that. We were out to sea for sixty days on maneuvers.
6 We pulled to—actually, the ports that I went to, we of course—besides Da Nang, we
7 were in Singapore, we went to Hong Kong, we went to the Philippines, and we went to
8 Taiwan. So those were four or five of the ports that we called in on.

9 KC: Those are some pretty big, pretty significant ports of call.

10 CH: Yeah.

11 KC: Tell me about those places.

12 CH: Well, Hong Kong is on hills, and we pulled into that, and we were allowed—
13 if we didn't have duty, we were usually allowed to go ashore for eight hours and then we
14 had to be back. Of course, again, as a nineteen-year-old—yeah, as a nineteen, twenty-
15 year-old I think it was, it was an exciting thing. You know, seeing all these foreign
16 places. You asked about the sights and sounds and smells, and they were very definitely
17 different from where I grew up. The smells were very different. The crowds were very
18 different. These are big cities with a lot of people running around them. Taiwan, Taiwan I
19 remember. There was a lot of pirating of records and stuff like that that we bought. Of
20 course, we didn't know it at the time. It didn't even dawn on us. We just saw these
21 records that were, you know, of groups back home. So we bought a bunch of records in
22 Taiwan. I think in Taiwan—no, it must have been in Singapore. In Singapore, we went to
23 the Tiger Balm Gardens, which is a famous Chinese gardens with Chinese landscapes and
24 statues of Chinese gods and animals and stuff like that. In Subic Bay, in the Philippines,
25 when my father found out I was going to Subic Bay, he gave me the name of one of his
26 old World War II buddies who had settled down in Manila. And he said, "If you get a
27 chance to go to Manila, look up my friend." When we pulled into Subic Bay, I requested
28 permission to get a couple days off to go to Manila to see if I could find—my father had
29 given me his address, so I request permission for a couple days off to go to Manila and I
30 spent a couple days in Manila with my father's friend. He actually—one of the days he
31 took me out fishing on his boat, which was very kind of like a postman's holiday. I just

1 got off ship and now I'm back on a little boat bobbing around in the Pacific. Anyway, I
2 went back to Da Nang. In Da Nang, while we were in Da Nang, we were going to be
3 there for a couple days and I requested permission to go ashore to see if I could visit my
4 friend Tim Leonard, and it was granted. I went ashore in Da Nang, and I found my friend
5 Tim in Da Nang. One of the things I remember vividly is while I was on this military
6 transport—it might have been a bus, who knows. But I remember vividly going from the
7 docks to where I was going to meet my friend, seeing what appeared to be three or four
8 generations of the Vietnamese family standing by the road begging. It was a glimpse. It
9 was just a glimpse I saw these people. It couldn't have been, you know, driving down, it
10 couldn't have been two seconds that I saw them. But it really made an impression on me.
11 Anyway, I went to visit my friend Tim, Tim Leonard. We spent probably a couple hours
12 together and he gave me one of his pins, 1st MAV, 1st Marine Air Wing pins, which I
13 have to this day. He gave it to me, and I've cherished it ever since. Anyway, I went back
14 to the ship. This is probably early '69 now. Well no, in fact it is early '69. We were
15 assigned out of Da Nang. We were assigned to a group called the Amphibious Ready
16 Group Alpha.

17 KC: Tell me about this group. Who were they? What was their purpose?

18 CH: Well, Ready Group Alpha was—you know, to be quite frank you Kelly, I'm
19 not too sure what it was. It was just a group of ships that went out and supposed to do
20 operations together. In January of '69, we were on the group, Amphibious Ready Group
21 Alpha, we were part of an operation that they called "Old Mariner". What that was, at the
22 time remember we had a contingent of Marines on board, and we had sixteen of those
23 Mike boats. What Old Mariner was, it was reported to be the largest amphibious
24 operation in the Vietnam conflict. It was outside of Da Nang. I'm not sure whether it was
25 North of Da Nang or South of Da Nang, but along with all the other ships in the Alpha
26 group, we did a very large amphibious landing off the coast of Vietnam. Well, on the
27 coast of Vietnam dropping off Marines to roust the Viet Cong.

28 KC: Tell me about that. What do you remember about that?

29 CH: Well, prior to that, unfortunately I remember one of the young Marines going
30 to the back of the boat, back to the ship and shooting himself in the foot. Obviously, he
31 did not want to go ashore. It shattered his foot and I guess, you know, he was Medevac'd

1 over to the I think USS *Liberty*, although I'm not sure it was the hospital ship. He was
2 Medevac'd there. Operation Old Mariner, it was like I said, an amphibious landing. The
3 morning of the landing we had all of the Mike Boats out in the water before dawn. We
4 loaded them up with supplies and the contingent of the Marines went on board. I
5 remember we were probably, you know, I'm guessing maybe a mile off the shore. It
6 could have been farther; it could have been closer. I remember seeing jets bombing the
7 shoreline. I remember seeing the bombs go down. I remember seeing them going off and
8 the jets flying off in the distance. I think the operation lasted about a week or so. You
9 know, again here I'm a nineteen-year-old boy. I'm out to sea, I guess part of it at that
10 point in time—I guess part of the wisdom of my joining the Navy is I didn't have to go
11 ashore. (Chuckles)

12 KC: What other sort of things do you remember about your time there? Not
13 necessarily with this outfit, but the USS *Winston* on your first tour? Because you did
14 serve two tours.

15 CH: I did, I did. I'm sorry, what was the question again?

16 KC: What else do you remember about your time on the *Winston*? Does anything
17 stand out? Any particular incidence or any particular people stand out to you?

18 CH: No. You know, I remember my first performance review and I got good
19 reviews. Obviously, there was areas of improvement. I don't remember what it was, but I
20 do remember getting good reviews from whoever my superior was. You know, obviously
21 going to these foreign ports was exciting and you know. I remember when we were out to
22 sea, we used to have helicopters come in and drop off mail at the fantail of the ship. I've
23 got photographs of that. A couple of them doing that onboard ship. I've got a couple
24 photographs of the *Winston* and me on board, looking all young and short haircuts and
25 my dungarees and stuff like that. (Chuckles)

26 KC: Right.

27 CH: Nothing really stands out per se, I guess. I don't know. You know, I really
28 don't know.

29 KC: Did your job change at all on the *Winston*? Did they bring in other enlisted
30 men, other sailors, seaman that were lesser rank than you?

1 CH: Oh yeah. Actually, I remember studying to become an E4, which was a petty
2 officer 3rd class. I remember studying to become an E4 to move up. I remember getting
3 little packages from my family of—you know, little care packages. I think my oldest
4 sister Therese one time—back then they had either six or eight ounce little cans of Coors
5 beer that they smuggled into the care package. Being a radioman, we had all these air
6 conditioning ducts in the radio shack to keep all the radio equipment cool. I remember
7 putting the little cans of Coors up in the air conditioning ducts to keep them cool. When
8 the big wigs weren't around we used to, you know, sneak off and have a little can of
9 Coors beer. Here I am, nineteen years old. Twenty years old at the time, I suppose.

10 KC: Yeah, probably I guess you would've been by this time.

11 CH: Yeah.

12 KC: Now, you mentioned getting care packages from your family back home.
13 What sort of correspondence did you have with people back home, including your
14 family?

15 CH: Actually, I had quite a bit of correspondence with my family. I used to write
16 them, and they used to write me. Actually, afterwards, you know, when my mom died
17 and my father died, my mother or my sisters or I don't know who it is, but they started
18 going through their stuff and they—I have a whole stack of letters that they had saved,
19 that I had written while I was overseas. So I got quite a bit of letters from my family and I
20 wrote back quite a bit, too.

21 KC: What sort of things would you write to them? And what sort of things would
22 they write to you in return?

23 CH: Well, I'd write where I was going, what I was doing. You know, sometimes
24 how I was feeling. I remember at the time I had picked up a guitar and was playing the
25 guitar. You know, I was never any good at it, but I was trying. They would write back
26 and tell me what they were doing and what the family was doing, how everybody was
27 doing. I remember—So that kind of stuff. I had a girlfriend. Her name was Nora
28 Marcheck. I would get letters from her. Of course, I'd correspond back to her as well. So
29 that's basically it.

30 KC: What sort of idea did you have of what was taking place back in the US, back
31 in the States?

1 CH: At that time, nothing. You know, again this time a twenty-year-old guy who
2 was out on a world adventure.

3 KC: So no one was providing you with any sort of information about the anti-war
4 protests going on? About the social upheaval?

5 CH: No. At that time, no.

6 KC: Okay.

7 CH: At that time, no.

8 KC: Right.

9 CH: No.

10 KC: Okay. Tell me about the people you served with on the *Winston*. You don't
11 have to provide names if you don't want to but tell me about the relationship among you
12 all there. Like you say, you all have to get along. You may not necessarily like each
13 other, but you have to get along given the proximity and time, and things like that.

14 CH: Right, right.

15 KC: What was it like to be a young, low-ranking sailor on board this supply ship?

16 CH: Yeah, can you hang on a second?

17 KC: Sure. (Audio Cuts)

18 CH: Sorry. What was it like being on board the USS *Winston*? Well, like I said,
19 you had to get along together. I became good friends with a fellow by the name of
20 Geoffrey Zender. He and I used to go—we used to pal around together on board the ship.
21 When we went into ports, if we were able to, we'd always go into port together. You
22 know, the radiomen and—obviously the radiomen got to know each other more than
23 some of the other people because we were stuck together in this little radio shack for
24 eight, twelve hours a day. However long our shifts were. You know, we were all
25 eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-olds. For the most part, I would venture to say that ninety
26 percent of us were all eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-olds. And I'm a fairly easy
27 individual to get along with, so I don't remember being at odds with anybody.

28 KC: How much or how aware were you of the war as it was taking place in
29 Southeast Asia? What did you know about it? Were you hearing things about it? What
30 was your perception of the war?

1 CH: Well, my perception was that we were fighting communism. That was my
2 perception of the war. I knew we had guys that were getting killed and wounded and
3 maimed for life, but I believed that we were doing the right thing. I believed that we were
4 doing the right thing. You know, it's kind of probably out of fashion today, and I don't
5 know if I ever really thought of it like this, but my country called, and I accepted the
6 challenge.

7 KC: When does your time on the *Winston* come to a close? You were there from
8 December of 1968. When did you leave the *Winston*?

9 CH: I left the *Winston* on—I'm trying to think. I left the *Winston* in September of
10 1969.

11 KC: September of '69.

12 CH: Right. After we left Da Nang, we came back obviously on the Pacific. On the
13 way back, several things happened on the way back. One was that I remember being a
14 radioman. Remember, we're bobbing up and down in the middle of the Pacific Ocean
15 being a radioman. It was probably a two, three-week transit back from Vietnam to San
16 Diego.

17 KC: Now you come back on the *Winston*?

18 CH: Yeah, I flew in and came back on the *Winston*. I remember that I was
19 required to climb up the big radio mast that had all the antennas and I remember having
20 to climb up there and being very afraid of heights at the time. (Laughs) I guess I was
21 okay. I guess I had a safety belt on and all of that. So if I fell I wouldn't fall down and kill
22 myself, I'd rather hang there. But I remember that. I remember also pulling into—and
23 being a radioman, on the teletypes there's these little tinker tapes that you put in a
24 machine and for every letter there's a hole that is punched into the tape. We used to get
25 bags and bags of those with all the, oh gosh what is it—messages that we would send.
26 Our duty was at the time we'd take that, and we'd dump them over the side of the ship.
27 We'd empty them out. It was called "chad". Remember the hanging chads in Florida?

28 KC: (Chuckles) Right.

29 CH: It was called chad and we used to just dump them off the side of the ship.
30 Well, when we were in, I think it was probably Subic Bay, they had put a fresh coat of
31 paint on the side of the ship. One of the junior radiomen, rather than going to the fan tail

1 and dumping it off, decided to dump it off the side of the ship while we're out to sea. The
2 next morning, the old man got wind of all this literally hanging chad on the side of the
3 ship. (Laughs) And he was not a happy camper.

4 KC: That's a whole new meaning for the phrase, "Hanging chad."

5 CH: That's right, that's right. Also, on the way back, we were told that the
6 *Winston* was going to be decommissioned. And so in the Navy, they had what is known
7 as dream sheets. And that's, "Where do you want to go the next time?" Well, on the way
8 back, I guess I've always been—I don't know, I was born and raised in a very Catholic
9 family. We tried to be very religious and went to church every Sunday and my father
10 used to go to church every day. I used to go with him all the time. I was an altar boy. On
11 the way back, on the way back to the United States—we got back, I think in May of '69.
12 On the way back to the United States I remember that family in Da Nang along the side
13 of the road begging. And I thought, "Wait, I wonder if I could go back there and help
14 those people." Not that particular family, but the Vietnamese people. So on the way back,
15 I volunteered to go back.

16 KC: To go back to Vietnam?

17 CH: Yes. Yes, I volunteered to go back.

18 KC: Now this wasn't out of a desire to preserve the American way of life, it
19 wasn't out of desire to help win the war. It was out of a desire to help these people, these
20 unfortunate people.

21 CH: That's right.

22 KC: Caught in the middle of this maelstrom of the Vietnam War.

23 CH: That's exactly what was going through my mind at the time.

24 KC: Wow. That's a pretty heavy decision to make as a twenty-year-old man.

25 CH: Well, I guess, I guess. So when I turned in my dream sheet the
26 (unintelligible) goes, he says, "Hicks, forget it." He says, "Forget it." He said, "We've
27 got thousands and thousands and thousands of volunteers. A list a mile long to go back to
28 Vietnam." I said—well, you know, whatever. I turned in my orders or turned in my
29 dream sheet. We got back to San Diego and my family was waiting there for me and they
30 had a grand homecoming. Nora Marcheck was there. A couple of my buddies from high
31 school were there. Mark Lubasitch and Greg Riley were there. The only reason why I

1 remembered that is because I was recently going through some old photographs of my
2 time in the Navy, and I saw them there with the family that day. My orders come in and
3 go back to Vietnam. I thought, “Well, okay.”

4 KC: Let me ask you this, just to keep my timeline straight here, when did you go
5 back to the US?

6 CH: In May of ‘69.

7 KC: May of ‘69.

8 CH: Yeah. The ship was being decommissioned. In September of ‘69 I got my
9 orders. It might have been in August of ‘69. I got my orders to go back to Vietnam to be
10 assigned to the nature naval and communication station outside of Saigon at a place
11 called Nha Be. I got my orders to go back there.

12 KC: Okay, now you were in-country, or you were on the *Winston* from, let’s see,
13 December of ‘68 until it was decommissioned in August or September.

14 CH: Actually, it took longer than that to be decommissioned, but my orders—
15 when I got my orders, had to obviously go where I was told to go, and the ship was still
16 in the process of being decommissioned when I got my orders to go back to Vietnam. I
17 actually left the *Winston* before it was actually decommissioned.

18 KC: Okay, but you were back in the States by you say, May of ‘69?

19 CH: May of ‘69.

20 KC: Okay. So from December of ‘68 to May of ‘69, you were in-country as it
21 were and then came back to the US.

22 CH: Right.

23 KC: Alright, alright. Now you’ve talked about this reunion with your family and
24 friends there in California. What was it like to see your parents, what was it like to see
25 your siblings?

26 CH: Oh, it was great, it was great. You know, some of the photographs that were
27 taken that day—just happy. You know, my mom was just tickled pink, my father was all
28 proud of me at this point in time. He was actually disappointed that I enlisted in the Navy
29 because being an officer he wanted me to go to Annapolis. But I guess at this point in
30 time he started to be proud of me, which was fine with me. It was nice, it was nice being
31 home. Here I am away six, seven, eight, nine months, whatever it was. Yeah, it was great

1 to be home, great to see the family, good to see Nora. And Greg and Mark were there.
2 Most of the family was there. Of course, my older brother Gregory wasn't there. He was
3 up in Vallejo, California, at the time.

4 KC: Okay, now you get home in the spring of 1969, in California. What was the
5 climate like, the social climate like for veterans returning home from war in Vietnam?
6 Did you encounter any of the hostility?

7 CH: Not at that time, I did not. No, not at that time. Actually, my friends were—
8 you know, from high school, we got together, and we had a good old time, and they were
9 asking me about my adventures overseas. No, I did not sense any of that. That would
10 come later, that would come later. I did not sense any of that at the time. As a matter of
11 fact, I don't think in '69—yeah, I don't recall any of that at that point in time.

12 KC: Of course, as you said before you grew up in a Navy family, so you had
13 support there and then you're still in the Navy. It's not like you're cut loose to civilian
14 society, to fend for yourself.

15 CH: Right.

16 KC: You're also still in a tight and naval community, so that probably would have
17 buffered you I would think.

18 CH: That is correct.

19 KC: If something was going on.

20 CH: Yes. I was still going where I was told to go and doing what I was told to do.

21 KC: That being said, were you aware at this time when you came back, of the
22 changes and the social climate relative to the war and other cultural issues?

23 CH: Nope. No, was not. That would come later.

24 KC: Right.

25 CH: That would come later.

26 KC: So what did you do in the Navy from May of '69 until you left for Vietnam
27 again?

28 CH: Decommissioning the ship. You know, taking away the—you know,
29 decommissioning the ship. Taking the ship apart basically. Taking all the radio
30 equipment off, taking all the—shutting down the radio shack. You know, I was still an E3
31 at the time, so I think I probably had to do a lot of the grunt work. I did not have a car at

1 the time, but I used to hitch a ride back up to Los Angeles. A lot of times we used to
2 hitchhike from San Diego to Los Angeles, Pasadena.

3 KC: What would you do?

4 CH: We used to hitchhike. We used to hitchhike in uniform, and we used to get
5 picked up and very nice people would take us up there and back. Actually, I usually took
6 the bus back.

7 KC: What sort of things would you do when you'd go up to Pasadena or LA?

8 CH: Go out to Bob's Big Boy and have their french fries and blue cheese
9 dressing, which I dreamt about overseas and just be with the family and go to church.
10 You know, go to church and just be with family and friends. I was footloose and fancy
11 free really because I had a place to stay. I had food over my head, I was getting paid. I
12 didn't really have any obligations. You know, you do all the things that nineteen, twenty-
13 year-olds do.

14 KC: Right. Did you keep up with the progress of the war in Vietnam?

15 CH: No, no. Did not, did not.

16 KC: Now, your orders come in—I guess in August or September of 1969 and
17 you're going to be going back to Vietnam, to this new assignment. And we'll get into that
18 in the next interview session.

19 CH: Right.

20 KC: Just to kind of wrap up for today, what was your reaction to finding out that
21 you were going to go back to Vietnam? And what was your family's reaction to this?

22 CH: Well, my reaction was, you know, I'm going back to Vietnam. I had no idea
23 what was in store for me. I was a radioman. So anyway, I really had no idea what was in
24 store for me. Other than that, I'd volunteered. My orders came back that I was to go back
25 for another year. My parents, that's a different story. (Laughs)

26 KC: Tell me about their reaction.

27 CH: Well, their reaction was, "Why did you do that?" I distinctly remember my
28 father asking me, "Christopher, you just came back from Vietnam. Why did you
29 volunteer to go back?" I don't remember doing this, but after my mom passed away, I
30 found a letter that I had written in October of 1969 that was in response to my father
31 asking me why I had volunteered to go back. I guess I was in tune with what was going

1 on at the time. My response was, you know, was a one-page letter hand-written. I got a
2 copy of it hanging on the wall of my office here that basically said, “Mom and dad, I’m
3 doing it for freedom. I’m doing it because I don’t want the world to be overrun by
4 communism. That my children and their children could be free.” You know, I don’t
5 remember writing the letter although the letter’s there so obviously I did write it. I found
6 out afterwards that my father had gotten it—and this was years later that I had found out
7 that somebody in my family had gotten the letter printed in the Pasadena Star News.

8 KC: Really?

9 CH: Yeah.

10 KC: What kind of reaction did you have when you found out about that? Being
11 printed in the newspaper?

12 CH: Well Kelly, this is years later.

13 KC: Sure.

14 CH: I thought, “Well that’s kind of neat.” I actually thought it was kind of neat
15 that my family cared enough to do that, more than it being printed. I thought it was pretty
16 neat, you know. I thought it was pretty neat. My mom indecently, after I was on leave,
17 my mom—remember, I’m the third oldest of fourteen children. When I left home my
18 youngest brother was three years old. So it was really like two families. The older half
19 and the younger half. When I was on leave between duties, between the Winston and
20 going back to Vietnam, my mom—we lived at Pasadena at the time and my mom called
21 me into her bedroom. She locked the door. She pulled me aside and said, “Christopher, I
22 want to give you this. I want to give you these.” What she gave me was a ring that her
23 father had given her, a nice little gold ring with a big rock sitting on top of it in a crown.
24 She also gave me another small ring that her first husband’s father had made in 1896 in
25 the Black Hills of Dakota.

26 KC: Wow.

27 CH: I was stunned. I was stunned and I still have them today, I still have them
28 today. When I was in Ireland, I had briefly lost the ring to a girlfriend over there, but I got
29 it back from her. But I still have both of those rings to this day.

30 KC: What kind of significance did you and your mother attach to those rings that
31 she made this presentation to you?

1 CH: I don't know what significance she did and at the time I didn't think about it.
2 Other than that, I was flabbergasted. Later in life it was quite—oh gosh, what is it. You
3 know, out of fourteen kids she gives it to me? You know. So that was quite a significance
4 to me.

5 KC: Sure.

6 CH: My mom must have thought highly of me.

7 KC: Very powerful I would think.

8 CH: Huh?

9 KC: Very powerful I would think.

10 CH: Yeah, yeah. Well, it is in later life, a very powerful statement that out of
11 fourteen kids she gave them to me. I don't know if that was because I was first to leave
12 home, my older brother and I. But she could have given them to my older brother
13 Gregory, but she didn't.

14 KC: Sure.

15 CH: My father and my mother were shocked that I had volunteered to go back. So
16 anyway.

17 KC: Well, why don't we take a break there for today Mr. Hicks?

18 CH: Yeah.

Interview with Christopher Hicks

Session [2] of [3]

Date 23 April 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History interview with Mr.
2 Christopher Hicks. Today is 23 April 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Hicks is joining me by telephone from his office in Long
4 Beach, California. Mr. Hicks, with our last interview session we ended up with the end of
5 your first tour, your first time there off the USS *Winston*. You were talking about your
6 decision to volunteer to come back to Vietnam for various reasons that you mentioned
7 before. And since our last interview session you sent me a copy of the letter that you
8 wrote to your family explaining this decision to volunteer to go back to Vietnam. I'd like
9 you to read that letter to me if you can, so we can get this on the record. So that other
10 people can kind of get an idea of your mindset and your philosophy, and why you
11 decided to take this very large step in your life to go back to Vietnam when you didn't
12 have to do so. I know that you have that in front of you. If you would please, can you
13 read the letter?

14 Christopher Hicks: Sure. My father asked me why I volunteered to go back to
15 Vietnam since I just came back. I don't know if I wrote this letter the day he asked me or
16 a couple days later, but it's dated October 7th, 1969, and it reads as follows, "I
17 volunteered for Vietnam because I believe in our way of life. I believe in a land where
18 freedom of speech is important, freedom of religion and freedom to protest against the
19 war. Freedom to burn—" Sorry, I'm going to get ahold of it.

20 KC: It's okay.

21 CH: Okay, all right. I'm going to get ahold of it. "Freedom to burn one's draft
22 card. I volunteered so Black people could have a place to protest against White brutality
23 and so that the hippies could protest against police brutality. I volunteered so teachers
24 will have a place to teach. Their beliefs without fear of being shot for their teachings, and
25 so that pupils could listen to the beliefs without the fear of being tortured for listening to
26 the teachers. I volunteered so the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) would have a
27 place to rally against a free society. I volunteered so president killers could be guaranteed
28 a fair trial and so you could read this without being thrown in prison for treason or

1 “crimes against the people.” So you can travel freely from city to city, state to state. I am
2 giving a year of my life so you can go to college of your choice and take the courses you
3 want to take, so you students can ditch classes in protest of this war. I volunteered so my
4 children can live in a free society in the years to come and so their children can too. To
5 me, all of this is important and I’m willing to give a year of my life, and maybe even my
6 life so the American people can go on living in a society where all of these things are
7 obtainable. You ask why I volunteered for Vietnam and my best answer could only be, I
8 volunteered for you. Love, Chris.”

9 KC: What was your family’s reaction to this?

10 CH: Well, you know, Kelly, I can’t remember. I was twenty years old at the time.
11 I turned twenty-one my second time in Vietnam. You know, as a parent whose daughter
12 was ordered to Iraq, I can only imagine the fear that my parents had for me. But to be
13 quite frank with you, I don’t remember. I don’t remember what their reaction was.

14 KC: As a twenty-year-old man who had seen some military service, had done his
15 one bit of his duty, and known other members of the military, particularly the Navy of
16 course, did you feel that your attitude toward this, towards the war and towards your
17 participation in the war, did you feel like it was novel? Did you feel that you were one of
18 the only people that you knew who had this kind of approach, this kind of understanding
19 about your service? Or did you feel that there were others like you?

20 CH: No, I didn’t feel alone. Although I don’t remember talking about it, I do
21 remember that, you know, between my first and second tour, a classmate of mine—
22 actually, he wasn’t a classmate of mine, he was two years older than I. He went to
23 Vietnam, and he was killed within a couple of months. You know, Kelly, you’re asking
24 me questions that I really don’t remember. I really don’t remember whether I felt alone
25 nor not. I have always been under the—I don’t know if impression is the right word or
26 not—that it was a noble thing that we were trying to do over there and that was defeat
27 communism.

28 KC: Now obviously you put some thought into this decision. This wasn’t
29 something you said, “Oh, what the hell. I’ll go ahead and do this again.” Did you have
30 any trepidation about volunteering to go back?

1 CH: No, not really. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I didn't know
2 where I'd be stationed. You know, as I mentioned last time I think, I didn't even know if
3 I would get orders back there because of what one of the (unintelligible) said. You know,
4 that there's a list a mile long of individuals like myself volunteering to go back over. So,
5 no. But I didn't know what I was getting into. So to answer your question, yeah, I
6 probably did have some trepidations.

7 KC: Sure.

8 CH: I'd been watching this on the television since the mid-60s and here I am late
9 '69, October the 7th of '69 and I knew people were getting killed and everything. I just
10 didn't know what to expect.

11 KC: Did you know in what capacity you would be serving in Vietnam once you
12 got the orders?

13 CH: No, did not. I got my orders to a naval communications station, Nha Be. I
14 had no idea where that was, I had no idea what type of base it was. I had no idea of
15 anything.

16 KC: Describe for me your leaving the United States for this tour in Vietnam.

17 CH: I left the USS *Winston* actually on August the 9th of 1969. On September the
18 9th I had a month's leave. On September the 9th, I got my orders to what they called
19 NAVSUPACT Saigon (Naval Support Activity Saigon). In late September of '69 I was
20 sent to a two week, what we called SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape)
21 school and that was at the US Naval Amphibious base in Coronado. And it was a survival
22 school. SERE stands for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape. You know, they were
23 trying to give us a little idea what would happen if you went over there and got captured
24 by the enemy or you got lost or you're wandering around in the middle of the jungle and
25 didn't know where you were, etc. It was training on small arms. Small arms and what
26 they called counter insurgency operations. They taught us how to survive in the jungle. I
27 distinctly remember this part and that was that if you were injured and out in the jungle
28 by yourself or even with a couple of your buddies and you didn't have any fresh water—
29 that if you urine, when it comes out of your body it's sterile. They said, you know, "If
30 you're wounded, you need to pee on your wound to clean it off." You know, little
31 survival techniques like that. They taught us how to—you know, if we had some basic

1 equipment with a tarp, an old can or something, how to put it in the sun to catch the
2 condensation to drip into the can, so you would have some drinking water and stuff like
3 that. I completed that on October the 3rd of 1969. The only reason why I know that is
4 because I cheated like I said and went back and read some records between the last
5 interview and this.

6 KC: Let me ask you this while we got you here at SERE school at Coronado. You
7 talked about the survival aspect, the “S” in SERE. What about evasion, what about
8 resistance, and what about escape? Take me through the things that you learned there
9 about these three aspects.

10 CH: Well, evasion is trying to keep out of sight. You know, trying to keep out of
11 sight if you were out there by yourself or even if you weren’t out there by yourselves,
12 how to stay away from the enemy. What to do—you know, smoking was a big no-no
13 because smoke carries in the jungle. It carries anywhere I guess, but smoking was a big
14 no-no because I guess the North Vietnam and the VC (Viet Cong) were trained not to do
15 that because it would give away their location. You know, resistance would be fighting to
16 stay out of your hands as best they could. You know, escape was—like I said, if you were
17 captured, I guess things that you could do. Although to be quite frank with you Kelly, I
18 don’t remember much of that. I don’t remember much of that.

19 KC: Sure.

20 CH: I suppose while I was going through that I may have been thinking to myself,
21 “What have I gotten myself into?” But I know for a fact that it did not dampen my desire
22 to go back there the second time.

23 KC: Okay, you’ve touched on an important point there and I’d like to follow up
24 on this a little bit. You say that when you’re going through SERE school you probably
25 were thinking, “What have I gotten myself into?” Christopher Hicks is a radio operator
26 and now all of a sudden Christopher Hicks has volunteered to go back to Vietnam and
27 they’re telling him, “Oh yeah, you used to be on the *Winston* as a radio operator, now
28 we’re going to train you how to deal potentially with surviving and being captured by the
29 enemy in the jungle.”

30 CH: Right.

1 KC: What's going through your mind here? Did you have any idea where this
2 might be leading you?

3 CH: Umm—

4 KC: Obviously, you're not going to be part of the Blue Water Navy now. I
5 assume you had that understanding.

6 CH: Yeah. (Laughs) At this point in time that would be a correct statement. I was
7 not going to be part of the Blue Water Navy. You know, I've been thinking about this
8 and when we get into it later while I was in there, I don't know whether I was just, you
9 know, a young man who had very idealistic thoughts about our country, about what we
10 were doing. I do know that you asked me if I had any trepidation or any regrets about
11 volunteering to go back a second time and I clearly remember that I did not. You know, I
12 really didn't know what I was getting myself into. I really did not know what I was
13 getting myself into. You know, I found out later after, when I was in 'Nam the second
14 time that, you know, radio operators were a key target for the enemy. Because of course,
15 the radio operators, you know, call in air support and all other sort of fire base support
16 and all that sort of stuff. Radiomen were key targets over there, but at the time I didn't
17 realize that.

18 KC: Well, you finish up SERE training in October. When do you leave for your
19 next assignment? When do you leave for Vietnam?

20 CH: Well, you know, as near as I can tell, it's probably shortly after SERE school.
21 I was in Nha Be on October 16th of 1969, so it was probably shortly after SERE school
22 that I went. I don't know the exact date. On October the 10th of '69 I remember—well, I
23 don't remember, but I read from one of the letters to home—no, it was off of my service
24 jacket that I had advanced from a radioman seaman up to a radioman 3rd class. So I was a
25 3rd class petty officer when I arrived there. I know I was in Nha Be on October the 16th
26 from reading one of the letters home that I was there. You know, probably if I got out of
27 SERE school on October the 3rd and I was in Nha Be on October the 16th, it must have
28 been very shortly after I completed SERE school.

29 KC: Now how did you cross the Pacific to Vietnam the second time?

30 CH: On a plane.

31 KC: Okay. Tell me about that trip.

1 CH: Yeah. Again, it was by myself. I mean, the plane was full of GIs going over
2 there, but I did not go with a unit, I did not go with a company. That struck me later in
3 life or afterwards it struck me that unlike World War II and probably in the Korean
4 War—I don't know what it was like for the rest of the, you know, the rest of the branches
5 of the military. Actually, I know my marine buddy in Okinawa, he went over there with
6 his unit. As a Navy person though, I went over by myself. Meaning, I didn't know
7 anybody on the flight over there. It was a big adventure getting on the plane, having your
8 C-Bag and landing in Tan Son Nhut Airport. This time in the middle of everything, Tan
9 Son Nhut Airport was the main in and out for military personnel out of Saigon.

10 KC: What was Tan Son Nhut like when you arrived?

11 CH: Big. You know, you walked down the flight of stairs off the plane and there's
12 a big black top there and you've got all kinds of military aircraft and you've got all kinds
13 of military vehicles. You're looking around and there's, you know, barbed wire all
14 around. Sandbag bunkers and all of that. It's the heat of the day and here I am.

15 KC: When did you get your orders and where were they to?

16 CH: Well, I got my orders while I was aboard the USS *Winston*.

17 KC: Okay.

18 CH: Like I said, it was to the Naval Support Activity Saigon, and they directed
19 me to go to Nha Be. I'm guessing it's probably ten, fifteen miles. I believe it was
20 Southwest of Saigon. It was a large naval communication station that also had—it was
21 also on the Saigon River. It had all kinds of brown water Navy boats there, PBRs (Patrol
22 Boat, River), you know, lifeboats, all the other types of small boats that go up and down
23 the canals in South Vietnam.

24 KC: So you're right up there at Nha Bai, here it is October of 1969. What was
25 your role going to be? What was your job going to be once you got there?

26 CH: Well, at this point I was a radioman. Like I said, they had a big naval
27 communication station there and mine was to be a radioman. What I did there was—
28 actually when I first got there, it was primarily working on the teletype machines. You
29 know, sending and receiving messages from Saigon, from the ships off the coast of
30 Vietnam. You know, supply orders, etc. We had—our duty was twelve on and twelve off.
31 We worked for twelve hours, and we got twelve hours off for a while. You know, being a

1 radioman, it was all air conditioned because back then the communications equipment
2 needed, as I'm assuming they still do today, but I know back then the communications
3 equipment needed to be—the temperature needed to be below a certain point so that the
4 equipment would not overheat, so it would operate.

5 KC: Take me through what your job was there at Nha Be. If it seems mundane too
6 you, it will not to other people who will be listening to this interview or reading the
7 transcript. Take me through what your job was and don't worry about it being too
8 technical if that's a concern for you. Take me through the ins and outs of it.

9 CH: Well, you mentioned if it's too mundane. In some of the letters I was reading
10 the other day, it did appear to be mundane. (Laughs) I was the low man on the totem
11 pole. In addition to using the teletype machines, I was also assigned to—we had these
12 mimeograph machines where we would have to mimeograph, you know messages, etc. I
13 do distinctly remember being assigned to doing that and that was kind of boring because
14 you'd just sit there on the mimeograph machine and turn the handle and make X amount
15 of copies all day long. You know, we made—back then and to be quite frank I can't
16 remember the name, but there was a song by Credence Clearwater that had the same
17 tempo as the mimeograph machine. We'd try to play that Credence Clearwater song, or
18 we'd even sing the song as we were, you know, operating the mimeograph machine. It's
19 the mimeograph machine, for those who don't know, it's an old-fashioned copying
20 machine that you had to use with a special type of liquid chemical to transfer the images
21 from the master copy onto the other copies that you were making copies of. So anyway, it
22 was a big place. Yeah, it was a big place.

23 KC: So how long were you running the mimeograph machine with the blue ink
24 and everything? How long were you doing it?

25 CH: I can't remember Kelly. You know, it was part of the daily job; it was part of
26 the daily routine. While I was at Nha Be it was part of the daily routine while we were
27 there. This is off the subject though, but there was a guy there who was leaving, and his
28 last name was Hicks as well. When it was shortly after I arrived, he was leaving, and he
29 was gracious enough to leave me his jungle fatigues that had been broken in so that I
30 wouldn't look like a newbie. (Laughs) You know, wearing his clothes versus my clothes.

1 KC: Those looks are pretty important too, especially for somebody who is in your
2 position. I would think that at least the appearance of being in-country for a while would
3 make things a little bit easier on you when you came across other people who had more
4 time in-country.

5 CH: Yeah, yeah. It made you look—when I got his uniforms, I felt good that I
6 didn't look like I was the new kid on the block anymore, I remember that.

7 KC: Did your job change while you were at Nha Be to something else?

8 CH: Yeah, it did. We had two sections which was twelve on and twelve off.
9 Again, in reading the letters to home, they had switched it to three sections which means
10 that it was eight hours a section now. Apparently, one of the individuals who was using
11 the voice equipment was going on R&R (Rest and Recuperation) and I was chosen, you
12 know, by the powers to be, whatever, to be trained on the voice equipment to fill in for
13 him while he was gone. I wrote home that I was a little nervous about it because it was
14 completely unfamiliar to me, but I told my mom and dad or my brother or whoever I
15 wrote to that I was advancing very well, and I thought I could probably handle it when he
16 left. So there we were. We were now on three sections instead of two sections, which
17 means that I got more time off.

18 KC: Let me ask you this question, and I don't mean to make this sound unfair.
19 You had volunteered for the reasons that you mentioned before and now you're in-
20 country. You're in Nha Bae and you're in the communications outfit and you're working
21 in an office. Now, this is not to demean your service or your experiences in any way,
22 believe me.

23 CH: Right.

24 KC: But when people typically have a mindset, I would think of yours going into
25 it and there you are in an office for your tour in Vietnam, did you feel that you were
26 being, or your desires were being fulfilled? Did you feel that you were making a positive
27 contribution to this effort, to try do all the things that you wanted to help do?

28 CH: No, I did not. You know, when people ask me why I volunteered I give them
29 the same answer that I gave you. I guess the same answer that I gave my parents. This is
30 after I started talking about it, years after I was out of the service. I would say that my
31 intentions were good, but it didn't work out that way. Well, later on when we get into it,

1 it worked out a little bit, but right at that point, no. I didn't think I was over there doing
2 what I thought I might be doing. To be quite frank with you, the realization started to set
3 in that maybe I wouldn't be able to do it because, "By God, Hicks, there's a war going on
4 and the road to hell is paved with good intentions." So no, I was over there, and I was
5 part of the effort at this point in time even though I was just not—well, I won't even use
6 the word just, even though I was the support person in the back lines. No, I didn't think I
7 was fulfilling why I volunteered to go over there.

8 KC: A little disappointing is what I hear you saying.

9 CH: Uh, I don't know if I was disappointed. You know, maybe it was
10 disappointing. Although, in any situation you're in, the activities at the time tend to take
11 over and sometimes you may not get the chance to sit down and reflect on, you know
12 prior thoughts.

13 KC: Sure, sure.

14 CH: And Nha Be was a big base. It had been attacked in the past. While I was
15 there, Saigon was attacked, and we could hear the bombs going off and all that. While I
16 was there, Nha Be was not attacked at all. As a matter of fact, it was quite calm.
17 Remember this is after Tet of '68. This is towards the end of '69. I believe Nixon had
18 started to withdrawal troops at that point in time. They started Vietnamization, which was
19 President Nixon's, you know, plan to replace the American GIs with the ARVN (Army of
20 the Republic of Vietnam), the South Vietnamese Army and Navy personnel and Air
21 Force personnel. So no, it was a quiet time. Big base. There was a whole village if you
22 will, or shopping district if you will or whatever you want to call it, where after you got
23 off watch and if you weren't sleeping you could go off base and go to bars and walk
24 around and go shopping and take your clothes out to get them washed and ironed and—
25 washed, starched, and ironed by the "mama-san", as we called the women over there, the
26 women who did that.

27 KC: That brings up another good area I'd like for you to discuss for me. You were
28 on a twelve on, twelve off and later on eight, then off sixteen, then eight again. Tell me
29 about your daily routine and that includes the off time as well. You've already discussed
30 what you were doing while you were on duty, but what was your daily routine? When do
31 you wake up? Take me through your whole day.

1 CH: Well, it depends on what watch you had is when you woke up. You know,
2 obviously if you were midnight watch to twelve in the afternoon, you sleep afterwards,
3 you're up at six o'clock or so. In reading some of the letters home, which quite frankly I
4 don't remember too much, but apparently, I did—I had bought one of my younger
5 brothers, Anthony, a guitar before I left and he had expressed an interest in it and I
6 bought myself a guitar and took the guitar over to Vietnam with me. You know, in the
7 letters home I indicate that I was practicing my guitar. We played football, we played
8 basketball, we went out of the base. I was born and raised Catholic and at the time going
9 to church mass services was important to me. When they had mass, I would go to mass as
10 much as I could, especially on Christmas and the holidays and stuff like that. I wrote
11 home on October 16th, 1969, that everything "was safe." Outside the base they had what
12 we called "The White Mice". They were the Vietnamese police. We called them The
13 White Mice because they wore all white uniforms and they stuck out like a sore thumb in
14 the population. You could definitely tell who the police were. I remember, or I don't
15 remember, but I listened to the World Series—three of the World Series games. At the
16 time I wrote that, the Baltimore bombs apparently—Baltimore was in the playoffs and
17 didn't do too well. The chief on the time off, twelve on, twelve off—eight on, sixteen off,
18 there was a chief. His name was Chief Mercer and he asked me if I had a driver's license.
19 I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Well, listen. You're going to have to go get you a military
20 driver's license." And they gave me a book to read. All the driving rules in Vietnam, etc.
21 To get a military driver's license because on my twelve on, twelve off and eight on,
22 sixteen off I was going to start to be required to drive into Saigon to pick up, you know,
23 correspondence from the headquarters in Saigon. I got my military driver's license, and I
24 went to a place called—in November. Anyway, I got my military driver's license. Part of
25 what my off-time duties were—I was still on duty, but I just wasn't in the com center—
26 would be to drive into Saigon to pick up, you know, correspondence, etc.

27 KC: What about other off duty things that you might do? Off duty past times?
28 You talked about some of the things. What about correspondence with your family, with
29 your friends? What sort of things are you reading in the newspaper, hearing on the radio?
30 What other sorts of things do you have?

1 CH: Well, we've got the *Stars and Stripes*. That's the military newspaper that's
2 been around I believe since World War II and of course they had their own *Stars and*
3 *Stripes* edition in Vietnam. We had very grainy television where we could kind of watch
4 the World Series. We had the radio. I read in some of the letters that I wrote home that I
5 was doing a lot of reading, reading of books. My correspondence home was asking
6 questions about the stuff that was going on back home that some of my brothers or my
7 mom or my dad had written about and how the other family members were doing, how
8 they were doing in school. A lot of letter writing, a lot of reading. At this point in my life,
9 I don't think I was doing a lot of drinking of alcohol, but maybe outside of the base some
10 of the shanty bars, I probably did. I don't remember—and playing games; football,
11 baseball, basketball, thinks like that with the rest of the people there. With the rest of the
12 guys there.

13 KC: Describe for me the relationship among the people with whom you worked
14 and lived.

15 CH: Well, for the most part it was good. I did notice over there that—and again,
16 this was late sixties and the Black Power movement had started. There's certainly—it
17 appeared to me that the Blacks hung out together. I remember them doing the little—you
18 know, their welcoming handshakes where they'd shake their hands and all the other sort
19 of stuff that they did. You know, their welcoming handshake. I remember seeing that.
20 Not that I didn't get along with any Blacks, but I remember them hanging out together
21 more so than hanging out with the White guys.

22 KC: Did you see any evidence of problems, racial problems between Whites and
23 Blacks?

24 CH: No, I didn't see any. I didn't see any at all. Not that I remember at all. You
25 know, we had in the barracks—we had the mama-sans who cleaned up, you know, the
26 barracks and obviously they got paid for it. I can't remember whether we chipped in and
27 paid or that was provided for by the Navy. As I mentioned, we would have to take our
28 clothes out to, you know, outside of the base and leave them off the laundry and come
29 and pick them up a day or so later. They'd all be folded and starched. I read in a letter
30 that they'd often be burnt with irons. It appeared that they did more starching and ironing
31 than they did cleaning because a lot of times whatever stains or whatever was still on the

1 uniform. I remember talking to Vietnamese people. I remember—well actually, I read in
2 one of the letters home that I was talking to one of the “mama-sans” and she indicated
3 how she knew that an education was a very good thing to have. That obviously impressed
4 me because I wrote about it home. Off base I went one time to a Vietnamese restaurant,
5 and I remember having what they called Chinese soup. It was a clear broth with some
6 onions in it and has some sort of hot peppers in it. It was one of the hottest things I’ve
7 ever eaten. It was very good, but it was one of the hottest things I had ever had. Again, in
8 the letter to home I wrote that I’d met a Vietnamese guy there who was an artist. He was
9 also in the Vietnamese Army, but his real passion was an artist. He invited me over to his
10 home after the restaurant and according to the letter home I went over there and I wrote
11 home that I wanted to get a picture of mom and dad drawn by him, which I don’t think I
12 ever did. So you know, there were definitely Americans over there who did not—I know
13 this is going to be politically incorrect, but I know there were definitely Americans over
14 there who didn’t like the “gooks” as a lot of people referred to them. To me, it was not a
15 problem, it was not a problem.

16 KC: What was your opinion of the South Vietnamese Military Forces? Clearly
17 you had an affinity for the South Vietnamese civilians, what about the military forces?

18 CH: Well, at that point in time I had very little contact with them Kelly. I had
19 very little contact with them.

20 KC: Describe for me the day-to-day operations at Nha Be. Again, this is a—as I
21 recall, it was also a PBR support base to some degree, as well as a communications
22 center. Describe for me the day-to-day activities there at and around Nha Be.

23 CH: Well, we also had—it was a PBR support base, it was a repair facility for the
24 boats and also some ships that came in. It was also—we also had helicopter pads and we
25 had the helicopters coming and going at all hours of the day and night. I’ve got some very
26 nice photographs of some helicopters taking off at sunset with the silhouette of the
27 helicopters behind the sun. So there was a lot off helicopter activity there as well. We
28 also, I remember seeing for the first time—and to be quite frank I can’t remember what
29 their called, but they were those amphibious naval crafts that were rubber and they had
30 big propeller fans if you will, that would lift them off of the ground and they were both
31 amphibious and could also move around on the land. Those were big, huge things. So

1 there was that type of activity as well. Of course, all the coming and goings of all the
2 guys. You know, it's just like a little city. People coming and going to work. Yeah,
3 people coming and going to work.

4 KC: How much contact did you have with the sailors who were going out and
5 flying up and down the river on the PBRs?

6 CH: At that point in time Kelly, none. At that point in time, none.

7 KC: Had you had any in Vietnam after that time?

8 CH: I did. We can jump to that or let me explain to you what happened.

9 KC: Please do.

10 CH: After I got my driver's license, my first trip into Saigon was—I went, well
11 actually in October. In October I went to Saigon to get my military driver's license and
12 that was an experience. Up to that time I had been—I went from Tan Son Nhut Air Force
13 Base directly to Nha Be. Up until that time, it was probably a month in-country. It was
14 my first full way out if you will, from Nha Be any distance away from the base. You
15 know, obviously we used to walk out to go to the little shops outside. This required me to
16 go to Saigon. I went to Saigon to get my military's driver's license, which I did. And on
17 the way back—going there was crazy because everybody in Vietnam at that point in time
18 either rode motorcycles, little motor bikes, or bicycles. There was a million of them little
19 boogers running around on the road. It was very stressful trying not to hit them and run
20 them over and that sort of stuff. On the way back from getting my military driver's
21 license—I suppose I was with somebody else because I wasn't allowed to drive because I
22 didn't have my military driver's license going there, so I was probably with somebody.
23 The truck broke down and we were stuck at the side of the road for a couple of hours
24 until some other military vehicles came by and were able to help us get it started again.
25 And riding home, I put down the whole experience was, "creepy." I probably broke down
26 in the middle of nowhere on the side of the road and being in-country, not knowing
27 whether we were going to be shot at or drive by or whatever. Apparently, I made it okay.

28 KC: Hmm, interesting.

29 CH: I came back, and I had my military driver's license and my first time I drove
30 into Saigon, and I can't remember exactly when that was, but it was probably shortly
31 thereafter. We were twelve on, twelve off and now on the twelve off I had to drive into

1 Saigon to pick up the mail. When I went there and back, I had got the worst headache that
2 I had ever had in my entire life before then or since then. I think it was due to the stress of
3 driving. Of, you know, driving there. I probably had somebody shotgun with me but
4 driving there and trying not to run over all these Vietnamese people, the stress of it
5 probably just gave me a very bad headache. When I came back, I told myself, "You know
6 what, Hicks? I'm not doing that again." So when it came time, the next time it was due
7 for me to drive into Saigon, Chief Mercer said, "You know, Hicks, you got to go back
8 in." I looked at him and I said, "Listen Chief, I can't. I lost my military's driver's license
9 and without the military's driver's license you can't drive." He was clearly upset; he was
10 clearly upset. But here I am, twenty years old. I can't, you know, I'm thinking, "Oh well,
11 what can you do?" So anyway, I didn't go. A couple weeks or a couple months later, I
12 can't remember when it was, I get called into his office and he says, "Hicks, I've got—"
13 I'll never forget it, he said, "Hicks, I've got nothing against you, but it's your time to go
14 into the field." I thought, "Oh shit, what have I done now?"

15 KC: Now, do you think this was the result of you not being willing to perform this
16 other duty?

17 CH: I'm sure it was, I'm sure it was. I did think that at the time, and I still think it
18 to today. You know, I can't blame him. Here I was—thinking about it right now that you
19 ask me that, I suppose I was lucky I didn't get court marshalled. (Laughs) That comes
20 later. So I got temporary assigned duty and I was issued an M16, a flak jacket, a helmet,
21 my duffle bag, and I was sent off to a temporary TAD (Temporary Additional Duty) duty
22 station somewhere. I can't remember where it was Kelly, but I remember it was on some
23 sort of boat and I arrived there. Again, I'm by myself. All these things I do by myself
24 because that's the way things operated over there. I wasn't transferred around with a unit
25 or anything like that. I'm by myself and I get to the boat and it's evening time and I'm
26 not really sure what to do or anything. But I do remember getting all my gear and finding
27 a little place on deck under a tarp where I slept all night. And the next morning I
28 remember getting up and going down and checking in and they said, "Well Hicks, we
29 don't need you here." So they sent me back to Nha Be. I went and got back to Nha Be—
30 get back to Nha Be and I'm back in, you know, Chief Mercer's unit. It wasn't too long
31 after that where I get called in again and he said, "Hicks, we got some new orders." They

1 were to a PBR support base called Tuyen Nhon. That's probably not the correct
2 Vietnamese pronunciation, but that's what we called it. It was called Tuyen Nhon, and it
3 was a support base. It was also a fire support base as well as a PBR support base. Yeah, it
4 was literally out in the middle of nowhere. It took a day and a half or two days to get
5 there by boats or it took like a half a day to get there flying in my helicopter. And so there
6 I was, really right now getting into the middle of the thick of things. I didn't know what I
7 was getting into, but it was literally, literally out in the middle of nowhere. It was about
8 ten, fifteen miles from what they called the Parrot's Beak, which is in Southern Vietnam.
9 It would be west of Saigon.

10 KC: Yeah, so you're probably about what, forty-five miles or something like that
11 from Saigon?

12 CH: I don't know how far it was. It was a distance away Kelly, it was a distance
13 away. It was probably more than that, but I can't remember to be quite frank with you
14 how far it was from Saigon. We supported the PBR operations up and down the canal.
15 We also—being a radioman, I had a little army communications—gosh, I don't even
16 know what to call it. It originally sat in the back of an army pickup truck. And it was a
17 little communications component that was brought in so I could use it. It wasn't there
18 when I got there, but it was brought in so we could communicate with Saigon and Nha Be
19 and wherever else. It was a little thing where it had a door on it, and it had enough room
20 to sit down on it with a little countertop and on three sides it was all communications
21 equipment. Again, we were twelve on, twelve off there. It seemed to me, I remembered
22 that the equipment was down more than it was up. When it was down, we had to fly in,
23 you know, an army technician to get it back up running again and that might take a
24 couple of days. So for a couple of days at a time I wouldn't have anything to do except
25 lay along the banks of the canal and sun myself and get a nice tan.

26 KC: Tell me what it was like to come into this new unit so far out in the country.
27 What was it like for you, who had been a radio operator, been on the *Winston*, had been
28 in Nha Be, now all of a sudden, you're going out into this very strange new environment?
29 What was it like for you personally, psychologically to take on this new assignment?

30 CH: Well, again I wasn't thinking of my original intent for volunteering to go
31 over there. You know, Kelly, people listen to this or read this or do whatever, it was kind

1 of exciting. You know, here I am. I'm going deeper in-country. Now, unlike Nha Be,
2 now everybody's wearing flak jackets and helmets and carrying around M16s and other
3 various types of weapons. On the PBR that I rode up on—I'm assuming it's a PBR. You
4 know, they had twin 50s on it. You know, everybody was on the lookout and everything.
5 It was probably a little exciting. At the time I don't know whether I was thinking about
6 whether this could be it or not, but you know, going out to a new place it was an
7 adventure for a twenty-one-year-old.

8 KC: Sure, sure absolutely. What about the people you encountered in this new
9 position? What were they like when you came to the unit? What was their relationship
10 with you and what do you think of them?

11 CH: Well, it was a smaller base than I had been in Nha Be, so everybody was—
12 you know, you knew everybody. We had the American base and then right next to it was
13 an ARVN base. ARVN being the Vietnamese soldiers. There was the ARVN base. We
14 got along together, we got along together. I never had problems with anybody while I
15 was over there. I can't remember any problems. There were the contingent of Yanks that
16 again, didn't like the "gooks". It didn't bother me at all. As a matter of fact, I've been
17 reading the letter from home. I had my guitar with me at the time. I don't remember all
18 the details, I apparently befriended some Vietnamese there and went over to one of the
19 Vietnamese houses on base and played my guitar for the "village elder." We had a dog
20 there and it was a big, brown, long-haired dog. It was probably a mutt, but a big brown
21 long-haired dog that—I mean, especially in the heat of the summer, if you had thrown it a
22 steak, if he couldn't plop his head over and get it, he'd just leave it lay there. If a
23 Vietnamese person walked by, that guy turned into a killing machine.

24 KC: Huh.

25 CH: So obviously that was, by some training, I would assume some American
26 person, you know? Wouldn't harm Americans, but if a Vietnamese person walked by,
27 he'd get up and start growling and turn into a real bad SOB.

28 KC: I'll be darned. Describe for me your job there.

29 CH: Well, I was a radioman. Like I said, we had twelve on, twelve off. I had the
30 little army mobile communications box, you know, whatever you wanted to call it. It had
31 a teletype machine in it. I would get messages from the base commander and whoever

1 else and I'd have to relay them, you know, type on teletype into the thing and then relay
2 them to wherever they were going. It was base activity, it was supplies, it was personnel
3 issues and all of that sort of stuff. I do remember—and this was getting away from my
4 job, but I do remember once a week they used to fly in and it might have been once a
5 month. I think it was once a week. They used to fly in fresh T-bone steaks and fresh bell
6 peppers and fresh other type of fruit for us or other type of food for us. We'd have a big
7 old barbeque there. Otherwise, we ate out of the chow hall, or we ate C-rats. I remember
8 eating C-rats.

9 KC: Describe for me again the activity that was taking place there. Again, this is a
10 smaller PBR support base, quite a bit farther out than your previous job. Describe for me
11 the ins and outs, the comings and goings. What were coming in? What would take place
12 with PBR? What kind of interaction would you have? Describe that activity there.

13 CH: Well, obviously the PBR support base and other we would get them in there,
14 we would get them for repair. We would get them to resupply ammunition, resupply
15 food, things like that. They were constantly coming in and going. There were other types
16 of boats coming in as well. You know, while I was there, we used to monitor the
17 firefights that were going on up and down on the canals. I distinctly remember one time
18 in the com center getting—and this may sound, to most civilians who weren't over there,
19 they're either shocked or dismayed at this, but we had to, as US Forces—I don't know if
20 this was in every situation, but a lot of times our guys had to call in and request
21 permission to shoot back if they were fired at. Which, you know, that's no way to run a
22 war. I can remember one time, and it was nighttime. I can remember one time I was
23 manning the voice communications equipment in the com center, and I remember getting
24 a call from a couple of PBRs and just screaming and yelling, "Request permission to fire
25 back, sir." All the while there were twin 50s going off in the back. So obviously they
26 were calling in, but they were also defending themselves at the time they were calling in,
27 requesting permission to fight back or to shoot back. And that struck me as particularly
28 dumb, you know, stupid. Meaning that they had to call in to request permission to shoot
29 back. After the firefights—after the firefights they would go out on what is known as
30 sweeps. That's where you would go to the area where the firefight was to see whether or
31 not you could pick up any intelligence information as to who was there, if there was any

1 bodies, you know, anything. While I was there, I volunteered to go out on the sweeps. I
2 don't know if it was out of boredom, I don't know if it was out of the excitement or I
3 don't know what it was, but I did volunteer and I went out on some sweeps to where the
4 firefights were. One time we did find, or I did find an NVA (North Vietnamese Army)
5 backpack. In writing home, I had found a pair of black pajamas which I thought were a
6 really big war trophy. Back at the base I started to wear this dead NVA's black pajamas
7 around the base.

8 KC: To what kind of reception?

9 CH: Oh, you know, we all did it Kelly. It was out in the middle of nowhere.
10 Actually, before I went to Nha Be or went to Tuyen Nhon, a guy, one of my buddies
11 there sent me the price of a haircut that I wouldn't get a buzz, wouldn't get my head
12 shaved off. And so I said, "Well, I'm going to show you." So I went and got a buzz cut. I
13 got all my hair shaved off. So he paid up. The price of the haircut was twenty-five cents.
14 So I really made out big. (Both laugh) But that's what I was like when I went to Tuyen
15 Nhon. I was there—I think I was there four months. It was probably March sometime that
16 I arrived there. While I was there, I know two months I didn't get a haircut which was if
17 you were in Nha Be or Saigon or something like that you got a haircut every couple of
18 weeks to make sure you were, you know, proper uniform and all. I remember distinctly
19 not getting a haircut there. As a matter of fact, a buddy of mine and myself, we requested
20 permission to go back to Nha Be for a couple of days for whatever reason, just to get
21 away. Permission was granted. I went back to Nha Be and I distinctly remember being in
22 the head and some, you know, first class petty officer came in there and started screaming
23 and yelling at me because not only were my uniforms not pressed, but I had this long
24 shaggy hair. He got all pissed at me and he demanded that I give him my military ID,
25 which I had to, and I did. He asked me where I was from and I told him, "Tuyen Nhon,
26 I've just been here for a couple of days." And he says, "Well you need to get a haircut.
27 Give me your military ID. It will be at the front gate getting out. I'll leave it there and
28 you get a haircut. When you're ready to leave, come by and pick it up." So it was very—
29 had a more lax atmosphere at Tuyen Nhon than it did at the big bases. Ironically, I don't
30 know if this was just my way, but I did not get a haircut. I went to the front base or the
31 front gate and told the guy on duty that, you know, such and such said my ID card's here,

1 can I get it? And he gave it to me and of away I was with my long hair. So I guess I was a
2 little rebel then. But, getting back to the sweeps—

3 KC: Yes. I'd like to interject here if I may.

4 CH: Yeah.

5 KC: What I'd like for you to do, and I think this is very interesting. Take me on
6 one of these sweeps. From the time that you volunteer, to the time that they set you up for
7 this thing, to the gear you're taking with you, to the whole shoot mesh. Take me through
8 the entire sweep.

9 CH: Well, I don't know Kelly, if I did this with trepidation or not, but you're in
10 full gear. You've got your helmet on, your flak jacket, you've got your M16, and you've
11 got your bandolier of ammunition. You're going down hostile territory down the canal.
12 You're going down hostile territory; you don't know whether—at the time I didn't know
13 whether they were going to be waiting in ambush for us or whether they had fled back
14 into the jungles not been seen or what. You would pull up to the place—and this was
15 during the daytime, obviously. You wouldn't do a sweep at night, this is during the
16 daytime. You would get off and be very cautious. You'd be looking around wondering,
17 you know, if something's going to be coming from somewhere. You would go, you
18 know, probably a couple hours walking around just seeing if you could find any tell tale
19 sign of the enemy, who it was. Like I said, I did find an NVA backpack and also, I saw
20 bits and pieces of human beings, you know. Even if it was the enemy, it was still bits and
21 pieces of human beings.

22 KC: Do you remember what kind of impact this had on you at the time?

23 CH: Yeah. War is hell, that's the impact that it had on me. That's the impact that
24 it had on me, war is hell. You know, what can you do? What can you do? I wrote home
25 about it to one of my brothers and I said, "You know, all these war movies that you
26 watch? You don't know until you run across something like that." One time one of our
27 troops was found all bloated floating down the canal. Another, you know, another tragedy
28 if you will of war. You know, I volunteered several times—at least several times Kelly to
29 go out on the sweeps. I also volunteered. I know on at least one occasion I volunteered to
30 go out on a night patrol, on a PBR in a couple of units.

31 KC: Tell me about those.

1 CH: Well, it was—you know, you had sectors where you thought there might be
2 enemy activity and they would go down and they would pull up on the banks of the canal
3 and stand watch all night. Trying to listen, trying to see whether or not any activity
4 happened. I don't know—I know that in Vietnam we had electronic sensors. All around
5 our base in Tuyen Nhon there was electronic sensors that would sense you know,
6 movement or activity. I don't know on these patrols whether or not we were going into an
7 area where these sensors had been planted, if you will. So I mean, I don't know. Trying
8 to get some sleep for a couple of hours down in the hole of a fiberglass PBR boat, all
9 crunched up with your gear on and everything was not a comfortable thing. I can only
10 imagine what those guys had to that were permanently assigned to that—what those guys
11 had to go through. But nothing happened, several times I went in the sweeps I was not
12 involved in any firefights at the times that I volunteered to go on the boats. There was no
13 firefights. You know, I don't know whether I was looking for trouble or whether I
14 thought it was a big adventure, but I did some volunteering out there.

15 KC: When you went out with the PBRs again at night, describe the environment,
16 describe what you would be doing. What your role would be and describe what it was
17 like to be out there on these rivers or canals at night in Vietnam.

18 CH: Well, it was spooky. It was spooky not knowing whether you were going to
19 get ambushed, not knowing—you know, just not knowing. You'd be asked to stand
20 watch. I can't remember whether it was for a couple hours or six hours and then you'd try
21 to get some shut eye. Again, you were literally out, even more out in the middle of
22 nowhere from the base. We had, or they had, the VC had what are known as sappers. And
23 what a sapper is, they were these underwater demolition experts that would try to float
24 down underwater and plant explosives on boats and whatnot. So we had the
25 (unintelligible) grenades that we would be tossing into the canal all night long trying to
26 prevent any sapper from coming up and strapping explosives onto the boat. It apparently
27 worked because we weren't blown up, at least the times I was on board. (Laughs)

28 KC: Thanks goodness.

29 CH: I know I was there on April the 1st, 1969, in Tuyen Nhon. There had been
30 some activity at the base. Except for the PBRs coming in and out for service and supplies
31 and stuff like that, towards the end of March, beginning of April of '69, we started to get

1 all kinds of activity from US Forces coming into Tuyen Nhon with shipments and
2 shipments and shipments of supplies. Of missiles and rockets and ammunition and all that
3 sort of stuff. All of them were stored away's away from the base. I don't think it's strictly
4 on the base, but it was away from the base. Obviously, they had watches around it 24
5 hours to make sure the stuff was not compromised. On April 1st, 1969, we had two LCMs
6 (Landing Craft Mechanized) that had come up to the shores of Tuyen Nhon filled with
7 ammunition, both of them. The LCMs are those little boats that, you know, if you watch
8 *Saving Private Ryan*, the ones that run up on the beach and then drop the front. These
9 were filled with ammunition supplies. That night, April 1st, 1969, some sappers got
10 through and strapped some charges to the bottoms of the LCMs and went off, went off. I
11 don't know, the good lord was probably looking down on us because they had strapped
12 the explosives a couple feet too far to the back and all that happened was the LCMs sunk.
13 Had the charges been a little further forward, I don't think I'd be here talking to you
14 today. I have an after-action report of that, that somebody sent me here recently, but I
15 remember that happening. We had, you know—we were all very happy that obviously it
16 didn't blow us to kingdom come.

17 KC: Sure, sure.

18 CH: That night, the next day we had work parties where we had to unload all the
19 ammunition from the boats. They were eventually towed back to Saigon and repaired.

20 KC: Now you said this was in April of '69. Is it '69 or '70?

21 CH: '70, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, April of '70.

22 KC: Well, this brings me to another point here. You're out near, you said the
23 Parrot's Beak which is the area of Cambodia and Vietnam there.

24 CH: That's correct.

25 KC: You're there in April of 1970. At the end of April or the beginning of May of
26 1970, of course the United States along with ARVN divisions, invade Cambodia. This is
27 part of Nixon's plan to hit these Vietnamese, North Vietnamese base camps that were in
28 Cambodia, that they've been using as refuge for all these years. Did activity pick up
29 while you were out there at Tuyen Nhon?

30 CH: That's what it was. We were staging the area to go into Cambodia.

1 KC: Okay, tell me that and all the things that you think may have been associated
2 with the staging area and troops coming in. Ammunition and leaving, all these supplies
3 leaving and stuff like that. Tell me about that.

4 CH: Well, at first, we didn't know. I guess it was on a need-to-know basis. We
5 very definitely noticed an increase in activity. We noticed obviously, all the ammunitions
6 that were coming in and being stored at or near the base. We had no idea what was going
7 on until May 1st. That's when we found out that President Nixon had ordered our guys
8 into Cambodia. You know, obviously there were more PBRs coming in, there were more
9 boats coming in, there were more helicopters in. There was more everything coming in
10 gearing up for this. Anyway, I just knew there was more activity, and I didn't realize—I
11 do now obviously or at least I don't think I did—I didn't realize the significance of going
12 into Cambodia. So anyway, anyway.

13 KC: Now, had you heard anything from any of the other sailors or any of the
14 American ground troops that you had spoken with or had contact with about these
15 sanctuaries over in Cambodia? Did anyone express, you know, the sense of frustration or
16 anything about, "We just can't go over the border, we can't hit these guys. It doesn't
17 make sense"?

18 CH: No, I wasn't in that circle, so to speak. You know, Kelly, I was the support
19 personnel.

20 KC: Sure.

21 CH: I was a support personnel. I wasn't in the thick of things, so to speak. So, no.
22 I don't remember that. Several things that I do remember, we had those big watch towers
23 in the base. I would periodically go up and stand watch with the guy who had the duty to
24 stand watch. I remember one time we had these M79 grenade launchers in the tower. You
25 know, out of boredom or out of—I don't know, probably out of boredom we used to
26 shoot M79 grenades across the canal into the fields. I guess we did it one too many
27 because the electronic sensors picked up activity over there. I think they called in some
28 air support to terminate all the VCs that were over there. (Laughs) It really wasn't, it was
29 just us messing around shooting off M79. Of course, I never told anybody. (Laughs)

30 KC: No, of course not. Having a fun little shoot on the taxpayer's dime with an
31 M79 grenade.

1 CH: Yeah, another time, middle of the night I'm in my cot sleeping. We have,
2 you know, the mosquito nets up, so we don't get eaten alive by mosquitos. Of course,
3 we're in bunkers filled with sandbags, sandbag bunkers and little hooches, I think we
4 called them that were made out of the boxes from the C-4 explosives that the SEALs
5 (Sea, Air, and Land Teams) and other forces used to use for whatever they used the C-4
6 for. One night while I was there, I'm sleeping, and all hell breaks loose. I mean, there is
7 shooting and firing and there's just guns going off. Rifles and machine guns going off all
8 over the base. I remember jumping out of bed and putting on my flak jacket and my
9 helmet and grabbing my M16. The adrenaline. I remember to this day the adrenaline rush
10 that I got when that happened. It was just like everything is just—your hand standing on
11 top of your head and your back. Your adrenaline is just going a mile a minute, and
12 everything is just clear as can be. I grabbed my M16, and I ran down behind the bunkers
13 into the com center. Everybody's in the com center wondering what the hell is going on.
14 Do we need to call in air strikes? Etc. What had happened was that the ARVN had
15 decided to do a "mad minute". What a mad minute was, was when they tested all their
16 weapons. They forgot to tell us that they were going to do it. (Laughs) So that was the
17 closest I came to getting brown drawers while my tour was over there.

18 KC: (Chuckles) So what was the outcome of all this? What did you wind up
19 doing?

20 CH: You know, after we found out what was going on, after we found out it was a
21 mad minute, you know, it was stand down and go back to bed. You know, I've often
22 thought about what my reaction was. Had that been a real firefight I wonder if I had done
23 the right thing by—because I remember running down unprotected down the wooden
24 sidewalks that we had. Because we didn't have any cement sidewalks, they're all wooden
25 sidewalks. I often wonder whether or not if that had been a real thing what I would have
26 done, you know? So anyway, anyway. The base itself was three-sided, all barbed wire
27 around. Just rows and rows of barbed wire and in dispersed within the barbed wire were
28 Claymore mines and Claymore mines are an antipersonnel mine that stand up. They're
29 above the ground, they're not under the ground and they're filled with ball bearings and
30 other metal objects. It's kind of like a shot gun on the ground, but more deadly than a
31 shotgun. The distance that it covers is a lot more than a shotgun. However, we would

1 have to go into the barbed wire area. On more than one occasion throughout my stay
2 there we had to go through the barbed wire and turn the Claymore mines back around
3 because them little boogers used to slip in under the barbed wire and turn the Claymore
4 mines around facing our base.

5 KC: These would have been Vietnamese sappers that would have done this.

6 CH: Yeah, the VC or the NVA, or whatever.

7 KC: How would you find out that this was the case?

8 CH: We'd go out and look at them.

9 KC: Okay, simple enough. So this was something that was regular enough that
10 you had to go out and check out on a regular basis.

11 CH: That's right, that's right. Yeah.

12 KC: And did you go out yourself?

13 CH: No, I didn't. It was done by the grunts or whoever it was that did it. On
14 several occasions that we used to go out target practicing with our M16. We were careful
15 not to shoot any water buffalos because that was a Bozo no-no over there.

16 KC: And explain for the reader of the transcript or the listener why that would be
17 the case.

18 CH: Well, because us GIs could get into big trouble for killing the substance of
19 the local people. You know, the water buffalo were beasts a burden. I suppose they gave
20 off milk and I suppose they ate them and all that sort of stuff. It was definitely a Bozo no-
21 no to shot them and kill them.

22 KC: What other sorts of things, different kinds of experiences do you remember
23 about your time in Tuyen Nhon?

24 CH: Well, like I said, a lot of times the electronic equipment was down so I would
25 sun myself on the banks of the canal. We went swimming in the canal and looking back
26 on it I don't know if that was a wise thing to do because the Vietnamese people did
27 everything in the canals that, you know, most first world countries would not do. I didn't
28 catch any sicknesses or anything. I remember, because of a lackadaisical pace of the base
29 I remember liking it there. Like I said, I volunteered to go out in sweeps, I volunteered to
30 go out at least once on a night patrol. Maybe I was a little bit bored and wanted some
31 excitement or just something to do, something new to do. I've got some photographs of

1 the base, which was nothing luxurious for sure. During the monsoon season we would
2 hook tarps between the different hooches and poke holes in them, let it fill up with water
3 and we'd stand under the tarps and bathe ourselves with fresh water. It was hot. You
4 know, being a radioman, I had to be in an air-conditioned place so going from the heat to
5 air conditioning and air conditioning to heat and reading letters from home, I was
6 catching cold an awful lot. Not enough to do me in, but apparently, I caught a lot of colds
7 over there which was kind of ironic. (Laughs)

8 KC: (Chuckles) In that part of the world.

9 CH: You know, so—

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

11 CH: Well, you know, in reading the letters home I was preaching to my brothers
12 about saving money. We all had paper routes when we were younger, and I was
13 preaching to my brothers to saving money. When I was in Nha Be there was not a lot of
14 places to spend money. Although I did buy, I guess from Japan—actually it was from
15 Japan. I bought a nice set of photograph equipment, an Asahi Pentax camera and all the
16 trappings. I paid \$141.85 for a nice camera, for a couple of extra lenses on it. In reading
17 the letter from home I had decided that I did not want to go on R&R because I wanted to
18 save the money, so when I got home, I wouldn't be broke. I had a chance to go on R&R
19 Kelly, but I just didn't take it.

20 KC: Well, that's some forward thinking that I'm sure that not everyone who
21 served over there was interested in. They would burn up that R&R as soon as they could.

22 CH: Yeah.

23 KC: In the minute that it required—

24 CH: I remember when I was at Tuyen Nhon before I was sent—when I was at
25 Nha Be, before I was sent to Tuyen Nhon in November there was a—the USO (United
26 Service Organization) had planned a show at the base. I wrote home that the New Christy
27 Minstrels were going to be playing there. I wrote that I did not know whether I'd make it
28 because it was—oh gosh, what is it? I was just off watch, and I'd probably be exhausted
29 and stuff like that. I do remember that I did not make it, I did not go to it. I had another
30 opportunity to see Bob Hope, but there was somebody there who really wanted to see

1 him, and I had off and he had duty, so we switched duties. He went and saw Bob Hope
2 and I didn't.

3 KC: That was very considerate of you.

4 CH: Well, I guess.

5 KC: Very generous of you.

6 CH: I guess. What can you do? Anyway, listen I have got to go Kelly.

7 KC: That's great, let's stop there for today.

Interview with Christopher Hicks

Session [3] of [3]

Date 7 May 2010

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History interview with Mr.
2 Christopher Hicks. Today is 7 May 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Hicks is joining me by telephone again from Long Beach,
4 California. I interrupted you a moment ago, sir. I'm sorry about that. Go ahead and pick
5 up that story again, please.

6 Christopher Hicks: Well, as I mentioned we had the—I think I mentioned about
7 the Mike boats being hit by some sappers that was filled with ammunition. Fortunately
8 for us, they placed the bombs or the charges too far back in the boat. So it sunk the boat,
9 but it did not blow them up. That was on April 1st, 1970. And then, we went—we found
10 out, and I don't exactly know when, but we found out that the buildup of ammunitions
11 and everything were for our foray into Cambodia. That, I believe, started on May 1st.
12 While it did not directly affect me, there was a lot of activity that was on the base,
13 obviously. There was buildup of personnel, of boats, and the ammunitions that I said.
14 And then on May 1st, I believe it was, our guys started to go into Cambodia and sometime
15 —I can't remember exactly when, but you know, sometime mid to late May I was
16 reading the *Stars and Stripes* about the Kent State Riots. I remember thinking to myself,
17 "What the hell is going on back there in the States?" I think that was the first time that I
18 really realized that we, in Vietnam, we were really being vilified by a lot of people back
19 in the States. I remember it having a negative effect on me from the standpoint that, you
20 know, I thought I was over here doing good and everything and I don't know that it
21 started to—I don't know that I started to question why we were over there, but I just
22 remember that, you know, having all those riots and shootings and protests and
23 everything in the streets—you know, it made me feel uneasy, it made me feel uneasy.
24 Anyway, I distinctly remember that, and it'll probably be etched in my mind until the day
25 I die. Thinking that here we are over here and that the streets of the United States are
26 boiling over in protests and stuff like that. Anyway, at the time, as I mentioned, I'm a
27 radioman and the communications equipment that I dealt with mostly was off of an old
28 army unit that was—generally on the back of a pick-up truck, but on the base obviously it

1 was on the ground, and it was down more than it was up. Although I saw some—you
2 know, especially at night in the distance, we used to have what we called Puff, Puff the
3 Magic Dragon. They were airships that had, for lack of a—I don't know what the
4 technical terminology was, but they had those fancy Gatling guns. I think every tenth
5 round was a tracer and at night, in the distance, we used to see these, you know, Puff
6 airplanes shooting down. Obviously trying to protect our guys in the distance, in the field
7 and stuff like that. But by enlarge when I was at Tuyen Nhon, it was very peaceful. We
8 were not attacked. I mentioned that we did have to go out into the barbed wire, around
9 the perimeter of the base and turn around the Claymore mines that, I guess the VC had
10 snuck in at night and turned the Claymore mines around to face us. And then, shooting
11 them off if we were attacked. We would be the ones that were injured and not them, so
12 we had to constantly keep our eye open to make sure they were not facing us versus
13 facing on the outside of the perimeter of the base. So really there's no action, there's no
14 firefights near the base except for the mad minute, which that one time where the mad
15 minute went off and I thought all hell started to break loose. There was really nothing.
16 Since my radio equipment was down more than it was up, I had a lot of leisure time there.
17 I used to practice my guitar that I had taken with me. I was there for four months, so July,
18 August, September, October. So I was probably there till the end of July of 1970. When
19 time came for me to get my orders I thought, "You know what? I like it here, there's no
20 action." You know, I said, "You know what? I want to stay here." Stupid me, being a
21 radioman, I was familiar with the format, etcetera of messages and I did a Bozo no-no
22 and I typed up a message myself rather than going through the proper channels and
23 requesting an extended stay there. I just typed up a message and sent it to Saigon
24 requesting that I be extended there to Tuyen Nhon 'til the end of my tour. A message was
25 sent back approved and then a couple weeks later I get this message being called to
26 Saigon to go before the captain because of this message that I had—basically, before a
27 captain's mass, which is the naval—not the penal system, but it's where people go when
28 they're in trouble. And so I went to Saigon and I went forward the captain and it was a
29 short, you know, interrogation by the officers and everything about why I did it, etc. They
30 said, "Well, for your 'punishment' you're going to spend the rest of your time in Saigon."
31 Like I said, I think I probably had about three or four months. July, August, September,

1 October. I probably had three months left to do in Saigon or on my second tour. The last
2 three months of my tour, I was actually in Saigon. You know, it was after the Tet of '68,
3 which at the time—well, at the time I didn't know it, but I found out afterwards and I
4 truly believed this, and all indications are that the Tet of '68 was a complete total, utterly
5 squashing of the Viet Cong and the Viet Cong infrastructure and all that. By enlarge,
6 Saigon was a pretty peaceful city while I was there.

7 KC: I was going to say, some people would consider it hardly punishment to go to
8 Saigon.

9 CH: (Laughs) Well, after that, that's what I thought too. You know, what can you
10 do?

11 KC: What were you going to do there at Saigon?

12 CH: Well, I was a radioman. So I worked in the big com center there. Again, I
13 was in communications and worked at the radio station. I was assigned to—while in
14 Saigon, I was assigned to stay in an old—you know, it might have been a 1920s, 1930s
15 old French hotel where a lot of us GIs stayed while we were in Saigon. Actually, that's
16 where we lived. It was quite an old building and I believe I was on the third or fourth
17 floor. It had those old elevators where you would have to pull one gate, you know, to
18 your right and then there was a second gate to your right, you'd get in the elevator and
19 then you close the gates and go up. I remember thinking, "You know, this thing is too old
20 and rickety for me to you know, risk my life." Although it was probably safe. After the
21 one use of the elevator, I walked up and down every time I had to come or go. You know,
22 Kelly, it was a big metropolitan city. A lot of American GIs, a lot of Vietnamese
23 obviously going around on their little motor scooters and all of that. They had a night life
24 there. There's a famous street called Tu Do Street that was just a bunch of bars and
25 entertainment places and stuff like that that we used to go to on our off time. That part of
26 my tour there was quite uneventful as well.

27 KC: What kind of—I know you're a radioman, you're working in the big com
28 center there, but what sort of things in particular would you be doing there at your new
29 assignment in Saigon?

30 CH: Well, you know, communicating with the other bases, other naval bases. You
31 know, probably I think we were in three corps. Saigon was three corps. South Vietnam

1 was broken into what they call I Corps, II Corps, III Corps, and IV Corps. I Corps was up
2 by the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), IV Corps was down at the very bottom of Vietnam. I
3 was in III Corps, I believe it was. Just communicating with the other naval bases. Also,
4 communicating with the ships that were offshore, sending, you know, supply requests,
5 receiving supply requests. I had a top-secret clearance, so we received and sent top secret
6 messages about, you know, movements of ships and troops and stuff like that. I do
7 remember that being, you know, Vietnam in July, August, September, October was very
8 warm. I remember that going from the very air-conditioned com center outside, I used to
9 catch colds quite a bit because of the change in temperatures. Anyway, that's basically it
10 I guess.

11 KC: Now, as you're starting to grow short on your second tour there. We're
12 looking at September and into October. When you think about coming home, what sort of
13 things did you want to do? What did you want to do with your life after you got done
14 with this tour?

15 CH: Actually Kelly, I still had—when I was in Tuyen Nhon, a friend of mine got
16 orders to NAV COM Unit, London, England. Naval Communications Unit, London,
17 England. At the end of my second tour, I still had fifteen months left to do in the service.
18 In the Navy, and I guess it's in all four branches of the government, but in the Navy, you
19 have what is known as a dream sheet. You were dreaming where you wanted to go, you
20 know, after your duty station was finished. After my friend got orders to NAV COM
21 Unit, London, England, I thought, "Boy, that'd be kind of neat to go over there." And so
22 on my first choice I put NAV COM Unit, London, England, as to where I'd like to go
23 after I left Vietnam. And then my second choice was anywhere in Europe. When I turned
24 it in to the office, the (unintelligible) said, "Hicks." He said, "You're crazy." He said,
25 "You need eighteen months left to do in the service just to get a ship on the east coast,
26 never mind going all the way over to Europe." So I put down there at the bottom of the
27 dream sheet that I'd be willing to extend some time in the Navy to get to Europe. I
28 submitted it and, you know, thought nothing of it. When I got my orders from—you
29 know, probably a couple months prior to my leaving, when I got my orders, I got orders
30 to Naval Communications Relay Station, Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

31 KC: Hmm.

1 CH: Wow, here we go. I read my orders and I turned it over and read the back of
2 them. I turned it back over and read it again and turned it back over and read it again.
3 Sure enough, they were sending me to Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Nowhere did it
4 say that I had to extend.

5 KC: Really?

6 CH: Here I am, I've got fifteen more months to do in the Navy when I leave
7 'Nam. I've got thirty days leave and so they sent me from Vietnam, halfway around the
8 world to Northern Ireland for fourteen months left to do in the service.

9 KC: Now, when you left Vietnam, did you come back to the States for thirty
10 days?

11 CH: I flew out of Tan Son Nhut Airbase, which was outside of Saigon. Again, I
12 mentioned this several times, but again I was by myself. I didn't go with a unit, I didn't,
13 you know—I don't even know if I knew anybody on the plane with me. You know, I
14 went by myself. I flew in and, you know, I can't remember—it might have been Travis
15 Air Force Base that I flew into, and I can't really remember whether I had family
16 members pick me up or not, but I do remember coming in and going through customs. Of
17 course, they were asking the usual questions. You know, "What do you got in your bag?
18 Do you have any weapons with you? Do you have any contraband, you know, cigarettes
19 or marijuana?" You know, things like that. Of course, it was no to all of those. I do
20 remember coming back feeling a little bit uneasy because of what was going on about
21 service members. Well, not even service members, but I do remember feeling a bit
22 uneasy coming in in a uniform and traveling because of what was going on here in the
23 states. But yes, to answer your question I had thirty days leave. You know, at the time I
24 had broken up with my girlfriend. I think—well I don't think, I know. I broke up with
25 her, you know, in between my first and second tour over there. So it was just—you know,
26 meeting with friends and hanging out with the family and, you know, I guess partying—
27 partying, I guess.

28 KC: Did you feel any sort of—did you notice any sort of change from the time
29 that you left from your second tour to the time you came back? I'm talking about changes
30 in your community or in society or even among your friends or yourself for that matter.

1 CH: Umm. Well, you know, obviously I was glad to be home in one piece. But
2 no, I don't think so. The family had grown, my younger brothers and sisters were, you
3 know, they were very proud of me for my service. They, you know, even to this day they
4 talk about that. But no, you know—I think at the time I was looking forward to my last
5 duty station, going to Ireland. My gosh, what a way to spend the last fourteen months in
6 the service in old, civilized world. Anyway, I got back to the States. It had to have been,
7 I'm just thinking it had to have been early to mid-October 1970. I spent a month's leave
8 and then I packed off and went to Ireland. I arrived in Ireland on November 18th, 1970. I
9 remember the date because one of my brothers, Timothy, that was his birthday. He was
10 all excited that I was going to Ireland, and I was going to be there on his birthday.

11 (Chuckles)

12 KC: Well, tell me about your time in Ireland. What were you doing there? What
13 was it like?

14 CH: I flew into London. From London I flew up to Glasgow I believe, and then
15 from Glasgow I flew into Belfast. I was in uniform and when I got to Belfast, the Belfast
16 airport, there was a message sitting there waiting for me saying, "Take a taxi from Belfast
17 to Londonderry." So I said, "Okay." I had some money, so I was able to pay for it. I think
18 from Belfast to Londonderry it's probably forty-five to sixty miles, something like that.
19 So I went outside and I got to a taxi cab, and the guy asked me where I was going and I
20 told him that I was going to Londonderry, to the naval base. I remember him saying this
21 and it wouldn't strike me until later as to why, but he said, "Well, I can take you there,
22 but around here we call it Derry." So I said, "Let's take us to Londonderry." And he said,
23 "Well around here we call it Derry." I said, "Well, okay." And this was at nighttime. It
24 was dark, November. Ireland is very north so during the winter months it gets dark at four
25 o' clock in the afternoon and the sun comes up at eight or nine in the morning. It's the
26 exact opposite during the summer days. I arrived in Derry and checked in. They gave me
27 a place to sleep, my bunk and all that. I remember the first day, the first full day I was
28 there, I remember for most of my life—well, not most of my life, but at that point in time
29 I had spent more years in Southern California. You know, went from fourth grade
30 through high school. What's that, eight years? I had spent eight years in Southern
31 California. My first day in Derry I got up and it was drizzling and then it started to pour

1 and then it drizzled and then the sun came out and then started to drizzle and then it
2 started to snow all in one day. I went back to the barracks, and I asked somebody, I said,
3 “What the heck’s going on with this weather over here?” You know, sunny Southern
4 California. The guy said, “Listen Hicks.” He said, “Don’t go to sleep on the second
5 Tuesday in July, otherwise you’re going to miss summer.” And that was pretty much it.
6 1971, you know, July-August of ‘71, there was just two weeks of just beautiful weather.
7 The sun came out every day, it wasn’t raining. The weather was 70°, 75° and just
8 absolutely beautiful. I had found out that it had rained on average 265 days out of the
9 year over there. That’s why they call it the Emerald Isle.

10 KC: Right.

11 CH: Anyway, I was assigned to the com center, the communication center again,
12 but this time I was a Morse code operator. I did not use voice equipment; I did not use
13 teletypes; I did not use anything. I was strictly a Morse code operator. Who I
14 communicated with were the USNS ships which were not part of the United States Navy,
15 but they were contracted with United States Navy for, you know, hauling supplies and I
16 guess troops and whatever else the Navy didn’t want—you know, they were like supply
17 ships. Actually, I became quite proficient at Morse code. I had not used Morse code since
18 I got out of radioman C school in 1969. So it took me a little while to get up and running,
19 but I got quite proficient at Morse code. In Ireland, it was considered sea duty, even
20 though I was on land. Well actually, they’ve shut the base down in Northern Ireland right
21 now, but our duty was what we called 2-2-180. We had two mid-watches which were
22 from midnight to eight in the morning. And then we had two midwatches and then we
23 doubled back and had eight hours off and had two E watches. Then we had two-day
24 watches and then we got eighty hours off, which were three plus days.

25 KC: Right.

26 CH: And so, you know, I had started to make some friends there. I met a guy by
27 the name of Rod Miller who was from Monterrey Park, California, just up the street from
28 where I had lived in Pasadena, California. He had moved off base, out of the barracks
29 because I guess the space in the barracks were quite limited. They used to give guys who
30 wanted to move off base a little allowance for rent. Rod Miller had found this place, it
31 was actually a mansion. It was called Ardmore and it was actually a mansion that started

1 to be built in the 1700s and it took like a hundred years to complete. The lady who owned
2 that property, her name was Mrs. Nicholson. Her husband was a QC, a queen's counselor
3 and her son was a QC as well. Over in Ireland or in Great Britain, the death taxes, which
4 we would call the state taxes over here, but I call them death taxes. The death taxes over
5 there were just horrendous. And so, in order for her to make ends meet, she owned this
6 estate, but in order to make ends meet she'd rent out half of her you know, her mansion.
7 So Rod asked me if I wanted to move out there with him and I said, "Well, sure." So at
8 the time we were paying what amounted to sixty dollars a month, split between three of
9 us for this old thing. We were living off base, on this vast property that had waterfalls and
10 lakes on it. You turned into it on the left-hand side, there's the old gate house where the
11 groundskeeper were living. Just absolutely gorgeous. Here I was, I thought I was in hog
12 heaven, you know? I was at the EM Club, the Enlisted Man Club one time, and it was in
13 February of 1971 and I had met another fellow by the name of Rich Bish. He and I
14 became friends. He said, "Well, there's a party over there at what they call flats." It was
15 an apartment. "But there's a party over here at this flat over in Derry, why don't we go to
16 it?" So I went to it with Rich and Rod and a couple other people and it was, you know, a
17 flat that was being rented by some other, you know, American sailors. At the time—oh
18 gosh, do I put this in? Sure, why not. At the time, that night Rich had some acid. He said,
19 "Here, do you want to try it?" I had always heard about acid, and I said, "Sure." So it was
20 this little crystal thing that I put on my tongue and I thought, "Oh." You know, by the
21 time I got to the flat I was just, you know, having the "trip of my life." I didn't really
22 know what was going on as far as what this was going to do to me or anything like that. I
23 remember listening to The Moody Blues all night long. Anyway, there was this young
24 gal, two young gals there. One was named Hester Kincannon and the other one was
25 named Caroline Ward. I think I was introduced to them, but I sat down on this chair, and
26 I just sat there all night long because I couldn't move because of the acid. That was, by
27 the way, after that I said, "You know what? I do not like what this does to me because it
28 just completely took control of me." And I couldn't get out of it or anything like that, so I
29 never did it again. So that was the one and only time. Well, that was over and the next
30 couple of weeks during our eighty hours off, there's a place in Northern Ireland called
31 Port Rush. It was like a mini Knott's Berry Farm. You know, a lot of the Irish went there

1 for, you know, for the weekends and stuff like that. So a bunch of us sailors and I
2 remember Hester Kincannon went with us. We just had a real nice time up there and
3 came back. A week or so later I met back up with Caroline Ward. I kind of fancied her.
4 She was a cute, young Irish gal and she and I started to talk, and this was in late February,
5 and I asked her out and went to—I can't remember the name. I got a photograph of it, and
6 she'll kill me if she ever reads this or listens to this. I can't remember, but we went to a
7 dance hall. We both had a nice time. I met her in February, we started dating in March. I
8 asked her to marry me in June and we got married in October.

9 KC: Oh wow.

10 CH: Yeah. We're still married.

11 KC: That's terrific.

12 CH: We're still married. Anyway, her parents did not like Yanks. Caroline was
13 the rebel in the family. She was the fourth of seven, the fourth child of seven. She went to
14 her dad and said, "You know, da—" They call him da. "You know, I'm seeing this
15 American fella. I want to know if it's okay if I bring him over" And he said, "Well,
16 Caroline," he says, "It's not up to me, you have to go talk to Mary Tess." Which was
17 what Charlie Ward, Caroline's father called her mother. Her name was actually Maywar.
18 Anyway, Caroline went to her mother and said, "Ma, I'm seeing a Yank and I'd like to
19 bring him over." Anyway, she just—there's an Irish expression, she just went up like a
20 blue light. She said, "No Yank is going to step foot in my house as long as I live. By god,
21 you're going to have to break up with him." That night, we had set a date to come up
22 there and Caroline told me to go up to the end of the block and wait. If she's hanging out
23 of the window waiving her hands, I'm not to come out. Well, she was hanging out of the
24 window waiving her hands not to come up. We went out and she said that she told me
25 what had happened and everything. So we continued to see each other for the next couple
26 of weeks or so. Finally, her parents relented and had me come up to meet them. So
27 Caroline and I are in the living room, and we're sitting on the little couch and the whole
28 family's sitting around like a family council. Her dad's back in town. Her dad was in the
29 British Navy, and he had retired and at the time, the "troubles"—this was 1970, '71 by
30 this time. The troubles had started to escalate, and he was a Catholic policeman. The
31 Ulster police forces were made up primarily of Protestants. They were feared for his life

1 and everything, so they sent them to Scotland to be, you know, to be a policeman over in
2 Scotland in some naval base over there or something like that. He used to come home,
3 you know, once a month for a weekend or something like that. So he was there. He sat
4 around and they started asking me questions. I don't know why—I don't remember why I
5 had this because before I went to Vietnam, they said that you do not carry any personal
6 information with you about family, about where you're from, about photographs, about
7 anything because if you got captured, they would use that against you. But I had in my
8 wallet, the last family photograph that was taken of my family before I left for Vietnam
9 the second time. It was a little black and white thing that fit in my wallet. They were out
10 talking to me, and I don't know why I did this, but I pulled the photograph out—Oh!
11 They were asking me about my family. So I pulled out the photograph and I gave it and I
12 passed it around. Well, that was all it took. (Chuckles) I must have been a good Catholic
13 coming from a family that large.

14 KC: (Laughs) I thought that's where you were going with that.

15 CH: And so, after the photograph I was in like flint. I was just—they accepted me
16 into the family, and they had no problems with me. I remember, we were engaged in
17 June. I remember Caroline's father was in Scotland, but I went to his mother, went to
18 Caroline's mother and I said—back then what we did, we went to the parents and said,
19 “Hey, I'd like to marry your daughter. Do you have any problems with that?” She said no
20 and then Charlie came back and he said no, and he even took me down to his favorite
21 pub, Tracey's Bar. He and I sat and had a grand conversation for a couple of hours. But
22 what was it like? Very cold. I made use of my foul weather pea jacket a lot over there,
23 which is a big, thick—at the time they gave them to sailors. Everybody had one, but it
24 just depended on whether you used it or not where you were stationed. But I remember
25 using that a lot. The communications place that I was at, was at the back end of the base.
26 When we came in—I bought a car over there. I bought a little Mini and it's made by the
27 same company that the Minis are made now, but it was not quite as—it was a tin can
28 from what I remember. It was very economical. Large cars were not very useful over
29 there or practical over there because the roads were so small. So I had bought a little mini
30 and I'd drive from Ardmore out to the base and then back again. The troubles were
31 flaring up quite a bit during that time. And Caroline—when I got into the car with the taxi

1 driver for the first time, he said, “We call it Derry around here.” Well, I soon came to find
2 out that the Catholics called Londonderry, Derry, and the protestant’s called
3 Londonderry, Londonderry. So I knew from that conversation with the taxi driver that he
4 was a Catholic on the way out. The British Army had come in and they had built a post in
5 the Catholic section of Derry, a post, and it was actually in Cregan Estates where
6 Caroline’s family lived. There were always riots around the army base and all tear gas
7 was going off and the rubber bullets. It was almost the spectator’s sport because on the
8 top—Lee’s Lane was down, not in the valley, but it was down a hill. And so when these
9 riots used to start going off, you know, the families and people used to stand up at the top
10 of the hill, watching the shooting and the firing and the tear gas and all of that stuff going.
11 Not shooting, you know, live rounds, but rubber bullets and stuff like that. One night I
12 dropped Caroline off and Caroline lived obviously—they called it the “bog side” of
13 Derry and then they had the “water side”. The bog side was primarily Catholic, and the
14 water side was primarily Protestant. The water side is where the naval base was. I
15 dropped Caroline off one time at night. I got her home on time, you know, I think I did. I
16 was going down through the center of town, and I had just passed the post office and I
17 was not—honest to God Kelly, I was not seconds past the post office and it just blew up.
18 The IRA (Irish Republican Army) had planted a bomb in it and it just disintegrated. It
19 was like, “Oh my god.” I went around the corner, and I was shaking in my boots, you
20 know. I tell people I came closer to getting blown up in Northern Ireland than I did in
21 Vietnam. So I turned around and I started to go down and all of a sudden these British
22 soldiers are in the middle of the street pointing guns at me. Pulling me over and all that
23 because they obviously thought I had just planted a bomb and was trying to get away.
24 You know, I very slowly got out of the car, and they started asking me questions. I said,
25 “Listen, I’m an American sailor. I’m just heading back to the base.” I showed them my
26 ID and they asked me a couple of questions. Where I was, what I was doing there, etc.
27 But they let me go after that. It was definitely, you know, people say well—it was really a
28 civil rights movement more than it was a religious. It just so happens that the Protestants
29 were the haves, and the Catholics were the have-nots, and that was part of what the whole
30 thing was all about. The Catholics were just trying to get equal rights just like the
31 Protestants had.

1 KC: Let me ask you this, while you're over there in Northern Ireland, did you
2 receive any different treatment? Special treatment? Did you see any resentment because
3 of the fact that you were part of the American Military?

4 CH: No, not at all. They loved us Yanks, they loved us Yanks. Either the
5 Protestants and the Catholics. Kelly, they absolutely loved us Yanks over there. You
6 know, there was the odd drunkard. I remember sometime some drunk Irishman chased
7 me around the city for a while because I don't know what was happening. But by enlarge,
8 no. They were very nice to us, etc. We were treated very well over there. Very well.

9 KC: You don't just get to throw out a comment like "a drunk Irishman chasing
10 me around town for a while" and then not follow up on it. (Chuckles) What was the story
11 behind this?

12 CH: (Laughs) Well, I don't know. There was some guy who one time, I remember
13 he may have thought I had cut him off and he was in a car behind me. He was after me
14 and I was up in, I was up in—what I did was, I had no idea what was going to happen. I
15 thought, "You know what? I'm going to pull up in front of this army post where there is a
16 bunch of British Army." It was a lookout post in the middle of town. It was fortified
17 with—it kind of reminded me of Vietnam because it was a watch tower that was fortified
18 with sandbags and had barbed wire around it and everything. I thought, "You know
19 what? I'll be damned if this guy's going to do something to me." So I pulled up in front
20 of the army post and he kind of sat there for a couple of seconds and decided to drive
21 away and he drove away. I waited there a couple of minutes to make sure he was gone
22 and then just continued onto wherever I was going. You know, I say some drunken Irish
23 guy. I'm assuming he was. I have no idea whether he was or not, but he was sure acting
24 like he had some drink in him.

25 KC: Well, tell me about coming back to the States when this was over with. What
26 I want to talk about is coming back into American society, no longer as a sailor but as
27 someone who was a veteran of Vietnam. What was it like for you to come back and to
28 reintegrate into American society?

29 CH: Well, you know, Kelly, when I left Ireland, I was married. Caroline had
30 accepted and we were married October 27th, 1971. I left Ireland January 19th, 1972. We
31 flew into I guess it was JFK, JFK Airport. I don't know what it was named back then. We

1 flew in that night, we stayed at a friend's house. Caroline and I, again we're on our own
2 again, you know. Here I am, I'm on my own again. I'm not traveling with the unit or
3 anything, but I've got a new bride with me. We go to Brooklyn Naval Shipyard. It was a
4 Friday night, and we get there about five o'clock. I go in, report in and they said, "Come
5 back Monday morning." It's like, "Okay." Well, I had an aunt we were supposed to visit
6 in Baltimore. So we took the train to Baltimore, they picked us up. Monday morning, I
7 took the train back to Brooklyn. I got out, took me three days to process out. We stayed
8 in my aunt's house for a week. We flew to Wisconsin to visit with another aunt. We flew
9 to Salt Lake City to visit with my brother. My older brother, who incidentally was still in
10 the Navy and the Navy had sent him to Salt Lake University to finish up his degree. He
11 was an officer by then. We stayed there probably for a week and then we flew home. By
12 that time, my parents had— (phone rings in the background) hang on a second. Let me
13 go—yeah, I don't need to get that.

14 KC: Okay.

15 CH: Yeah, at the time, my parents had moved to Ventura, California. So we
16 moved to Ventura, California, and we stayed there at my parent's house for a couple of
17 months. We started to look for a job right away. I wanted to get a college degree. There
18 was no real college. There was a junior college, but no real college in Ventura. My sister
19 told me—one of my sisters was living in Long Beach and she said, "Well, I can get
20 Caroline a job as a secretary at Saint Mary's Hospital in Long Beach." So we came down
21 to Long Beach. She took a test to be a secretary on Friday. Saturday, we looked for a
22 place. Saturday, we went back to Ventura, got her two bags of stuff and moved down to
23 Long Beach. I'm just saying this because I understand what you're asking me about, you
24 know, coming back into American society and all that. Kelly, I was married, and I did not
25 really have much time to pay attention to the political goings on because I was, you
26 know, I was trying to start my life and build my life and go to college and all of that sort
27 of stuff.

28 Kc: Sure.

29 CH: I do know that—and I can't remember whether or not the riots and the
30 protesting of the war was still going on. Although at the time, and this was in 1972, at the
31 time I believe Nixon abolished the draft. They had the lottery system, but for the most

1 part—and I believe the chronological events in this are true, but I believe for the most
2 part by 1972 the protestors had stopped protesting because our guys weren't getting
3 drafted any longer. One of the reasons why I think they sent me to Ireland from Vietnam
4 and did not make me extend in the service to get to Ireland—I think the reason for that in
5 retrospect was because they had already started to draw down the troops in Vietnam and
6 they didn't need new bods in the service. So I think by '72 when I came back and started
7 to build, you know, build my life, start my life with my young bride, that all the
8 protesting had stopped. I will say that, except for family and very few friends, I did not
9 talk about my Vietnam experience for years and years and years after that.

10 KC: Why was that?

11 CH: Huh?

12 KC: Why was that?

13 CH: Well, I think it was because of how we were looked upon as, you know. I
14 never had anybody spat upon me or call me a baby killer or anything like that, but I
15 didn't want to find out, so I never talked about it. I think it was because, you know, that
16 thought from reading the *Stars and Stripes* in May of 1970, "What the hell's going on
17 back there in the States?" I think that had a lot to do with it. I think that had an awful lot
18 to do with it.

19 KC: Do you think that you faced any sort of, I guess discrimination as a result of
20 your Vietnam service?

21 CH: No, not really. I'm trying to think. No, I do not think so. You know, initially
22 Kelly, it was never brought up. I can't remember if I had to put that—I enrolled at Long
23 Beach City College for the fall semester 1972. I cannot remember whether or not it had a
24 question on there whether I was a serviceman or not. No, I do not remember any
25 discrimination. I didn't talk about it. I just flat out didn't talk about it.

26 KC: Interesting. Just a couple more questions if I may here today. As you look
27 back on your experiences in Vietnam, how do you think they most affected your life?

28 CH: Well, Kelly I read that letter to you. I felt that way then and I feel that way
29 now. I believe and I've told people I'm very proud of my service now. I think, you know,
30 it was Ronald Reagan who started to build back up the military and started to have, you
31 know—I just started to be very proud of my service when Ronald Reagan was in office. I

1 think that we were right in being over there and I think history will show that we were
2 right in being over there. I still believe now that politically how it affected me, I think
3 that we let the Vietnamese people down by, you know, the democrats taking over
4 congress and cutting off all funding. Nixon's Vietnamization program was working. The
5 Vietnamization program was where we were training the South Vietnamese on our
6 military tactics on all that sort of stuff, and it was definitely working. Between '72 and
7 '75, when we were still somewhat funding the South Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese
8 got into some major battles with the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, the NVA. The
9 South Vietnamese were very definitely holding their own. They lost because we cut off
10 the funding and they had no more ammo over there. So it affected me from the standpoint
11 that I think our country, the United States of America, let the Vietnamese people down,
12 number one. Number two, I think it made a better person out of me. Being in the service,
13 as I mentioned to you when I got out of high school, I was going to more parties than I
14 was classes. My father was in the Navy for twenty-two years, so I was not unused to
15 discipline. Going into the service for four years, spending time, you know, in a foreign
16 country in a war zone. Plus, in Ireland I think it made a better person out of me Kelly. I
17 have broken down several times in this interview and that's always bothered me. I don't
18 know why I do it, but I always do it when I think about my service in Vietnam. I don't
19 know if it's because, you know, I came back unscathed or because I came back, you
20 know. I don't understand it Kelly. It just happens. I don't know whether it was due to that
21 initial thought of, you know, "What the hell's going on back there in the States?" But I'm
22 very proud of it, I'm very proud of it. I'm very proud of my service.

23 KC: Well, you should be. Well, I have just one more question.

24 CH: I would do it all over again. And it's interesting because I did not realize this
25 at the time, but as a matter of fact I say I'm a member of the VFW (Veterans of Foreign
26 Wars) and I get their monthly news magazine and a couple years ago they had a whole
27 month magazine dedicated to the Vietnam Conflict. You know, the Vietnam War, the
28 Vietnam Conflict, police action, whatever you want to call it. But the majority of us guys
29 that went over to Vietnam, the majority of it—I mean, the big majority of it were all
30 volunteers. We volunteered to go over, and I think that said a lot about my generation.
31 Anyway, go ahead.

1 KC: It's just one last question that I have. I like to give people the opportunity to
2 think about this and answer this however you can and however you wish to. As you look
3 back on it, what Vietnam was then in the popular mind, in your mind, your experiences
4 there, the country's experience there, the experience of the Vietnamese, what do you
5 think the legacy is of the Vietnam War? What is its greatest legacy?

6 CH: What the legacy is, what the legacy is. Well, I think there's two legacies. One
7 legacy is that—I think one legacy is that the United States let one of our allies down. You
8 know, I think the United States at the end let our allies down. I think that's a very
9 shameful episode in United States history, number one. Another legacy is that if you
10 recall, I said that when I was at Tuyen Nhon—when the boats used to go out at night or
11 during the day but then at night they'd get into a fire fight, they had to call back and
12 request permission to return fire, even though they were doing it at the time they were
13 requesting permission to return fire, they still had to do it. That's no way to run a war. So
14 one of the legacies is that—I think in Iraq and a little bit maybe in Afghanistan, but
15 certainly in Iraq, you know, get the politicians out of the way. You know, the Vietnam
16 War was not run by the generals, it was run by the politicians as far as what you could or
17 could not do. So I think that's part of the legacy and I think that the Iraq War and
18 certainly in the Afghanistan War to a certain extent, I think that's being done. I think the
19 generals—and certainly the first Iraq War, that was completely run by the generals and
20 not the politicians. I think another legacy is that I think, I think—I could be wrong, but I
21 don't think I am. I think that a lot of people who protested against the war, whether they
22 were out on the street or whether they were not out on the street, I think that the attitude
23 towards us who were over there is either changing or has changed. A little story, I'm an
24 insurance agent and on the back of my car I got a little bumper sticker that says,
25 "Vietnam Veteran". I had a couple weeks ago, a month or so ago, I had an appointment
26 with a Vietnamese family. He's sixty-five and the wife is sixty-six. When I drove up to
27 their house, the Vietnamese man was outside, you know, checking the mailbox and
28 everything. You know, he was checking the mailbox. I had not met him before, but I
29 pulled up in front of his house and he saw my Vietnam Veteran sticker on the back of the
30 car. He asked me, "Were you in Vietnam?" And I said, "Yes, I was." And he said,
31 "Thank you."

1 KC: Wow. How did that make you feel?

2 CH: Oh, it made me feel great. Are you kidding me? You know, the Vietnamese
3 people that I know, and I do know some through church and meeting that family, the
4 Vietnamese family—him saying that, that just solidifies in my mind that what we at first
5 attempted to do was correct. Because you don't get a "thank you" from somebody, from
6 that country, who thinks you were doing the wrong thing. So it made me feel real good. It
7 made my day, Kelly. It made my day.

8 KC: I'm sure it did.

9 CH: Yeah. You know, you say the legacy, what's the legacy? You know, I don't
10 know. I hope the legacy is that we never do that again. I hope we never let down one of
11 our allies like we did over there.

12 KC: Well Mr. Hicks, is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview
13 before we close it up?

14 CH: Nope, not really. Oh—no. I appreciate the opportunity. I hope this is worth
15 keeping in perpetuity or whatever that word is. (Chuckles)

16 KC: It absolutely is, it absolutely is. Well, thank you so much Mr. Hicks.
17 (Interview audio ends)