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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Alfred Turgeon
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Aaron Kellerhals**

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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 KC: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History interview with Professor
2 Alfred Turgeon. Today is 5 April 2011. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas
3 Tech University, and Al is at his home in State College, Pennsylvania. Al, to begin this
4 interview I'd like to get some background information from you if I could.
- 5 AT: Sure.
- 6 KC: Could you tell me when you were born, and where?
- 7 AT: September 13th, 1943, in White Plains, New York.
- 8 KC: White Plains, New York. And what were your parent's names?
- 9 AT: Arthur and Betty. Both deceased now.
- 10 KC: Okay, what did your folks do for a living?
- 11 AT: My father owned a restaurant for a while and then did various other things.
12 Wound up working on a golf course. When he sold his restaurant, my uncle invited me to
13 work on the golf course and that got me interested in turfgrass management. Went to
14 Rutgers and studied it, and after the Army went to graduate school and been a professor
15 of turfgrass management for the last forty-years.
- 16 KC: So I guess that initial golf course experience stayed with you.

1 AT: Oh, absolutely. I've visited golf courses all over the world, and all the
2 continents, and continue to be totally enthralled with the whole notion of dealing with
3 this complex system.

4 KC: Very cool, very cool. Now what kind of restaurant did your father own?

5 AT: It was a luncheonette, open long hours, six-days a week. Kind of burned him
6 out, otherwise I probably would be in the restaurant business today.

7 KC: Now did your mother work at the restaurant too?

8 AT: Sure did, and my sister and myself.

9 KC: So there were two siblings?

10 AT: Yeah, I have a sister that's three-years older.

11 KC: Okay, very good. Well, tell me about growing up. Was it in White Plains that
12 you grew up?

13 AT: No, at Tarrytown.

14 KC: Okay, tell me about growing up there. What was childhood like for you?
15 What sort of things did you like to do as a boy?

16 AT: I learned from an early age to develop a strong work ethic. We're a very
17 work-oriented family and our lives were around the restaurant. My father sold it when I
18 was fourteen, and it was then that my uncle said, "Come work with us at the golf course."
19 And so I simply transferred my energies from the restaurant business to the golf business.
20 Maintaining the turf on the golf courses, worked there all through high school and
21 college, so I wasn't really involved much in sports or other activities. I was mostly—went
22 to school and went to work. Even at Rutgers where I did my undergrad, I worked my way
23 through college and took ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) only because I was
24 not only the first member of my family to go to college, but I was bound to be the first
25 one to serve in the military as an officer. Aviation was something I regarded the same
26 way; it was another first. So making those critical decisions as an undergrad, I wound up
27 flying a helicopter in Vietnam.

28 KC: Now, going—

29 AT: When I got back from Vietnam, I was tired of flying. I didn't really feel
30 passionate about flying the way many of my colleagues did and I asked, in my last year
31 on active duty, to be given a ground job. They happened to need a meteorology instructor

1 and while I had no great passion for teaching meteorology, I didn't want to fly, so I took
2 it. Then fell in love with teaching, and then one thing led to another, and I pursued
3 graduate study, and then an academic career.

4 KC: Now, let's back up here just a little bit

5 AT: Sure.

6 KC: To get a little more information on just kind of growing up, what kind of
7 influence you had. Were any members of your family involved in, for example, the
8 Second World War?

9 AT: Oh yes, my father was in the Second World War. Most of my uncles served
10 either in the war or shortly afterwards. They were all enlisted and all but one was in the
11 Army, one was in the Marines. So we come from, on both sides of the family, from a
12 strong military [background and commitment to the nation's defense].

13 KC: Did any of these individuals, any of these family members talk to you about
14 their time in the Army? Their time in the Second World War?

15 AT: Oh sure, not very much. My father would talk about it a lot, but he was a
16 cook and baker in the Army, never saw any combat. But the other uncles that I had, who
17 actually saw combat, were somewhat reluctant to talk about it but would, with a little
18 pressing, reveal some things.

19 KC: So would it be fair to say that there was a background or a dynamic in your
20 family that encouraged this type of service? Service to the country?

21 AT: Oh, absolutely. It was expected that you would serve your country.

22 KC: All right. Now, tell me about high school. What was that like for you? Did
23 you go to school there in Tarrytown?

24 AT: Actually, I went to Archbishop Stepinac High School in White Plains.

25 KC: Okay.

26 AT: Catholic boy's school.

27 KC: What was that school like for you? What was your time there like?

28 AT: Oh, it was fine. It was all boys, so it tended to be a little crude and
29 roughhouse, but it was a great experience. One thing about a Catholic education, you
30 learn discipline. I've learned that, in my life, that discipline's one of the most important
31 components of success. One thing I try to teach my students, usually in a casual off-

1 handed way, is the importance of finding your passion, planning your work, working
2 your plan, and learning discipline to be able to get things done. I learned that at an early
3 age growing up in a work-oriented family and benefitting from a Catholic education.

4 KC: Sure, sure. Especially during those times.

5 AT: Yeah.

6 KC: The Catholic education in the 1950's—'50s and '60s, I guess. Now, how
7 aware were you of larger, global events as you were growing up? I mean this is the early
8 days of the Cold War, how aware were you of what was going on in the world?

9 AT: I was an undergrad at Rutgers in the early '60s and there was a lot of campus
10 activity. One group that preached, "Better Red than dead." While the other faction said,
11 "Like Hell. I'm not going to do that." But we were very, very conscious of the Cold War
12 and the Cold War manifested itself in many ways, and one of those was the focus on
13 Vietnam. It was perceived at that time as the frontline of the war against Communism. I
14 think our understanding of it improved over time, but early on it was perceived as a sort
15 of Communist threat. Viewing Communism as a monolithic kind of structure that
16 threatened to take over the whole world, and that we had to fight there and other places to
17 prevent that from happening.

18 KC: When did you enter into Rutgers?

19 AT: Fall of 1961.

20 KC: Fall of 1961, okay. And why did you choose Rutgers?

21 AT: I wanted to study turfgrass management and the two logical institutions to do
22 that were Rutgers and Cornell, and I was accepted at Rutgers, and it was sixty-one miles
23 away, so it was a pretty logical choice.

24 KC: Yeah, pretty easy decision to make there, I guess.

25 AT: Right. As a matter of fact, I often times would come home and work on the
26 weekends [on the golf course] during the growing season.

27 KC: Now, you mentioned that you entered Rutgers in 1961. Now, this is
28 obviously a very important time for someone of your age and of course, one of the things
29 that is inevitable that we discuss, because you're talking about 1961 and entering college
30 and the larger global issues of the Cold War was the Kennedy Administration.

31 AT: Right.

1 KC: As a young man, what was your impression of John Kennedy and his time as
2 President?

3 AT: I loved John Kennedy. He was such an inspiring figure, and he issued the call
4 to serve your country, and it was a sort of an idealistic time, particularly the early '60s.
5 Of course, when he was killed, I was shocked. Fall of 1963, I remember I was coming out
6 of a physics lab and a colleague told me he'd been assassinated on a Friday afternoon,
7 and it was such a shock to lose that president.

8 KC: I would assume that because you went to a Catholic school, that you were
9 Catholic as well?

10 AT: Absolutely.

11 KC: Would it be fair to say that that had an influence on the way you perceived
12 him?

13 AT: I suspect so. Yeah, he was the first—he wasn't the first Catholic to run for
14 the presidency, but the first one to win. He had great support from the Catholic
15 community, as well as some of the Jewish community. I knew a lot of Jewish friends
16 growing up and they all were for Kennedy because they figured if a Catholic could make
17 it someday, maybe a Jew could make it.

18 KC: What did you think about Kennedy's presidency itself? I mean, it was
19 obviously a busy time, major events taking place. The Berlin Crisis—

20 AT: It was a mixed blessing, I think. Started out fumbling on the Bay of Pigs and
21 it seemed that he was trying to play catchup after that. He sort of glorified Vietnam and
22 Special Forces, so it was a time of a lot of innovative thinking as it related to pursuing the
23 Cold War. Very idealistic in those early days. So I liked him, I admired him because of
24 his oratory skills, but I think he made some bad mistakes as well.

25 KC: Well, talking about again these kinds of events and mistakes and
26 achievements and innovation, one of the major events that comes up of course was the—
27 you mentioned the Bay of Pigs and some of the troubles that that brought about. What
28 about the Cuban Missile Crisis? You would've been nineteen, twenty years old, ROTC.

29 AT: Oh, yeah.

30 KC: What do you remember?

1 AT: Oh yeah. Yeah, some people I knew who were older were called up for that.
2 Some of the fellows who had already served and were in the Reserves were called up for
3 that, so that was a very scary time. It's interesting, some of the records that we now have
4 access to indicate just how close we came to a nuclear confrontation over that.

5 KC: You mentioned Kennedy's assassination a little bit ago, and you told me
6 where you were because of course, most everyone remembers where they were at the
7 Kennedy assassination. What kind of effect do you think the assassination of President
8 Kennedy had on you, and the country at large?

9 AT: Well, it seemed to mark the end of an era of idealism. Then we wound up
10 with Johnson, who was a very different personality and perceived in a very different way.
11 So it was a shock for both reasons, one the end of the Kennedy idealism era and the
12 beginning of the Johnsonian era, which was quite different.

13 KC: Sure, sure. Now, you also mention that you were in ROTC, was that a
14 requirement?

15 AT: No. When I went there as a freshman that was the first year it was not a
16 requirement. I went there because I felt I had a military duty, and I opted to respond to
17 that duty by entering into officer training, so that I could go on active duty as an officer.
18 Not as a full-time career, simply to do my duty.

19 KC: Okay, and was this something you discussed with your family? Or just
20 something you felt on your own that was necessary?

21 AT: Pretty much felt on my own, but my family was totally behind me on it.

22 KC: Sure, sure. What was ROTC like on the Rutgers campus there in—

23 AT: It was great. My freshman year they began the Rutgers Rangers, so I joined
24 that and got really involved in it and served as the commander of the Ranger Company in
25 my senior year. In fact, my 1st sergeant, who was a junior when I was commander, fellow
26 by the name of Jack Jacobs. Jack subsequently earned the Medal of Honor in Vietnam.
27 You see him on MSNBC as a military advisor now.

28 KC: Very, very interesting and quite a connection there. You mentioned the
29 Rangers, the Rutgers Rangers. What was this organization?

30 AT: It was an organization that had appeal to those in ROTC who were enthused
31 about the physical and intellectual challenge associated with [special operations] types of

1 entity. Most of the people who were in there wound up becoming Rangers or Special
2 Forces or people like that, playing that [particular] role in their military service. I didn't, I
3 became a helicopter pilot.

4 KC: Right. You mentioned that there was—you discussed some of the dynamics,
5 some of the different things that was going on there on the Rutgers campus. You talked
6 about the Communist movement, the slogan "Better red than dead", and those kinds of
7 things. There you are in, I don't want to say a conservative background, but you certainly
8 had some more traditional kinds of influences. Of service to the country and patriotism,
9 and you're going into ROTC out of a sense of duty, things like that. What was the
10 atmosphere like on the campus of Rutgers there in the early '60s, the type of—

11 AT: It changed over time as the Vietnam War became more and more obvious to
12 people. You got to remember, in 1961 nobody knew anything about Vietnam.

13 KC: Sure.

14 AT: But by '65, they sure as hell did. So my junior and senior year, the awareness
15 of Vietnam and the controversy over Vietnam and the assumptions regarding our role and
16 the necessity of intervening in Vietnam, all of those were challenged. I remember there
17 were teach-ins, and various kinds of activities, and a growing anti-war movement. So it
18 was a contentious time and you were either for it or against it, and if you were for it, then
19 you planned on doing your duty, and if you we're against it, you planned to fight it and
20 some people were even talking about escaping the draft by going to Canada and other
21 places. It was an interesting time in US history.

22 KC: Well, you were certainly on one side of this divide, it sounds like. What was
23 your opinion of the other side? Did you see their views as valid? Did you see them as
24 naïve? What was your opinion of—

25 AT: At the time, I saw them as cowards. People who were afraid and refused to
26 do their duty and would come up with any reason not to do that. I think in retrospect, I
27 look back now, and I think I look back with a bit more sympathy towards those
28 individuals. They had their commitments and their ideals, and they were not comfortable,
29 to say the least, with our involvement in Vietnam and I think it was understandable why.

30 KC: Sure.

1 AT: But even though I later came to believe that the war was a mistake or at least
2 was fought in an inappropriate way that cost a lot of lives, very much like the Iraq War, I
3 became a little more sympathetic but still stuck with my view and am today proud of my
4 service.

5 KC: Sure, sure. Absolutely. Now, you graduated in '65 you said?

6 AT: Correct.

7 KC: Okay. Did you know where you were going to go? What you wanted to do
8 when you finished?

9 AT: The interesting thing is when I started out, I figured I would be flying a
10 fixed-wing in Germany, and—

11 KC: So you wanted to fly then?

12 AT: They never even asked me if I wanted to fly helicopters, I just got orders. So
13 the orders were Infantry School, Helicopter School, then Vietnam.

14 KC: You knew that immediately?

15 AT: Well, I knew that as I went on active duty. There was no question about it
16 then. All the options that might've existed a year or two before were off the table. Now,
17 everything was oriented towards Vietnam.

18 KC: You mentioned that you thought you might like to fly fixed wing.

19 AT: Yeah.

20 KC: But you got rotary wings. So you were interested in flying?

21 AT: Right.

22 KC: No way around that, I mean that was something that you wanted to do. Why
23 flying?

24 AT: Again, it was just a first. No one in my family had ever flown, had ever been
25 a pilot, and I was into firsts, I was into doing new things. And initially, flying appealed to
26 me because you get a different perspective on the world, and indeed you do when you're
27 up at two thousand, three thousand feet. Things look different, and the world is perceived
28 in a very different way. But some people have a passion for flying, they love that notion
29 of being one with a machine and doing all the things you can do. I found that ninety
30 percent of flying was mostly holding, heading, airspeed, and altitude. It was
31 fundamentally boring and decided after I was in it, and particularly about half-way

1 through my tour in Vietnam, that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life flying. So as
2 soon as I got home—I did my duty because I had to, but as soon as I got home, I made it
3 clear I wasn't interested in flying anymore. And in fact, when I left active-duty, I only
4 one time, seventeen-years later, got back in a helicopter. Found I could still fly it, but
5 that's the only time, and I've had no interest in doing so since then.

6 KC: Sure, sure. Well, you graduate in 1965, I assume you're going to officers
7 basic somewhere. Where was officers basic?

8 AT: [The] infantry officers' basic course was at Fort Benning, [Georgia].

9 KC: Okay. Tell me about your time at Fort Benning. I mean, tell me the nuts and
10 bolts of it. Your arrival there, your daily routine, what went on—

11 AT: Yeah, we lived in BOQs (Bachelor Officer Quarters), two men to a room. It
12 was very much like basic training even though we were all second lieutenants. It was an
13 interesting group because you don't get drafted into infantry, you choose infantry and I
14 chose it because I liked the idea of infantry and knowing [that] if I ever got shot down,
15 I'd want to know what to do on the ground. I want to be comfortable in that environment.
16 So I deliberately chose infantry. Now, a portion of our IOBC (Infantry Officer Basic
17 Course) class were lawyers who were going to go into the Intelligence Corps, but they
18 had to go through infantry first. So you had this intriguing dichotomy of academic type
19 lawyers and gung-ho infantry types going through the same training. I enjoyed the
20 training for the most part, I liked being outdoors. I liked being in the woods. I liked
21 patrolling, I liked weapons. I enjoyed it, I loved the physicality of it and the challenge of
22 it. Now, at the same time, I had friends going through other branch schools, armor [and]
23 artillery—and they would talk about driving to class. Hell, we never drove anywhere, we
24 ran. So infantry was a little different, but I was pleased with it. I enjoyed it. I loved Fort
25 Benning. In fact, I was on vacation last week in Georgia and we spent a day and visited
26 Fort Benning. I hadn't been there since the '60s.

27 KC: Oh wow.

28 AT: Thoroughly enjoyed visiting the Infantry Museum there. So I look back with
29 some joy on that experience.

30 KC: It sounds like it was a very positive one for you.

31 AT: It really was.

1 KC: I assume you did well then?

2 AT: Yeah, enjoyed it.

3 KC: Okay, all right. Now, you finish your time at Fort Benning, you're probably

4 there what two-and-a-half, three months, something like that?

5 AT: Yeah, started November [1st] and finished January 21st, but we did have a

6 leave during Christmas.

7 KC: Okay. Now, you talk about November through December of '65. Of course,

8 in November of 1965 one of the most famous, iconic battles of the Vietnam War takes

9 place, the Battle of the Ia Drang.

10 AT: Right.

11 KC: Air-mobility as a concept is tested really for the first time in the battle against

12 the North Vietnamese. Did you have any inkling that was going on? Did you get any

13 reports back? Did anybody discuss that with you?

14 AT: Only peripherally aware of that. All it really did was heighten our enthusiasm

15 for engaging in the training and learning as much as you can. I mean, as a teacher, one of

16 the important things you try to do is establish the need for or the importance of this

17 particular instructional module. Well, when you're undergoing military training in a time

18 of war, it's not hard to emphasis how important it is to develop certain skills that could

19 ultimately save your life. So we took the training very seriously.

20 KC: Sure. You finish your time at Fort Benning and as a helicopter pilot there's

21 one place you're going to go for primary and that's to Fort Wolters.

22 AT: Right.

23 KC: Tell me about your time there in Mineral Wells, Texas.

24 AT: It was a difficult experience, I'm not a particularly well-coordinated person.

25 Learning how to fly a helicopter was really a challenge. You had to deal with the stress of

26 flying and learning how to fly under an instructor who was attempting to get your skill

27 level up very quickly, because we didn't have the luxury of taking our time, we had to

28 progress based on a rather ambitious schedule. So it was a stressful time, both at Fort

29 Wolters and at Fort Rucker for advanced. It was a challenge, and I was glad [when it was

30 over].

1 KC: I'd like for you to tell me about your time there at Fort Wolters, tell me about
2 the training regimen. Tell me about the classroom. Tell me about some of these things in
3 particular that were more difficult for you. Give me some of the gory details.

4 AT: The difficulty was in the helicopter itself, was learning the basic skills. When
5 you fly a helicopter, you really need five appendages. Your left hand is controlling the
6 collective and the throttle. The right-hand the cyclic, and your two feet the pedals that
7 control the angle of attack of the tail rotor. So learning how to coordinate all of those in a
8 way that's safe and effective was a real challenge, and then mastering the basic skills of
9 just taking off, flying straight and level, navigating, monitoring instruments, monitoring
10 what's going on outside, landing safely, being conscious of the need for identifying
11 forced landing areas in the event something goes wrong, puts you under a great deal of
12 stress. Now, eventually I got good at it and could do that pretty well, particularly in
13 Vietnam when you fly virtually every day, sometimes long hours. I had one day with
14 sixteen-point-two hours of logged flying time. You get really good at it after a while,
15 even a person as uncoordinated as me. But learning how in that training environment was
16 difficult. Now that was half of the training, the other half was academic or classroom
17 training and that I enjoyed. I enjoyed learning about aerodynamics. I enjoyed learning
18 about weather. I enjoyed learning about all of the academic aspects of aviation, but the
19 actual flying itself, mastering the skills and handling the stress of that was a challenge for
20 me.

21 KC: Now you talk about the stress of learning there, what sort of things would
22 you do to relieve that stress? Did you get the opportunity to go out? Did you visit any of
23 the cities around Mineral Wells? Anything like that?

24 AT: We lived—I was newly married. I got married after I finished infantry
25 training and my wife graduated from college and took her with me to Fort Wolters. So we
26 were newlyweds and we lived in Weatherford, seventeen miles away because housing
27 was short. I would drive with a friend who also lived there in those apartments in
28 Weatherford. We drove the seventeen miles together every day, trading cars one week
29 versus the other. So we had time to talk and do things, but mainly the focus was on
30 training and the relaxation came when we were back in Weatherford and we'd have
31 dinners together or have parties and things like that. But on base, it was all work.

1 KC: Right. Speaking of being on base and all work, your instructor pilots, were
2 any of these returning veterans from Vietnam?

3 AT: At Fort Wolters they weren't. All the instructor pilots I had there were
4 civilians.

5 KC: Okay.

6 AT: When I went to Fort [Rucker], [however], many of [instructors] were
7 veterans, particularly when we moved into UH-1 transition. They were—all those, I
8 recall, were veterans, and it was fascinating [talking] to them. Some of them were
9 arrogant and difficult, others were great guys and I found I did better when I developed a
10 good, positive rapport with my instructor, not when he was hounding me or being critical
11 of me. [Interestingly], that [experience] influenced my own teaching style. I will
12 challenge students, but I'll always do it in a non-threatening way, cause some people
13 don't learn well in [a hostile] environment.

14 KC: What kind of helicopters were you flying here at Fort Wolters?

15 AT: We flew the TH-55. It was a Hughes 300—very small aircraft, barely enough
16 room for two pilots and you felt like you strapped the helicopter to your back. It was so
17 small. But it was a fun thing to learn to fly in once you mastered certain skills. And I did
18 enjoy flying alone and doing cross-country flights and that sort of thing.

19 KC: Well, tell me about—

20 AT: And then, when I [moved on to] Fort Rucker, we started with instrument
21 training, and we did that with a Bell [OH-13] and a Hiller [OH-23]. These were Korea-
22 era, bubble-type helicopters. Then we had the Huey transition, and we flew mostly D-
23 model Hueys. That was like a Cadillac compared to those other aircrafts.

24 KC: I'm sure. Just to wrap up your time there at Fort Wolters, how well do you
25 think you did there? Did you feel comfortable at the time about where you were, and your
26 abilities?

27 AT: Well, it varied. Early on it would always be stressful, and then, eventually
28 once you developed a comfort level, then the stress would be less and you could focus on
29 really learning and enjoying what you were doing. So it was a variable experience and it
30 was very much influenced by the quality of the instructor. A good instructor made it less
31 challenging and more enjoyable, a tough instructor made it very stressful.

1 KC: Sure, sure. You finish up your time at Fort Wolters and you say you went on
2 to Advance [Rotary Wing instruction] at Fort Rucker, correct?

3 AT: Right.

4 KC: All right. Well, same questions. What was it like there at Fort Rucker in,
5 what's this 1966?

6 AT: Right.

7 KC: In the middle of 1966, describe what it was like there at Fort Rucker.

8 AT: It was pretty much like the experience at Wolters, except it was in Alabama,
9 much more humid. We lived in little apartments in the Danville Inn. There was a
10 swimming pool there and that was nice, we could—on those hot and humid days. This
11 was now in the summer of '66, it got awfully hot and humid, and we could get home and
12 usually we got home fairly early in the afternoon unless we were flying in the afternoon,
13 and we could jump in the pool and relax, and cook on the grill, and things like that. So
14 the social part of it I enjoyed very much, we made a lot of friends. The training part,
15 again, was a variable experience. Early on was a real challenge, later became—as you felt
16 you got on top of things, then it became a little more enjoyable, less stressful.

17 KC: Now, you mentioned earlier that you did have Vietnam veterans, pilots who
18 had returned from Vietnam who are training you at Fort Rucker—

19 AT: In the Huey.

20 KC: In the Huey. What sort of things were they telling you? Were they offering
21 you advice, “Look the book says do it this way, but when you get to Vietnam this is what
22 it's going to be like. These are the things to lookout for.” What kind of—

23 AT: Yeah, we didn't really talk much about tactics. I learned that in Vietnam. But
24 we did talk about working around the limitations of the aircraft. I remember one
25 instructor was very, very good in teaching how you can get that aircraft up and flying
26 even though you were overloaded and couldn't get it up to a hover. So I remember
27 clearly his cautions about how you deal with a situation like that with a D-model Huey,
28 which tended to be a little bit underpowered given its carrying capacity. But basically, I
29 enjoyed the military pilots, particularly the commissioned officers. The warrants, a lot of
30 [them] were young and they somehow had some animosity towards commissioned
31 officers. But the commissioned officers, the several that I had, were great guys. They

1 were fun to be with, they made it enjoyable, and they showed me that flying could be fun.
2 So it was a variable experience depending where we were in the stage of training, and the
3 quality of the instructor.

4 KC: Sure, sure. What was it like transitioning from the trainer to the D-model
5 Huey?

6 AT: It was glorious, it was— I mean, first of all, you didn't have to manipulate
7 the throttle, it had a governor on it so once you brought it up to full RPM (Rotations per
8 Minute) you didn't have to worry about that. Although in some emergency procedures
9 you would take it off the governor. For example, in dealing with a hydraulics-failure
10 you'd actually use the throttle to help control the yaw of the aircraft when the controls are
11 very difficult to manipulate [without hydraulic support]. But basically, we flew with a
12 governor, and that made it more fun and easier to fly, but the smoothness of the aircraft
13 and the sophistication of the aircraft [made flying it] a joy. It was like going from a
14 Model-T Ford to a Cadillac. That kind of magnitude of difference.

15 KC: Sure, sure. And again, do you feel that you came out of Fort Rucker in pretty
16 good shape, in terms of your abilities?

17 AT: Yeah, I could do the basic skills. I didn't know anything about flying in
18 combat other than a couple of things that some of the transition instructors explained. But
19 basically, the focus was on how you managed the aircraft. With the hours we had, we
20 were reasonably good at that. When you get to Vietnam, of course, you're having to fly
21 under high density altitude conditions, so it's a little different. You're flying in a combat
22 situation where you continually have to be aware of the dangers of small-arms fire from
23 the ground, particularly during take-offs and landings. There were strategies and tactics
24 you learned flying in a combat environment that they never even touched on in flight
25 school. So really, the early days in Vietnam as a co-pilot under an [experienced] aircraft
26 commander were when you really learned about combat flying.

27 KC: Now, when you finish your training at Rucker, you said that you were going
28 to Vietnam, you knew that was going to be the case.

29 AT: Right.

30 KC: You hadn't been married for very long, what kind of awareness of what was
31 going on in Vietnam did you have at that time?

1 AT: At that time, I was painfully aware of it. I mean I figured there was a fifty-
2 fifty chance I wouldn't come home. So when I graduated I had about a months' leave and
3 my wife and I visited some relatives around the country and spent a couple weeks in
4 Mexico, a delayed honeymoon. When I left, I left fully aware that it was very likely I
5 wouldn't come home.

6 KC: And what did your new bride think about this?

7 AT: Well, we tried not to talk about that. Basically, I made sure that my affairs
8 were in order—what little affairs I had at that age, I was twenty-three. My affairs were in
9 order, she was staying with her parents, had a job working with RCA (Radio Corporation
10 of America). So she was in a good, secure situation, I didn't have to worry about her. I
11 could just focus on me, and we did meet in R&R (Rest and Recuperation) in Hawaii for a
12 week [the following July], and that was a glorious time. I just accepted the fact that I was
13 in that situation and had to deal with [whatever challenges I would face].

14 KC: What about the rest of your family? Your mother, father, sister, what were
15 their impressions of—

16 AT: You know, they didn't talk about it. We just didn't discuss it. It was when I
17 came back that they all wanted to learn about what happened, but when I was going, we
18 just didn't talk about it. It was almost like that's not an issue that we should discuss. It
19 was just I'm going there, and hopefully things will work out and I'll come back. That was
20 about the extent of it.

21 KC: What was your impression of the debate in American society at the time?

22 AT: Well, by then I was clearly on one side of the issue, and I just ignored it. It's
23 hard to be engaged in an intellectual discussion when you are personally committed to
24 doing something, and so you might as well feel in a supportive position with respect to
25 that because otherwise it makes what you've got to do even more difficult.

26 KC: Sure, sure. And that's put very well. Okay, so it is—I believe you said
27 December of 1966 when you're going to leave, you've—

28 AT: December [4th].

29 KC: On December [4th]. When you said your goodbyes, where [were] you flying
30 out of?

1 AT: My wife and her family lived in Moorestown, New Jersey, right near
2 Camden. So we left from the Philadelphia airport. [I initially flew] out to California, I
3 spent a day or so there waiting for a flight to Vietnam and hung out with some guys
4 waiting. Then, eventually we got on the flight, and the flight over was a lot of fun
5 actually. People were jovial, the flight attendants were a lot of fun, they would come
6 around and talk with us, play card games, and so on. In fact, I think I articulated in that
7 article I wrote that I shared with you, that there were four flights. The flight over, the
8 flight to R&R, the flight returning, and the flight home. The first two flights, going over
9 and to Hawaii, were jovial, fun, raucous. The other two flights, leaving Hawaii to go back
10 and then leaving Vietnam to go home, were very quiet, you could hear a pin drop;
11 nobody said anything. So it was a totally different kind of experience.

12 KC: Right. Those are interesting points you make there, we'll explore those more
13 as we move through.

14 AT: Sure.

15 KC: Because obviously, it's representative of your overall experience and other's
16 experience as well from your perspective. So here it is December 1966, you've left your
17 wife behind, you've left your family behind, you're going to Vietnam. You say the trip
18 over was somewhat raucous, you'd met some friends, and things were going well. Where
19 do you come into Vietnam? Do you come into Tan Son Nhut I would assume?

20 AT: Yeah. We landed at Tan Son Nhut, disembarked the plane. We had to get on
21 these busses and the first shock, other than the oppressive heat and humidity, was the
22 windows on the busses had these thick, wire mesh screens. They were obviously to
23 provide some measure of protection against hand grenades and other devices that might
24 be thrown at the bus. So that's the first time I immediately felt the reality of being in a
25 combat zone. I remember there was a young captain, and he had a .25 caliber semi-
26 automatic pistol, and so he was the only guy who was armed and so everybody huddled
27 around him. (Laughs)

28 KC: That .25 caliber is going to keep the lot of y'all safe.

29 AT: A peashooter.

30 KC: (Laughs) Yeah.

1 AT: We huddled around him cause he could provide some protection. Anyway,
2 we were bussed to a place called Camp Alpha. Had to spend the night there and then we
3 would be picked up and taken out to our respective units. Well, during that night there
4 was a mortar attack, and it was an understatement to say I felt helpless cause there I was,
5 my first day in-country, no weapons, no nothing, not knowing anything and there's a
6 mortar attack. Actually, I found out later that a VC (Viet Cong) insurgent tried to attack
7 Camp Alpha, and one of the guards was killed in the process. That was kind of a dramatic
8 beginning of my wartime experience. But the next day we got up, had breakfast, and I
9 was told to report to a certain place, and there was a pilot from my unit, the 116th Assault
10 Helicopter Company who was there to pick me up. I got in the back of the helicopter with
11 my duffel bag and was taken to Cu Chi—no, initially Phu Loi, the battalion headquarters,
12 and then to Cu Chi to sign in, get my bunk, and become acquainted with the people in my
13 new unit.

14 KC: One of things I don't think we get enough in the interviews that we conduct
15 is a description of say, Saigon in 1966, or a description of Camp Alpha in particular.
16 What were these places like? Your first experience with them.

17 AT: Saigon, I didn't spend much time in Saigon. I went directly from Tan Son
18 Nhut to Camp Alpha, and then to Cu Chi. So my only impression was getting on and off
19 the bus. Camp Alpha was a typical wood barracks with bunks. Very tight quarters with
20 people moving in and out very quickly. You were a piece of meat being transported
21 basically. But it was very typical of other military type situations, like in a training
22 situation. My hooch where I lived in Cu Chi was a wooden building with a metal roof.
23 We had cots that we slept on in a very small area with a metal locker to keep my stuff in,
24 and a wooden locker to keep other stuff in and a bed, and that was about it. I put a nail in
25 the wall to hang my rifle, and we lived in a very spartan situation. There was a mess hall
26 a couple buildings over where we'd have our meals, and there was the flight-line we walk
27 out to and say hello to the enlisted crew members, the crew chief and the gunner, pre-
28 flight the aircraft and go fly. We flew every day, We might get a day off once every
29 couple weeks or so, but basically we flew every day. On Sunday you could go to church,
30 unless you were flying out early, but normally we didn't early Sunday morning. We
31 settled into the routine very quickly. When it rained, it got real muddy. That mud would

1 stick to your boots, those laterite soils are very sticky. Would stick to your boots, and
2 when it was dry it was very dusty. If there was a mortar attack, we had these little
3 sandbag bunkers we'd run into. You know, you quickly adapted to the reality of a new
4 environment.

5 KC: Speaking of this new environment and adaptation, tell me about coming into
6 the 116th. Tell me about the people, tell me about the mission, tell me about what the
7 116th was when you arrived there in December of '66.

8 AT: The guy who picked me up, who flew me in was a warrant officer. He was
9 leaving. He was leaving like two days later and I just fly with him once. My first day
10 flying was with him. We ran through emergency procedures [as he] checked me out. You
11 know cut the engine; we did the force-landing. Cut the hydraulics, we did the procedure
12 for hydraulics failure, and he said, "You're good to go. No problem." Then he took me in
13 to meet the company commander, [—] Major Patterson. He welcomed me to the
14 company, and he said, "You know, every pilot during his tour here can expect to face one
15 emergency." He says, "Are you ready? Are you ready for that?" I said, "Yes, sir." But I
16 wasn't, I was scared as hell. It's funny, you think about it now, and you say, "God, that
17 was such a threatening and dangerous environment." But at the time, you're just young
18 guys all dealing with the same thing. You learned how to adapt to it. That's the amazing
19 thing about it. I don't know if it's unique to Americans or maybe it's just all human
20 beings, but no matter what environment you're in, you quickly learn to adapt as you look
21 at your comrades and deal with them very much the way you would in any other aspect
22 of life, except that here you got to be a little more careful cause you're in a combat zone.

23 KC: Right, right. What was the mission of the 116th? Were you supporting
24 particular units?

25 AT: It was an assault helicopter company, and we supported many different units.
26 We supported the 25th Infantry Division, which was there at Cu Chi. We supported the 1st
27 [Division], which was over at Phu Loi. We supported the 4th [Division] that was a little
28 bit north of us—Dau Tieng, I think. The 9th [Division] when they moved into the Delta,
29 we supported them. On one occasion or two, we supported the Australians or New
30 Zealanders in Vung Tau. And then we supported a lot of Vietnamese units, ARVN (Army
31 of the Republic of Vietnam) units, RF/PF (Regional Forces/Popular Forces) [—] these

1 are like the militia. Mercenaries controlled by the Special Forces. We supported a broad
2 array of units. It was interesting, each unit seemed to have its own character. If you
3 supported the 1st, they would jump off the helicopter just as you hit the ground. If you
4 supported the 25th, they would jump off, but not quite so soon. The Vietnamese units
5 sometimes had to [be] thrown off. The Australians were crazy, they would jump off
6 before you got to the ground. Screaming, yelling, and firing their weapons. So each unit
7 was different and you could detect the character of it in a combat assault when you saw
8 how they handled their engagement in combat.

9 KC: Different levels of leadership and professionalism, and those kinds of things.

10 AT: Yeah. And unit culture, I think.

11 KC: Right. Absolutely, the identity of the unit, for sure. Al, take me on your first
12 mission. Whether it was just as a co-pilot or if it was part of a lift, take me on the first
13 mission that you had.

14 AT: The very first day was what we call, 'ash-and-trash' flying, it was moving
15 materials and people from one location to another. I flew with a warrant officer who was
16 just about ready to leave country. We'd pick up stuff at one place and take it to another
17 place. Then, sometimes people would hitch a ride and if we had room, we'd take them. It
18 was just basically flying from one location to another, you were constantly up and down,
19 all day long. I think that first day we flew about eight-hours of flying time. We'd have to
20 refuel about every two-hours, so we'd monitor the fuel gauges and when we got down to
21 about—I forget what it was, a couple-hundred pounds of fuel we'd look for a place to
22 refuel. We had refueling places all over the place. Flew, often times, these fuel bladders
23 and we'd land, the crew chief gunner would get out, fill it up, and we'd be on our way in
24 a matter of minutes. Then around noontime we'd take a break, find a place to eat, usually
25 find a battalion mess or something. You know, introduce ourselves, and they were always
26 happy to feed helicopter pilots because who knows, they may need us someday.

27 KC: Yeah, you would be a very handy contact to make, I would think.

28 AT: Yeah, we were always welcome wherever we went. [Everyone] loved
29 helicopter pilots because we were the lifeline if a person was wounded or needed critical
30 supplies, or whatever. The helicopter was the icon of Vietnam and helicopter pilots were,
31 for the most part, well treated.

1 KC: Sure, sure.

2 AT: And that was it, it was basically routine. The first combat assault was
3 exciting.

4 KC: Tell me about that.

5 AT: That was several days later. We flew in a ten-ship formation. Well, I should
6 precede that by saying when you have a combat assault schedule, you'll always have an
7 evening briefing. So as you come in from a day of flying, you'd call operations. They'd
8 give you some weather information, tell you what the active runway was so you could
9 land. Then they might say, "Oh, at 19:30 hours there'll be a briefing." Well, you knew if
10 you had a briefing that there was a combat assault the next day. I got the point where I
11 would pray that there wouldn't be a briefing. If the sergeant at the desk said, "Oh, and
12 there's a briefing at 19:30." I'd [think to myself], "Oh my God, it's a combat assault
13 tomorrow." [A] combat assault was unlike flying single ship where you could take
14 evasive action, you could change your pattern [and employ] the tactics you learned from
15 the more experienced pilots. You could take that knowledge and you could use it to
16 survive. In a combat assault, you were in a ten-ship formation. Typically, staggered right
17 formation means that the second ship was to the rear and right of the first, then the third
18 ship was to the rear and left of the second, and so on. You'd have usually four gunships
19 flying alongside of you and you'd land in an LZ (Landing Zone), you'd try to come in
20 fast and low. Land, drop your troops off as the gunships are firing up the tree line. As
21 soon as the troops got off, they would start firing, you'd stop firing your outside weapons
22 and the gunships would peel off and the troops would take over. The idea was, if there
23 were enemy there, to keep their heads down with fire, suppressive fire, so you could get
24 in and out. So it was exciting, but because you were a cog in a larger machine, you
25 couldn't take evasive action. You just had to hold your course no matter what, and you're
26 flying in pretty tight formation with the next guy's rotor blades very near yours. It was a
27 more stressful kind of flying. I didn't particularly enjoy that, but I enjoyed single ship
28 cause if I was resupplying a particular place, I always took a different route. I'd either fly
29 high or I'd fly low. I always came in fast. I'd [descend to] tree-top level. I'd maintain my
30 speed [until I got close to the LZ; then, I'd do a rapid deceleration], [drop] in that LZ, do
31 what I had to do, and get out quickly again. I learned how to fly in a way that, in any

1 other circumstance would be called “cowboy flying” but in a combat situation it’s good,
2 defensive flying.

3 KC: Right.

4 AT: So I got a taste of all of that in my first week, and because we flew everyday
5 your skill level and your confidence level increased. You learned how to navigate. In a
6 combat assault, both [pilots] would be on the controls. One guy flying, the other guy
7 [with his hands] lightly [placed on the controls] in case the other guy got shot, so you
8 could take over right away. Otherwise, one guy flew, and the other guy navigated,
9 handled the radios and communication, helped monitor instruments, monitored traffic
10 outside, and so on. Even though it could be boring from time-to-time, there was lots to
11 do, and you learned how to do it very efficiently and well.

12 KC: Now, that first combat assault you go on, I assume you weren’t the pilot, or
13 were you the pilot?

14 AT: No, it takes about three months.

15 KC: Okay.

16 AT: To get up to the level of becoming an aircraft commander, and so my first
17 three months was [as a] co-pilot. However, we called it “pilot”, [as] the Army had this
18 ingenious method [by which] both pilots could log first-pilot time. Instead of calling them
19 “pilot” and “co-pilot”, you called [them] “aircraft commander” and “pilot”. Typically, in
20 Army parlance, the commander was the commander who gave the orders, and the pilot
21 was the guy who flew and was responsible for the airplane. But in reality, we were pilot
22 and co-pilot.

23 KC: Right, right. Well, take me—if you can remember this one in any sort of
24 detail, take me on this first combat assault. I want you to take me on loading up, the pre-
25 flight, the pattern, the emotions you’re going through, psychologically what you’re
26 seeing, what you’re doing. Take me on that and as much detail as you can.

27 AT: Sure. First of all, you’re going to take off from your base of operations, in
28 our case Cu Chi, and you’re going to take off in a ten-ship formation. So you get your
29 helicopter, you line up on the runway. The gunships are operating independently, and you
30 get ten aircraft ready to go. Somebody is in command of the formation, it might be the
31 company commander, the operations officer, or one of the platoon leaders. He says,

1 “Flight we’re ready to go.” And he would takeoff and the others would follow and then
2 you’d be climbing, and so the guy in front of you would be at higher altitude and so
3 you’re struggling to gain altitude as quickly as possible so that as soon as you get to your
4 flying altitude you can be in the same level, or actually you’re a little bit higher than the
5 guy in front of you to avoid [the] rotor wash [from] the aircraft in front of you. You’re in
6 that formation and you’re basically looking at that guy to your front and getting into and
7 maintaining that position, so you’re about one rotor-blade width apart. If he turns, often
8 times he’ll say, “Turning right.” Because you’re just focusing on that aircraft in front of
9 you and if you see his rotor blades dipping to the right, you know you’re turning right,
10 and you automatically do a right turn with your cyclic. But it’s totally concentrating on
11 that aircraft in front of you and maintaining [the correct distance from him]. Then you get
12 to your destination where the troops are, and you land in formation [to] load [the] troops.
13 Now, with Americans, Americans carry a lot of gear and so you would carry six fully
14 combat-loaded American troops. If we carried Vietnamese, we’d carry, believe it or not,
15 up to sixteen of them. One, because they’re a lot smaller. Two, because they didn’t carry
16 much stuff. They’d carry a small rifle and a little jar of nước chấm and some rice in a
17 pouch, and that was about it. Not much more. So you could pack them up there and carry
18 a whole bunch of those guys. But it’s typically six fully combat-loaded Americans, then
19 you could easily fly the aircraft. You could fly with seven, but it’d be a struggle getting
20 off the ground, and then if you didn’t burn off enough fuel, landing could be a challenge
21 when you’re heavily loaded too. So anyway, now you’d be fully loaded, and you’re going
22 to do the same thing you did before. Lineup, takeoff in formation, this time it’s harder to
23 gain altitude because you’re much more heavily loaded. But it’s same thing, just
24 struggling to rapidly gain altitude and get up to your flight altitude. Then, you settle
25 down, [in] formation [flying], [you are] focusing your attention on the guy in front of
26 you, maintaining that proper rotor width. Listening to instructions and doing what you’re
27 told. Now, in a combat assault, you’re going to land in a potentially hostile environment.
28 Typically, you would land a smoke, but not always. It might be a Pathfinder on the
29 ground dropping smoke. It might be a helicopter dropping smoke bombs. You had to
30 make sure you landed at the right LZ. You’d oftentimes land to smoke if somebody could
31 get there on the ground. When you came in, you wanted to come in fast and low, which

1 was a bit of a challenge because you had to come in and decelerate and then drag those
2 skids on the ground and stop, and make sure everybody stopped at the right time and the
3 right location and avoid a pileup. Then, the idea is to get those people off as quickly as
4 possible. So in a ten-ship formation, you had five ships on one side, five on the other.
5 Oftentimes, you'd be firing outside door guns approaching the LZ. As soon as you got on
6 the ground, they suspended that fire. The troops would jump off and they would start
7 firing, running towards the tree line. The gunships, which would be firing up the tree line,
8 would break off. So it was a well-coordinated activity. Now, if you had an inexperienced
9 person leading the formation, sometimes they'd come in high. In other words, they
10 wouldn't start the descent early enough, and you'd come in at a relatively steep angle,
11 which meant you would bunch up on short final. Which meant that you were coming in
12 high and slow, and you were more of a target to [anyone] on the ground. So you always
13 hate it when you've got an inexperienced flight leader because invariably, you'd be
14 bunched up on short final and a more inviting target for the [bad guys]. So the ideal was
15 to come in low and fast, skid that thing on the ground, and no sooner had the skids
16 touched down you'd be pulling collective and pulling off again. In a well-coordinated
17 combat assault, you were down and up in a matter of seconds. When it went well, it was a
18 beautiful thing to see. When it went badly, it was a nightmare and when you started
19 receiving fire and people getting hurt, it became a real nightmare. It never happened to
20 me, but sometimes on a combat assault some of the helicopters would get shot down and
21 then they're burning in the LZ as the others tried to get out of there, and then you had to
22 all of a sudden convert it into a rescue mission. So it was always a lot of danger in doing
23 those things.

24 KC: Now this first combat assault that you're on here with the 116th, was this a
25 hot LZ? Were you receiving fire?

26 AT: No, no. Only about one out of five LZs would really be hot to where you
27 really were in serious danger. Most of the time, you couldn't find the guys, they'd be—I
28 think a lot of times they knew we were coming, so they'd vacate before we got there. So
29 a lot of times it was a dry run.

30 KC: Right.

1 AT: But when you did start receiving fire then you knew it was serious business. I
2 could never tell when we were receiving fire. I mean, unless they hit your windshield or
3 something. There was so much noise and so much stuff going on, I couldn't tell. But the
4 crew chief and gunner would say, "We're receiving fire, let's get the hell out of here."
5 Now, when you were done, sometimes you'd make one landing, sometimes you'd follow
6 up with some more troops, and then you'd land someplace and you'd wait, either to be
7 called to take them out or to make another assault, or to resupply the people you just
8 dropped off. Sometimes we'd do an assault, then we'd sit for an hour, two-hours, playing
9 cards, eating C-rations, just waiting for instructions on what to do next.

10 KC: When you finish this combat assault, when the day's over for you—on this
11 first one, we're just sticking with that one right now. When you're done, the bird's put
12 away for the night, what kind of thoughts are going through your mind? I mean, this is
13 your first combat assault in Vietnam as a pilot. Not aircraft commander, but as a pilot.
14 What are you thinking about? Do you recall?

15 AT: Yeah. You worried about doing your job and doing it properly because there
16 was so much tension and there were so many things that could go wrong that you were
17 always thinking, "How do I do this? How do I make sure I don't screw up? What would I
18 do if this happened, or that happened?" Sometimes you'd ask the more experienced pilots
19 these questions and sometimes they'd answer, sometimes they'd just joke it off and say,
20 "Pray." Or what's the famous one, you know, "When things get real bad you bend over,
21 put your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye."

22 KC: Right, right.

23 AT: That was oftentimes the joking answer. So what you did, you'd always say a
24 little prayer and hope for the best and try to be ready for whatever happened. So it was a
25 little fear, a little apprehension, but the greatest fear usually was the fear that you might
26 screw up and make things bad for other people. You didn't want to do that, you wanted to
27 be able to do your job.

28 KC: Right. Yeah, I hear that as a common refrain among many veterans from a
29 variety of different experiences. Whether they're helicopter pilots or whatever they might
30 be, that's something that this—

31 AT: That's consistent with that.

1 KC: Yeah.

2 AT: When you're in combat, you don't think about US policy or all of the things
3 that brought you to this place. You think about, one, how do I survive this? Two, how do
4 I do it without embarrassing myself and making a fool out of myself? Three, how do I
5 help my fellow pilot, my fellow soldier? Because I wanted to be able to depend on him
6 and so I want him to know that he can depend on me. So you really you worked for each
7 other.

8 KC: You've had your first experience combat assault in Vietnam, what was it like
9 flying there? I mean it's not Fort Wolters. It's not Fort Rucker. What was it like flying
10 in—

11 AT: It's—you couldn't wait to get off the ground cause it was hot and humid.
12 You want to get that big fan turning and get to where there was some breeze. So we
13 didn't dilly-dally on the ground. We pre-flighted, got in the aircraft, fired it up, got
14 permission, and took off. Flying you know was—the aircraft wasn't as powerful because
15 you had that heat and humidity, we called high-density altitude conditions and so it
16 tended to be not as responsive, and a little more sluggish. You prayed for a brand-new
17 ship, and new ships always seemed to have a little more power and be a little more gutsy
18 than [an] old ship that had been around for a while. So you prayed for a new ship because
19 you're always worrying about having enough power to do what you had to do. You
20 recognized your limitations of—and the amazing thing is you'd have people get onboard,
21 field-grade officers were often at fault for this. Some colonel would get on board and I'd
22 say, "Sir, I think we're a little heavily loaded here." He'd say, "Nah, you're not heavily
23 loaded, you can do it." And he damn-near crashed the thing. I finally learned to say, "No,
24 we're heavily loaded. This needs to go off and it needs to go off now." You realize that
25 the word, "Aircraft Commander" means you're the commander. It doesn't matter who
26 that guy is flying in the back. You're responsible for his safety and if he wants to argue
27 with you, fine. [Let him] argue, but I'm the commander and I make the decision. I've had
28 to tell that to a couple of colonels, and [sometimes] I got into trouble for it. [But] as long
29 as I was respectful, I always had my way. You learned to take charge for your safety, the
30 safety of your crew, the safety of your passengers, and the accomplishment of the
31 mission. That was the part of the maturing exercise, never be intimidated by rank. You do

1 your job, you do it well and you try to accomplish the mission, but never take
2 unnecessary risks just because somebody wants you to. You've got to take command of
3 that. That was pretty much it. Most of the time, you got along with people. People would
4 say, "Gee can I get a ride?" "Sure. I've got room, I can take you." You tried to help
5 people, and you tried to make everything work. You knew that if you were carrying
6 supplies, it's cause somebody needed them. And so, you made sure you did the very best
7 you could without putting yourself or the aircraft or your colleagues in danger. So you
8 tried to do your job, you recognized your limitations, you made sure that other people
9 recognized those limitations, and you tried to be as good as you could be so that you
10 increased the chances of surviving.

11 KC: You've mentioned that you would pray for a new ship, you'd pray for a new
12 bird. Were you assigned one particular helicopter, or were you moved around from
13 different helicopters—

14 AT: No. No, the enlisted crew were assigned specific aircraft, the pilots would
15 move to different aircraft. Now, eventually you got to know all of the crews because
16 you'd come around and fly that aircraft again. But the pilots were never assigned an
17 aircraft. You would be given a one-day assignment and that would be your aircraft for
18 that day, and the next day you'd probably be given a different one. But after a while you
19 get to know the crews, and you learn to work with them as a team.

20 KC: Now, were there particular birds that you preferred? Or even particular crews
21 that you preferred over others?

22 AT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I mean some of the crew chiefs were really good. They were
23 really good aircraft mechanics, they knew that aircraft, and I always wanted to pre-flight
24 the aircraft with the crew chief. So when I'd walk up to an aircraft as the aircraft
25 commander, and even as a pilot, I would ask the crew chief to accompany me [during the
26 pre-flight inspection]. We'd [start at the] top with the rotor blades. We worked our way
27 down. I'd ask him questions. A good one would not only answer, but he would offer
28 things and I'd say, "Anything to be aware of?" And he'd say, "We've had this problem."
29 "That's okay. Let's keep watching it. You sense anything at all, you tell me, and we'll do
30 whatever we have to do." Some of them, usually the inexperienced ones lack the
31 confidence to do that, so you had to work with them to get them up to that level. You had

1 people leaving and coming all the time, so you're always dealing with new people, and
2 sometimes with new aircraft. If we lose some, we'd have the new replacements coming
3 in. So it's a very dynamic situation.

4 KC: Sure, sure. And again, the ability to adapt to all of these changes I would
5 think would be crucial to [accomplishing the] mission. So you say for about three months
6 you were a pilot?

7 AT: Right.

8 KC: Are there any other missions that stand out in your mind during your time in
9 the other seat as being particularly noteworthy or important—

10 AT: [Yes], when I landed on a mine. That was noteworthy.

11 KC: You landed on a mine? Okay, tell me about this.

12 AT: I explained that in that article.

13 KC: Yes, but tell me about this.

14 AT: I was a copilot. I was in-country only about a month. I was flying with this
15 old warrant officer; this guy had actually been a Navy pilot in World War II. He got out
16 and he joined the Army and became a warrant officer. He was a crusty old guy named
17 Jerry and was kind of weird. Anyway, he would say, "All right, land in that LZ." So we
18 get down to this LZ, and the ground was very convoluted, I was moving around [at hover
19 altitude] trying to find a level place to set the skids on and this noise went off, and
20 everything turned black. Next thing I [knew], [the left side of the helicopter was on the
21 ground. As I was flying left seat, I was positioned at the bottom of the helicopter.
22 Needless to say], it was a little frightening. Once [a helicopter is] on the ground, the
23 aircraft commander is no longer the aircraft commander, it's the ranking person who's in
24 charge. So after we got hit by that mine, I was the ranking officer, I was a 1st lieutenant.
25 So I took charge and I got the crew and we hid behind an APC (Armored Personnel
26 Carrier) and waited for an aircraft to come pick us up and take us home. The old warrant
27 officer complained that I didn't put everybody in for a medal. I said, "Well, nobody
28 earned any medal. We landed on a mine, we got out of there, and we got home." So that
29 was the first argument he and I ever had, one of the last.

30 KC: (Chuckles) So I assume that you weren't aware that there were mines placed
31 anywhere in the area?

1 AT: No. I mean, there were two other helicopters and three APCs in that same
2 LZ. I had no reason to believe there was a mine there. But there sure as hell was.

3 KC: Now, you say everything went black. Does this mean that you were knocked
4 unconscious briefly?

5 AT: I think so, maybe just for seconds. But I remember the noise. I remember
6 everything being black. I remember the vibrations. And I remember saying to myself,
7 “Oh God, I hope I’m not dying.” And then all of a sudden, I opened my eyes. I tried to
8 move, and I was pinned. Then I realized it was the seatbelt shoulder-harness assembly
9 that had me pinned tightly to the seat. So once I unhooked that, I looked up and I could
10 see through the [roof] window what was left of the rotor blades churning up the earth.
11 Then, all of a sudden, I see this knife come in and that was the crew chief. He cut out my
12 plastic [roof] window so I could get out of the aircraft. Jumped out and ran with him
13 behind this APC. The interesting thing was, when I got back home—I don’t think I put
14 this in the article. I had to—because I was a ranking officer, I had to report to the supply
15 sergeant and tell him everything that was on the helicopter that was attributable to combat
16 loss. This supply sergeant was a nasty, grumpy old guy. When I went into the supply
17 room and told him this, he was in [a] most cheerful mood. He said, “Well, what did you
18 lose lieutenant?” I said, “Well—” I said, “We lost two semi-automatic pistols.” And I
19 saw him write down four. “And we lost two M-1 Carbines.” And I saw him write down
20 three. I said, “Sarge, you’re putting down different numbers than I’m telling you.” He
21 said, “Sir, that’s our secret.” Turns out the guy was short in some critical things,
22 including weapons, and this provided an opportunity to makeup those shortages because
23 he was due to rotate home and if he didn’t make them up, he’d have to pay for them out
24 of his pocket. After that, he and I were buddies. That supply room was mine. I could have
25 anything I wanted.

26 KC: Understood how the system worked.

27 AT: (Laughs) Yeah.

28 KC: I want to ask you about that as well, but before we get there, was there or
29 were there any sort of repercussions for you having landed this on a mine? I mean, I
30 would assume there would have to at least be a report if not an investigation, what
31 happened as a result of this—

1 AT: I don't remember any investigation [on that matter]. When I intermesh rotor
2 blades with a guy at refueling, [however], I was interviewed by an officer—a major who
3 asked me about details of the event. But I don't recall any interview [on the mine
4 incident]. It was pretty straightforward—we landed on a mine. So there was no guilt or
5 pilot-error or anything. You land on a mine, you blow up. But I do remember when we
6 were brought in, the company commander was there to greet us and I remember him
7 saying, "I want you to go to the hospital to get checked out." I said, "I'm fine." He said,
8 "No, I want you to go." And he says, "I'm putting you on an aircraft tomorrow. I want
9 you to get right back in the saddle and I don't want this to affect you." When I went into
10 the hospital, I had to wait to see [a physician], and when he saw me, he [says], "Whoa,
11 what happened to your legs?" He pulled up my pant [legs] and I had some cuts [there].
12 Apparently, I either cut them jumping out of the aircraft or hitting something in the
13 aircraft. He put some antiseptic on it and some bandages, and said, "You want a Purple
14 Heart?" I said, "Can I get a Purple Heart for this?" He said, "Yep, [it drew blood and that
15 qualifies you for a purple heart.]" So he wrote me up [and, several weeks later, I was
16 awarded] a Purple Heart, [along with several air medals]. Many years later, [I was happy
17 to learn that a purple heart qualified me for significant] benefits [from] the [Veteran
18 Administration].

19 KC: Sure, sure.

20 AT: But at the time, it didn't seem like much. I remember that, but I remember
21 the lecture by the [company commander], "I want you right back in the saddle tomorrow.
22 I don't want this to affect you." So it was quite an event.

23 KC: Did it affect you though?

24 AT: I think so, I think it scared me. It brought home the reality that this is a really
25 dangerous situation I'm in here. [After the mine incident, I began saying] a little prayer
26 every morning, [asking for help] to get through the day. [I never prayed to get through the
27 entire tour, as I thought that was asking too much. I simply took it one day at a time. And,
28 some days, I would pray to get through the next ten minutes, as the next minutes looked
29 really bad]. But the most dramatic thing that happened [to me during my tour], and I
30 clearly explained this in that article, is when I had to lead a flight of six [helicopters] into
31 that LZ and extract seventy-two infantry [troops who were surrounded by a much larger

1 VC force]. Because you can only carry six [fully combat-loaded troops per helicopter and
2 we only had], six helicopters, [we had to make two trips to extract all] seventy-two
3 infantrymen. We go in there the first time and there's this crossfire, machinegun fire
4 coming out from both sides of the LZ.

5 KC: And you're aircraft commander on this one?

6 AT: Yeah. I said, "This is it. I can't take evasive action. I can't do anything, I got
7 to just pray." I thought I was going to fly right through this stuff. And I figured this is it,
8 I'm in my last seconds here. I started to say a little prayer. All of a sudden, we got to the
9 point where it looked like I was going to fly right into that stuff, and [the stream of
10 machine-gun fire] lowered, almost as if a big hand had come [out of the sky] and pushed
11 it down. We flew right over it, and I remember thinking, "What the hell happened here?"
12 And I looked— just amazing. We [terminated the flight to a hover], turned around [180
13 degrees, set the skids on the ground,] picked up [our six] guys, [and] headed out. [The
14 trail helicopter was now the lead, and I was the trail.] Two aircrafts got shot up coming
15 out, [one with his hydraulics shot out and other with a hole in his fuel cell, and they
16 headed to Cu Chi to make emergency landings there]. I [informed the mission
17 commander], a captain flying at two-thousand feet with the battalion commander,
18 [saying], "I'm down to four ships. If you can join us, we could each take an extra man
19 and get this done." [He said, "You lead the flight back to the LZ; I'll drop off my
20 passenger and join you as trail."] So we went back a second time, [picked up the
21 remaining troops and] tried to come out [again]. [However], when I lifted collective [in
22 attempting to bring the helicopter up to a hover], I ran out of RPM [and the helicopter
23 didn't move]. I looked back [and saw] eight fully-combat loaded troops. And I couldn't
24 leave anybody, I couldn't stay there. I had to get out of there. We were [within] seconds
25 of complete darkness cause it was late in the afternoon and in the jungle when the sun
26 goes down you can't see anything, you can't see the trees you got to fly over. So I gave
27 the order, "Get rid of all extraneous gear. Everything. Web gear, C-rations, ammo,
28 everything we don't need, get it out of this aircraft now." I looked back and I could see
29 stuff flying out of both sides of the helicopter. I'd never seen an order carried out with
30 such efficiency in my life. At this point I could get it light on the skids, so I did the
31 typical trick with the D-model Huey, I pulled what I could, I nudge the cyclic forward,

1 we started scraping along the ground, gradually picked up speed. We eventually [reach
2 sufficient speed to hit what is called] translational [lift, by which we were able] to get [up
3 to] hover, [then] slowly accelerated, [and] started to climb. [The] crew chief gets on the
4 mic, [he's] crying [and] says, "Sir, please, please get out of here." As I'm approaching
5 the first line of trees, I could see I wasn't going to make it. So I remembered a trick an
6 old warrant officer taught me. Come back on the cyclic just a bit [in order to] get a little
7 [faster rate of] ascent. I did that and almost cleared the first line of trees, [with the] tops
8 slapping the belly of the aircraft. As I continued to climb, we made it to the second line of
9 trees, which was the top of the canopy, the jungle canopy, and cleared [them] by [several]
10 inches. [I slowly pushed forward on the cyclic to] accelerate, got up to full speed, did a
11 cyclic climb, got [up to altitude], and landed those troops [at the secure LZ several miles
12 away.] [Obviously], well, God was with me on this one.

13 KC: That's incredible. What was the setup for that? What was the background?
14 When did this take place? Where was it—

15 AT: Well, [I thought] I was done with flying [that day]. [I put] the aircraft to
16 sleep, walked to the mess hall where I was about to have dinner, and my platoon
17 commander says, "Al, I've got a mission for you." And he introduces me to this major
18 who had just arrived in-country and was assigned to our company. As it turned out they
19 needed every helicopter pilot they could get, so we had majors coming as not even as
20 platoon leaders, just regular pilots. He says, "Take Major So-and-so, and go to the White
21 Platoon. We don't have any aircraft available, there's an aircraft there. Take it and fly to
22 this destination and await further instructions." So no dinner. I take this major, we
23 introduce ourselves to the enlisted crew members because they were in a different
24 platoon, so I didn't know [them]. All I had was instructions to report to [a particular]
25 location. We took off, major and I talked a little bit, mostly smoked this cigar he had. We
26 landed at [the] location, and there were five other helicopters there, lined up already. I
27 noticed that all the other aircraft commanders were warrant officers, so I was the ranking
28 [AC], but I knew somebody else would be coming who was in charge of the mission.
29 Sure enough, a few minutes later this captain lands, calls me over, and says, "You're
30 going to lead this flight of six into this LZ. There's seventy-two infantry [there that] need
31 to get out of there. It's getting late so you're going to have to get over there quickly."

1 KC: These were Americans?

2 AT: Yeah. Yeah, American troops. 25th Infantry, I think.

3 KC: Okay.

4 AT: And he says, "I will fly with the battalion commander, and we'll be
5 monitoring the operation." So I said, "Fine." I take off with this flight of six. As we get
6 close, I call for smoke, cause you wanted smoke to make sure you landed at the right LZ.
7 I called and I waited, and I waited, and there's no answer and I called again. Then, the
8 battalion commander gets on the mic, he's screaming at the guy [on the ground], "God
9 damn it, get that God damn smoke [out now]. God damn it." Next thing I know, I see a
10 red smoke bomb and I said, "Identify red." Guy on the ground says, "Roger that." I had
11 to make a decision because at this point, we're almost on top of that LZ, and that meant I
12 had to make a very steep descent in a flight of six, which I loathed to do because I knew
13 we would stack up on short final and be a very inviting target.

14 KC: And it's getting dark.

15 AT: Right, it's getting dark, I knew I didn't—I really wanted to make a three-
16 hundred-and-sixty go-around and come in fast and shallow, but I was worried I wouldn't
17 have enough time to complete the mission. So I opted to go directly in. I could hear the
18 guys in the back saying, "Oh shit." So we came in, that's when I encounter that crossfire,
19 got through that, [and] landed. Took off in the opposite direction we came in and did
20 another one. Got home that night. At that time, I had already talked to the company
21 commander about changing units. I'd found there was a unit in Saigon that needed
22 experienced helicopter pilot cause they were about to lose their two experienced guys and
23 they had a whole bunch of new people come in and nobody to train them, supervise them,
24 and get them up to speed, or to be the maintenance officer for the four helicopters in that
25 small unit. I found out about them, and I figured, boy that'd sure be a nice place to spend
26 the second half of my tour, and I asked the company commander about it, and he says,
27 "You can leave but only after your replacement comes." So I said, "Fine." And well, two
28 days later is when we had this mission. When I got back that night he says, "You can go
29 tomorrow [morning]." He says, "You've done your job here." So the next day somebody
30 dropped me off in Saigon and I said goodbye to the Hornets and I was now with the 2nd
31 Single Group's [Aviation Section] and I spent about a week [flying] with these two old

1 warrant officers. They checked me out as “instructor pilot” for the unit. I also became the
2 maintenance officer for the unit, and I had a lovely experience with them. I really enjoyed
3 it.

4 KC: Let’s take you back to this extraction of these troops there, with the 23rd—
5 you said you believe it was the 25th.

6 AT: Yeah.

7 KC: All right. You come in, you’re leading this group of six ships in. You just set
8 down, you land. How far away—

9 AT: Landed to a hover, turned around a-hundred-and-eighty degrees cause we had
10 to [go] out the same way we came in.

11 KC: Right, okay.

12 AT: So I came out as trail.

13 KC: All right. How far away were you from the troops on the ground?

14 AT: Oh, they were right there. I mean, we were right next to the tree line, and
15 they emerged from this tree line.

16 KC: And they’re in contact?

17 AT: Well, there’s— obviously there’s enemy forces because we received that fire
18 going in. We were told there were VC on the east, west, and north sides of the LZ, that’s
19 why we came in [from] the south. As we were [going] out we received fire because two
20 of the aircraft got shot up. One lost its hydraulics, and one got a hole in the fuel cell.
21 There was enemy contact there, no question.

22 KC: Yeah, wow. Now, were the other two, the damaged ships, were they able to
23 get back where they needed to—

24 AT: Yeah, they flew to Cu Chi.

25 KC: They flew to Cu Chi.

26 AT: One has to do an emergency landing without hydraulics, and the other had to
27 land before he ran out of fuel.

28 KC: That’s incredible, incredible. Now you had to make two-trips in here to get
29 them all, right?

30 AT: Yeah. So the second time we went in with five. Caught that crossfire again, it
31 lowered again unbelievably. The second time we went out it was a little different. The

1 guy who led us out was this (unintelligible) captain who in the first one was flying at
2 two-thousand feet, and he joined us. Normal procedure is the new lead, I was trail going
3 out. The new lead would say, "Trailer you up?". Which means, "Is everybody loaded?
4 Are we ready to go?" And you'd say, "This is [trail], affirmative." And then he took off.
5 Well, on the second trip out, he didn't ask, he just took off. I think he panicked. So I go to
6 lift collective and I bleed off RPM. So here I am, stranded alone, and it's just seconds
7 before dark, so it's a pretty tense situation.

8 KC: Wow, that's incredible. Now, at that time, what takes over for you? Is it
9 training that takes over? Is it emotions?

10 AT: I think training, and I think at that stage you develop enough maturity to say,
11 "Okay, everything's turning to shit, and I just got to do what I got to do to survive." You
12 do what you know how to do from your training [and experience], and you just focus on
13 what you got to do, and you don't think about anything else. You know, there have been
14 times in my life when I've faced challenges, not quite as serious as that, and the same
15 thing [happens]. You just focus on the challenge, you don't get distracted, you just do
16 what you got to do to get through it. [It was] a great lesson in life.

17 KC: You get back on the ground when this is all over and you'd already talked
18 about getting out of the unit. But right then, physically, emotionally, psychologically,
19 when you've made it through this thing, what's that like for you?

20 AT: Tremendous sense of relief. Tremendous—I had this big smile on my face.
21 Of course, I went to the—we had a little officer's club there and I went to the bar and had
22 some drinks and told guys about it. Cause what happened was, when it was obvious that
23 we were in a combat situation, two of the ships took off with bullet-holes that affected
24 their flight capability. Then what happens is everybody else gets in a helicopter and they
25 start to come up and find out what's going on. Well by then the missions over, they're
26 calling me and I'm saying, "Yes, we've accomplished our mission, we're done, I'm
27 heading back to Cu Chi." So then they all turn around and head back to Cu Chi. Then it
28 was the bar, telling people about it. But then I packed up and [left the next day].

29 KC: Now, did you earn any awards as a result of this?

30 AT: No, not as a result of that. I did get a Distinguished Flying Cross from a
31 different thing that happened in the Delta with the 9th Infantry.

1 KC: Al? Let me—

2 AT: Got some other awards as well from other things.

3 KC: Let me interrupt you right there, Al. I think we're at a good point to stop for
4 today.

5 AT: Yeah. I think so, cause I got to go.

Interview with Alfred Turgeon
Session [2] of [2]
Date 6 April 2011

1 KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Al Turgeon.
2 Today is 6 April 2011. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, and Al is joining me from his home in
3 State College, Pennsylvania. Al when we left off yesterday, you were talking about your
4 time there in the 116th and then eventually working your way out of the 116th. Again, like
5 I mentioned a moment ago, I'd like to back up a little bit and get some information from
6 you on a number of different things. One of the things that you mentioned in passing, you
7 were talking about some of your more memorable moments as a helicopter pilot there at
8 the 116th. You had talked about the episode where you landed on a landmine, and it
9 wound-up of course destroying the ship. You said that look, there was no investigation,
10 there would've been no negative repercussions for this, it's just one of those things that
11 happens of course. But another that you mentioned briefly, was an episode in which you
12 meshed rotors with another ship.

13 AT: Right.

14 KC: Can you tell me about that whole episode?

15 AT: Yeah. This was in February, I was still a pilot, not an aircraft commander,
16 and I was flying with my platoon commander. I forget what we were doing that day, but
17 we wound-up at a particular place for refueling. So we pulled up to the fuel-bladder, and
18 crew chief and gunner got out to refuel the aircraft. Well, while we're sitting there,
19 another aircraft pulled in beside us very close to our left. So when we were done, my
20 platoon commander, the aircraft commander, says, "Okay, pick it up and let's go." And I
21 looked out and I said, "Sir, I think our rotor blades are almost overlapping out there."
22 And he didn't even bother to look, he says, "Nah, nah." He says, "That's fine." I said,
23 "No, I really think it's dangerous." He says, "Get the damn thing up and do what your
24 told." So I gently lifted on the collective, I turned the rotor just a little bit to the right, just
25 so I could move away from the guy and not toward him [and] began to lift up. All of a
26 sudden, all hell broke loose. I looked over and I could see the aircraft to our left with
27 which we had intermeshed rotor-blades, sort of pumping up and down and the pilot in the
28 right seat his head was bashing against the window. I thought, "Oh my God, what

1 happened?" Finally, everything calmed down. We shut down everything. Got out and
2 indeed, we had intermeshed rotor-blades and destroyed both aircraft. I felt terrible about
3 it, so we sat there and waited and eventually somebody picked us up and extracted us. I
4 was taken out by one aircraft [and] he left on another. There was a major who was in the
5 aircraft with me and as we were sitting there flying back to Cu Chi, he asked me
6 questions and I told him exactly what I just told you. I said, "I feel really bad about this
7 whole thing, but I brought it to his attention, he didn't respond, and the worst-case
8 situation happened."

9 KC: Now, when the blades mesh like this, I would assume that pieces of the
10 blades would've come off. Did that happen?

11 AT: Yeah, yeah at the ends of the rotor-blades is an iron piece. I was not aware of
12 that until I actually saw it lying on the ground. We walked around afterwards, and I
13 remember somebody saying, "Boy, if that had hit anybody it would've killed them for
14 sure." What you could see was just—rotor-blades at full velocity, at full throttle are at
15 about three-hundred RPM. Those blades stretch out a diameter of about forty-four feet.
16 So you can imagine what the speed of the rotor-tip is. When those things hit each other,
17 [there's a tremendous] force generated. So it was a pretty dramatic event, but fortunately
18 nobody was hurt.

19 KC: Okay. Okay, that was my next question there. I was—

20 AT: The man in the ship next to me, he had his ballistic helmet on and even
21 though he took a little bit of beating for a few seconds, he didn't suffer any adverse
22 consequences from it.

23 KC: Now I'd assume that that not only would destroy the rotor-blades, but would
24 tear up the transmission as well, and—

25 AT: The whole aircraft.

26 KC: Yeah, yeah.

27 AT: All that vibration and stuff.

28 KC: Was there any sort of repercussion out of this? Was there any sort of
29 investigation? Did you—

1 AT: Well, apparently so. I was only aware of the investigation as it directly
2 involved me. But the platoon commander was shortly thereafter reassigned to another
3 unit.

4 KC: Is that right? So he was probably found guilty then of—

5 AT: I don't know.

6 KC: Negligence or something.

7 AT: I can only assume that, but I don't know.

8 KC: Yeah.

9 AT: I looked up his name, cause I never saw him again after that. I looked up his
10 name in the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association directory and I didn't see a rank listed
11 by his name, so I'm wondering if he in fact got out of the Army before retirement.

12 KC: Right. What kind of relationship did you have with this guy prior to—

13 AT: [Ok, but] he was a sort of denigrating kind of person.

14 KC: Like you mentioned before.

15 AT: Was always—he'd always make fun of people. One of the lessons you learn
16 in life, often times from negative influences, is that's not a good management style to
17 belittle people, cause you destroy their confidence. I'm sure he had an adverse effect on
18 mine. You destroy their confidence and instead of building capability, you're destroying
19 it or undermining it.

20 KC: Right.

21 AT: So I learned a lot about management during my military training and
22 assignments. Some very positive and some very negative.

23 KC: What about the role of a leader in—whether it's a platoon leader or a
24 company leader, what kind of role does their leadership play in making this particular
25 outfit function effectively?

26 AT: It's the same in every organization. I mean, I've been an academic
27 administrator, I was a department head, a [Research and Extension] center director, I was
28 a vice president [in a large lawn-service company for] two-and-a-half years. So I've had a
29 lot of management experience despite the fact that I had been primarily an academic in
30 my career. The same principles applied everywhere; the main job of any manager is to
31 build people. You build people, they'll do a good job. If you don't do that, if you

1 undermine that, then you have to suffer the consequences and the consequences
2 sometimes can be very severe.

3 KC: There was also in the article that you provided me about your experiences
4 there in Vietnam, you mentioned an episode in which your engine failed.

5 AT: Right.

6 KC: You go on to describe this in some pretty clear detail. Would you mind
7 relating that story for the listeners?

8 AT: Well, there were two of them. One was—the first time was when we
9 basically landed [and] setup a perimeter [of defense]. They [extracted] the helicopter and
10 then we were taken out. The second time was when the engine quit and I was flying
11 [V]FR ([Visual] Flight Rules) on top, [i.e., we had perfect horizontal visibility but a solid
12 cloud bank below us. When the engine quit, we] auto-rotated through a [clouds on
13 instruments—a frightening experience]. Fortunately, I had my Decca Navigator to keep
14 me over Highway 13. So there were two events, which one do you want me to describe?

15 KC: Both is the obvious answer.

16 AT: (Laughs) Okay. The first one we were flying home actually. It was late in the
17 day, and I had eight infantry [soldiers] sitting in the back. Now they were not combat
18 loaded, they were carrying rifles, but they didn't have packs or anything and they were
19 just hitching a ride to Cu Chi. We're flying along at around two-thousand feet [when] I
20 hear a loud noise. The helicopter starts dropping like a rock. At first, I didn't know what
21 it was, and it took me a second or two to figure out the engine quit. So I bottom collected
22 [and] went through an auto-rotative descent. I was positioned over a rice paddy with very
23 level-ground, so it was [an easy] landing. Once we were down, I gave the signal to setup
24 a perimeter of defense. So they went out and I stayed with the helicopter to maintain
25 communications. When a helicopter goes down and you issue a mayday call on the
26 emergency frequency, oftentimes what you find is you get helicopters from every place
27 coming in to see what's going on and to help out. I had helicopters from my own unit
28 show up, [including] gunships to provide security. One guy landed and gave me a PRC-
29 25 radio so that I could maintain communication without being in the immediate vicinity
30 of the aircraft, because an aircraft down like that could be a magnet for mortars.

31 KC: Sure.

1 AT: So it's best to try to keep some distance from it. So I had this PRC-25 and
2 then my company commander landed and he sort of took over the situation. So as we're
3 on the ground I'm maintaining communication with the PRC-25 radio, I get a call from
4 the guys flying gunships that there were men in black pajamas advancing towards our
5 position from the east. So I repositioned some people, [moving] about half of them [to]
6 the east-side of the perimeter and monitored what was going on and indeed, I could see in
7 the distance some activity of men in black pajamas. I lifted up my M-1 carbine rifle, I'd
8 never fired it in [the] four months [I had been in country]. Asked the company
9 commander, I said, "Think I should take a shot?" He said, "Sure." They were quite a
10 distance away. I got off a round and it jammed, and that's when I learned an important
11 lesson. You're supposed to clean those things. You can't just carry it out and drape it on
12 the back of your seat, and then at the end of the day carry it back and put it on the nail on
13 the wall. You got to take care of it. Afterwards, that's when I went to see the supply
14 sergeant. This was a different supply sergeant now. The other one who had that shortage,
15 who was so happy with me when I landed on a mine, he'd already gone, and had a new
16 one. I checked out a rifle cleaning kit. Brought it back to the hooch and I was cleaning
17 my M-1, and the other guys said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, cleaning [my]
18 rifle." And I explained why, and then they all went and got cleaning kits.

19 KC: (Laughs) Learned from somebody else's mistakes.

20 AT: [Yes, otherwise, the] event [was very routine]. We were on the ground [for]
21 about forty-five minutes.

22 KC: And how many enemy did you see in the area?

23 AT: I saw a couple guys in black pajamas, and they were way off in the distance.

24 KC: Right.

25 AT: I just took a shot. There wasn't any village or anything there, but then [they]
26 disappeared, so I guess they were scared away by [the] gunships. So we weren't in any
27 real danger. We were well protected and had plenty people to secure everything until they
28 evacuated the helicopter and then we were subsequently evacuated.

29 KC: Right, okay. Now, was this something that you'd received training in
30 somewhere along the line? What to do?

1 AT: You know, they sort of talked about it, but nothing ever really prepares you
2 for it. You just sort of use your wits. You're on the ground, you know that any time
3 anything happens, you do a mayday call, and then things just sort of happen. The other
4 couple times I was down, [for example], when I landed on the mine, we were out of there
5 in minutes. When I auto rotated the other time [through the] clouds, a guy picked us up
6 right away and then they landed a squad to secure the helicopter until it was evacuated.
7 Things just sort of happen.

8 KC: You mentioned this auto-rotating down through some clouds. Tell me about
9 that episode.

10 AT: That was interesting. We were returning home, I had no passengers, we'd
11 been flying all day long. This is when I was with the 2nd Signal Group's [Aviation
12 Section].

13 KC: Oh, okay.

14 AT: One of the four helicopters had a Decca Navigator, and that's a device that
15 sits on top of the control panel and it has a rotating paper map [along with] a pointer on
16 the map that moves laterally. You can use [this device] to position your flight path above
17 a particular piece of ground. Since we were flying over heavily jungled terrain, I was
18 using it to maintain our flight path above Highway 13. In the off chance the engine quit,
19 we'd be able to land on the highway rather than in the trees, which would've probably
20 been fatal. So sure enough, we're at about three-thousand feet, perfect visibility on top,
21 but a solid cloud bank below us—the perfect excuse to use the Decca Navigator. All of a
22 sudden, again, a loud noise and the ship starts to lose altitude. This was a partial-engine
23 failure. So again, I entered an auto-rotative descent, issued a mayday call, [and navigated
24 through the clouds on instruments]. We entered the clouds at about twenty-five hundred
25 feet, hoping we'd break out in time. About seven-hundred feet we broke out and I could
26 see Highway 13 just to my left. I had just enough time to reposition the aircraft over the
27 highway, start my flare, pull pitch, and land on the highway. Then I setup a little
28 [defense] perimeter just with our crew. Another helicopter came, picked us up, and took
29 us [to Saigon].

30 KC: Now, you've got about—I guess just going by the numbers you've given,
31 about eighteen-hundred feet of auto-rotating through clouds.

1 AT: Yes, that's right.

2 KC: And obviously, you're hoping that you don't come out of those clouds about
3 you know fifty feet from the ground. I know you're probably going to say, "Well,
4 training takes over" or "It's happening so quickly" or whatever, but what's going through
5 your mind as you're making this descent through the cloud bank?

6 AT: Concentrating real hard on what I had to do. There was no time to worry or
7 be afraid or anything. You just focused on what you had to do. Here I am, making a very
8 rapid descent about probably thirty-five-hundred feet a minute on instruments, and
9 watching to see when I had visibility to see the ground. And so, I totally focused on that
10 as I'm issuing a mayday call. When we got on the ground it was a relief. It was only
11 afterwards that I started to think about it and said, "Wow, we've been lucky again."

12 KC: Right. Now, does anything like this, does it shake your confidence? Or do
13 you say, "You know what, that was pretty hairy, and I made it through."

14 AT: Some of those things actually build your confidence.

15 KC: Yeah, yeah. All right, another one of the episodes and obviously this is a very
16 important one and the description you gave yesterday was good but was rather brief, was
17 the time that you earned the Distinguished Flying Cross.

18 AT: Oh yeah.

19 KC: Can you please take me through that in as much detail as you remember?

20 AT: Okay, that was in—was that in April? May? It was in April, and I was an
21 aircraft commander then. We were supposed to support the 9th Infantry Division
22 operating in the Delta on some kind of mission. So we went to the location, I think it was
23 in My Tho, [a city in the] northern part of the Delta, [and landed], waiting to be called.
24 And we waited, and waited, and waited. We waited all day, sitting there in flight idle. At
25 one point we all took off [for Cu Chi to] refuel, and [returned] and waited. Because it was
26 a very dynamic environment and things were changing so much, they kept changing their
27 plan. This was the first time I experienced [sitting] in a helicopter at flight-idle all day
28 long. It wasn't until nightfall that we were given specific instructions. There [were] two
29 infantry companies of the 9th Division that were in a series of LZs, and they were
30 surrounded by a VC or NVA (North Vietnamese Army) force estimated to be two
31 battalions. Our job was to go in and bring in critical supplies, [i.e.] water [and] ammo,

1 and take out dead and wounded American soldiers. Because it was dark and because the
2 area was surrounded by [the enemy], we were to do this single ship with no lights. So
3 we'd be called individually to go to a particular LZ, land to flashlights, do what we had to
4 do, get out of there, come back, and then wait to be called again. We did that all night
5 long. It was a very hairy operation because the enemy could hear you, but they couldn't
6 necessarily see you cause it was pitch-black. We had to navigate by dead-reckoning to
7 [specific LZs], and land to flashlights on the ground. Because of the nature of that
8 operation and how dangerous it was, all of the aircraft commanders were written up for
9 Distinguished Flying Crosses and the crews for Bronze Stars.

10 KC: Wow. Did you make more than one trip?

11 AT: Oh yeah. Yeah.

12 KC: How many did you make?

13 AT: I can't remember. Maybe three or four.

14 KC: Oh wow. Now, as you go in the first time, and make it out successfully, do
15 you look at it like, "Okay, we're going in again. I need to change tactics, the way I'm
16 coming in whatever it might be. Is this going to be easier? Is it going to be—"

17 AT: Well, normally, you would. You'd always change flight paths and so-on,
18 never establish a consistent trend. But here it was pitch-black, and so that was a little less
19 important. Yeah, I changed a little bit, because they might get used to the noise coming
20 and going. So I changed a little bit, but basically the focus was get there, find them in the
21 dark, land, drop off what you needed and pickup what you needed, and get out of there.

22 KC: All right. Now, when you arrived in Vietnam, this is December of '66, and
23 you're working down in that part of South Vietnam, the southern part of South Vietnam,
24 obviously there are two major operations that take place—ground-operations that take
25 place shortly after you arrive in January and February of 1967. Respectively, I'm talking
26 about Cedar Falls and Junction City. Now, the 116th was involved in both of those,
27 correct?

28 AT: That's right.

29 KC: What was your role, and we'll take Cedar Falls first, what was your role in
30 Cedar Falls?

1 AT: Okay. Cedar Falls was conducted in the Iron Triangle and specifically against
2 the village Ben Suc. That was one of the most exciting days I can remember because
3 there were so many aircraft involved in that operation. I think the 1st Infantry Division,
4 the 25th Division, and [several] other [subordinate units, including the] 173rd [Airborne]
5 Infantry Brigade, [the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, and the 11th Armored Cavalry
6 Regiment].

7 KC: Right.

8 AT: The 1st Infantry was the [attacking force (i.e., the “hammer”) and the] 25th
9 [Infantry] was [the] blocking force [(i.e., the “anvil”). An entire] battalion of the 1st had
10 to be landed [around the village of] Ben Suc, all at the same time. We [were one of six
11 10] ship formation [that landed a total of 420 troops]. The commander [of that battalion]
12 was Alexander Haig.

13 KC: Oh, is that right?

14 AT: He was a lieutenant colonel. What was fascinating was, as we’re flying in a
15 ten-ship formation, we’re just following like we normally do in a staggered-right
16 formation, but the formation leader had to coordinate with all the other formations so we
17 could all land at the same time surrounding Ben Suc. So we [flew S-shaped patterns], so
18 we could all land at a particular time at our designated spot around Ben Suc. I remember
19 looking out and seeing countless numbers of ten-ship formations all over the sky. The sky
20 was filled with helicopters [preparing for this and other related missions]. It wasn’t just
21 helicopters; the South Vietnamese ran boats up the Saigon River. They brought soldiers
22 in and then they evacuated people in those boats. I remember after we landed, we had to
23 go back and extract people. We took South Vietnamese residents out of there and flew
24 them [to a refugee camp at Phu Cuong, several miles away]. I just had people on my ship
25 on the couple trips I made, but some of the other guys carried pigs [and] chickens, and it
26 was quite a mess trying to deal with all that. But it was an exciting day. But the most
27 exciting thing I remember was looking across the sky and seeing just so many
28 helicopters, all of them flying in a coordinated effort to pull off this operation.

29 KC: Now, you bring in—you’re part of this effort to bring in this full battalion
30 and drop them around, like you say, drop them around Ben Suc, and do you immediately
31 load up some of the indigenous personnel onto your bird?

1 AT: No, I don't think so. I think we landed, dropped them off, and then got out of
2 there right away. Then later, we were called back to transport villagers out and do various
3 things.

4 KC: Right. Now, Cedar Falls obviously was—in a lot of ways has become a
5 metaphor for the way the United States fought the war in Vietnam, this massive
6 overwhelming firepower against the Viet Cong, and then removing villagers to safe areas
7 and all of that. What was your—

8 AT: Well, this stands out in my mind as a singular event because I never saw
9 anywhere near that number of aircraft involved in one operation.

10 KC: Yeah, I can imagine so. Yeah, absolutely. What are your thoughts about the
11 way these types of operations came about and the way they played out? Did they make
12 sense to you at the time? And the removal of the civilian personnel, did those things mesh
13 properly in your mind?

14 AT: I think so. You know, again we were at such a low operational level that it
15 was only incidental that we got some fundamental understanding of the particular tactics
16 involved. It was only in fact, reading later that I realized that the commander of that
17 battalion we landed in Ben Suc was Al Haig, I didn't know that till years later when I
18 read about it in books.

19 KC: Yeah, that's very interesting.

20 AT: But I remember we had done a lot of operations in the Iron Triangle, and one
21 of the frustrating things was you could never find the bad guys. You would do an
22 operation and then you had no contact, but you'd have casualties because of booby-traps
23 and things. So it was a lot of frustration trying to find a very elusive enemy. It was—I
24 remember in the '90s, a graduate student of mine had us over to her house for dinner, and
25 I noticed a book on the table near the couch called *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*. Now, I knew
26 about tunnels, but I had no idea that they were as extensive as they actually were until I
27 read that book. You discovered things later that added substance to the particular
28 memories you had from the actual events in which you were involved. In Junction City,
29 for example, we operated a lot around the Tay Ninh area because that was right near the
30 Cambodian border and that's where a lot of VC presumably [entered] into the country
31 from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I don't have a lot of recall of our role in Junction City, I

1 remember we were involved, but I don't have any particular recollection cause it was like
2 a lot of other operations, you did what you were told, you landed troops, [then] you
3 [brought in] supplies. But I did learn later that that was the only real combat parachute-
4 drop ever done in Vietnam by American soldiers. I think it was the [173rd] Airborne
5 Brigade that actually parachuted in, including the brigade commander.

6 KC: Right, right. Absolutely. And it was a much longer, more drawn-out
7 operation than Cedar Falls, it was much more intense, I think. But Junction City was
8 much larger and absorbed a lot more resources and things like that. I would assume, and
9 maybe I'm wrong here, but I would assume that you would be working in a supporting
10 role, bringing in troops, inserting troops and then taking them out. Like you say, working
11 as an air-ambulance when necessary and resupply, and those kinds of things. I would
12 imagine that in something—a lengthy operation like this, that a lot of those days and
13 missions would probably kind of blend together. Does that seem fair?

14 AT: Yeah, and often times, you really didn't have the whole picture.

15 KC: Sure.

16 AT: We would get a briefing, but that briefing would be specific to our particular
17 role, not our role in conjunction with other units as part of an overall operation. Never
18 really gave us that perspective.

19 KC: Right, right.

20 AT: You might learn about it by other means, but we weren't formally briefed on
21 a lot of those things.

22 KC: Now, working where you were in that part of South Vietnam, you've
23 mentioned how frustrating it could be because the enemy was difficult to find, but yet the
24 enemy could still inflict casualties.

25 AT: True.

26 KC: As a helicopter pilot, as an aircraft commander or as a pilot, was this a
27 frustration that you felt particularly personally? Or was it a frustration that you heard
28 from the guys that you're bringing in and dropping off and picking back up? What is the
29 source of this frustration for you personally?

30 AT: I don't really recall a lot of personal frustration because we basically did
31 what we were told. But you sort of hoped that given the expenditure of treasure and lives

1 that you were winning. And so the question always arose, “Are we winning?” And
2 sometimes people would say, “How can you win when you can’t find the bastards?” Or if
3 they can show up and then suddenly disappear. I mean we would be mortared sometimes
4 at night, and we’d have gunships in the air in less than two-minutes but could never
5 found where the mortars came from. Well obviously, they would jump out of the ground
6 from that tunnel system, fire off a few rounds, and then go right back [in] again. So they
7 were gone before anybody really understood what was going on.

8 KC: Right.

9 AT: [Thus], it was hard to find the enemy so that you can have decisive victories.
10 Then when you did have a decisive victory, when there are a lot of body counts like they
11 did in some Starlite Operations at night, and they’d discover a whole unit out in the field
12 and bring artillery and air support in and rake up quite a harvest. That became quite an
13 event because so often there would be no contact and very little results from an operation.

14 KC: Now given the nature of your role there, you’re flying almost every day and
15 you’re oftentimes flying in a very dangerous environment.

16 AT: Right.

17 KC: It’s like you said, maybe it was one-in-five you’d fly into a hot LZ but
18 regardless, you could be flying ash-and-trash and still be shot at.

19 AT: Oh yeah, and at any moment you could be called upon to do a medevac.

20 KC: Sure, sure.

21 AT: They had so-called medical evacuation helicopters that were specifically
22 designed for that, but everybody did medevacs.

23 KC: Right.

24 AT: Wherever you were, if they could pick you up on radar and say, “Are you
25 available to do a medevac? We’ll vector you to the location.” And if I could possibly do
26 that, I’d say, “Sure.” And squawk my transponder so they could [fix my location and
27 vector me in for the] pick up, get them to a hospital right away, and then I’d resume what
28 I was doing before.

29 KC: Right.

30 AT: That happened a lot, and there were even times when a medevac chopper
31 would be circling, waiting for a gunship escort, and we’d just go in and get them cause

1 we had our own guns, they didn't, and if we needed to we could fire going in, fire going
2 out, and do a little more to protect ourselves. Often times, we'd be resupplying those
3 same LZs from where the casualties came, so we'd do sometimes two things at once.

4 KC: Right. Sure, sure. Was there ever a point where your crew would say, "Wait
5 a second, we don't need to be going in on this. We've been flying all day together, we've
6 been in and out, we've pushed our luck, let's just get home." Did you ever get that
7 response?

8 AT: No.

9 KC: I didn't think so.

10 AT: Never. If I was called upon to do something that was really risky, I would
11 consult with them. I would say, "Guys here's the situation. I'd like your support on this, I
12 think we should do it." And [I] never had a problem. They were always willing to help,
13 particularly if it was an American. Now if it was a Vietnamese wounded, I've taken some
14 of those in medevacs, and landed [at] a [Vietnamese] hospital and waited for somebody
15 to show up and pick up the wounded person. [Sometimes] you'd get so disgusted over
16 that.

17 KC: Wow.

18 AT: Whereas an American, you called in and you landed [at an American
19 hospital] and there were people there to take him right now. Get him in and give him
20 medical attention, we put a very high priority on that, everybody did.

21 KC: Well, you know, that's interesting you should mention that. Yesterday, when
22 we were talking, you briefly talked about the different units and the styles of units, and
23 the personality of the units, and you would say, "The 1st would do this, and the 25th
24 would do this, and some of the ARVN units would maybe possibly be more reluctant to
25 get off the chopper—"

26 AT: That's understating it.

27 KC: (Laughs) Well, give me your perception of the ARVN units with which you
28 worked, or those that you were around, or those that you evacuated—

29 AT: They were highly variable. Some of them were good. The ARVN Rangers
30 were good. Some of the ARVN Divisions, the 25th ARVN Division, they were fair. They
31 were never as spirited as American soldiers, but they were fair. Some of the RF/PF, the

1 local militia, you didn't even know if they were good-guys or bad-guys because there
2 were incidents where you'd drop them off and then they'd be shooting at the helicopters
3 that just dropped them off.

4 KC: That happened to you personally?

5 AT: No, not to me personally, but guys in my unit complained about [it] a couple
6 of times.

7 KC: Wow.

8 AT: So it was highly variable. It depends upon the unit, and I guess it could even
9 change over time depending upon the commander.

10 KC: Sure.

11 AT: Whether they had good leadership or bad, whether they were dedicated or
12 whether they were corrupt, because you had all of that.

13 KC: Right. And like you say, with human beings it's going to be variable, and all
14 these other factors obviously play a very important role in it.

15 AT: One incident I'll—not an incident, but a fact of life that it was sometimes
16 discouraging. As a helicopter pilot, you had to wear flight gloves. You wore thin leather
17 gloves, and you wore them as protection from fire. So it was mandatory, you were not
18 supposed to fly without gloves, and your hands would sweat and so the gloves [would
19 deteriorate]. You'd go through a pair easily in a week, so we were always drawing flight
20 gloves. Well at one point, the supply ran out. There were just no flight gloves available.
21 So you either wore the beat up old crusty ones or you operated without them. Then we
22 discovered that on virtually every street corner in Saigon you could buy for ten piastres a
23 pair of regulation Army flight gloves, which they obviously stole off the boat and then
24 sold on the street. So here you asked yourself, "What are we doing here? We're supposed
25 to be protecting these people and they're stealing our stuff and selling it to us." That was
26 a bit discouraging.

27 KC: Well, that takes us to another area AI, and I think it would be a good time to
28 discuss this, tell me about life outside of the helicopter. Tell me about life in Cu Chi, at
29 the base, the people, the indigenous personnel with which you worked or worked around,
30 tell me about life outside of combat.

1 AT: Mostly drinking. You'd come home, you'd eat, you'd have something to
2 drink, we might sit around and play cards at night or read. If you could get a day off, then
3 oftentimes there was work to do. We were building an Officers Club, so we were out
4 there being carpenters and pounding nails and things. But most of the time you'd do a
5 little reading, we'd sit around and have a couple drinks at night. Out in the sticks there
6 wasn't much to do, so you did what you could. If you could get a three-day R&R and go
7 to Vung Tau, that was nice. You get down there and party for a few days and have a good
8 time. But that was pretty much it. When I moved to Saigon, we lived in Saigon so there
9 was much more to do there. If I had a day off, I'd take a walk downtown. I loved to walk
10 around and just get a feel for the neighborhoods and the people and the culture. I enjoyed
11 it. I loved the Vietnamese people. I thought they were a gentle, loving people, and
12 charming, and I love their dress, and their way of life, and their food. In our villa in
13 Saigon, we had a cook, so we ate well, and we'd sit around and watch television or have
14 a party. Of course, being in Saigon, there were a lot of people there, so we even had some
15 women come over who were with the American embassy or the British embassy, or with
16 the Red Cross or whatever. There were people from other units who would come in and
17 party with us. So that was a more lively kind of social environment in Saigon, but I
18 especially enjoyed getting out in the city and seeing the people.

19 KC: You mentioned Vung Tau, did you get many opportunities to go?

20 AT: I did twice. Had a couple of times when I went down, had a nice weekend in
21 Vung Tau.

22 KC: Tell me about Vung Tau.

23 AT: It was a lovely place. It was the in-country R&R place, so there were a lot of
24 GIs [there], a lot of partying. You could buy stuff. I didn't, I didn't buy a lot of stuff. I
25 was trying to save money. I went into the Army without a dime, went to Vietnam newly
26 married but no savings, and I came back with six-thousand dollars in the bank. I even had
27 an opportunity in my last several weeks because they essentially took me offline. I was
28 acting operations officer and I was offered the opportunity to do several R&Rs, and I
29 could've gone to Japan, or Bangkok, or Australia, and I opted not to so as not to spend
30 the money.

31 KC: Right.

1 AT: Yeah, it's all a blur. But Vung Tau was a fun place. They had a lot of Aussie
2 soldiers, and they were great partiers, never seen people party so hard as those guys.

3 KC: (Laughs) I've heard that quite a bit. What about the—you mentioned that you
4 enjoyed the company of the Vietnamese, that you admired them as a people and their way
5 of life, and those kinds of things. What was the general attitude towards the Vietnamese
6 that you saw, not just from yourself, but from other Americans who were there?

7 AT: Well, a lot of Americans resented them because they didn't feel that they
8 were appreciative of what we were doing, and you couldn't trust them, you couldn't tell
9 who was a bad guy, who was a good guy until he tried to do something to you. So there
10 was always an element of distrust, even when we supported them in the air mobile
11 operations. We tended to be segregated, we'd stick to our own and they would stick to
12 their own. I remember there was one event [involving C rations]. We [usually] carried C-
13 rations [in case we needed to eat in the field]. Usually, [we'd just] eat the cans of fruit,
14 and maybe crackers and jelly, and throw out the rest. Cause you couldn't get excited
15 about cold ham-and-beans or whatever there was in those little cans. So we'd be throwing
16 this stuff out and one time we had a whole pile of stuff that people were just throwing
17 out, so I [took] all those cans over to the Vietnamese who were sitting [nearby] cooking
18 rice, and I offered it to them. They were very, very happy. [They opened the cans and]
19 blended [the contents] with the rice, and really enjoyed it cause they didn't get much
20 meat in their diet and this was a real treat for them. Then, one of them offered me a bowl
21 of rice with some nuoc nam, [a fish sauce used to flavor rice], and I thought, "Oh my
22 God, this stuff really looks terrible." Then I tasted it and it was actually pretty good.

23 KC: It is pretty good.

24 AT: Now, I'm a fan of nuoc nam.

25 KC: Yeah, I wonder I think there are people who stay away from it for obvious
26 reasons, and people who take that first step and embrace it because it is really good.

27 AT: Oh, it is. Yeah, it's great. To this day I love Vietnamese food. In fact, when I
28 went there to visit forty-years later with my daughter, we actually went to a Vietnamese
29 cooking school for a day.

30 KC: You went back to Vietnam then?

1 AT: In 2007. Yeah, forty-years later. Thought about doing it for years, but I didn't
2 want to go alone, and I didn't want to go with a bunch of GIs and just tell war stories. But
3 my daughter, who's an attorney who works for a law firm in New York City, she loves to
4 travel. So she wanted to do a trip through Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia, and asked me
5 to join her in Saigon. So I did. I flew there, met her at the airport, we spent a week
6 together. We did take a trip up to Cu Chi and Tay Ninh, a daytrip, and we did some
7 touring around the city. Had a really nice time there. On one day we went to this cooking
8 school, and we cooked all day.

9 KC: I'll get that later on, I think. I'm going to ask you some more questions about
10 that as we work our way through the interview process. Okay, now you talked about the
11 general attitude towards the Vietnamese. What was the Vietnamese attitude towards the
12 Americans do you think?

13 AT: It was variable. If they wanted something from you, like a helicopter ride,
14 [they were very respectful]. I always tried to accommodate them if I could, and mostly
15 they were pretty friendly towards us. I can't say that I detected any real animosity coming
16 from them. I'm sure some of it existed, but generally they were either neutral or fairly
17 friendly. Now, sometimes the people weren't. If I would be walking in Cu Chi or in
18 Saigon, some of the people would keep to themselves. Others were very friendly and
19 were happy to talk to you.

20 KC: Sure, sure. What was American morale like when you're with the 116th?

21 AT: Well, I think for the most part it was good. You know, if we lost somebody,
22 if somebody got killed or severely injured, then people would be down for a few days.
23 Americans have a unique ability to make the best out of any situation, and we did.

24 KC: Say you would lose someone in the platoon or in the company, someone that
25 you knew.

26 AT: Yeah.

27 KC: What sort of—I don't want to say "grieving ritual" because that puts far too
28 much, I think organization on something that probably wasn't terribly organized. But
29 what sort of process do you and the other guys go through?

30 AT: Very little formalized process. I heard some units would have elaborate
31 rituals, but mostly we just sort of sulked. People would talk about it in low whispers, and

1 bitch a little bit, and then you'd get over it. But I think that varied with units. I remember
2 when I lost—I think I told you, when I went through primary at Wolters I lived in
3 Weatherford and I drove to work with [a] guy [named] Terry. Well, Terry was killed. The
4 way I learned about it was bizarre. It was in January, I'd been in-country about a month-
5 and-a-half, and I was walking into the mess hall and there was a guy from Terry's unit
6 who was visiting. He was talking to some of our guys about a warrant officer in his unit
7 who'd just been killed. I walked over and listened, and knowing he was from Terry's
8 unit, I said, "Oh, by the way, do you know Terry?" He just looked at me and said, "Oh,
9 he was killed too." He was on that same helicopter, and they were shot down by—it was
10 euphemistically called "friendly fire incident". It was Vietnamese artillery that hit their
11 helicopter and knocked it out of the air. It was a sad time.

12 KC: I'm sure. This is maybe a good time to ask this as well or broach this topic as
13 well. Yesterday, you were talking about, "I was afraid on occasion, and I just say a little
14 prayer." With all of this going on, with all this danger and all of this stress and people
15 you know being killed, what role did faith, religious faith, play for you? Or did it?

16 AT: It did. Although, when I mention that incident where we extracted seventy—
17 two infantry, that was probably the most profound experience I had because I concluded
18 at the end of that day that I was actually going to make it. That I had— it wasn't just
19 dumb luck. I survived for a reason, and that really strengthened my faith.

20 KC: Was it something that you did formally? Did you go to services?

21 AT: Oh yeah, they had church services Sunday mornings. Unless I was flying,
22 normally we didn't. They'd delay operations usually on Sunday so you can go to mass.
23 They had Catholic service and I went to that pretty much every Sunday.

24 KC: Another thing that I would—

25 AT: I remember, I used to—every morning I'd say a little prayer. I'd say, "Just
26 get me through this day." I never prayed for the whole thing, I took it one day at a time
27 and just prayed to get me through this day.

28 KC: Interesting you should say that. Another thing that I would think that would
29 keep some sort of center for you, you know, something that you can hold on to, would be
30 your life back in the States. Did you often think about what you had back in the States?
31 Your new bride, anything like that?

1 AT: Well, of course. I was newly married, and I missed my wife, and I missed my
2 friends. But I would write a letter every day. I still have all those letters.

3 KC: Is that right?

4 AT: I'd get one from her almost every day. That was the main communication.
5 One time I had the opportunity to actually call her on the phone and talk to her. Basically,
6 we communicated with letters or by making little tapes, they had these little audio tapes.
7 Other than that, pretty much stuck to business. I had a job to do and we were busy. I
8 mean, we worked every day and there wasn't much time to think about much.

9 KC: Right. You mentioned yesterday that you did get the opportunity to go on
10 R&R to Hawaii and this was the place where wives could meet service personnel on
11 R&R usually for a week.

12 AT: Right.

13 KC: Of course, in Hawaii. Tell me about the lead-up to that and tell me about the
14 R&R and what it was like.

15 AT: Well, that was an exciting experience, I—normally you do your R&R about
16 half-way through your tour. Well, I had changed units right about that point and for the
17 first month I was terribly busy. I flew over a hundred-and-sixty hours that month, and
18 you're supposed to only fly a hundred hours a month. [However], because we were short
19 [staffed] and I was training new people, [I had to do a lot of flying]. It was after I'd been
20 there [nearly two] months, I scheduled an R&R to Hawaii. Jean met me there and we
21 stayed in [a] hotel in Waikiki. Rented a car and drove around the island and stuff. But I
22 remember, I was very nervous. I couldn't calm down, I couldn't relax. All I could think
23 about was the fact that I had to go back, and even though the unit I was in was somewhat
24 less hazardous than being in a combat assault company, still there were inherent dangers
25 every day. So I didn't feel that the R&R was what it should've been because I was so
26 preoccupied in thought about this, and I remember when I went back it was a very, very
27 sad time. In contrast to the flight going over which was raucous, and everybody was
28 excited, on the flight going back I remember getting onboard, I sat next to a Special
29 Forces captain, we said hi, and that was it. Never said another word the rest of the flight.
30 Just sat there. Got back, went back to my unit, and went back to work.

1 KC: Tell me about this transition, and you did to some degree yesterday, but tell
2 me about the transition to this unit away from the 116th, how did that come about?

3 AT: I discovered—I forget how, but I discovered that there was a small aviation
4 unit in Saigon that needed an experienced helicopter pilot. I don't know if I read it
5 somewhere or what, and I made a telephone call and talked to the unit commander and he
6 said, "Yeah, I'd like to visit with you." So I had a day off, I went to Saigon, I
7 interviewed, and he said, "Loved to have you." And so, I went back and talked to my
8 company commander, and I said, "This unit in Saigon would like to have me and I'd like
9 to go." And he said, "Well, I'll release you after I get your replacement." And I had no
10 idea how long that would be. Then it was about two or three days later where we had that
11 incident where we had to extract those seventy-two infantry. At the end of that, he says,
12 "You can go tomorrow." Even though my replacement hadn't arrived. So it happened
13 fairly quickly. From the time I first learned about it, interviewed, talked to the company
14 commander, and then actually left the unit.

15 KC: Now did you reach the point to where you just had enough of the flying?
16 Enough of that type of flying?

17 AT: Yeah. Yeah, so many things had happened. Landing on a mine, the
18 intermeshing rotor blades, the engine failures, being shot up many times, seeing other
19 people get hurt. It seemed to me I was always brushing death, and I said, "God, I don't
20 know if I can do a year of this." And when the opportunity came up it was just natural to
21 go. I did go back and visit the unit a few weeks afterwards, and everybody was saying,
22 "Boy, if you find something for me, let me know. I'd sure like to do that."

23 KC: Yeah. Sure, sure. And this was about half-way through your tour, is that
24 right?

25 AT: Yeah, right.

26 KC: Yeah. And again, what unit did you join at this point and what was the
27 mission of this unit?

28 AT: It was called the 2nd Signal Group, Aviation Section. The 1st Signal Brigade
29 was responsible for all signal communications in Vietnam. It was commanded by a
30 brigadier general, and I carried him around several times. [The brigade] was divided into
31 two groups, the 2nd group in the south and the 1st in the northern half of South Vietnam.

1 The group commander, there were two of them in the time I was there, were full colonels
2 and I carried them both around. Then there was an aviation officer associated with the
3 group, he was in like a staff-position. And then, there was an aviation section commander
4 who was a major and he was the one I interviewed with, and who was my direct
5 supervisor. [Our section] had four helicopters and several fixed-wing aircraft, [including]
6 some Beavers and Otters. I think that was it, mostly old Army aircraft. Many of the pilots
7 in the unit were older pilots who were primarily or exclusively fixed wing. Then, the
8 helicopter pilots were all young people except for those two old warrant officers, and
9 they were due to rotate back within two weeks. So when I joined the unit, I spent time
10 with them, getting checked out, learning the job I had to do. And then, they left. Then, I
11 was the senior helicopter pilot, even though I was still a junior first lieutenant or a first
12 lieutenant in a unit with a bunch of majors and captains and some very young warrant
13 officers.

14 KC: Okay, tell me about your job there. What were you doing with these—

15 AT: I was the instructor pilot, so anytime a new pilot came in I had to give them
16 an orientation ride, fly with them, and then there were two young warrant officers who
17 were there when I arrived, and I eventually checked them out to be aircraft commanders.
18 Cause for a while I was the only aircraft commander, and we needed to have two-
19 choppers flyable every day. So I got one of them checked out almost right away, and the
20 other one a little bit later. They did a lot of the work as aircraft commanders. I still flew
21 quite a bit until the last two-months [when] I did a total of thirty-five hours of flying,
22 mostly short missions [or] checking out aircraft after they'd been through [some]
23 maintenance [procedure]. Then, my other job was to be maintenance officer for the four
24 helicopters, and I had to learn that whole operation. We were a low-priority unit, so it
25 was—(Chuckles) I'll tell you an incident that happened. We had to keep two of the four
26 helicopters flyable every day and ideally you wanted to have a third one in reserve. So
27 you had one that you could get flyable quickly, and then you could have another one that
28 was down for maintenance. Well, when I first took over the job the line chief was a Spec
29 6, [a] Specialist 6 grade. [Equivalent] to a staff-sergeant. He orients me to the flight line,
30 and he takes me to this CONEX (Container Express) container, and he says, "Now this is
31 our illegal CONEX, and you can't tell anybody about it." So he opens it up and he shows

1 me all these parts that we were not authorized to have because we were only [allowed] to
2 do first-echelon maintenance, and the parts that we had in that CONEX were for second-
3 echelon maintenance that was to be done by the direct support maintenance company
4 across the helipad. So I said, "Why do we have these illegal parts for things that we are
5 not supposed to do?" And his answer was, "Cause it's the only way we can keep our
6 aircrafts flyable." And I said, "Gotcha." Well, about a month later, we had an IG
7 (Inspector General) inspection and damned if they didn't discover our illegal parts
8 inventory. And I remember this [lieutenant] colonel sitting down with me, saying, "Now
9 lieutenant, you got to let the system work. The system works, you got to just let it." So I
10 surrendered my whole illegal parts inventory.

11 KC: Oh no.

12 AT: Within two-weeks, all four of our helicopters were down sitting in the direct
13 maintenance company's building, [EDP (Equipment Deadlined for Parts) for parts]. [So],
14 I go over there, and I say, "Sarge what's going on? I need two helicopters flyable." And
15 he says, "They're down EDP for parts." I said, "I just gave you a whole CONEX
16 container filled with parts." He says, "Yeah, we blew through those in no time, and now
17 we're EDP for parts."

18 KC: Yeah.

19 AT: So I said, "I tell you what, you give me a list of the parts you need for those
20 helicopters, and I'll get them for you." So I got the list, and I borrowed a helicopter from
21 another unit and I flew to Vung Tau where they had a parts depot, and I walked into the
22 supply room. Our guys had been down there before and had been able to trade stuff and
23 get parts, and I walked in a sergeant behind a desk, and he says, "What can I do for you
24 [sir]?" I plopped this case of frozen steaks on the counter and said, "Sergeant, I suggest
25 you get these steaks into the freezer [right away], because they've been out for about an-
26 hour-and-a-half already. And by the way I'd appreciate it if you could give me these
27 parts." So a few minutes later I walked out with two big-boxes of parts. Flew back to
28 Saigon, turned them over to the sergeant at the maintenance company, and that night I
29 had all four of my helicopters back. It took me two-months to rebuild our illegal parts
30 inventory. [We needed it. We couldn't keep our helicopters flyable without them].

31 KC: So you continued to do that and built it back up to where it was?

1 AT: Yeah.

2 KC: And the IG be damned over this, this time.

3 AT: Yeah, exactly. We figured out a way to hide them so they could never
4 discover them again. But what I learned from that was the system doesn't work. It never
5 works. It's never worked anywhere. Any place I've ever been it's never worked; it
6 always gets screwed up. If not now, then later. Until somebody corrects it, and then it
7 gets screwed up again. I learned that you got to learn how to operate around the system,
8 and never be totally dependent on it. Unless—

9 KC: Right. You've mentioned this before, you know, with—there is a system that
10 is the official system, then there's the shadow-system that actually works a bit better for
11 your own personal, individual needs or for small unit needs. Describe how that whole
12 thing worked for me. I mean you're a bright guy, you're involved in this—

13 AT: [To get] whatever you need, you needed stuff to trade. Trading was an art
14 form, and you had to have something to trade. Well, our basic supply of goodies came
15 from basically two people. There was a major who was a deputy-commander of a supply
16 depot in Saigon who was a rated aviator but was in a non-flying job and he needed to fly
17 eight-hours a month to get flight pay. So eight-hours a month, he would call and I would
18 set him up, usually to fly with me, and the deal was it that it was going to cost him two-
19 cases of steaks. He would have the steaks delivered, and I'd fly with him that day and the
20 next month I'd fly with him again and it'd be another two-cases of steaks. Then we had
21 trading materials. We [would] eat some of the steaks and use the [rest] for trading. If we
22 needed plywood, we'd trade steaks. If we needed parts, we'd trade steaks. Then, I
23 discovered in—I think it was Phu Loi, there were these two cooks and we stopped in
24 there sometimes to get coffee in their mess hall, and they loved to fly [in] helicopters. So
25 when we were down, taking a break, we'd take them up for a ride and we'd walk out of
26 there with two big cans of shrimp, and now they use the shrimp for trading materials. So I
27 traded steaks and shrimps for whatever we needed. This was just an active, ongoing
28 process, and that's the way you operated. If you have to accomplish your mission, come
29 hell or high water and something doesn't work, that's not an excuse. You've got to figure
30 out how to work despite it. You did whatever you had to, and so that's what we did. We

1 never did anything really illegal, but we were creative in what we did to ensure that we
2 were able to function the way we were supposed to.

3 KC: What was the most interesting, or memorable of the trades you made?

4 AT: I hated the Army flying helmet. The earphones would compress your ears
5 and it was like punishment to wear that thing, particularly [during] a long day of flying. I
6 ran into some Air Force guys and they showed me their headgear, and it was really nice.
7 It wasn't as ballistically-sound as the Army one was, but it was much more comfortable. I
8 figured I'd walk into an Air Force supply room and just talk the guy out of a helmet.
9 Well, that didn't work. So I'm talking to this Air Force colonel who came over to visit us
10 one night, and [I told him what happened. He said], "No, no you got to [have something
11 to] trade." So walked back into that supply room with a case of steaks and said, "Morning
12 sergeant." And he says, "Yes, lieutenant?" And I plopped the case of steaks on the
13 counter, and he looked up, immediately saw what it was, popped to attention and says,
14 "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?" I walked out of there with a helmet, flight vest, [and
15 some] blankets. The supply room was mine. I learned, again, anything you want you can
16 get, but you got to have something to trade. Nobody gives away anything.

17 KC: I've heard it said that steaks were in great abundance in Vietnam, but you
18 had a hell of a time finding a hamburger. Did you find that to be the case?

19 AT: I don't recall eating hamburgers.

20 KC: Yeah.

21 AT: We ate—the Army's mess hall would be whatever, pork-chops, occasionally
22 steaks [but] not very often. Usually, mystery meat or something. The food was decent,
23 the best food usually was out in field messes. A battalion out in the field [would] have a
24 battalion mess, and they usually have a sergeant who was a damn good cook. We'd
25 always stop there for lunch, or if we could take a break go in for coffee and they were
26 always very nice to us cause everybody's nice to helicopter pilots.

27 KC: Right, right.

28 AT: And [we] ate well there. When I lived in Saigon, we ate very well. We had a
29 great cook, and he could do marvelous things with whatever he had.

30 KC: Well, you served in an active combat unit, and you served more in the rear
31 there in Saigon, so I think you're in a good position to address this next question.

1 AT: Sure.

2 KC: And it's one that often times comes up whether it's stereotypical, some
3 people say it's ubiquitous, whatever, but the issue of drugs in Vietnam. The many
4 allegations and some people say they weren't allegations, it was obviously true, of rates
5 of drug usage in Vietnam. Whether it was marijuana or whether it was heroin, or
6 whatever it might be, what was your experience there? Did you see a lot of this?

7 AT: No. Very, very little in the time I was there. Now, I understand it got worse
8 later, but when I was there it was very little. There was one occasion, I remember
9 walking to the flight line, I walked across the enlisted barracks, and I could smell
10 marijuana. I'd never had marijuana, but I knew what it smelled like. Then one time the
11 guy who had marijuana was caught, and the battalion commander wanted to use him as
12 an example, and I was actually asked to be the defense council for the guy. So I began
13 preparing how to defend the guy, and we're just about ready to go to trial and they decide
14 to drop the charges. So he never went to trial. That was the only incident I had in which
15 drugs was involved.

16 KC: As someone who was in Vietnam, someone who has continued to read about
17 it as you've mentioned, what do you think about the allegations or at least the scope of
18 drug usage there? Do you think this is something that is overblown? Do you think that it
19 is something that is underreported? What do you think about that?

20 AT: I don't know for sure, but my tentative conclusion is that as the war dragged
21 on, particularly as we got [into the] '70s, that drug use became more and more rampant,
22 and it was a real [problem]. There were some units where they basically had mutinies and
23 they would frag officers and NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers), things got so bad. I
24 guess, depending upon where you were and when you were there, it could get about as
25 bad as it could get.

26 KC: Sure, and I think that also this is a way to approach just about everything
27 when looking at the Vietnam War. Depending on where you were and when you were
28 there, because it was a different war in different places at different times, for sure.
29 Another one of the hot-button issues with—regarding the war in Vietnam is the issue of
30 race, of Black and White relations. Later on in the war, we of course have a number of

1 incidents where race is a factor in precipitating fights or riots or various different things.
2 What was your experience in terms of race relations there?

3 AT: We had, I think one or two Black pilots in our unit. Some of the enlisted
4 personnel, aircraft maintenance personnel were Black. I don't recall any incident at all. I
5 mean, we were all brothers doing a job and looking out for each other. So I can't say
6 there was any animosity, it was a feeling of brotherhood.

7 KC: Some people say that the issues of drugs and the racial problems were much
8 more pronounced in the rear than they were in front-line units. You've served in both.
9 Did you see any sort of difference?

10 AT: No, not at all. In all of my field operations when I was with the 116th, there
11 were a lot of black soldiers and I never recall being involved in or being aware of any
12 significant problems. Living in Saigon, I wasn't aware of anything there. Most of the
13 people I interacted with in Saigon were officers, because there was a concentration of
14 military personnel there playing various staff-roles. We'd run into them in social events,
15 social events mainly. They'd come visit our villa or we'd and go visit theirs and have
16 dinner or party, or something. It wasn't often. It didn't happen all the time, but
17 occasionally and I don't remember hearing anything that was a problem. I remember one
18 night we had a Special Forces sergeant come over to our villa and we were having drinks
19 with him, and he and I got into a friendly argument over [who would be in charge if we
20 were shot down in my helicopter]. I said, "I would, I'm the superior officer." And he
21 said, "To hell you are. You wouldn't know what to do. I'd take command." And I said,
22 "Well, I'd take command, but I'd listen carefully to what you had to say." And we joked
23 back and forth, and I liked the guy. He'd been in Vietnam three solid years. Just loved
24 being [in] Special Forces. But he was a staff-sergeant, so apparently, he must've been a
25 bit of a problem cause he didn't get promoted. I did get him in my helicopter one time
26 and scared him. (Laughs)

27 KC: Really? Tell me about that.

28 AT: It just happened to be he was out at the heliport, and I said, "You want a ride?
29 I don't have to leave for a while." He says, "Sure." And I gave him a little lesson, took
30 him out into the flight pattern, and did some emergency procedures to scare him. But he
31 was a good buddy. Again, officer, enlisted, it didn't matter. I mean, there was respect

1 shown and everybody respected their position and job, but we all got along like brothers,
2 and I always enjoyed the enlisted. As the [helicopter] maintenance officer, all of the
3 enlisted crew members and maintenance personnel reported to me and they were like my
4 brothers. I really loved them.

5 KC: What was the pace of life like for you there living in Saigon, serving in this
6 unit, compared to serving in the 116th?

7 AT: Well, we did mostly support missions. It was called “indirect combat
8 support” or “other than combat support”. We moved people, we moved equipment from
9 one signal location to another. [And we transported personnel], so it was administrative
10 flying. Now, I did have an engine failure and that put us in Indian territory, and we were
11 always overflying enemy territory. I did some medevacs here and there when I had the
12 opportunity to do so. So it wasn’t exactly trouble free, but it was of far less intensity than
13 being with the 116th. We never did any formation flying in the 2nd Signal Group, it was
14 all single ship. In the 116th, we did [lots of] formation flying, we carried commanders
15 around to do recons, we did all kinds of missions. So it was a much more intense kind of
16 thing and some of them are hazardous.

17 KC: Right. What other sort of things come to mind when you think of the second
18 half of your tour there with the 2nd Signal Group? Were there any other particular stories,
19 or anecdotes, or developments that you’d like to relate?

20 AT: Trying to think. No, not really. There was a little bit of tension between the
21 fixed-wing and the helicopter pilots. And—

22 KC: Tell me about that.

23 AT: I wanted to learn to fly fixed wing. So if I had a day off, I would go out with
24 the fixed-wing guys and fly with them, get a feel for the other aircraft. Rarely did the
25 fixed wing want to fly helicopters, they just distrusted them, didn’t like them, didn’t want
26 to have anything to do with them. We’d get into friendly arguments about that.

27 KC: Okay.

28 AT: Other than that, I can’t remember.

29 KC: A little friendly tension but nothing even serious, anything like that.

1 AT: Mostly we'd do our job during the day, at night we had dinner together and
2 sit around watching television, [playing] cards, [reading], [listening] to music, or
3 [drinking]. Occasionally, we'd have people over and we'd have a party.

4 KC: Now, with the kind of time that you would have available here, or like you
5 say, watching television, playing cards, listening to radio, what do you hear about what's
6 going on in the States at this time?

7 AT: We had access to news, and I remember the big item when I was with the
8 Signal Group was McNamara's fence and everybody would joke and jeer about it, and
9 say, "What the hell's that guy talking about? What an idiot." But other than that, it was—
10 and then there was a little bit of some racial riots and stuff, and that kind of made me
11 angry. I mean, here I was in a war and my wife was living in New Jersey where they're
12 having race riots and it made me a little upset. But against the people there, not the
13 people in Vietnam.

14 KC: Right. What sort of things was she communicating to you? You mentioned
15 that she would write you every day, every-other-day or so, what sort of information are
16 you getting from her?

17 AT: Mostly family stuff. She was working for RCA, and she'd tell me about what
18 she was doing and the guys there, what the family was doing, and that sort of thing. And
19 her brother John was in the Navy, was on a Navy destroyer and so she would tell me
20 about what was happening with him in the Gulf of Tonkin. That was it, mostly family
21 stuff, and I would tell her what was going on in the unit and so on.

22 KC: Well, here we have it winding down toward the fall, the winter of 1967. Are
23 you keeping a calendar? Do you know what day you're going home?

24 AT: Oh yeah. Yeah, it was how many days to DEROs (Date Estimated Return
25 Over Seas).

26 KC: Right.

27 AT: Yeah. Particularly the last two months. The last two months I started to get
28 nervous. Stuff that I would take for granted or be casual about earlier, I started to get a
29 little bit apprehensive about because I was getting close.

30 KC: Things such as what?

1 AT: Getting killed. I mean, I figured, you know, I actually see this window of
2 going home and I don't want to do anything stupid here at the last minute and not make
3 it.

4 KC: Right.

5 AT: There was that. But what they did in the unit is we had one of these—my
6 roommate actually was a major and my last two months he said, "Look, you've trained
7 all the pilots, you got plenty of pilots, you don't really need to fly. How would you like to
8 be the acting operations officer and let me go out and do more flying?" I said, "Fine." So
9 the last two months I was the maintenance officer and most of my flying was checking
10 out aircraft after maintenance procedures. I spent most of the days sitting in the
11 headquarters building monitoring flight operations and acting in the role of operations
12 officer while everybody else was out flying.

13 KC: What do you do as operations officer?

14 AT: Just received all the requests from all the different units and processed them,
15 and [made] assignments for all the pilots flying all the different aircraft. Most of the
16 detail work was done by a specialist and a sergeant who worked under my supervision, I
17 mainly just monitored what they were doing and maintained communications. [One day]
18 there was a problem, [a poncho or something] got caught in the rotor-blades, and [the
19 crew] were afraid to fly it. So we flew out, checked out the aircraft, it was okay to fly and
20 so we gave them [our aircraft and flew back the other one] and ran a full inspection on it.
21 I had to be ready for anything that came up, because I was one pilot who was there, who
22 was in a position to respond to anything. There were a couple of things I had to do like
23 that.

24 KC: All right, it's December 1967. What day are you going home?

25 AT: December 4th.

26 KC: December 4th.

27 AT: For some silly reason I thought I would go over to the 90th Replacement
28 Battalion, which was in Bien Hoa and relax a few days. Well, it was the most depressing
29 environment I've ever been in.

30 KC: Why?

1 AT: I regretted leaving my unit two-days early, because I had to turn in all my
2 weapons, and I was assigned a cot. There was some fat second lieutenant with a semi-
3 automatic pistol on his belt and here I was with no weapons, and this kid was going to
4 defend me in case we were attacked. I thought “This is really stupid”. Here I am [with]
5 no weapons. They went through my gear, and they pulled out the jungle fatigues, [as] I
6 was not authorized to take [them] home. That kind of pissed me off. Then, the only thing
7 to do was to sit in the officer’s club bar and drink, and so I sat in there for three solid days
8 and there was a song playing on the jukebox continuously. It was “Billy Joe McAllister
9 jumping off the Tallahatchie Bridge”. The damn song played every minute, every day, for
10 three days. I sat there drinking beer, reading, and listening to this damn thing, and eating
11 three meals a day, and thinking, “God, I can’t wait to get out of here.” Finally, my flight
12 that I was supposed to get on arrived, I loaded my gear [and boarded a] fully loaded
13 [aircraft]. I remember lumbering down the runway. It took forever for this thing to finally
14 break ground and when it did, everybody cheered, and that was the last thing I heard on
15 this flight. Nobody said a word until we landed. I think we landed in Guam for a
16 refueling stop and then in California, and when I got off in California, I walked around
17 the airport. Called my wife cause they were getting ready to meet me in Philadelphia. I
18 went to the little USO (United Service Organizations) place and there was Connie
19 Francis. She was a small lady dressed in black, and I said “Hi.” And she said, “Hi.” But
20 she seemed a little timid, so we didn’t really have any conversation. But I got some
21 goodies they had, and I waited for my flight, and I got on. I remember, there was a guy,
22 an old man sitting next to me, and he says, “Where are you coming from?” I said,
23 “Vietnam.” He said, “What did you do?” I told him. He says, “Oh my God.” And that’s
24 the last thing we said. Got to the airport, there [were] my parents and my parents-in-law,
25 and my wife and we had lunch and then we went home. That was it.

26 KC: What did you want to do when you got back home?

27 AT: Well, I wanted to see my friends and my relatives, so there were lots of
28 parties. People would come over, I would go out visiting, it was kind of fun, but mostly
29 didn’t talk about the war. Mostly talked about what my friends were doing and who was
30 where, who got a job, who was in the military, and so on. Just getting reacquainted with
31 everything.

1 KC: Now, oftentimes in the public's mind I think, in our course to become—kind
2 of a cultural reality despite what the actual reality may have been, that Vietnam veterans
3 have a difficult time or had a difficult time adjusting to society when they returned. What
4 was your experience like?

5 AT: There was no difficulty readjusting. The problem was figuring out what I
6 wanted to do. I grew up thinking I wanted to be a golf course superintendent, and when I
7 got back from Vietnam, I had decided two things. I didn't want to be a golf
8 superintendent anymore and I didn't want to fly helicopters. I was trying to think, "What
9 in the hell am I going to do?" I did visit my old advisor from Rutgers while I was home,
10 and he said, "If you want to come back to school." He says, "I've got an assistantship for
11 you." And that didn't appeal. I didn't want to go back to Rutgers and do that. If I did grad
12 school, it would be somewhere else. But I just didn't know what I wanted to do and it
13 made me a little depressed. When I went back on active duty in January and reported to
14 [my next duty station] at Fort Wolters and they had me slated to be a flight instructor, and
15 I remember telling this major that I reported to—I was still a first lieutenant, I hadn't
16 been promoted to captain yet. I said, "I'm being honest with you sir, I don't want to fly
17 anymore. I plan to get out of the Army this fall, I do not plan to fly. I would really prefer
18 a ground job if that's possible." I didn't know what his reaction would be, but he was a
19 nice guy, and he says, "I don't have anything right now, but if you want to wait around
20 maybe something will come up." I said, "That's fine." So I sat there and I'm sort of
21 rationalizing to myself, "Well, what the hell? Maybe I'll just fly, and it won't be so bad.
22 Pass the time." All of a sudden, I see this lieutenant colonel show up and I hear him
23 talking to the major and he says, "I need a meteorology instructor." And the guy looks
24 over to me, and I look back at him and got up, and he says, "You know anything about
25 meteorology?" And I said, "Yes, I had a course in it in college and, [of course], I went
26 through that training when I was here at Wolters." He says, "You know anything about
27 teaching?" I said, "Oh yeah, I've got a lot of experience teaching." Which was a lie, I
28 didn't. This colonel says, "Well, would you like to teach meteorology with us?" And I
29 said, "Yes, sir." I shook hands with the guy and the major, and we left. He took me over
30 to the Maintenance and Meteorology Unit. Half the guys taught aircraft maintenance and
31 half meteorology.

1 KC: Well, they're basically the same thing.

2 AT: Yeah. (Laughs) Met the guys, and the following Monday I went through a
3 [four-week] MOI, Methods of Instruction [course], which was, to this day, the finest
4 educational experience I've ever had. Loved it. Then I had to learn the material, I sat in
5 on two different instructors teaching the same thing. Two hours in the morning and two
6 hours in the afternoon, got up to speed on everything and using the visual aids. I started
7 teaching under supervision and then I got my own class and fell in love with teaching.
8 Just [then], I got a letter from my old advisor at Rutgers whom I had stopped in to visit
9 during the Christmas Break and he says, "There's an assistantship at Michigan State in
10 turfgrass weed control and I suggest you check into it. It looks good." So I sent this little
11 letter to [the professor there] telling him my background and inquiring into the position. I
12 get back a very detailed, two-page letter. We started communicating and the first thing he
13 said is, "Well, you've never taken any calculus." He says, "If there's any possibility you
14 can take it at night school or something, that'd be a good thing to get out of the way." So
15 I enrolled in TCU (Texas Christian University), in calculus. Two-nights a week for two-
16 and-a-half hours and I worked every night and [every] weekend [on that calculus]. For
17 nine-weeks and I got an A in the course. Then I found out that the Army could let you out
18 early if you [were going] back to school. So I applied for that and they agreed to let me
19 out six-weeks early so I could start the fall term in September. At the end of it I had a
20 very nice experience there, I learned a lot. I left on very good terms; they even gave me
21 an award [for my work there]. Went to [MSU] and met my major professor and started
22 [grad] school. Had a— Oh yeah, I remember what it was. When I went to grad school, I
23 was in a very much of a rush. I noticed that the other grad students took things casually,
24 and I didn't take anything casually. If I [needed] a course, I took it. If I had to do
25 research, I did it. Everything I did, I did with purpose and efficiency, and I raced through
26 a master's and PhD in three years.

27 KC: Yeah, I saw that in some of the paperwork you provided. That was very, very
28 quick obviously.

29 AT: Just hit the ground running and never stopped.

30 KC: Do you think that was your personal predilection towards this kind of
31 discipline and efficiency? Or do you think it normally helped—

1 AT: I think so. I think I learned something in the Army about efficiency, which
2 none of my fellow grad-students knew anything about. I was there on a mission, and the
3 mission was to get through this experience, get done, and get a job. Exactly three years
4 later in September of '71, I became an assistant professor at the University of Illinois and
5 been a professor now for almost forty-years.

6 KC: That's some pretty good timing on those—

7 AT: Yeah, it was excellent.

8 KC: Let's me know how the academic job was—

9 AT: Everything just fell into place and worked out well. It's been a great ride, but
10 I think Vietnam taught me the value of the preciousness of life. I guess for a long time I
11 tried to make the most of it and do my best.

12 KC: What was your experience like in graduate school up in Lansing?

13 AT: It was fine. I was in an institution where the anti-war sentiment was great. I
14 mean, the president was out marching with people protesting the war. Of course, the
15 thing that turned everybody against it was Tet, I think in '68, which I just missed by two-
16 months.

17 KC: I wanted to ask you about that as well.

18 AT: Yeah. But there was a lot of anti-war sentiment, but I was a grad student, I
19 needed money, so I joined a Reserve unit as a captain for two years and did one summer
20 camp. I hated the Reserves. It was the most chicken-shit operation I've ever seen. They
21 weren't mission oriented; they were just playing the game and they were more concerned
22 about the length of somebody's sideburns than they were about operational efficiency or
23 mission effectiveness.

24 KC: Sure.

25 AT: I was pretty disgusted with it and quit. But in the two years I was in the
26 Reserves I would, from time-to-time drop by the lab in my uniform and what I found was
27 despite the anti-war sentiment, I never caught any grief about it at all. My fellow grad
28 students respected my service, respected me, and while we would debate the war there
29 was never any [animosity directed] against me because of my service. That was quite
30 interesting. I mean, you hear stories about people spitting at soldiers in uniform. Well, I

1 was two hundred twenty pounds and all muscle and anybody who was foolish enough to
2 spit at me would be picking up their teeth, but nobody ever did. Maybe that was part of it.

3 KC: Perhaps.

4 AT: But anyway, I quit the Reserves after two-years cause I just got fed-up with
5 it. Dedicated myself to my studies and my academic career. But my time at Michigan
6 State was good. It was fast moving because just like in the Army I never took a day off;
7 well, I never took a day off as a grad student. I just worked and got it done. Got a job and
8 when I went to the University of Illinois, I never took a day off. I worked and got the job
9 done and progressed very rapidly. It was only after a while I decided I really needed to
10 take a little time and smell the roses and not work all the time. Eventually, began to work
11 at achieving some balance in my life, but it took a while. I think Vietnam was the
12 propelling force for that.

13 KC: You mentioned the Tet Offensive, did you continue to follow the progress of
14 the war once you got home?

15 AT: Oh absolutely, sure. Read about it. But you know, it was not an obsession,
16 my obsession was making a career and the Army was behind me. But I followed it and I
17 was worried about my friends, and I wrote to the guys in the 2nd Signal Group, and they
18 said, "Boy, the environment sure is different around here." When Tet hit, [there were no]
19 weapons in the villa. They had to send somebody in a Jeep to go onto the flight line
20 where we had weapons stored in a secured CONEX container and get them back to the
21 villa so people could defend themselves. So there was a little worry for a while, and then
22 the whole environment in Saigon changed after that. So I maintained some
23 communication for a while, and then dropped it. After a while, I didn't really want to
24 think about Vietnam. I wanted to put it behind and just think about my future.

25 KC: Right.

26 AT: It took about twenty-years when all of a sudden, I began thinking about it a
27 lot and reading books. Joined a Vietnam veterans' group and had a sort of rebirth of that
28 experience for a few years until I worked it out of my system.

29 KC: What do you think prompted this renewed interest?

30 AT: I don't know. I don't know, but it happened in 1988. I just all of a sudden
31 found [that] after sweeping it all under the rug for nearly twenty-years, I decided that I

1 needed to face it. To face it head-on and to deal with it, because it would erupt from time
2 to time. I'd be watching a movie and there'd be some war-type action and I'd have
3 nightmares about Vietnam.

4 KC: Really?

5 AT: So I figured, somehow I got to deal with this thing. And I read everything,
6 and I met with other veterans, and I got involved in things, and finally worked it out of
7 my system.

8 KC: How do you say you worked it out of your system? Is it something—you
9 don't participate in the Vietnam veterans' group anymore?

10 AT: No, I do lecture in the Vietnam course I talked to you about and it makes me
11 face it every semester. Once I'd done everything and met with veterans, I decided that,
12 you know, there were some things I needed to face and come to grips with it, rather than
13 trying to sweep it under the rug. After I did that for a while, then the nightmares stopped,
14 and I didn't have to worry about it anymore.

15 KC: You mentioned that there were these—

16 AT: There were some times during that guest lecturing. A couple years ago, a girl
17 started asking me questions at the end of my class and she took me to a place I hadn't
18 been before, and I got a little emotional about it and realized that there were some things I
19 didn't face. And I started to do that, and come to grips with it, then I could deal without
20 getting upset anymore.

21 KC: What were these sorts of things? Or do you care to talk about them?

22 AT: It's still difficult to talk about some of it because the issue was if I survived
23 after facing all the things that I did, was there a reason for it? And I never really came up
24 with an answer. But I figured that if there was, then I had to be worthy of it. I began to
25 question if my life was conducted in a way that made me worthy of it. Well, I think I did
26 okay. I don't think there was anything really special there and that I decided that I needed
27 to be even better at what I do, and why I do it, to be worthy of it.

28 KC: Again—I'm sorry, go ahead.

29 AT: No, that's it. I just—you survive what other people didn't, and why? Is it just
30 dumb luck? Was there a reason? And if there was a reason, what was it? By being
31 satisfactory and responding to that, and that's the key issue to my life.

1 KC: Has your religious faith played any role in this? Do you think?

2 AT: Oh yeah, yeah but—who am I that I should be singled out as some special
3 person? I’m a professor. I’m okay, but I’m not any great shape. I’m just good at my job
4 and dedicated to teach students, and to prepare them for life’s challenges and I think I’ve
5 done okay but is that a satisfactory answer? I’m not sure. I’m not sure, I still debate that,
6 but it makes me want to be a better father. A better husband. A better professor. A better
7 example. Vietnam, I think is that spear that keeps pushing me in that direction.

8 KC: Well, I really appreciate your discussing something like that which was
9 difficult, obviously. I only have one more question for you Al.

10 AT: Sure.

11 KC: And it’s a broad question and feel free to answer it however you see fit.

12 AT: Okay.

13 KC: As we’ve continued to look back on the Vietnam War, unlike any other war
14 in the country’s history and unlike any other experience in the country’s history because
15 of its ramifications in so many different ways, we look back at the Vietnam War and say,
16 “Well, the Vietnam War meant this”, “No, no. No, this is the legacy of the Vietnam
17 War”, “Here’s what we should have learned, here’s what we did learn”. And we continue
18 to kick this football around that’s the legacy of the Vietnam War. Depending on who you
19 talk to, you get a different response. But as someone who was there, and someone who
20 has learned, and someone who has a perspective that only you can have, what do you
21 think is the legacy of the Vietnam War?

22 AT: You know, Vietnam was a war we got involved in for I think two reasons.
23 One, we perceived a Communist threat that had to be dealt with, and that was the
24 battleground where we had to deal with it. And secondly, largely because of the efforts of
25 Cardinal Spellman at the time and others, we felt that we needed to come to the aid of a
26 country that was in danger of being overrun by forces that the people didn’t want to be
27 subjected to. So there were two, I think, reasonably legitimate reasons for getting
28 involved, and there was the assumption that we could be effective in helping to enable the
29 Vietnamese people to chart their own future. Now, the first issue, the perception of a
30 communist threat was subject to reinterpretation as we became somewhat more
31 sophisticated in understanding the threat. That Vietnam wasn’t kowtowing to Moscow or

1 Peking or anybody else, they were largely a nationalist movement, but there was
2 communist involvement. If we could look back at it, knowing what we know today,
3 would we have gotten involved as much as we did and the way we did? Perhaps not. But
4 I look at our involvement in Libya right now and it's cautious, you got some people
5 saying, "No, no, no. We need to go in there and make the most of it." You got to say,
6 "We shouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole." And you've got what appears to be a rather
7 modest engagement right now. Any one of these things could turn rotten the way
8 Vietnam did, and I think that's just the peril we face as a nation that is attempting to
9 respond to challenges around the world, some of which are in our direct best interest, and
10 some of which are not, in trying to be the world's policeman. That's a question that we're
11 going to have to wrestle with, to what extent can we do that? We're trying to help the
12 Libyans, we're trying to help the Iraqis, we're trying to help the [Afghanis]. There is
13 other areas where we could very easily become involved, and what's our capability?
14 What's appropriate and what's not? So what's the legacy of Vietnam? Vietnam is
15 continuing to manifest itself in many different ways as we as a nation wrestle with the
16 extent to which we can and should be involved as a mitigating influence. I think it's not
17 easy, it's really hard. Now, the other legacy of Vietnam is that operational level. If you're
18 going to do something, you got to do it right. When I saw what was happening in Iraq
19 after the initial invasion, I said, "Oh my God, we're doing the same damn thing we did in
20 Vietnam. We're engaging in search-and-destroy operations to kill bad-guys." Well, the
21 problem with—and operate with a strategy or a tactic directed primarily at killing bad-
22 guys, is one, you invariably kill some good-guys with it. Or two, you preclude the
23 opportunity of turning those bad-guys into good guys, and if you kill them, then you
24 infuriate their uncles, their brothers, their sisters, their mothers and so on, and the bad-
25 guy situation takes on a life of its own. That's what happened in Vietnam, you'd kill a
26 villager who was thought to be a bad-guy and you turn the village against you, and then
27 you've got an incessant supply of bad-guys. So search-and-destroy as a singular tactic
28 didn't work in Vietnam, and it didn't work in Iraq. When they finally turned it around
29 and adopted what they started out at in Vietnam, a counterinsurgency strategy, which is
30 dependent upon getting the people on your side, that began to turn Vietnam around. But it
31 was too late, people were fed-up with it. Poor General Abrams tried his damndest, but

1 they kept pulling his resources away, because we went too long with a losing strategy and
2 we damn-near did the same thing in Iraq. Fortunately, they turned that around, it's not
3 totally trouble-free but it's still problematic but to a much lesser extent. Afghanistan, I
4 don't know what the hell were going to do there, that's a minefield that we're mired in
5 and I don't know that there's any satisfactory resolution. So what's the legacy of
6 Vietnam? We appear to be because of who we are, destined to get involved in more, and
7 the only question is ensure that we don't get involved beyond the point that we reach the
8 point of diminishing marginal returns and it's no longer worth the effort we expend.
9 That's not a very satisfactory answer, it's the only one I can come up with right now.

10 KC: No, I think it's a very well-thought out and rounded answer.

11 AT: We can't put our heads in the sand and ignore the rest of the world, but to the
12 extent that which we try to be a mitigating influence, we got to proceed carefully. Don't
13 let the war hawks make us do something that's not sound, but at the same time let's not
14 put our heads in the sand, let's do something meaningful and carefully thought out and
15 effective. That's the legacy as I see it, it's not simple, it's not easy.

16 KC: Well, Al, is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview before we
17 bring it to a close?

18 AT: No, I think I've talked myself out for one day.

19 KC: (Laughs) Okay. Well, thanks a lot for that.

20 AT: Okay.

21 (Interview audio ends)