The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Dan Hilliard
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Sarah Tapia

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

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Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 21 January 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Hilliard is joining me by telephone from his home in Inglis, Florida. Mr. Hilliard, to begin the interview I'd like to see if you could provide me with some biographical background information. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

Dan Hilliard: I was born 3rd of January 1949 at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C.

KC: What were your parents' names?

DH: I'm sorry. Say that again.

KC: Your parents' names?

DH: Father was Grover Clarence Hilliard, Jr., from Dover, Tennessee. Mother was Betty Jane Hilliard. She was born up in Flora, Indiana. This in August of 1920 and December of 1925 respectively.

KC: Okay. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

DH: A late brother. He was born in Champaign, Illinois—I believe it was at Chanute Air Force Base, 1944. He went on to become an aerospace engineer working for Boeing on the Saturn V project back in the '60s, later on Pratt & Whitney down in West

Palm Beach. He was involved with development of power plants related to the SR-71 Blackbird and the F-14/15/16/18 series of jets initially when Pratt was flying it—power plants for those aircraft.

KC: Very interesting. What did your parents do for a living?

DH: My father was career Air Force. He started out in what was then the Army Air Force, back in World War II. Primarily, at least initially, bomber maintenance and he had some crew chief experience with that. He went on eventually to focus entirely on aircraft maintenance. He was appointed as a warrant officer in 1957 when we were at—what was Morrison Field in Palm Beach Air Force Base. Retired in 1971, as I recall, from the 335th Tac (Fighter Squadron) fighter wing in Takhli, Thailand. It was the Wild Weasels. Thirty-four years, as I recall. He was a wrench bender from word go. My mother was essentially a housewife. She did work sporadically at the different Air Force bases we were stationed at as a civil servant, secretarial work, and that sort of thing. Perhaps more significantly to her, she was an avid golfer.

KC: Oh, is that right?

DH: Yes.

KC: Tell me about growing up. I know that you mentioned on the questionnaire that you moved around quite a bit. Kind of a military brat, as it were, born at Water Reed. What was it like growing up for you in that kind of environment?

DH: It was a never-ending succession of adventure. My earliest coherent memories of life probably beginning sometime around the age of three, when I started putting things together in order. We were stationed at Lake Charles, Louisiana, and I don't have a lot of recollection of that. We went from Lake Charles to Columbus, Ohio, Lockbourne Air Force Base, a SAC (Strategic Air Command) base. At the time my father was working for SAC. That was followed by—they transferred him to West Palm Beach which was essentially a Military Air Transport service, MAT at the time, became MAC (Military Airlift Command) later on. It was a post-World War II base that was—it was what it was. A lot of fishing and outdoor activities started coming in to my life at that point. It was a family ritual, if you will, in the fall we would go out quail hunting or dove hunting, or stuff like that. My grandfather, on my mother's side, had moved down—brought the family down post—right before the end of the Depression into central

Florida. Set up home in Frostproof, which was right in the middle of what was then a burgeoning citrus industry. He was a middle man between the grove owners and the packing houses. That circumstance really doesn't exist anymore, it's all one big combine. He would buy the fruit, get it picked, and get it to the packing houses. He was an avid outdoorsman. He spent most of his life outdoors and probably was the catalyst for much of our family activities. We were in West Palm for five years. Went through elementary school and just about to get through with that and we got transferred out to Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma, the suburbs of Midwest City. That was the junior high era of my life. We were there for about three years. Again, the outdoor activities continued. Growing up, doing what kids do—(??). Going out and playing in the snow whenever it happened, that kind of thing. Learned to waterski out there at Lake Tenkiller, which was a magnificent reservoir if there ever was one. Probably discovered girls somewhere along the way. 1962, late '62, my father was transferred to Gaum at Anderson Air Force Base. We followed just a few months later. I think we arrived around some time in middle of February, my mother and I. I had been there less than twenty-four hours when (Laughs)—third degree sunburns over ninety percent of my body. You know, you go from the snowy white of Oklahoma to the tropical South Seas and it's pretty quick. Absolutely loved that duty assignment, or tour, if you will. Magnificent island, place for a kid to grow up. Started playing the guitar. Made virtually all of my spending money there spearfishing. I had a band of friends that were of like mind. By the time I left there in 1965 I was routinely free diving to about eighty feet. We were making individually anywhere from 50-100 dollars a day when we were diving. This was back, like I said, in the mid '60s. Physically fit would hardly describe my condition at that time. Anyway, all good things came to an end and oddly enough it was just before we left in, was in June of '65 that they had the first publicly announced B-52 raid on Vietnam. It was staged from Guam. I don't remember the exact count, there was something in the neighborhood of about fifty or fifty-five of the B-52s that had been brought in. They had increased security substantially and we had to show our ID cards when we came home from school daily coming through the front gate. They did have a few missions prior, I don't know what the purpose of—we could hear them take off. You can't hide that many jets departing at one time. They would take off and come back two or three times. Then they had the big

mission, it was the day that we left, actually. Launched about, I'm gonna say in the early hours of the morning. The launch process took, as I recall, about forty-five minutes. We were at the terminal waiting to board our jet to come home when they started returning. Our delay—our departure was delayed because of that so we're sitting there watching these guys land. They had, many of them I think their first experience landing a very light B-52. They had expended fuel and many thousands of pounds of ordnance. A couple of them would touch down and bounce back up into the air, fifteen, twenty feet. One of them looked like he was gonna drag a wing coming into the terminal. (Laughs) Everybody was screaming to, trying to get out of the way. But it all worked out. We got on the plane and came home. They lost three aircraft on that mission that day. I don't know the circumstances of one of them. Two of them were involved in a mid-air collision somewhere, as I recall, during a refueling operation in the general vicinity of the Philippine Sea. The third had the wing commander on board and they were all lost as well. We got back to the States, were stationed at Patrick Air Force Base in the east coast of Florida, right next to Cape Canaveral. I stayed there for about three-and-a-half years. Graduated from high school, played football, surfer boy. Got into college and it really just did not resonate for me. It was something—it was a junior college and I viewed it, frankly, as something like the thirteenth grade. Wound up doing a reality check of sorts. This was in the timeframe of 1966-67, in that year of college. I got to the point where I just said I wasn't going to continue with it. Approached a—knowing full well I was gonna get drafted or join the service. At the time, of course, the draft was in play. I took stock of my situation, went down and visited an Army recruiting, Navy recruiter, Air Force recruiter. What I was interested in at the time, actually was the NAVCAD (Naval Aviation Cadet) program with the Navy. Excuse me just a minute, Kelly.

KC: Sure.

DH: If we get cut off call me back, please.

KC: Sure.

DH: Where was I? I just had someone I had to talk to briefly.

KC: Oh, okay, no problem. Talk to me about the—you were interested in the NAVCAD program.

DH: Oh, yes, right. So I looked into that. They required two years of college for NAVCAD and I had one with a spotty record, as far as grades. Talked to the Army recruiter about the Warrant Officer Candidate Flight Program. And frankly, because of a movie my father had brought home and showed us, when we were living in Guam. It had to do with counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam, and ambushes and so forth, I was not warm and fuzzy about the idea of being on the ground over there. They call that my small token, reflects towards discretion, if you will. We danced around a little bit, the recruiter and I. They had me take an exam, which I obviously passed. One thing led to another, about, oh, a month before I was inducted a got a little brown card from the Selective Service Office suggesting that I was gonna be drafted. The recruiter had asked me to give that to him, which I did, unopened. I stopped on the way home from that visit and got a buzz cut and my parents thought I had lost my mind, and so did my friends, being a surfer sort and all that. I told Dad that I had joined the Army and my mom just about cried and Dad was quite proud, particularly when I told him I was going to warrant officer flight school.

KC: I bet.

DH: So that pretty much covers the country prior to induction. I was inducted up in Jacksonville, Florida, in February of 1968. That was a rather chaotic time in the world news about Vietnam and America and everything.

KC: Well, let me interrupt you here, if I may, then. One of the things I'm curious about. Here you are, military brat, you're moving to Florida, Oklahoma, Guam, moving around quite a bit, father's in the Air Force. How aware were you of what was going on in Vietnam throughout this time? Or world affairs in general, the Cold War in general and Vietnam specifically.

DH: That's an interesting question. How would I put this? I was very much aware of what was going on in Vietnam. My focus, my perspective on that was shaped by two things. Once or twice a week—I want you to imagine a bunch of teenage boys on an island like Guam, and you've got a couple of outdoor theaters. Otherwise, you're left to your own imagination for entertainment in the evening hours. We would go down to the flight passenger terminal on the air base on certain evenings in the night and watch people, people who were being assigned to the island. Them and their families would get

off the plane, they would report to wherever they reported. We'd say goodbye to friends who were going back home and we'd see troopers in the green fatigues and camouflage with funny looking guns getting off the airplane and taking a rest stop. We knew there was a lot of troop movement through that terminal. We had the local high school that I went to—it's funny, two and a half years of split sessions. They had Typhoon Karen hit that island in 1962 and it destroyed one of the schools so we were doing split sessions at the remaining structure. One of our teachers—we had two teachers, actually, that were tuned in to this. One of them was the biology teacher, we didn't get much discussion on it there. The other one was a world history teacher, quite a bright fellow. He engaged the students and we talked about Vietnam a lot. I don't recall that he guided discussions, he just prompted people to talk about it. He would sometimes fill in blanks, things we didn't know about, or couldn't be expected to know about in that environment. I would say probably at the point I left Guam, I was probably a couple of orders of magnitude more aware of what was going on over there than the average high school student. We got back to the States and you get more of a media bath, even at then. We had three channels here in the States, there was one on the island. We had much better newspaper coverage, and so forth. So I was fully conversant with the war protest, the conflict that was going on, the, of course the coup that happened when the Diem was in charge of South Vietnam. All these were topical and current affairs to me. I was very much aware of the mess that was going on, the ongoing mess. I was more or less of the perspective that, motherhood and apple pie, if my country needed me, I was willing to commit to that. I preferred to do it on my own terms. That would be the flight school process. Most of the kids where I went to school, my senior year in high school was at Satellite High School, which is just south of Patrick Air Force Base, a great many of the kids were military dependents. And I think largely of the same mind. Your environment shapes your views quite a bit at that age. If that answers your question, I—

KC: Yeah, it does. I'd like to follow up and see if you could offer me your views on some other things here. So, you mentioned that, yeah, you're aware of what's going on in Vietnam. You have been kind of bouncing these ideas back and forth against each other and what you're seeing, and raised in this kind of environment, and seeing what's going on. But you also talked about being in the States and what's going on here. You're

talking about not just the war, but the protests. What was your opinion, or can you talk about your experiences in the midst of this? You were of one mindset, you know, the war protesters obviously something very, very different. How do you feel about all of this when it's going on? The protest, the war, your spot in it, what's going on here?

DH: This simple version of that is that I had difficulty understanding why the protestors were doing what they were doing. I didn't know what was motivating them. I did not accept the idea that—the "Why can't we all get along" theory is not something that was practical to me then. I mean, conflict was part of the world. It was more of a stand together or be divided in pieces kind of perspective. They were standing on the other side, somewhat offering solace to the enemy. I didn't understand the politics of why we were over there and I wasn't questioning that. I did understand the concept of loyalty and standing together against a common foe. I think that some of the things that were done, some of the protestors, their activities and so forth, were just nonstarters for me. I didn't get their point at all about what they were trying to present or what they were supporting. My father's generation, sometimes referred to as the "Greatest Generation," fought a war that was profoundly more violent than what we experienced in Vietnam both in terms of expense, casualties, long-term impact, cost, everything. I had the occasion to look into the fringes of that war when I was living on Guam. I saw things over there that most people have not seen, and even though it was, you know, eighteen years after the war, when we got there, there was an awful lot of residue left over. I had the opportunity to dive on sunken vessels that were still loaded with ordnance, both American and Japanese. Had the occasion to find a Zero that was lost in the jungle, largely intact, full of bullet holes. Found and provided sustenance to a Japanese war straggler that was camped out on the north side of Anderson Air Force Base.

KC: Really?

DH: Was eventually brought in and sent back to Japan and my contribution to him was canned food on a fairly regular basis. He never showed himself but I understood the commitment that he had, and the fear, I think. I understood my own determination to stand on what I thought was the side of right. I was not as intellectually introspective as I might be today but that was where I stood at the time.

KC: Yeah. Well, let me follow up on something here, and maybe it's not all that pertinent to the Vietnam experience. But I've got to find out about how you came across this Japanese straggler. What was going on there? I want to know about this.

DH: Well, it's a good question. Guam is a U.S. possession, about thirty miles long, average is about six to eight miles wide. Got high terrain scattered all over it, mixed population, locally they call themselves the Chamorro, the Guamanians, as we referred to them. Primarily the local population was centered around the central and southern part of the island. The north part, NAS (Naval Air Station) Agana and Apra Harbor were centrally located in the island. Anderson was all up at the north end. We started diving, and that was a time when my parents started golfing, as well. It was relatively common for them to drop us off at the location of our choice to dive, they would go golf, pick us up when they return. Sometimes we'd be in the water for three or four hours, sometimes we'd be there all day long. So, as you grow, and your experiences, your interests start to shift, you start looking for new venues. We found a couple of places that we could go diving that were quite a bit more interesting than what we had been doing. One of them involved a long walk down a small dirt track on the east side of the island. Right at the bottom there was a spring, actually it was a cave spring. We used to go play around that. We would also dive off the coast. There was no—west side of the island has barrier reefs and large lagoons, the right side is just cliff faced rock with a little coral fringe, very wild. In the process of all this, and you know kids. There's always the forbidden zone, these were off limits areas that for whatever reason the Air Force didn't want anyb—or the military authorities did not want anybody in to. Of course, that's like putting a red cape in front of a bull. You've got a bunch of fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-year-old kids running around armed and dangerous with spear guns and rippling with muscles and all this kind of stuff. We had, at that point, got to a position in life where just spearfishing for the sake of money was actually getting a little boring. This was something I never I told my parents. We decided that it was great sport to go out and torment sharks, there was a lot of sharks on that island. We would go out and spear enough fish to get some blood in the water and the sharks we start showing up and we'd start shooting the sharks. That seemed like just a great pastime to us. We were always looking for a new place to find sharks and we jumped over—went over the cliff in one of these off-limits zones. It was right up the

very, very north end of the island. Just to the east of the extended runway center line at Anderson Air Force Base, it was about a 600-foot descent down a lava cliff. The first few times we went down there we were—it took a while. We finally got it figured out and there was a small, coastal plane, if you will. It was a few hundred yards deep, had some trees at the bottom, more caves and that kind of thing. We actually camped down there several times. One of the trips down, we were going by—it was a large, huge, huge slab of rock that had broken off the face a little bit and it had a small cave under it. We got to looking and found where this fella had set up camp. He had made a rock wall to keep the weather off of him on one side. He had collected—there was a World War II GI issue hatchet in there and there was a couple of, just personal effects. Something like that. Also some little flyers. They used to distribute these things by airdrop around the island occasionally. They were little like 3"x5" cards with Japanese writing and basically said, "The war is over. Come on in. We'll send you home." He had several of those that he had saved. We realized what we were looking at and we were loath to tell the authorities what we had found because (Laughs) we even got our parents in trouble. It was off-limits and we weren't supposed to be there. So we started taking him canned goods, pork and beans, pineapple, whatever. Whatever we could filch out of the cabinet. We did that, I'm gonna guess probably I was involved with that for about six months before we came home. That particular gentleman was finally brought in and shipped home. As a recall, it was about a year or two after I left when he finally gave it up.

KC: That's incredible.

DH: Well, I look back on it and say, yeah, this does seem like another page in the book to me back then. I'm never going to philosophically accept some of the actions of the Japanese Empire, particularly in the early days of World War II. We had family friends that were participants, unwilling participants of the Bataan Death March and several other of the significant atrocities the Japanese committed during that war. I can forgive that, I can't forget it. But with that said, they are people. They were doing what they had been directed to do, very much as we were. I don't think it's a matter of zeal, necessarily, if he was going to prevail in a war. As a man who does their homework and applies the best resources to it, I'm more than pleased to say that I support the outcome of World War II (Laughs) and consider it history. But, I don't think in the main that any of

the participants of that war and certainly not in Vietnam, did so with a view toward dishonor. They thought they were doing the right thing. They were or they weren't. It's not my place to judge that.

KC: Right. Well, I appreciate you talking about that. I think it's incredibly interesting. It got us off track a little bit but I don't get very many opportunities to (laughing) run across a story like this.

DH: Well, Kelly, we'll take this wherever it goes.

KC: No, that's cool. I'll take us back here to, back to your narrative. Now, you mention here in—you made this effort to go to community college, and like you said, for you it was basically the thirteenth grade. It wasn't sticking with you, you had a spotty academic record.

DH: Yes.

KC: You know that once you—there's no deferment once you're out of school. You had your father, of course, served his career in the military. There's a war going on in Vietnam, ended up a pretty bitter, divisive, ugly war. You mentioned 1968, of course, early part of that year is the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and everything that that meant.

DH: Shazam.

KC: Yeah, tell me about the Tet Offensive from your perspective. You're not over there. You're reading about it, you're seeing it on the news and hearing it on the radio and talking to other people about it.

DH: Yes. The Tet Offensive of '68, from where I sat at that time, came as a large shock. It was—I viewed it as somewhat of an insult to national pride, if you will. That an upstart country like North Vietnam would deign to do such a thing. I viewed it as simplistic insanity on their part. I knew full well that we had the military power to crush anything like that, and we did. But, it's just the attitude displayed in launching that offensive was a bit of a shock to me. That they would have the zeal to do something like that was just—it was not expected. I think that probably a lot of people shared a similar view, and that's a guess on my part but I don't think it was uncommon. It was like, "Oh, wow. Really?" I just couldn't believe it. The aftermath was—I shouldn't say the aftermath. What followed was disconcerting, the number of American troops that were being killed during the offensive was quite high. I remember—my recollection is that this

is the point in time where the weekly body counts of GIs started going about 100 on a regular basis. I think sometimes it was a couple hundred in those few short months after the offensive began. It was not a pleasant time of introspection on that subject for me. Considered possibly that I had misjudged who we were fighting over there, and their capabilities. It did not occur to me until quite some time later that I might have some cynicism to focus on the likes of Lyndon Johnson or Robert McNamara. That came in time, of course. At then it was a bucket of ice water in the face, I would say.

KC: Did it have any influence on your decision to join the military? Or the die was already cast there?

DH: No, it did not. That was already—that was pretty much already lined up and on the roll. I didn't second guess anything at that point.

KC: What about your father's military experience? Does that have an influence on your decision to enlist, as well?

DH: To the extent that what he did was a great contribution to the U.S. Air Force in general, and the nation in particular. And that he did so effectively and with honor, and recognition. It shaped some of my moral framework, or structure, if you will, quite a bit. He was a high standard. I was young enough to think that I did not want to embarrass him. So I tried to meet his standards as best I could, as best I understood 'em. I think in a way that worked out, but it was a high standard and it was a little bit daunting.

KC: Yeah, and this is kind of the background for your deciding to go in here. So, you've told your parents. Your father's proud, your mother's nonplussed, is maybe one way to put it. But you've joined up. You're going in.

DH: Yes, sir.

KC: Take me through your early military experience. Where do you go for basic?

DH: (Laughs) Okay, this is where it gets fun. I would have to double check my records, I think it was the 19th of February in '68 when I went to—got on a bus in downtown Melbourne, Florida. I took a ride up to Jacksonville for the induction center. I don't remember a whole lot about that. It was a very brief stay, a little bit of in-processing, physical, a test or two maybe. I do remember at that point one of the tests they administered, I think it was a psych test, struck me as very peculiar. They had several repetitious questions that were put in different form. One of them, "Would you

rather pick scabs or darn socks?" I didn't really know how to respond to that. I really didn't. So what I did, every time I saw the question I answered it differently. I wanted to cover all my bases because I didn't want there to be any barriers between them and me getting into flight school. I was a little bit concerned about that. We were there a couple of days, as I recall. Got on a flight out of Jacksonville on an old—I think it was perhaps a Martin 404 or something, it was a piston-powered propeller airplane. They took about thirty-five or forty of us and they were gonna fly us into some airfield close to Ft. Polk and take us in by ground transport. The flight was diverted by weather. We wound up in Alexandria, Louisiana, about—I don't know. It's probably about seven, eight 'o clock at night. We were hungry and we were sitting around wondering what to do. They said, "Well, they're gonna send vehicles to get you." I didn't know where Ft. Polk was, or where we were. We just sat there and sat there. At about two o'clock in the morning a fleet of taxi cabs showed up and so we had this caravan going to Ft. Polk. They didn't know where to take us. The guards at the gate let us in. I wound up spending the balance of that night in a laundry room for one of the barracks with two or three other guys, sleeping on the floor. That was an inauspicious start to the Army.

KC: Yeah, it sure sounds like it.

DH: We got our unit assignments the next day. Went in to boot camp and there was a, as I recall, four platoons in our boot camp. We had the—one of them was filled with people that were enlisted Reserve and National Guard. I was in that one. Also, those that were regular Army. Excuse me just one second. There's a gentleman here I have to talk—I'm gonna leave you here on speaker while I have this conversation.

KC: Sure.

DH: Where was I?

KC: Just arrived. You got your unit assignment, you're talking about the platoons (unintelligible)

DH: The platoon I was in was all ER (Enlisted Reserve), NG (National Guard), and regular Army. We had a platoon of Texans. We had a platoon of Cajuns. We had a platoon that was half and half. What a riotous bunch of monkeys those were. The Texas platoon was fine. The Louisiana platoon was fine. The mix of it, they were always getting into fights. The rest of us were sitting back trying to be intellectual about the whole thing.

Here's an example: we had a couple of National Guard morticians that had their own business someplace in South Carolina and they were reporting for basic training. One of them had gone through high school commuting in a Waco biplane. He used to land on the football field at school. They were funny as could be, absolutely hysterical. Between wild fits of laughter and insanity within that group, and watching the fisticuffs with the other, we got through basic training. Saw it snow, rain, and top seventy degrees all in one day there at Ft. Polk. Which was at the time, a truly abysmal place to be.

KC: Tell me about it. I've heard this a number of times, but tell me about it.

DH: Well, it was World War II era barracks. They weren't insulated. They were highly shined, I will admit that. We had an interesting array of drill instructors. We had one that was somewhat sadistic. We had another one that was a Hawaiian fellow who was kind of funny. We had our "Lee Ermey" types and they were diligent in training us to standards. They ran into a couple of things that they had never anticipated. One of the fellows in our platoon had been—he was also, I think enlisted Reserve. He was an interior lineman for the New York Giants. Big fellow. He was doing what he had to do, he wasn't enthused about it. I recall one occasion, we were going through bayonet training and one of the DIs (drill instructors) thought that they would harass him a little bit. They were giving him a little guff about the vigor he was putting into stabbing the bayonet target with his bayonet. They wanted to pick it up, and he did. He drove his M-14 all the way through that target up to the trigger guard. They had to disassemble the frame to get the gun out of it. So, yeah, there was some funny stuff, some hijinks, lo-jinx. They have a bivouac that you do when you're in basic training. Ours got cancelled because of weather. It was just pouring rain so we slogged out on a march in the rain. We set up our tents. The campsite got flooded out and packed up and we were home the same day. Absolutely miserable. So, I was thinking at the time, "Well, they're not gonna cancel the war because of rain. Why did we come home?" Well, actually they do cancel wars because of rain, as I found out later on. The chubby boys showed up at basic training and they'd lose forty, fifty, sixty pounds. The skinny rails like myself show up for basic training and pack on twenty or thirty pounds. That was pretty much it. Going back quite a while on my memory so I'm sure there some things I've forgotten about that. But I think that was the essence of the whole thing.

KC: Well, that's no problem. That's all I can ask, obviously. Okay, so you finish up here at Ft. Polk. The training in basic is the training in basic. Everyone's going through the meat grinder. Everyone's going through the same thing to a large degree.

DH: Yes.

KC: And you're finished here after, I don't know, what? Twelve weeks or whatever it may have been?

DH: It was an eight-week course at the time.

KC: Eight-week course, okay. So you're done in eight weeks. Now, you joined because you wanted to fly. Did you know that flying was gonna be on your radar, so to speak, once you finished there at Ft. Polk.?

DH: Yes, yes. That was—I'm not sure it's an accurate phrase but that was part of the contract. I joined specifically for flight school. If for any reason I had been removed from that program option I would have had a two-year enlistment. Which would have terminated, what? February of 1970.

KC: Right.

DH: I probably would have wound up as part of the military police or something like that. That did actually happen to one of my diving friends from Guam. He was—I should digress just slightly. Gentleman, his name was Chuck Teague, that's T-E-A-G-U-E, he was one of my best friends over there. His father was a lieutenant colonel when I met him. He was also the gentleman that taught Chuck Yeager how to fly in the—what was then the Army Air Corps during World War II. Colonel Teague later on became a—he was transferred over to Thailand, I believe. Thailand or Vietnam, I don't recall which. He was flying an A-1E Skyraider for the Air Force and was killed in a crash, the cause of which is not known to me. I don't know if it was an accident or combat loss. He was cut from the same fabric as my father, as you might imagine. That was one of the earlier experiences. But Chuck went in to—the son, went in to the Army with the same theory that I had. Found out that he had some problems with his heart, as far as he had an irregular heartbeat. They wouldn't let him in flight school as a result. So he wound up becoming military police for the Army.

KC: All right. Now, you finished here at Ft. Polk and the next stop is gonna be where?

DH: Next stop was Ft. Wolters.

KC: So you're going to beautiful Ft. Wolters for your first taste of a helicopter, by the sounds of it.

DH: Yes, and that also got off to a very inauspicious start.

KC: Okay, take me through your time there at Ft. Wolters. How did you get there? When did you arrive?

DH: Went to Ft. Wolters by bus from—as I recall, I think it was a Greyhound. There was seven of us in boot camp that were all going to flight school, including one of the morticians. There was also a fellow in the group that was the sole owner of a P-51 Mustang. Which was kind of interesting because he flew and we didn't. We took the bus ride, got to Ft. Wolters. They have a company area with the fort, once you got there they had what they called preflight. It was, as I recall, it was four weeks of classroom exercise to get you up to speed as far as all the things related to flying and dividing you up into flight classes and aircraft assignment. Barracks and all this other stuff. So we got there, settled in. They had prescribed limits on class numbers. As it turns out, they had about fifteen or twenty of us too many for that class that we were assigned. So we became—and I became one of them, what they would call Snow Birds. We were assigned to a barracks, and basically given very menial tasks to do. Cleaning up barracks, moving some of the furnishings. You know, cots or whatever—bunks, moving some of that stuff around. Polishing floors, just trivial stuff like that. It was a bad psychological let down for me. This was—in fact, one of the things I recall when this happened, they had a post theater there in Mineral Wells and I saw the movie Mrs. Robinson [*The Graduate*]. There's some melancholy aspects of that movie and that tune always stuck in my mind at that point. I'm sitting there one day thinking about that particular soundtrack by Simon and Garfunkel. I'm up in the barracks dusting the floors or something like that and I just broke down and cried. You know how it's just like all is lost. I'm the Snow Bird. I'm gonna be—I'm never coming back from hell or anything like that. Well, obviously that was one of my, what? Tender moments in life. I got over it. We had occasion, one of the other fellas and I, kind of a wild hair after about two weeks of this. We applied for a weekend pass, which is almost never done in that environment. But they took stock of it and said, "Yeah, okay. We can do that." We went in to Ft. Worth, got a hotel not too far

from Texas Christian University. Found us a liquor store that would sell us some rum and we had a pretty high ol' weekend. Had a heck of good time, actually. I had the hangover from hell for about the next three days. But it was very much worth it. We managed to pull that off one more time before our stint as Snow Birds. Then I was assigned to what was the 6th (WOC) Warrant Officer Class, 68-43 was the designation on it. And flight school began.

KC: Take me through flight school. From the way the classes are set up. The way the—you know, the activities of the day. Take me through the, you know, the curriculum that you're going through. Take me through this in as much detail as you can.

DH: Well, I have a few highlights on that and some very generalized memories. I will start out by saying that we got our barracks assignment, class assignment. Met the TAC (Training, Advising, Counseling) officers, all in the state of rigid attention, of course. We were issued flight clothing, flight uniforms and as I recall, a variety of books and manuals and so forth that we would be studying. We were given a short course on decorum and the standards that would be applied to us. Weekend inspections, parades, that sort of thing. We started out, again, it started with academics. My recollection, in very, very general terms was something in the neighborhood of a couple of weeks of academics and then flight class started. The platoon that I was assigned to was—we were issued to the OH-23 Raven made by Hiller. It was a Korean War vintage helicopter used over there, I think primarily for administrative missions and air ambulance duties. They also had the Bell H-13 which was one of the very early iterations. As I recall, I'm not absolutely certain of this, but the A and B model H-13s had wooden rotor blades. The ones that they had there were metal. So I don't know if they were—they obviously were a subsequent model but I don't know which one it was. They also had the TH-55 trainer that was made by Hughes Aircraft. Much newer, in many ways and a very, very tiny thing. A little three-bladed rotor system on it. We referred to it as the Mattel Messerschmitt. So we were given that assignment. Somewhere around the last week of June when we started flight, it went something like this. We had half a day of academics. We'd have lunch and then we'd have flight duty. Or we'd have flight in the morning, lunch, and then academics in the afternoon. Sometime the last week of June in '68 I got my first light helicopter. It was a very disconcerting thing. Despite the fact that my dad

was in the Air Force, I very seldom had flown anywhere in my life. Took a jet trip to Guam and a jet trip back. While were over there, took a ride up to Japan on a KC-97 for a little vacation. This was something they did over there. Got to take some pictures of Iwo Jima looking through the refueling blister on the back end of that airplane. But that was the limit of my flight experience. So I get into this helicopter, meet the instructor pilot. His name was Joe Burkett, B-U-R-K-E-T-T. He was a very nice guy. He was a civilian. We went through the preflight. We get everything. He starts the thing up and I'm going, "Wow, look at all the noise." The next thing that I knew is this thing picks up off the ground. And it was like, "My God, I'm flying" and I'm three feet off the ground not going anywhere but I'm flying. We got clearance from the tower. We flew out to a stage fuel somewhere in the general vicinity to the north and the east of what was then Ft. Wolters heliport. There's six lanes of asphalt that have little concrete pads. I think there was three pads in each lane. They were set off in groups of three. There was a little spacing between the two of them. We ran concentric traffic patterns to do the operations—the training operations. He would—if you were taking off to the north, you make right traffic and come back and land on one of those three lanes. It didn't matter which one. If you were on the other side then you'd make counterclockwise traffic pattern. So we'd get out there and the first substantial memory that I have of that exercise was a little bit of flight en route. When you're learning what they cyclic stick does and a little bit about what the pedals would do. Trying to learn how to correlate the throttle, it's just like motorcycle throttle, with the collective pitch which controls your power. So all of a sudden you have your wrist and both arms and both hands doing independent projects. Trying to control this whole monster. It's not difficult to do in flight when you're cruising. It's an entirely different experience when you're hovering. Because much of what your control input is counterintuitive to the way you would think it should happen. Just an example, when you're hovering your pedals control azimuth, period. That's all they do. They won't control which way the nose is pointing and the rate of turn, if any. When you're in flight all it does is counteract the torque. It's a device for trimming the aircraft in flight. So you have to make that transition between a hover and inflight. You're doing different things with your feet. Of course, with the throttle you have the opportunity to not have enough RPM on the thing, or you can have too much. In

either case, the instructor will get excited and start letting you know about that. You have a whole lotta learning to do. One of the places they would do that is out somewhere in the confines of the stage field. You could see at any given time a half a dozen or so helicopters out there wandering around like they were drunk circus clowns. Wobbling all over the place. Dipping and nipping and tucking and waltzing. It was absolutely hysterical to watch somebody else do it and totally embarrassing to do it yourself. It took me the best part of about six or seven hours of training before I learned how to hover. When I finally got to that point I was so relieved. Can't even begin to tell you how relieved. Had been there—been flying for just a very short span. On the 5th of July that year, we came back—we were flying around and Mr. Burkett took the helicopter up to a pad in front of the, what served as the bleachers, or terminal area of that stage field. Says, "You've got it. I want you to make three patterns and come to a full stop each time and then come over here and pick me up." That's when my solos started. And, boy, was that fun.

KC: Yeah?

DH: It was fun. The first pattern I made—for some reason, known only to God and whoever, a CH-34 Choctaw came into the pattern. At the time for perspective, it was a huge helicopter. Piston-powered Korean War vintage type machine. He entered the traffic pattern and I got all excited about that. I'm coming in to make my first approach to a hover and I was a little bit fast. The tower says, "Go around! Go around!" and I'm thinking to myself, "I ain't going around. I'm gonna land this thing!" and I did. I did my first successful quick stop maneuver. Got away with it. After that I made two more patterns closed traffic. Went over and picked up Mr. Burkett and he got in the chopper and says, "You scared me to death with that first one." And I said, "It seemed okay to me!" I soloed that day. I was signed off for it. I was the first one in the class to do that. I did get a dunking in the pool at the Holiday Inn just outside of Ft. Wolters on the way home. Which I enjoyed immensely.

KC: I bet.

DH: It was July. Texas. (Laughs) What more is there to say? That would be, I guess, one of the bigger elements of that first part of flight school. We got into night

flight. We got into advanced training. After about four weeks I had a—excuse me just one second. Would you hold the line?

KC: Sure.

DH: The night flight was a thrill. You go four weeks of primary training. Went into advanced training which, as I recall, was four, maybe six weeks. Something like that. Different instructor, I had that this nervous little flibertyjibit. Had been a scout pilot in Vietnam. The guy, even in my perspective then, he was a nervous wreck. Not a bad guy. He was just way hyper. He was the one that taught me how to get in and out of confined areas. Pinnacle landing, slope landings, all this stuff. He was the one that started putting a fine tune on my emergency procedures. Engine outs and so far and so forth. I made so many impromptu autorotations into the Brazos River bed. I couldn't even count 'em. I mean just every time you turn around, he got the throttle and he didn't care how high you were or how fast you were going or anything else. He'd just—surprise! Boom. Now there you go. The night flights were disconcerting a little bit. It's not a comfortable place for a guy that's got thirty or forty hours of flight time under his belt. Trying to read maps with the cockpit lighting that they had. As an example, if you have a route of flight lined out in red on your map and you look at it on a red light, you can't see it. It's not visible. So you learn these little small things as you go along. We had a cross-country one day en masse. The entire platoon was going the same route of flight. It was windy aloft, and we were being passed by school busses on the roadways below us. But somehow or another, we all got through it. They had told us when we entered, when that class was formed, that approximately forty percent of the classmates would be washed out. I didn't understand that as a possibility when I got there. Well, I understood it as a possibility, but I didn't understand it as a probability. I think in retrospect, it was a goal. They were looking for the upper sixty percent of the class in performance to move forward to advanced training at Ft. Rucker or Ft. Stewart. And I don't know to this day that's correct. But each phase of that they said they said they were gonna—we were gonna lose forty percent. They were accurate to within tenths of a point. We got to the end of the primary training. We were given the option of making a choice. Didn't mean we were gonna get it. But making a choice between Ft. Hunter and Ft. Rucker. Ft. Hunter was somewhat legendary at that time in the context of, A, they were doing all their training with Hueys as opposed to

piston-powered helicopters. And two, their military discipline and academic standards were quite high. I opted for Ft. Hunter-Stewart as did a number of other people in the class. I've never regretted that. For one, it had been an Air Force base and they had really nice quarters. The barracks were nice, they were heated. In retrospect, just to go back, the structures at Ft. Wolters were far superior to Ft. Polk but they were not anything approaching that of Air Force palace status. I had a little leave between the time of basic—or primary flight training and advanced training. I went home, spent—I think I had a couple of weeks, not real sure about that at this point. But I had a short period of time. Spent that with my folks. My dad gave me a car at that point. I think it was a 1965 Pontiac Tempest. I was going to drive that up there and he says, "You don't need it right now. You can come back later and get that on a weekend pass." And I said, "Well, I gotta get up there." And he says, "Well, just relax." "Dad, I gotta be there tomorrow." He says, "Just relax." He put me in uniform the next morning and took me down to the operation terminal at Patrick Air Force Base. One of his cohorts, gentleman named Lamb, Maj. Lamb, was a flight standards evaluator instructor for the Air Force in the T-39 Sabreliner. That's how I got to Ft. Hunter.

KC: You're kidding me?

DH: I am not. (Laughs) I thought that's quite a bit of weight for a warrant officer to pull, all things considered. It was a training flight for that particular mission. There was another pilot in the right seat who Maj. Lamb was instructing. We flew up to Ft. Hunter and we came down out of the—it's always dingy up there in the winter time. It was winter when I got there. We were coming in final, we were finally gonna break out of the overcast and everything. Holy mother of pearl, there were Hueys everywhere. Hovering all over the place. The tower cleared us to land and from that point on it was full panic. We stopped, got off the runway, Hueys were just getting out of our way like they're locusts running from the Orkin man. We taxied up to what qualified as the terminal. We had three field grade officers and several NCOs (non-commissioned officers) came out and stood at rigid attention as I got off of that airplane. (Laughs) They had no idea what had just landed in their midst. They were profoundly stunned to see a warrant officer candidate get off the aircraft with a duffle bag. One of them says, "Who are you?" "Sir, Major so-and-so, Candidate Hilliard reporting for duty!" It was all I could do to just not

break out laughing out loud. I mean, I understood exactly what had just happened. Totally unanticipated nonetheless, but that was my entrance into Ft. Hunter.

KC: Did they receive you in good spirits?

DH: Yes.

KC: That's good.

DH: They did. It was one of the more novel points in my Army career up to that point. I didn't brag about it but I never forgot it. It's just one of those oddities. You know, if you—I used to tell, when I lived down in the Florida Keys, I used to tell people, "Well, if you put nuts and bolts in a can and shake them. All the nuts will fall to the bottom." And that was life in the Keys. That was your neighbors. Random chance, if you provide enough opportunity, there's some funny stuff that's gonna happen to you in life.

KC: Right.

DH: That was one of 'em. Anyway, short—if you want to get into the flight school process there at Ft. Hunter—

KC: Yes, I would like for you to talk about this. You're gonna be working with the Hueys. It's a whole new environment. You're stepping up in every imaginable way at this point. So take me through your time there at Ft. Hunter-Stewart.

DH: I will. It's a—it was an interesting experience in a lot of ways. Very much different from the climate—and I mean the psychological climate that we had at Ft. Wolters.

KC: How so?

DH: When we were at Ft, Wolters we understood that it was primary training. We understood that some of our peers were gonna fall by the way. With the exception of the people that were flying the Hughes helicopter, we were flying artifacts. Even though I liked the Hiller, it was just bad. It was an artifact. These things had tens of thousands of hours on them. They were a maintenance challenge to keep up. They were underpowered. They were slow. They were drafty. There was just a lot of things going on there. The training curricula at Ft. Wolters was both fundamental and narrow in focus. They were teaching us the art of mechanical survival. The very, very basic fundamentals. Got into Ft. Stewart—Ft. Hunter-Stewart, the grooming toward officer status intensified. The academic training syllabus became much more diversified and much more intense. We

started studying instrument flight, as an example. We started flying simulators. Actually, one of my classmates managed to crash one of those which I felt was stellar of them in its own right. And by crash I mean fell over on the floor, crashed. The stuff that we had never entertained about the mechanicals of a Hiller H-23. When you get into a Huey, all of a sudden they have hydraulic systems. They have standby generators. They have start generators. They have turbine engines which have multiple tachometer needles. We'd never, you know—we had one for the rotor, one for the engine in the Hiller. Then you've got an extra little valve for the N-1 turbine speed in the Huey. You've got a whole different sound set and a very, very different perspective when you lift off the first time in one of them. You get in a Hiller and sit down and your rear end's about three-and-a-half feet off the ground. You get in one of the Hueys, pick it up to a hover, and your backside's about ten or twelve feet off the ground. So it's a different perspective. The amount of power that was available to a Huey, they just had an instructor and two students onboard, was phenomenal. I mean, just absolutely unbelievable. We could not grasp that we had so much power. Fourteen hundred, shaft-horse engine as opposed to a couple hundred. What it boiled down to. They smell differently. The flight line at Ft. Hunter smelled great in the morning with that turbine fuel burning. Something you never quite got at Ft. Wolters. There was no real sense of smell associated with the Ft. Wolters experience, except for the Texas Hill Country. The Hueys were quieter to a large degree. You start getting into the academics of all these things. We start getting into regulations. We'd sort of learned what a helical sun gear was and what it did. We learned about monocoques and some of our monocoque structures. Lift links, transmission links, and just—it was never-ending. It was just a constant string of education on these things. I look back at today and say 110 percent of it was necessary. Even though it didn't—we didn't always connect the dots at that time. I had an interesting little segue at this point. One of the fellows that accompanied me to Ft. Hunter from Ft. Wolters, was a farm boy from up in Minnesota. He was as Norwegian as they get. Nice fellow. Very direct, soft spoken. He was last in the class of those that were assigned to Ft. Hunter in academic standing and flight evaluations. They had him room with me because at that point I was up near the top. As if osmosis was going to occur and I would teach him something. I didn't know what to tell him. I paid attention in class. He slept. He slept when they let

him sleep, when he got away with it. He was always worn out. When I got out of class, then I slept. That was just my mindset at the time. His name was Olsen, he did graduate. He went on to become actually quite a well-known pilot back in the day over at Southeast Asia. He did well for himself but it was a little lumpy for him getting started. They did things like this to try and just bring the overall standard up. We're in the midst of the training. We've got senior classmen from other classes that are always disciplining the underclassmen. They were behaving—at the behest of the program they were acting as if they were TAC officers. So they would dress us down and inspect us. Critique us, do whatever they did, just as we did later on when we got to that point. We had an intense training program through instrument training. Which was quite an epiphany in its own right. I'm not sure if you have flight experience, Kelly, but trying to hold a Huey in a holding pattern over a non-directional beacon. This is an aircraft that's flying at over eighty knots, in a sixty knot crosswind is a phenomenal challenge.

KC: Oh, I can imagine.

DH: We did that. That was wintertime there at Ft. Hunter. We did basic familiarity and qualification on the Huey. As contact pilots, autorotations, and this was the program that followed instrument training. In our confined areas, and that sort of exercise we had done at Ft. Wolters. The autorotations were interesting because you had enough in the cool weather and the light loads, we had enough command authority. At the bottom you could actually, if you put it on the ground pretty quickly, you had enough blade energy left. You could pick it up and move it another fifteen or twenty feet and set it back down again. That's something that was not available to the lighter helicopters. When those things were on the ground they were on the ground. End of story. They were much easier to autorotate. At the point that we were finishing up those first two programs there at Ft. Hunter and getting ready to go to tactical training, we had narrowed—the standing in the class had narrowed down to a gentleman who was actually my flight buddy in training, whose name I can't recall right at the moment. He had been a pilot before being drafted with Piedmont Airlines, and he and I were in a footrace for honor graduate status in the class. I didn't know that. Turns out he did later on, I found out. But I didn't know it at the time. We were out with the instructor one day, who was prone to smoking a cherry tobacco stuffed pipe, which, I thoroughly enjoyed the smell of that. We

had done autorotations and the instructor said, “I’ll call the entry, you put it on the pad, Number Two.” I said “Okay.” We’re sitting there getting closer and closer. We started that maneuver from about 500 feet above ground. Pretty soon that pad is between my feet and the pedals. Pretty soon it’s disappearing and he says, “Okay, enter.” Well, there’s a lot of different ways you can approach that. My solution at the time was just to pull back on the stick, zero it out, and then back up. Which is what I did. After we started falling—advancing to the rear, as it were, with our very tail-low attitude. I rolled it forward and that was down a very, very steep angle I might add. Got accelerated and then pulled back on the stick and plopped that sucker right down on pad Number Two. Just square as could be. I looked over at the instructor and he smiled. I looked back at the guy that was sitting in the jump seat, my competitor for the honor graduate slot, and he just leaned forward and blew his lunch all over the floor. That was the highlight of my career at Ft. Hunter. I still laugh about that. I’d never seen anybody look so green in my life. Sitting in his shoes, or in his seat, I probably could have felt the same thing because it was a wild maneuver.

KC: Yeah, it sounds like it would be.

DH: It was. From there we went to what they called TAC Ex. It was a tactical training. We had—I don’t recall if we had any gunnery practice at that time. I really don’t recall. We did go out and camp out in the woods for a while. We did the prisoner of war thing where you go out and they—you get captured and they put you in a trashcan and bang on it and that kind of stuff.

KC: I wonder if you could take me through that. I think that’s a really interesting aspect to this training that not a lot of people know about.

DH: (speaking at the same time) Well, I didn’t get captured. I know what happened to some of the other people but it’s kind of a “That’s what he said” kind of thing. They took us out into the pine woods, there around Ft. Stewart. We had transferred physically to Ft. Stewart for this exercise. We were doing flight operations, as well. We were doing formation flights and so on and so forth. You know, tactical exercises. But there came a night where we have the E&E, or escape and evasion training class. They took us out in the middle of somewhere, gave us a map and said, “You have to get here without getting caught and if you get caught, we’re gonna send you to POW (prisoner of

war) camp and you'll be tortured," and all this horrible stuff. So we're all going, "Okay." They gave us a small ration of just stuff that seemed irrelevant. Some of us had enough wit to take a couple of crackers with us, stuff like that. They told us the fire towers in the local area were off limits for observation or anything. Of course, we ignored that. It had started raining right after they dropped us off. They had allowed us to build a fire and heat up some water, make coffee or cocoa or whatever we wanted to do. Maybe burn a marshmallow or something and then carry on. By nine o'clock that evening everyone in the crowd was soaking wet. It was frigidly cold and we didn't much care about anything but getting to our destination, where we had some vague hopes of finding warmth. I don't know if there was anything other than the hand of providence in the way that kept us from getting—my particular group from getting captured. We just did a forced march. Got to where we were going and that was fine. About half of the rest of the class did get captured. It was—the environment was such that the people—some of the people that were captured did not take it in the spirit of affairs. There was some violence that resulted from that. As in one case I think there was one of the TAC officers or NCOs, whoever it was involved was hazing one of these people. He stood up and knocked the guy on his butt. They said, "Well, you know, okay. We're all gonna get along after this." There was no more after that, there were no charges pressed. When we finished the exercise everybody got out of jail and so forth and they shipped us home still wet, miserable. We got showered up, dried off, changed clothes and all that good stuff. Within three or four days half the class was sick with some kind of Georgia munge. That was the time when were supposed to starting like TAC officers with the junior classmen showing up and so forth. It got a little hazy as to what was going on in my recollection. I remember one young black showed up from one of the underclasses. Of course, they were going to their barracks and they—my senior classmate peers were inspecting their duffels and everything. Found this kid had a pair of flip-flop shower shoes that were intended for display purposes and they were something that about a three-year-old kid would wear as far as size. So they had him hang those on his ears as decoration with the admonishment to get something that a grownup could wear. You know, that kind of stuff. It was childish. We went from there on to graduation. There's only one little story I'll tell you about the interim at this point that still makes me smile. I had at this point—I had my

1965 Pontiac up there at Ft. Hunter. On weekends we were—they were fairly liberal with letting us off post on the weekends. Unless we had a lot of demerits from inspections or anything like that. We'd go into town. The local community was very supportive. They weren't too impressed with age consumption restrictions on alcohol. There was a restaurant there called—down on the waterfront in Savannah called Hester's Martinique. It was down in the basement. They had black waiters that wore red tuxedos. They had an old black lady that played a piano down there. Sawdust on the floor, checkered table tops, and the best damn prime rib you'd ever eat in your life. And all the drinks, *all* of the drinks you wanted. So we used to go there quite a bit. Enjoyed that immensely. In the process, you know, people get out there, they filter around. You get to meet people and do stuff and everything. It's all well and good. It was enjoyable in that regard. I liked downtown Savannah quite a bit. I liked the—in the afterglow I liked what happened at Ft. Hunter. It was an excellent training program for what we were dealing with at the time. I don't think that I could—if knowing what I know today, if I was sent back in time to try and improve it, I don't think I could. There was one thing that I did, though, that almost got me in hot water. Well, no. Actually it did get me in hot water. I went into town one day and I'm thinking it was sometime around Christmas/New Year's maybe. I found a place that was selling fireworks. I bought myself a full box of M-80s, which if you're not familiar with those, small cylinder about an inch and a half long, three quarters of an inch in diameter, filled with firecracker powder, and a fuse sticking out of the side of it. I got back and I basically left them in the car and told one of the fellows that I was in flight school with that I had some of them. He said, "Can I have some?" And I said, "Sure." So I went out and I got him two or three of them and I brought them in and gave them to him. Next thing I know, this guy has got this windows that they had in the barracks and these things were hinged at the bottom, it would drop out and form like a trough. You could slide the screen open—little hole on the screen and you could slide it open to reach out and get the window to close it again. He opened this thing up and he was getting ready to light one of these and throw it out the window. Right in the middle of the company area. I'm going, "You idiot. Don't do that. Don't!" And he's persisting. For some reason the fuse was slow to light and I'm trying to stop him from this and all of a sudden it lights and he dropped it. It landed between the screen and the glass right there

in front of us. Well, just to set the stage, there's a small formation. Probably a squad-sized element marching up the sidewalk right in front of this, this situation. On the far side of him is the flag pole. It's right close to five o'clock, when we usually have the cannon go off and they would play "Taps." They're marching along, "Hup, hup hup!" "PABOOM!" And they all stopped, snapped to attention and turned right to salute the flag. I'm going, "Oh, my God." Glass and smoke all over the place. So at that point in time I exited the room and I decided I'd let this gentleman deal with this problem himself. That worked for about thirty minutes and then the captain, the company commander called me in to his office and that's when it got ugly. It was a Friday evening—actually, I'm sorry, it was a Saturday evening. He put it to me like this after we get passed all the "You dumbass" accolades and so forth. He says, "Its 5:30" or so Saturday evening. "That will be fixed seamlessly by this time tomorrow evening or you will be removed from flight school." I do not know how I pulled this off. But I got ahold of a glass shop operator after hours Saturday evening and managed to beg and whine my way into getting him to come down into the shop and cut me a piece of glass and give me some putty. So there I was about nine o'clock that evening out there with my brand new putty knife that I had just purchased from a hardware store, laying that piece of glass back in. The one thing I did not do, I didn't find a can of gray paint to cover it with. But the CO (commanding officer) accepted that and said, "If you ever do it again I'm gonna kill ya." So, to wrap up on the advanced flight training at Ft. Hunter, I was designated as the honor graduate for that class. My parents came up for the ceremony. They gave me the certificate which I still hold to this day. I got to salute the general and therein began a ninety-day leave—or, I'm sorry, a thirty-day leave before I was shipped off to Southeast Asia. Then that's when the change up came. I got orders to—

KC: (speaking at the same time) Well, Mr. Hilliard, if you could, we might need to stop there for today. We can pick this up at this point the next time.

Interview with Dan Hilliard

Session [2] of [9]
Date 29 January 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 29 January, 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Hilliard is joining me again from Florida over the phone. Dan, to pick up where we left off last time, you wanted me to kind of prod you about IP Gunnery School once you finished up there at Ft. Hunter. Can you pick up the narrative, the story there?

DH: Yes, sir. I can. I need to correct something. I suggested that I left Ft. Hunter after graduation en route to home and was notified for school at Ft. Rucker, the IP Gunnery course. That was incorrect. I actually had orders waiting for me. I did not know about it until the day those orders were handed to me. Like most guys, we—if you graduated in the upper tier of the class you got to make a—submit a dream list of assignments and, of course, I put down Cobra gunships, Cobra gunships, and Chinooks. They sent me to the UH-1 IP School. (Kelly laughs) Directly from Ft. Hunter. I think I had three days of travel, or something like that. It was, as I recall, a one-month course. Possibly a little longer, I'm not clear about that. One of my classmates got the same assignment, fella named Ralph Clime. We bunked up in a singlewide in wonderful downtown Daleville, Alabama, and commenced to it. It was a curious course, in retrospect. We had a minimal amount of gunnery IP work. We never shot any rockets but we did shoot miniguns and the M-60 machinegun mounts—flex mounts on the side. They were, as I recall, B and C model Hueys. We had, I think, a day each at the range with each of those systems. From there the rest of the training was all flight instruction MOI, or method of instruction training. Autorotation, systems, just everything that a normal contact instructor pilot would do. So, we went through that, finished up the course in short order. Both of us had a thirty-day leave and we took that, of course. In the whole process, that put us about two months behind our class as far as reporting to sunny downtown Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. But we eventually got there.

KC: Well, let me ask you this, if you don't mind, Dan. You got to the IP gunnery course, you said that takes about a month there. Then you've got, I believe you said like a

thirty-day leave? Okay, well, let me ask you, what do you do during that thirty-day leave? Right? You left the—you know, civilian life is behind you. You have friends, you've got guys you worked with and you've got a month before you know you're going to Vietnam. And Vietnam is not a popular place right now, obviously for a lot reasons. It's not the worse—not popular in the United States. So what takes place in that intervening month that you have here, this thirty days' leave. What do you do? What do you see? What's the atmosphere and environment like?

DH: What I had done when I left home, I left behind a number of high school classmates who were friends. Surprising number of my—percentage of my high school class went on to college. Somewhere close to eighty percent. There were a few that hung around. I had said goodbye to a fairly substantial network of people that I used to surf with, guys and girls. I was living in military housing in Patrick Air Force Base and about a block and a half from the beach and I spent a great deal of time there surfing. On rare occasion when the water would clear up I would go spearfishing or something but that was never very frequent. Mostly surfing and chasing girls. Did some of that. I went to flight school, went through that whole process and came back. I threw a party at home one night and despite our youth, I'm sure there was a lot of hangovers the next day. Spent some time surfing again. Visiting with family. My brother and sister-in-law came up—in fact, actually, my brother was working for Boeing at Cape Kennedy at the time so we visited there a little bit. Managed to get involved in a couple of other parties along the way and that pretty much covers it.

KC: Right. Well, what about your family? You mentioned that your mother was obviously a little—err more than a little concerned about your going off. Your father, of course, you know, being involved in the Army Air Force and later on with the Strategic Air Command, et cetera. What was it like for your family when you got your orders? You know you're going to Vietnam and with all of the things that Vietnam meant here in 1969 or 1970. What was that like?

DH: Well, I was a kid and I was off on a big adventure. Of which I did not fully grasp the implications, to be honest. I was basically—when I took off for flight school, I was nineteen years old. Oh, let's see twenty when I graduated. Had been locked up in that world for a little over a year in training and so forth. I hadn't had a chance to do a lot of

reflection on the social issues and all that stuff. Flight school was a pretty hectic pace in its own right. My mother—I guess my perspective at the time, my mother was concerned. I understood at least intellectually if not emotionally that she was concerned for my wellbeing. I wasn't aware—I wasn't concerned about that at all. My father was—I think he was—he had a bit of pride. He had some of the same concern. He was very stoic about it. He didn't make any comments of significance other than, you know, keep my eyes peeled, head down and all that good stuff. I don't know if I mentioned this during the last recording, you have to think that here in the context that he was career Air Force. Had been in it for most of his life. His father had been in the—the third member of the Allied Expeditionary Force, World War I. In Company K, 117th Infantry, during action in France. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism. In that time, in that generation, it didn't birth a lot of room for sensitivity. You know, the things that people would commonly talk about today, I don't think that was much of a topic back then. That's kind of where that all settled out. I got to the end of the period of leave. They drove me out to the airport and I jumped on a DC-8 and went pretty much nonstop to—I think it was Oakland or Travis Air Force Base—I'm not sure exactly where I departed from at this point. I would have to go back and check notes or something, but somewhere in California. Spent the next twelve, fourteen hours, something like that just sitting here watching the sky go by. Probably one of the most pivotal moments in my early experience over there. We landed, it was afternoon. We were sitting in the air-conditioned airplane. I was wearing Class A khakis, as pretty much everyone else was. They opened the door, had the staircase out there and we marched down the ramp like we knew what we were doing. I could not believe the heat and likewise I could not believe the stench. Vietnam was a country that was what punctuated by smells. I don't know how else to describe it. It was not just the smells of life around the city, which were relatively vile from time to time. But later on in combat operations, the smell of the jungle. The smell of the enemy. The smell of combat and everything else. It was a very fragrant environment. The most polite way I can put it. Sometimes the fragrances were more pleasant than others.

KC: When you step off the plane here, you say you went into Tan Son Nhut. What's the next step for you? Is there further processing? You go into the 90th Replacement Depot up in Bien Hoa. What's the next step for you?

DH: That was it. They took us to the replacement depot and we were there for, I'm not sure. I want to say five days to a week, perhaps. My recollection was, it was hot. It was smelly. It was humid. It was hot. The food was terrible. Mosquitoes were unbelievable. They gave us mosquito nets, of course. It was single-level cots with three-inch mattresses. It was a bit of an environmental shock to get—start adapting to that. Later on at the end of the story, or end of this tour, I tell you about a fixer I've got. Maybe I already have but it tells much. We're sitting there in the camp, they're giving us in-country orientation, I think is how they described it. I seem to recall that we spent a little time at the rifle range. We spent a little time in the patch of woods where they had North Vietnamese—what we called *chieu hois*, or people that had been captured, given up, and had come over to our side and they assisted in training, in their own way. We got talked to by medics about social habits and functions and malfunctions, and so forth. We got our unit assignments. The second significant emotional event that occurred at the 90the Replacement, for me was they had us out in bleachers one day, under cover. They were talking to us about sappers and booby traps and all this other stuff. Which was not real high on my list of concerns because I wasn't gonna be infantry. but I was paying attention. After some briefing, they had us all get down, and I think we were in groups of two or three. With about a, maybe a ten-minute split they were sending us down this trail. And sure enough, you'd get down there about thirty, forty yards and whoever was on point would hit a trip wire. They had these little blank caps that would make a pop and let you know that you just killed yourself, theoretically. Before we got through that thing, whoever had the joy of being on point had probably been killed a half a dozen times. It was at that point, that very precise point that two things happened to me. One, I knew I was gonna die over there.

KC: Is that right?

DH: Yup. I absolutely knew it. Because this was the clearest thing of vision I ever had. The second thing was, I looked into a box of C-rations that I had, and there was a four pack of Winstons in there and I smoked them. And I'm still smoking.

KC: Was it your first cigarettes—

DH: (speaking at the same time) I'll get over that one of these days. That's where that all started.

KC: Well, let me ask you this, Dan. You said something kind of interesting and I haven't heard this before. You mentioned that there were *chieu hois* there who worked with you to some degree. Can you expand on that a little bit? What was that about?

DH: Well, they had the virtue of their own training on the other side. They carried that with them and these people—in fact, the day we were there was—I think there was four of 'em. One of them, they were basically dressed in—they had Ho Chi Minh sandals. Something akin to a T-shirt, and shorts. They were peculiar to the style that they wore in Vietnam. They looked more like a towel that had been woven around their waist and up to their crotch. It was something very—it gives you a lot of mobility and so forth. With the first demonstration we got was how these guys go through the wire. How a sapper would get through the wire. It was fascinating because they had an apron of barbed wire set up and they had couple of those concertina wires laid across the top of that. The fella had a couple—in what passed as his shorts, he had a couple of little wire clips. He crawled up very slowly to the concertina, spread that open, clipped it open. Went through the rest of the wire like he was a snake. Never touched any of it. Which is significant because we used to booby trap the wires. Our perimeters, we had trip wires on the wire going to illuminating flares or, you know, claymore mines or whatever we had. We had that stuff rigged up. They knew it and they knew how to get around it. The other three that they had were involved in setting up the booby traps for the little walk down the "Trail of Tears." I did not see any of them on the trail. They were moving ahead of us. They'd get one cycle through and as soon as we passed, one of them would come back behind us to reset these things. I'm sure they were having a lot of fun with that because they were getting to do what they were trained to do, and they weren't getting shot for it. The food was probably better than they were used to. But, the last guy actually did something akin to a little ambush thing. He had a—I should recall, he had something akin to a piece of wood AK-47 or something like that. I don't know. But we're walking along and he jumps out and goes (makes rapid gunfire sound). Okay, we're all dead. That was the nut of it. Probably that particular class lasted about an hour and a half. Maybe two

hours possibly, I don't know. It was one of those kind of "meet your enemies." You see what you're dealing with. Of course, we had already seen a lot of Vietnamese by then. I was impressed by their small stature. If I saw two of them while I was over there that weighed over 100 pounds I would be surprised. They were—they're a very small people. They're very tough people. I never learned enough about 'em to understand their psychology real well. I think probably they're more aligned with Western culture than most people realize. That's just supposition on my part.

KC: Yeah, well, expand on that for me, if you don't mind.

DH: There was two classes of Vietnamese that I had—actually three, that I had any discourse with in my time over there, to a very limited degree. Some Montagnards, they were in I Corps and II Corps, primarily around Pleiku. We got into some of them up in I Corps. Villages out in the mountains have an operation staging out and you'd sit around and wait for a mission in the interim. They might come up and try and sell you a crossbow or something like that. Or the little kids would come up and they'd want to—you know, they were curious and everything. Surprisingly, a lot of them could speak English far better than I could speak their tongue. They would ask questions. We would ask them back and go back and forth. The kids were always big on telling us where the VC (Viet Cong) were hiding. They'd say like, "Over on the mountain, on the other side," or something like that. The adults were a little more taciturn. If you didn't wanna buy crossbow they'd just kinda leave you alone and go away. I didn't have any particular angst one way or the other about those folks. They didn't bother us, we didn't bother them. The next group was the Vietnamese Army. I had—I'm going way ahead of time here when I say this. After I got my duty assignment we wound up working with and around what was called the 1st Marine Division of the Army Republic of Vietnam. Their mascot was a black panther. They were all sole surviving sons of the Tet '68 Offensive. They were, in a word, highly motivated. The only people I saw in the U.S. Army or Marine Corps that could keep up with them was 1st Marine Recon. These guys were monsters. They kept their area of operations clean and pure. The North Vietnamese did not screw with them at all. The counterpoint was all the other Vietnamese forces that we dealt with through the breadth and the scope of the country, who were not noted for great heroism or gallantry or commitment to what they were doing. I didn't trust them. I didn't

trust them to do the right thing, I'll put it that way. Lastly, there's the civil side of the civilian life on the other side. Out of turn, but we'll get back to it much later. During the close of my final tour, there was a young lady working in the officers club at Camp Holloway. We called her "Annie." That was not her name. She had been working in that club—she was in her mid-twenties. She had been working there in one way or another for about seven years something like—you know, a long time. She spoke English without an accent. She understood the nuance of American lingo better than some GIs did. She was a very intelligent woman and on occasion when there was nobody else in the club, we had a lot of conversations about what was going on over there. She pretty much told the way it was from her perspective.

KC: And what was that?

DH: She thought the war was—that we should not have been over there. She though what were doing was causing a lot of carnage that was unnecessary. It was dividing the country unnecessarily. She was very civil about it. She was kind enough to talk about these things at great length. It was one of the parts of the puzzle that ultimately kinda shifted my perspective on what we were doing over there. But that was far, far down the road from where I was at the 90th Replacement Battalion. The essence of what I wanted to say there is in the civilian population, there was a lot of those folks that are good people. Never had any kind of emotional problem with them. I found—you get closer to the core of the big city, the closer you were to somebody who'd probably try and rip you off in some fashion or another. Steal your watch, your clock, whatever, didn't matter. As you got into the more rural areas, you found a bunch of strong, industrious, honest folks. I had no problem with them at all and I had no problem with what we were doing over there ostensibly on their behalf. Despite the hazards. I would say, I would add to that, when you got engaged in combat, you have to realize you're not—you weren't fighting for the Vietnamese. You were fighting for your friends, your buddies, and yourself. It was, you know, politics is in the back burner. Motherhood and apple pie's not in the refrigerator. It's a very up-front, in-your-face experience, and you're not concerned about the sidebar discussions or intellectual discussions or anything of that sort. But anyway, that's kinda where how my lines of demarcation with the people I dealt with the Vietnamese and so forth. I think mostly they're good folks. I don't have a problem with

them. I don't, and never will sign off on some of the things that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong did to the local civilians. It's what we would call terrorism today. They had the ability to be incredibly brutal. But, from their perspective, I imagine having a minigun opened up on your backside is pretty brutal, too. So, that's a discussion of something else.

KC: Yeah, that's—I really appreciate that. I took you a little bit off track there but I thought it was good opportunity to kind of get your impressions there.

DH: You can that anytime you want, Kelly. (Unintelligible)

KC: (Speaking at the same time) Let's pick it back up—Well, I appreciate that. I really do. Let's pick it up there at the 90th. You didn't know where you were going once you got in country. So I guess you're sitting there, you're going through the in-country orientation, kind of biding your time. Getting the idea of the lay of the land and what's going on, in what is probably a chaotic place, I would guess, to some degree. So, when do you get your—your orders are like four or five days later, you said. Where are your orders to? Where are you gonna be serving?

DH: I'm going to B Troop, Second Squadron, 17th Cav, 101st Airborne Division up at Camp Eagle. Which is nested kind of beside Huế at Phu Bai. We were on the south side of the Perfume River.

KC: Okay, being assigned to the 101st, obviously this is a very storied unit. Does that mean anything to you to be assigned to the 101st?

DH: You know, it didn't. I was aware of the 101st and a little bit of their history. For whatever reason, a great number of the TAC officers that we had through flight school had been either with the 1st Aviation Brigade and they had that little blaze on their shoulder. Or the 4th Infantry Division, which when they had that one. But predominantly it was 1st Cav troopers. These guys had the big horse [patch] on their shoulder. So I had assumed, probably, maybe, that I would wind up with the 1st Cav. Didn't happen. There was one fella in the 90th when I was getting ready to leave. Saw where he was going, he just gave me kind of an odd smile and says, "Good luck." I had no idea what he was talking about that day. I figured it out a little bit later. Probably because he knew what was going on up there and I didn't. They orders came, the rest of it is a little bit of a blur, Kelly. I don't remember the nuts and bolts of it. They took us down to Tan Son Nhut. Put

us on a C-130, probably, I don't know, twenty-five, thirty fellas, or my peers that were with me. Not all chopper pilots, of course, because the troopers. They flew us up there. I can't tell you how nice it was sitting in air-conditioned comfort again.

KD: I bet.

DH: Lord, have mercy. That was wonderful. We flew in—we landed at night in Phu Bai. Sat around a little bit scratching our head and wondering what was gonna happen. Couple of vehicles, I believe they were jeeps came and picked us up. Drive us up the highway a little bit to the front gate of the 101st Airborne. That was the first, I should say the second ominous vision I had. We were pulling up to the—what passed as the front gate and you'd like to think, "Well, this is our turf and we are fairly secure." They had a big, huge bunker on either side of the gate that was covered with wire and everything else. We were looking down the wrong end of a couple of M-60s. The thing that highlighted that is they had troopers come on the bus to—or the vehicles to make sure that we're GIs and hadn't been—what, abducted or slayed or anything else. He didn't have any surprises at the back of it. It was one of those moments. They drove us around and dropped us off at units of assignment. One or two at a time. Showed up at the 2nd/17th, got my bags out of the truck and asked where the operations was. They told me and I marched in there. The first person I met, other than the operations clerk, was the XO (executive officer), fellow by the name of Capt. Dave Livingston. I'll talk about him a little bit later. I had talked to him for just a couple of minutes and the CO walked in, and a credit to the man. He was wearing shower shoes, or flip-flops, he had a towel around his waist and a black Cav hat on.

KD: (Laughs) Really looking the part, then.

DH: He was. He was right straight out of *Apocalypse Now*. He actually, he could have played the role that Robert Duvall did in that movie to a T in so many ways. I'll get to that later. That's how I met Maj. Gary Dolan. He was the CO, I saluted, he laughed. He says, "Glad to have you on board. You're gonna go be on the scout platoon." I thought for a second. I didn't have a problem with that. I said, "You know that I went through gunnery IP school in the Huey, don't you?" He says, "Yeah. You're going to the scout platoon." I said, "Okay, if that's the way it is." There was a little more discussion and one of the ops people escorting me down to the scout hooch and showed me where my bunk

was and said, “Have a nice time.” That’s where my first few minutes—or my first evening at B Troop ended.

KC: Let me ask you to do this for me. Can you kind of lay the groundwork as far as the—we’ve already talked about the XO and Maj. Dolan here. But can you lay out how the unit was arranged? Scout troop as opposed to other kind of troops, what would be the purpose of the scout troop? How would it operate? For someone who’s not familiar with this, explain how that troop would operate and the hierarchy of command, and the other people in the unit when you first come in.

DH: Absolutely, that’s not a problem. The 2nd/17th Air Cav Squadron had three air cavalry troops: Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie Troop. They had a Delta Troop, which was a ground cavalry unit. Delta Troop’s primary responsibility in that capacity was perimeter defense. Quick reaction force to reinforce the cav troops from downed aircrafts or other tactical emergencies. They also had a number of jeeps not unlike the old movie *Rat Patrol* that they used to patrol the perimeter, or for quick response to penetrations or assaults on the perimeter. They had one of those recoilless rifles on them. They had miniguns and in some cases they had just regular M-60 machineguns. They were numbered probably—it was a company-sized unit. I’m gonna guess over there, there was probably a total of four platoons and support, so maybe 140, 150 people. I’m not sure. I didn’t have a whole lot of interaction with them on a point-by-point basis. The Air Cavalry troops had what they called a TOE (table of organization and equipment), I think that was a—I’m not sure I remember what that acronym stood for but it made, basically set forth the authorized strength of the unit resources. Table of Equipment, I think is what that stood for.

KC: Table of organization and e—

DH: And equipment. There you go. You’re ahead of me on that. We were authorized ten of the Hughes OH-6 light observation helicopters. We had nine Cobras and seven Hueys. We had—we also had—and I said we had seven Hueys that was in the, what we referred to as the aerolift platoon, or the blues. The Cobras were called the red birds, and the scouts were white birds. We had the red, white, and blue. We had a commensurate number of pilots, crew chiefs, mechanics assigned to those aircraft. The commander, unit commander had his own aircraft assigned for command and control. It

had radio panels in the back. It was never very suited for lift operations. But it was, you know, it was a command-and-control aircraft. We wound up with a total, as I recall, of twenty-seven aircraft per air troop. We also had an infantry platoon who were first on call for downed aircraft response. A platoon, twenty-eight, thirty guys including the platoon sergeant and so forth. That's recollection, not hard fact. But they were all rapell qualified and that was fairly typical on how they would get into the heavy jungle when the aircraft was downed. They carried probably more than standard numbers of M-60 machineguns for units like that, or about that size. I think every squad had one of them. They were well versed in the use of explosives and demolitions material. Probably had one of the most hectic tours you could have over there. Because they didn't just respond to our aircraft when they downed, they responded to whoever was nearby that went down. So they could wind up on the ground for Air Force, an Army helicopter, or whatever. It didn't matter. We had, and I don't know what the total staffing or personnel staff was for the unit. We also had an operations group with the unit. We had an operations officer, we had an executive officer, and a commanding officer. We had a supply officer but it was not a full-time job. He more was liaison with a squadron supply. The squadron also had a maintenance operation that I would say was probably two platoons in strength as far as manpower. They did first-level depot work on the helicopter from all the units if they could get them there. If they couldn't they could be slung load in and repaired or sent to the junk pile, whatever was appropriate. I think that was the 506th Maintenance Battalion that oversaw that. They were attached. They were not an organic unit to the squadron. We had, at Camp Eagle, we had B Troop at the very, very north end of the perimeter, adjacent to Headquarters Troop, which probably had a staff of about 120. With squadron commander, EX, operations—and he was full time, supply, intelligence. We had a fairly heavy, top-heavy staff of field grade officers there. We also had Delta Troop right next door to us. Then Charlie Troop was based over at Phu Bai. Alpha Troop was up at Quang Tri. The call signs for those units, for Alpha Troop was "Assault." For Bravo Troop was "Banshee." For Charlie Troop was "Condor." That stuck with us for the entire tour. They tried to get us to change it. They had a thing they would pass out periodically called Special Operating Instructions, or SOI. It had all the frequencies and codes and everything that we'd use from day to day. They kept trying to get us to use some of the

call signs and we basically said, “Pack it up your backside. We’re not bothering with that.” That was the setting, if you will, that I walked into. The troop area was very hilly. All of the hooches were pretty much on a slope of some fashion or another. They all had fifty-five-gallon drums stacked around them on end filled with dirt and covered with about four layers of sand bags. That was to protect against incoming artillery and rocket fire. Try and protect from the shrapnel. All of our sleeping accommodations were below barrel top. So unless they zeroed—hit the roof or something, you probably would survive it. Outdoor showers. When I say outdoor, they were in a separate building. They had a huge blivet of water in a tower up above it. Used immersion gas heaters to heat that water. It’s pretty much, you know, hot/cold water shower. Had a latrine—I think it was five hole or something like that. One of the curious things I saw over there was those big latrines. You think that you would take care of that out the outhouse but that’s not the case. They had—take a fifty-five-gallon drum. Bury it in the ground, almost to the top. Put screen over it and then take half of the metal culvert that would extend from the ground to about waist high and place them wherever it was convenient. It didn’t matter if there was Vietnamese girls running around cleaning hooches or anything else. You had to go, you had to go. You walked out there and you did your business right out in the sunshine. It was—it just was what it was. It’s not the way I would have set it up but I didn’t particularly object to it. Only had one guy that I knew over there that fell in one of them. I found out he was a captain, too. He was drunk. Oh, well. That’s what I walked into. We had, at that time—the day I arrived there was a fella. I’d have to go back and look at my notes.

(Editor’s Note: Interviewee asks interviewer a question off the record, mentions Diary of a Scout Pilot on the Bravo-Troop 2nd/17th website.)

DH: There’s a reference in the very early part of that to a fellow that was shot down the day that I arrived there. I can’t remember his name. That was the event that started the Battle of Hamburger Hill. He was out—I was down at Bien Hoa waiting for my plane. He was up hovering around Hamburger Hill. He found a com wire on something akin to phone poles, started following that. Got about halfway up the finger ridge to the crest of the hill and got shot down. We already had infantry on the ground in a sweep operation. I think it was the 505th, 502nd something or other. They were kind of

sweeping that direction. I don't think they really knew where they were going at the time. Gentleman got down. They got him out without any casualties or further gunfire. By late afternoon, as I recall and understood, the battle was engaged. This was like, "Oh, boy. I just got here and a guy got shot down today." That was just the prologue. That was just the tip of the iceberg of what I was gonna see over the course of the next few months.

KC: Tell me this, Dan. You arrive at the—to B Troop here on the 13th of May, according the records, anyway. The same day it says here that it was a man by the name of Felix Knight was shot down.

DH: Yep, that's the guy.

KC: What is it like for you? I mean, you're brand new in country, you know, you're the FNG (fucking new guy) here and as soon you get there, essentially, someone is shot down. What does that do to you as a guy who is brand new in country, has never experienced any of this before?

DH: I was beside myself with glee that he was still alive and apparently unscratched. He didn't indicate any particular pain or blood or anything of that sort. There was a lot of joking and joshing around, and "Yee haw! You dodged a bullet," and all that stuff. Comradery and alcohol, I was good with that. We celebrated his survival more than worrying about our possible deaths, if you will. We were—you can't be a helicopter pilot without being a profound optimist. I mean there's so many moving parts in those things that anything and everything can go wrong any time, in the most awkward of circumstances. You understand that before you even get to a combat zone. We were just spitting in the devil's eye, basically. It happened and he survived. The battle was joined and I actually—I was kinda looking forward to what was gonna follow. I had been told by early the next day, I had been assigned to a Lt. Ted Burns for operational training. That was gonna take two parts. One, I had not been certified or signed off in flying the Loach (LOH or light observation helicopter), which is how we'd refer to it in the future.

KC: Now let me ask you, just to clarify here. The light observation helicopter Loach, which type of helicopter were you flying for this?

DH: It was the Hughes OH-6A.

KC: Describe that bird for me.

DH: Let's see, about 1,160 pounds empty weight, 2,400 pounds max combat emergency weight. Four bladed rotor system. Alison C-250 turbine, it was pilot De rated 250 shaft horsepower. Had fiberglass tail rotor blades. It had a curiosity to me at the time—I came to appreciate this immensely. They Hueys and Cobras were suspended in flight by the transmission. Which is a very high object, as I recall. The Huey transmission weighed somewhere in the 3-400 pound range. I don't remember what it was, but it was a lot. That's a burden, if you will. The Hughes had a transmission case that weighed sixty pounds. It did not support the aircraft, it just turned the rotor systems. It had an A frame truss design philosophy when it was assembled, with a rather deep keel to provide for fuel space in the belly. As a result of that design—the blades weighed about twenty pounds apiece. If one of them crashed, the first thing they would do—cause it looks like an egg on a popsicle stick falling out the backside. They would roll and your blades would wad up in a little mess around the rotor head, and it would keep rolling. It would slowly start coming apart and disintegrating. The structure that was right behind the cockpit was a roll bar, if you will. It led to a remarkable statistic in the course of that war. The numbers are not clear to me. The legend is that the Hughes aircraft made 1,600 of these thing for the Army. There was contract provisions that if one of 'em was destroyed, and the Army would send it back to data fleet. They would attach it to an airframe to return it as the same aircraft. I don't know how much that was done. I know that a lot of 'em were rebuilt from extreme damage. In some cases they were shipped back to the States and rebuilt. So, I don't know what the total number of new airframes was, it was somewhere in that range. When the war was over, it was my understanding that we had 300 of 'em left. In the course of that, and again these are Army statistics, not my own, ninety-four point something percent of the people that were involved in adverse impact landings in that aircraft survived. Eighty-five percent of them survived with no injury whatsoever.

KC: Those are incredible numbers.

DH: One of the gentlemen in my troop had the misadventure of getting shot down twice, I think, in one day. Thoroughly drunk by noon, he didn't have a scratch on him. It was a remarkable aircraft in so many ways. It was powerful, it was nimble, it was surprisingly rugged in a lot of ways. I saw them come home with gaping wounds. I don't

know how else to put it. Just big holes in ‘em, and they survived. One of the most startling events that occurred to one of my hooch mates over there in the scout platoon, fellow named Edwards. Right after I left my first tour, he decided to engage a .50-caliber machinegun. What he didn’t bank on was the support staff for that machinegun. They had an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) and they shot his rotor head off. The rocket detonated right behind his head. They went in from about 150 foot altitude, hit nose first, bounced in the air, inverted. When he woke up, he was sitting in a puddle of JP-4, about twenty feet from the aircraft with his legs crossed. The electronics were still on in the airframe and he started to get up to turn them off to prevent a fire and the .50 caliber opened up on him. So he sat there, with two broken ankles. The observer that was with him did not have a scratch on him. They had broken three-inch web seatbelts on the way out the door with their hips. I don’t know what to say about that but it was not atypical of the experiences of people that were shot down over there. Survive absolutely brutal crashes and it was by virtue of the aircraft design. I would—if I had anything at all that I would enjoy doing now that I did in the Army, it would be a couple hours of flying one of those things. They’re an absolute riot. I’ve been upside down in ‘em. I can stop one of ‘em from 100 knots in less than 100 feet. I can do a low level pop up 360 degree autorotation. As far as I know, there’s not a chopper around that’s ever been able to do it besides a Loach. So, it’s a remarkable aircraft.

KC: Take me through this training for this. This is not an aircraft that you’ve flown before, correct?

DH: I had never touched one of ‘em.

KC: Never touched of them before and you’re leaving to go to—I guess to check out. To do some riding around, some flying around and to figure this little helicopter out. Take me through the process of checking out in this helicopter.

DH: Well, there was two people involved. One of the first was a squadron instructor pilot. I don’t recall his name or what unit he was in. I was introduced very shortly after I got there, I think within a day or two and we started flying this little thing. Easy aircraft to get used to. We did some pattern work, some approach work. We did autorotation. We went over emergency procedures, which were relatively small in that aircraft. Or, smaller in numbers. Something typical of what you had done in the States. It

was a ten-hour course. They figured you're no longer a flight student, you're a pilot. Expected to know a few things already. They ran us through ten flight hours of training in that aircraft. They got me signed off quickly. In fact, I was halfway through it before we were transferred down to Chu Lai and I finished it down there. The combat training was a matter of—duration was a matter of judgement on the part of the—whoever the combat check pilot was. In this case I mentioned it was Lt. Ted Burns and we had a scenario where basically I would go out on the first day and ride in the left seat as if I was an observer. This was just to see what was going on, get a feel for it. After the first day out, I would move over to the right seat and act as pilot in command and he would ride in the left. Which I thought was an incredibly courageous thing of him to do. But, the sport of flying scouts at that time was not just a matter of going out there and flying around low and slow. There's an awful lot of tactics that were involved. These were the tactics of survival. Which things you could and could not get away with. An example, you're flying along over a single canopy jungle on a hillside and you see a trail. It looks like there's fresh footprints on it. You turn around and you go back and you fly over the same track you just flew the first time. Somebody on the ground's gonna see a pattern. You do it third time, there's a very good change you're gonna get shot at in the same place. So, your flight pattern, when you're on a low altitude mission like that is purposely random. You don't repeat—you don't give 'em an encore, you don't give them a second chance to do the same thing that you just did. Our operating altitude depended on terrain. We could have our skids in the rice blades. We could be 150 feet in the air. We could be at a hover. We could be at 120 knots. Typically, I operated in—all helicopters have a phenomena that's called translational lift and it typically occurs at eighteen to twenty knots at forward speed. You get out of the recirculated wash in the rotor system, get in the clean air. You get a very substantial increase in rotor efficiency when that happens. So, given that early time in the mission you're very heavy with fuel and ordnance, you tended not to try and hover. Particularly up in the mountains where the air was thin. So, typically I would operate somewhere in the neighborhood of about twenty to forty knots. Also, just as typically, would operate with the aircraft substantially out of trim. Use a lot of left pedal because we had a lot of the—most of the Loaches that I flew, I flew with door gunners. They stand in the cargo compartment behind me on the same side. So the idea was, I

want them to see what I see and I want them to have field of fire on what I see. So we were flying around with twenty-five, thirty, forty-five degree of yaw sideways at forty miles an hour. Forty knots. It worked out very well. Their eyes were trained by the same influences that mine were. They had a different job, the same period to get through the day. They were not—how would I put this? They were not wallflowers. They were pretty much as pilots were from the group W bench. Pretty much aggressive, sometimes it could have been to a point where it would be aggressive to a fault. The side of that was that we operated with very, very few exceptions in free fire zones exclusively. We did this all the time. If we saw something with two legs on the ground, it was a target. There was very little hesitation. I did not have to tell anyone to shoot. They didn't have to ask me to shoot. They saw something, they could go for it. On those occasions, what we had no-fire missions, or fire-for-fire missions, they were incredibly well disciplined. You brief them before you leave at, "Well, we're gonna be supporting a CCN (Command and Control North) SOG (Studies and Observations Group) team in Laos and they're wearing uniforms just like NVAs (North Vietnamese Army) so this is no-fire." It didn't matter what happened, they wouldn't fire. Somebody could shoot at us, they would not fire. I saw that several times. Fire-for-fire mission, Christmas Day 1969. Fella's flying around finds a bunch of North Vietnamese taking a bath in the river, they waved at him. Of course, the gunner wanted to shoot them, and of course, he didn't until they started shooting at the helicopter. That was a total disaster for the North Vietnamese Army. So, I have the highest regard for those people. They were the ones that kept the choppers in tune and running. Despite some of the accolades that people lay on me today for the service back then—I do appreciate that. The grunts and the maintenance people, the crew chiefs, the gunners, those were the ones that are my heroes. They didn't get to sleep in. They didn't get to get drunk half as much as I did. They got guard duty and they got a whole lotta stuff that I didn't get a heavy dose of. I'm still in touch with a lot of those boys. We're all older but their hearts hadn't changed. I'm proud of 'em.

KC: You're introduced to this thing and in two days you're checked out in the Loach here, in the OH-6.

DH: It took a little longer than that, Kelly. The flight certification for being checked off to fly the aircraft, actually took about three days. The last part of it, and the

check ride happened down in Chu Lai. The combat part of it actually lasted—as far as flight days it was about probably eight or ten days of flight. Calendar-wise, it was about, I think maybe three weeks or so. I got my Purple Heart in the middle of all that stuff. It slowed me down.

KC: Immediately, or almost immediately, again, you arrive in country early May, you're with the troop on the 13th of May. You're checking out in the OH-6 and you mentioned receiving a Purple Heart, and this happens almost immediately, as well. Again, Dan Hilliard's being welcomed to Vietnam pretty rudely, it would seem. Take me through this. Because this is the same kind of timeframe we're looking at here, while you're checking out in the OH-6. Take me through the event that led to this. From the second you got up, through the entire day.

DH: The way this worked out, the second day, the first sunrise that I saw in Camp Eagle I awoke with the idea that I was going to Hamburger Hill. *Au contraire*, I had been assigned, overnight, to Chu Lai in support of the Americal Division. They had gotten in a little bit of a snip with—I don't recall if it was the 2nd or 3rd NVA regiment. You might find that in my diary. One of the two. They had gotten into a real contest with them down there in Chu Lai. We were detached from 101st and dispatched. We actually flew down there, I believe it was the next day. That would be the second sunrise. I managed to get in one or two sessions of contact training in the Loach with the instructor up there at Camp Eagle. While the rest of the troop was busying itself getting ready to go to Chu Lai—I didn't even unpack my bags. I changed uniforms, I got my flight suits and everything issued. Got my M-16, but otherwise I was just, I was on other duty with flight training. So we did that. We left, I think, it would have been the 16th, I'm not gonna swear to that at the moment. But, I had been at the early part of that day, I had been hanging out with Lt. Burns, been showing me a couple of things about the Loach. The aircraft we took down there had a mini-gun mounted on it. I thought that just looked like a lot of fun to me. We had all of our gear was—I think we were allowed to take one small duffle or something. All of our personal effects and everything was put on vehicles and taken down QL-1, or the coastal highway. We loaded up combat equipment and got in the Loach sometime after noon that day and flew down to Chu Lai in a very loose formation. There were several aircraft with us, I don't remember much about 'em. The lieutenant

kept us at low altitude until we got down there at the Da Nang costal feature there called the Hai Van Pass. I was enjoying it quite a bit. It was fun, it was exhilarating. You're 50 feet off the ground, 100 knots, birds are flying, the water buffalo are running away. Stuck my arm out the window and almost got a dislocated shoulder. I wasn't ready for the speed that we were travelling at. So we meandered on down the coast, we wound up at Chu Lai. That parallel runway to Chu Lai, one of them was a big strip for the fighters and heavy aircraft. They had an aluminum mat runway on the east side. It was probably about, I don't know, about 5,000 feet maybe. We got to camp out in tents between those two runways. Very close to the aluminum mat runway. Lovely place. Dried up lake bed, not a shade tree within a mile. Somebody had gotten there ahead of us, they had set up tents. I don't remember exactly how we got signed up to what tent. I wound up in a hex tent with two other pilots. One of 'em was a gun pilot and the other was a Huey pilot. So we had one of each platoon in that tent. The next day—this is a little bit of a blur for me. Or over the course of the next day—that afternoon and the next day everybody started showing up. We started setting up camp. The Major Dolin went and got briefings from his new superiors as to what we were doing, what the operations game was. What our area of operations would be. My recollection is that we started operational missions either the following day or the day after. It was very, very quickly thereafter that this started. Oddly enough, this night time air in Chu Lai wasn't that bad. It's right up close to the mountains. When it starts cooling off later in the evening the airflow comes out of the mountains. So it was not nearly as torrid as it was down around Bien Hua and Saigon. The scenery was nice during the course of the day we got to watch the Marines put in a couple of air strikes with F-4s on the faces of some of those mountains. I don't know what it was but that's always fun to watch. Just across the lake bed, which was probably about 3-400 yards away there was the Marine Air Group Air Officers Club. It was the biggest grass hut I had ever seen in my life. It was about 250 feet long, probably 125 wide. As time unfolded we became very good friends with the MAG 13 pilots because we saved them and they saved us. So that was a little bit down the road. But we had very fine nights at the officers club before it was over with. So, the events leading up to my fateful day, you can probably see this in my diary. I don't recall what precise date it would have been, somewhere I think between the 15th and 20th of May. I got to do my

first combat mission. I had at that time been signed off in the Loach. I was getting ready to get my first experience flying. You know, I was just flying as an observer. We took off in Chu Lai in the morning, fairly early. Went up to a little strip that was called Tam Ky International, it was perforated PSP (perforated steel planking) mat about 3,000 feet. Lo and behold, there was a big tent set up for to keep us in the shade during operations. They had all of our mission-ready helicopters on line at that place. The first day we got up there we began a routine that was pretty much a first light patrol in the area of operations. Followed by mission assignments that basically followed right on the heels. We would get a briefing, many times from the crew that we were relieving. Sometimes not, we'd start fresh. But it was a rolling program or armed aerial reconnaissance. I don't recall who the next one was that got shot down. I do recall, the first day I flew we went on our first mission. It was unholy hot. It was a whole new world. I'm sitting in this little tiny chopper wherein they assigned all the tall people. I didn't know why they always put the short guys in the Cobras and all of us giraffes in the Loach. It's very cramped and you've got armored plate on and the outside air temperature is somewhere well north of 100 degrees. We were out flying out around and Lt. Burns was doing what I did. He was flying sideways, he was flying up and down. He was flying very irregularly. By about the, I don't know, after about an hour of that I lost my lunch. He laughed. I had never been motion sick before. He laughed. He says, "Everybody gets sick on their first ride." You can engrave that in stone. There were no survivors. Everybody that got a ride in the Loach, and that included Marine F-4 pilots, Cobra pilots, didn't matter who you were. The first time you got one of those combat rides in Loach, you were gonna throw up. Just guarantee ya. What happened, however, when I threw up, it was about maybe a second and a half before they started shooting at us. I wasn't sure what I was hearing. I didn't like the sound of it, I wasn't sure it was gunfire. But they were shooting at us and I was throwing up on them, and for some reason they stopped shooting real quick. It was very brief, maybe four- or five-second bursts from a couple of different guns. I saw the muzzle flashes on the edge of a rice paddy where they were shootin' from. Then the lieutenant decided to run away and the Cobra shot at the treeline where the gunfire was coming from. We just kind of ambled on. That became a relatively common scenario, where you

draw fire. It wasn't necessarily what you were interested in pursuing. Usually you'd just return fire and then move on to something else that you were interested in.

KC: I'd hate to break into the narrative here, but I'm going to because I think it's a good spot. When you were working in the Loach, who were you working with? We're talking, you know, the pink teams, the light pink teams, can you explain that before we get back into this action again?

DH: Sure, and thank you for bringing that up. Communications, the Loach had an FM radio for conversing with infantry, and it had a UHF (ultra-high frequency) radio for conversing with aircraft. Our aircraft of interest were the Cobra gun cover, they had a team lead and a wingman. We would talk—we would speak to team lead. One of the other pilots, probably copilot in either one of the Cobras would be taken—or write down our reports. They would record the coordinates where these were reported. This was all done on the UHF radio. Additional coordination occurred between gunner, observer, and pilot. We had an intercom system in the aircraft. If you had both on board, and you keyed the mic, you would be talking to both of them. Conversely, if they talked to you, everybody would hear what was going on. Primarily, ninety-five percent of the communication I had out there with the Cobra team leader. He and I talked back and forth, the secretaries would take care of business with taking notes or shooting, whatever. That was how we operated. There was one little weakness in the middle of that scenario. That is if somebody else, intentionally or unintentionally happened to key up that frequency, UHF frequency that you're on, you couldn't talk to anybody. We had a great love of being able to talk to people. A typical scenario where you're getting shot at, you're flying along, minding your own business doing what you're doing, and somebody starts shooting. Typical reflex response, within about a half a second, you're keying the mic and screaming that you're taking fire and you tell them where it's coming from, if you can. The Cobra that's positioned for lead will roll in, start glaring rocket fire and minigun fire to suppress the ground fire. Sometimes they can see it, they can see the muzzle flashes. Sometimes not. It was as that occurred, the scout would be leaving the scene. Either hiding behind terrain, trees or climbing to altitude as appropriate. The first Cobra in would shoot, second Cobra would follow his break, and if necessary they would repeat that process. At some point they're gonna break off that attack. When they do that

on the last one, covering the last Cobra that's in. Would make about a half a run and break into high altitude and get out of the way. That's pretty much the scenario we had as far as air-to-air com. Air to ground, when we were working with the infantry, they had a radio that we called, it was a PRC-25, one of the troopers would have that on his back, and a little handheld mic. We would coordinate with them. They're walking down trails, they've got a question about something that happened ahead of them, we could go look at it. We tried to stay away from being right on top of them because if we did that they couldn't hear anything. But we were there to support 'em. Sometimes if they had a question where they wanted to go, like in a fork in trail and say, "Which way?" We'd say, "Take a left," or you know, whatever. The good part, if they were on the ground and I got shot down, they weren't far away.

KC: Right. Well, thank you for clearing that up. I think it'll kind of give the listener of the interview a little bit better idea of what's going on when you get involved in this. Okay, take me back to where you were there.

DH: Okay, first mission. Got shot at, got sick. We got back to Tam Ky and, Lord, it was hot. It was just hot, I can't even tell you how hot it was there. You're sitting under the green olive drab tent, they got the operations radio set up there. Not a breath of air. You can't drink enough water. It's hot. It was coming on lunch time, I picked up some C-rations. This was one of those points where I had had something before we went on the first mission. Part of my menu on that first one had been some kind of chocolate mint that they had in there and apple sauce. And to this day I can't stand those things. I cannot eat 'em again. But I managed to get something else to eat and somewhere along there, I think one of the pilots that was out there got shot up a little bit. Came back, we got launched and headed out. This was a curious experience. Forget the excitement, there was just a lot of odd things that happened on this second mission. We got out there, started operating along a river. I don't recall the name of it. It was a fairly decent sized river, forded it more or less north and south. Maybe a little northwest, southeast. It's a lot of agricultural country. Lot of rice paddies, rolling hills, huts, buffaloes, the whole deal. Single—or we called it single canopy, scrub, just intermittent patches of trees between the rice paddies and little strips of little jungle here and there. A lot of country like this down in the III Corps, IV Corps region. It was not terribly common up in the mountain country, but

that's what we had. I didn't recognize at the time, but it is a profoundly good environment for anti-aircraft gunners. Because they can see you a long ways off and they can plan what they're gonna do. As opposed to we fly over them over 100-foot tall trees. We're meandering around, I had no idea what I was looking for. I was just looking around and smelled something kinda funny. I was smelling this—it smelled good and I said, "What's that smell"? Lieutenant says, "That smells like a body." About that time I looked out at the river and there was a fellow in a North Vietnamese uniform floating upstream and he had inflated a little bit. So high that I don't think he was drawing two inches of water, every button on his tunic was about to pop. I was just looking at that, that was another one of those moments and I just, you know, had an epiphany. You're going, "Wow. I guess this is a real war." We kind of wandered away from that after a while and wound up in an area of trees and rice paddies and everything. Flew over a hooch and there was a bunch of women and kids and old folks standing in front of it in a group looking at us. I thought it was kind of odd, even with no experience behind me at all, I just thought it was kind of an odd thing for them to do. The lieutenant thought it was odd. Well, they were standing there for a reason. We flew over 'em once, we came back over a second time and we started getting shot at. This is probably the first seriously profound lesson I got in the field of combat. Several things happened at once. They shot at us and they hit us. I had a hole magically appear in the Plexiglas in front of my face and over my head. It was AK-47 fire. It was delivered from a distance of about maybe forty meters, at the most. The gunners were standing behind the grass hut, where the people were out front. I was, as I recall, there was three of them. There may have been more, I just got a glimpse. At that point we were—I'm gonna say maybe fifty meters from a very large tree that was by this hooch. The lieutenant's reflex was to dive to get out of their line of sight. He did an excellent job of that. Broke line of sight, broke fire. Next problem we had was that tree was growing a whole lot faster than we were going up. We took about thirty feet out of the top of that tree. As I recall it was either a teak or mahogany tree, I'm not sure which. In the process just before we hit it, I had to make a call. I had the visor of my helmet up, and I didn't know if I should guard the controls of the aircraft or guard my face. I elected to guard the controls. The lieutenant elected to stand on the right pedal just before we hit the tree. He came through it fine. There was no fiberglass or Plexiglas, or

anything left on my side of it. Most of it was in my face and in my eyes, dug into my ears and everything else. We had a limb about four inches in diameter it was stuck through the fuel cell in the cargo compartment. They had vertical and diagonal stabilizers on the tail back where the tail rotor was and that had rotated about thirty degrees. I saw 'em later on, I didn't know this at the time. All of our blades were curved, like the latest style was to have the blades bent backwards like scimitar. It was very drafty in that thing. I could not see because of all the debris I had in my eyes and all I knew was that we were still flying. I could not hear—the lieutenant was trying to talk to me. I couldn't understand what he was saying because of the wind. So after a few minutes of trying to fuss with my eyes and everything else, I took stock of, you know, where I was, we're still flying. Couldn't see, and I was just gonna sit there and enjoy it. We hobbled, and I mean that quite literally, had tremendous vibrations in the airframe and rotor system. We hobbled back to Tam Ky and landed. I didn't have a great deal of discomfort at that time, but apparently my appearance was startling. The people on the ground got all excited. They got me out of the chopper, laid me down in the ops tent. They called a medevac. So, that day I got my third ride down to the evac hospital in Da Nang. I think it was the 95th, I'm not sure if that's correct or not. It took me down there, wheeled me in to the emergency room. On the way, there was a couple of Vietnamese that had been brought in there. I don't know if they got tangled up with a mine or what. But one of them was missing his nose completely. It was gone. I tell you this because I met this guy later on. Almost at the end of the tour I ran into him one more time. I hope I can remember who he is at the end of the story. I hope I can remember to tell you about that. But anyway, they got me in the ER. They got me in the hands of an ophthalmologist. He quite literally cleaned out a small pile of Plexiglas, paint chips, leaves, all manner of nasty stuff out of my eye. My left eye—err, right one was not injured. But I had injuries in the left eye. The orbit had lacerations on the left side of my face that were not severe but the eye was quite painful. They medicated it, they numbed it out, bandaged me up. Kept me overnight. I don't recall a darn thing about that evening at all except the next day I got out and they released me to go back to the unit. I managed to snag a ride with somebody. There was a helicopter crew that was going to Chu Lai. They brought me back. I don't know what my hurry was but by the time I arrived, my recollection is that there had been one of the other scout pilots

had been shot down. I don't remember who it was. It happened on a first light patrol. Nobody was seriously injured, they just lost the aircraft. I entered into a time of watchful waiting. I was grounded. I got to sit there either at the MAG 13 club or in one of the tents out in the middle of the dried up lake bed. That's not a hard choice, by the way. Bided my time. Eyes heal pretty quickly and basically what I had was a lot of corneal abrasions and lacerations. They heal pretty quickly. I went back and saw a doc a few days later. He did a vision test says, "You know you're 20/20." I said, "I still can't see anything out of the eye." He says, "That's because you had 20/15 vision before that." I said, "Oh, I didn't know that." I thought I just passed muster, you know. I didn't realize I had X-ray vision or whatever. So, you know things were a little fuzzy in that eye. I was released for flight duty the next day and wouldn't you know it. Crack of light that next day, Lt. Burns got shot down. .50-caliber machinegun got him along that little river I was telling you about. Thus began a rather interesting day. I was not released for combat operations in the Loach at that point. But I was released to be a copilot in a Huey command and control. We were short of pretty much everything at that time, including ideas. Major Dolan was on the scene acting as C&C. He was running out of fuel. Captain Livingston grabbed me and we launched. I was sitting in the left seat acting as copilot. Didn't have a clue what I was doing, but there I was. Dave Livingston was very competent. He was dual rated both in the Loaches and they Hueys, and occasionally flew Loaches on missions. It was just something he did because he enjoyed it more than anything. We were in a C model Huey heading out to the badlands. Got out there, we're watching the scenery go by us. It's the first I'd been at that high of altitude in the area. So I was getting a larger picture now. Very pastoral, rolling hillside country, a lot of agriculture, a lot of huts out in the open. Water buffaloes, livestock, whatever, all over the place. Along the bank of this river is the remains of the Loach that lieutenant Burns and fellow named Wrooley had been with him. The remains of that aircraft were somewhere in the neighborhood of about 100 meters scattered out on the shoreline of this river. It had a gravel bar bank where they went down. We had multiple gunships on station. We had ourselves. I don't recall if there was another Loach on station at that time. There wouldn't have been sent down into that environment regardless. Lieutenant Burns and the Specialist Wrooley had been identified. I could see them, I knew they were alive. They had a medevac on station. The problem

they had was the .50 gunner was still active. Anybody would approach and he'd start shooting at them. We could see from our altitude, they were nimble enough that if the Cobras tried to engage them they would pull the gun down and go in the bunker. Unless you scored a perfect direct hit with the rockets they used the Cobras it wouldn't have hurt 'em. They were in and out. We called for air support. Couple of pilots from MAG 13 showed up in their F-4s. I witnessed something that was absolutely amazing. The FAC, forward air controller, Air Force or Marine, I'm not sure, was on duty. Marked the target for 'em and the pilots—the F-4 pilots actually had a visual. They had a bomb that they used over there, it's called a Snake Eye. If you've ever watched any of the old documentaries about Vietnam, sometimes you see a belly camera showing one of these things drop. It has four flat plates that unfold as a drag device to slow 'em down. It's applied at low altitude. The purpose of the drag is to let the aircraft depart the area before they—while they get ahead of the bomb so they're not in the blast radius because they're such low altitude. We're flying around off to the side, Captain Livingston says, "There he comes." I was looking in the sky. I said, "I don't see anything." He says, "Look down." There was a shadow, almost of an F-4 coming across the ground. It was about—it was late morning, it was approaching noon and the sun would have been pretty much straight up. You could just see a little wisp of a shadow around the aircraft he was so low. He flew directly over the pit. I was watching this and I'm thinking, "He's gonna get shot down." He flew directly over the pit and proceeded probably another seventy-five to one hundred yards before that bomb detonated. Right exactly in the middle of that .50-caliber position. It went off and everybody knew that chapter of the story was closed. The medevac came in without even being prompted. He saw what happened. He flew down the river, opposite direction that the Loach had crashed from and did a quick stop maneuver. Which they didn't teach us in flight school. Basically he laid the Huey on its side with a real sharp bank angle. Used the rotor system as an air brake and it was a wild thing to watch. In the process of doing this he was still applying a lot of pressure to the pedal and it reversed. The azimuth of the helicopter was actually looking where he was coming from. He reversed orientation completely, he was going backwards. They stopped about twenty yards from where the lieutenant and the Specialist Wrooley were. Medics got out, grabbed 'em up, got 'em on board, got 'em out. No further gunfire. No muss, no

fuss, no bother. The lieutenant had, other than a bunch of lacerations, he had a broken ankle. Specialist Wrooley had a .50-caliber gunshot wound in the back of his arm. It had just grazed him and it took an awful lot of flesh with it. I'm sure to this day he pays for that. But they both survived. Lieutenant Burns told me after—they were sent to Camp Zama, Japan for a treatment rehab. He came back quite some months later and we were talking about it. Last thing that he had seen before they hit the ground was 125 knots indicated airspeed. They had one of the shots—it may have the same one that hit Wrooley had severed all the control linkage in the thrust box behind the cockpit. That's where all the controls for the rotor system went through. He lost all cyclic command authority and rode that one right into the ground. He didn't have a choice in it but they survived. We flew back to camp, licked our wounds a little bit, and carried on.

KC: Okay, now I wanna ask you, at this point you've seen an awful lot of action here in a very, very short time in these little helicopters. Basically in these two days here, people being shot down, the F-4 underneath you, the explosion, the .50-cal. All of this seeming chaos that's going on and you're, again, you're still brand spanking new once you're in country. So you go back, you know, the helicopter's down. What takes place next? How does one process the kind of excitement, the kind of adrenaline, you know, the fear, whatever might be? What happens to you when you get back?

DH: Kelly, I don't know. (Both laugh)

KC: I'm glad I asked the question, then.

DH: It is so monumental. I'm not even sure you can process it. You recall I told you when I was down there in Bien Hoa that I had that vision that I was not gonna survive over there. That may have made me more accepting of the situation. I don't know. I knew that there was nothing that I could do except flip my kilt and charge. Crying about it was not gonna help. Being scared about it was not gonna help. That was premonition of attitude for the most part. I came to find out later on, as has been said many times, the best defense is a good offence and I wound up being terribly offensive while I was over there. I was. I have no regrets about that or reservations. But, yeah, we're sitting here right off the bat, new boy in the neighborhood got himself a Purple Heart, big deal. Watching my teammates fall out of the sky like snowflakes. It was a little

disconcerting. You look at the bright side and say they're still alive. We're still going. That's how, I guess how I dealt with that.

KC: What about your body? I mean, is there a come down from the adrenaline?

DH: There is. I think probably in the early goings I was so incredibly pumped up I couldn't even recognize it when I came down. It was a lot of high emotion. It ranged—as an example, we flew through that tree that day. I was angry about the—I was very angry and I wanted the Cobras to kill everybody. In fact, a lot of those people that I know were innocent that were standing in front of that hooch died that day. Because they got a face full of 2.75 inch rockets. Later on, I got a little bit more introspective, and I say later on. Frame this in a very rapid evolution. You sit there, you get shot at the first time, "Oh, boy, what a surprise." You get shot at the second time, "I don't like that much." You get shot at the third time you say, "I'm comin' for you, bub." That was just about the timeline in how your mind makes that shift. It was an awful lot of excitement. A lot chaos between the ears. I'm not sure I can—even today I'm not sure that I could explain how you process that stuff and how you deal with it. If it had been a very occasional event, we had a lot of time to think about it, it would have been a different story. We didn't get that option. It was like, you know, hell's bells. It's in your face, it's not gonna stop, what are you gonna do. There we went. It wasn't just the scouts. In the not too distant future of this discussion I'll tell you about one of our Medal of Honor winners and how that happened. Tell you about Cobra pilots getting shot up. Which is a pretty neat trick when you think about it. They didn't make much of a target. When you were shooting at 'em they were likely shooting at you, but it still happened, you know. They tended to be more the technicians. I guess the scout platoon was more like the mad Scotsman or something of that sort. Lift platoon, well, they would play cards and they would come pick you up when you needed a ride. That kind of thing. They were the intellectuals of the crowd, I guess.

KC: Now, once again when you're down on the ground after this engagement, or any engagement. You talked about the adrenaline, you talked about trying to process the thoughts and the emotions and those kinds of things. What about the more kind of mundane aspects of it, you know, in terms of checking out the bird. Filing paperwork,

briefings, if there's anything like that going on. Can you talk about the processes that you go through when you get back?

DH: We did not spend a lot of time in our capacity as scout pilots or air crewmen dabbling with paperwork. Our briefings were very compact. We had in our area of operations that may have spanned an area of, I don't know, I'll say 400 square kilometers, we would have grid boxes. As much as they had in the Gulf War, what they referred to as kill boxes in that escapade. We had grid boxes and they would assign us grid Charlie three, four, and five for recon. Now there was things driving that that we were not privy to. It would come from operations or intel and they would assign us. We'd got out on our recon missions. Typically we did not—scouts did not carry maps. We did not carry SOIs (signal operating instructions) because they were a security risk. They gave us what we call a shackle code. It was series of ten letters in a random presentation that was assigned to the number set zero through nine. We would write those in grease pencil on the cockpit overhead on the Plexiglas. If we needed some discreet information like a frequency, we would ask, they would give us something like Juliet, Kilo, Alpha, Charlie, Tango. That would be the UHF frequency that we would convert to numbers, dial it in, and go. As often as not, we'd get a briefing from the team lead on the way out. We were kamikaze corps, we weren't high thinkers. We were going out to do recon and looking at one rice paddy was pretty much like looking at the rest. It was just a different location was all that it amounted to. When we got back, on occasion there would be things to do. You might have a dud aircraft that's shot up. You'd have to transfer gear to another one. You might have any one of a couple odds and ends to do. But the scout pilots and crewmen didn't get burdened like that. Now the crewmen, the crew chiefs, they have to work on the aircraft. Pilots did not. Occasionally, we would be assigned an officer on guard for perimeter duty. Something like that didn't happen at Chu Lai, it happened at Camp Eagle. Depending on your flight schedule, which might be two to three hours one day, and eight hours the next, depending on how things washed out. You spend your time waiting for a mission, flying a mission, coming home, and going to the club or going to the mess hall. We did not have a lot of collateral duties in that platoon. The pilots in the other platoons did. I don't know, quite frankly, if I was commanding officer of a unit like that, I probably would have done the same thing with the scout

pilots. We had a relatively short shelf life and high turnover rate. So why invest the training or anything else to someone who many not be here tomorrow?

KC: You think that's why that was?

DH: I'm sorry?

KC: Do you think that's why that was?

DH: It's speculation on my part. With the advantage of some years behind me, and some introspection. Like I said, I'm sure I would have done the same thing had I command authority in that environment.

KC: Well, I think we might be at a point today, Dan, where we can stop.

DH: Okay.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [3] of [9]
Date 5 February 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 5 February 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, again, on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Hilliard is joining me by telephone again from his home in Inglis, Florida. Okay, Dan, you mentioned that you wanted to back up a little bit and kind of finish up a topic we were discussing before we ended our last session. So go ahead and pick it up there, please.

DH: Well, I guess, Kelly, this is pretty much for my own benefit as well as anything else. Just to get back into the storyline. But we got down to Chu Lai—at that point I had been signed off as far as flying the OH-6 without help. Had been there a very, very short period of time, wound up getting injured. Grounded for, I don't recall precisely, it was a week maybe give or take a little. The salient point in time where I resumed flying, and this was actually before I had full clearance from the flight surgeon. When Lieutenant Burns was shot down I wound up flying in the left seat with Cpt. Dave Livingston in a recovery mission on that. Following that particular frame of reference I was still waiting flight clearance, still waiting training. There was a number of things that transpired, I was mostly just killing time waiting for clearance. We had a number of the pilots, or flight crews and so forth were short down. Or the aircraft were shot up in very, very short order. We had a—we were based at Chu Lai and we would fly up to a little airstrip by a town called Tam Ky. We were operating to the west in—generally speaking to the west of Tam Ky. In the hill country and mountain country out there. Without my particular participation, in the course of that we had an event. There was a hill just south of the town. We referred to it as Tien Phuoc I think it's now called Tan Phuoc or something of that sort. There was a small hill just south of that and for reasons I don't know to this day, our blue platoon was inserted on that hill in a combat assault type mission. They walked into an ambush. I don't recall precisely what the results of that were, except quite a few of them were killed. The medic that we had, his name was LaPoint. We called him Doc. LaPoint was subsequently and posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was trying to protect the wounded comrades from

gunfire. They shot him and killed him. In that same mission, the troop commander, Maj. Gary Dolan was flying command and control overhead. I don't know how it transpired but he got shot up and then shot down. The forward artillery observer that was with him received a serious and tour-ending injury from the gunfire that did that. They landed in some form of carnage in the valley down below that, ultimately were recovered. The blues were extracted. My recollection is that there was five killed, and four wounded in that ambush. The number may not be precise. At any rate, a few days passed. We wound up with one operational Loach left in the unit. Out of an authorized strength of ten. This would have spanned a period of about, I think perhaps two weeks from the time that I reported to the unit. We were down to one aircraft, we had two pilots, I was one of 'em and I wasn't checked out for combat operations. Was sent to—by C-130 got a trip down to Pleiku, Camp Holloway. Picked up a Loach from those folks and flew it back. So then we had two aircraft and precious few pilots that were still functional. We received at that point a couple of pilots from the sister troops, Alpha Troop and I believe Charlie Troop had one each that were dispatched to us to help with the crew shortages. It was somewhere along there that—honestly I don't recall who it was that finished giving me a ride to give me combat certification. I do know that it was relatively perfunctory when they found out that I could hover. That was probably pretty much enough and they turned me loose out in the woods. The mission—in one sense it was pretty casual. The Cobra team leaders would get the mission assignment. We had an area of operations we called an AO, that was defined with map boundaries. They generally defined in irregular form. It would follow rivers, mountain ridges, such as this. You would have large splotch of real estate that was our official area of operations. Within that we had smaller zones, recon zones. They had designations, I forget how they did that but it was something like Recon Zone Alpha or Recon Zone Bravo. Something of that sort. In the evening, usually evening before we'd mission assignments, aircraft assignments and it was, you know, you're flying 401 and Baldie's gonna be your gunner, so-and-so will be your observer, something like that. Your team leader is 2-2, which as in Banshee 2-2. You'll be flying with 2-4 and heavy pink team, and you'll go from there. I didn't really have a lot of specifics unless I stopped by operations just to see what recon zones we were working. I sometimes would wind up just going out and following the leader. Go out and say,

"Okay, you're gonna work over here by that rice paddy." And I'd say, "Okay." There we'd go. My responsibility beyond that, make sure we were fueled up, flyable. Had the armor and ordnance and everything that we need. This was a very straightforward thing. The crew chiefs usually covered all the fine points. Know what the frequencies of the day were. Which was, you know, we had preset UHF radios have a preset frequency. It was channel one, two, three, four, five, whatever and you pick one and go. The first mission that I flew on my own, first combat mission, I do not recall who my crew members were. There were obviously more experienced than I. We went out to work the area of around Burke Hill which was the hill just south of Tien Phuoc that I mentioned where the blues were ambushed. Burke was the name of the platoon leader, first lieutenant at the time. He wound up retired from the Army as a, I believe a major general. I'm not sure. He was a very intelligent fellow. Well spoken. He was good leadership material from the go, we knew that. Everybody recognized that. So anyway, I was assigned to do a recon out there. In the process of that, found a trail on what would be the south side of that hill, parallel with a bunch of rice paddies. It wasn't right on the rice paddy edge, it was up in a wooded area on the hill slope. Lo and behold, found a string of packs, or rucksacks you might call 'em, laying on the trail. I thought that was fascinating and I turned around and take a second look and got shot at. That was the first time that I did that on my own, and also on my first mission. I had enough wit to talk to the gunner very briefly and said, "Somebody's shooting at us." He says, "Yeah!" (Both laugh) So at that point I inform the Cobras and they started doing what they do and we mosey on off from that. I don't remember any more about that particular mission. But from that point forward, your mission assignment, your team assignment was good throughout the day unless something significant interrupted that. Like an aircraft went down for maintenance or somebody was shot down, or something of that sort. So I would fly with 2-2 and 2-4 for the balance of a day and we would rotate. Sometimes we would relieve the operating team on station. Get briefed on what they had seen, where they had been on site and then turn around and continue the mission in something resembling an organized fashion. On other occasions, they might change the particular search area for a variety of reasons. So you'd wind up going into another piece of turf that was just cold and you didn't know what you were getting into necessarily. Some of the considerations that you had where

you were looking at this—you'd fly out to the area of operations and the search grid. Of course, Vietnam was geographically a very diverse country. There was a lot of places where you had the coastal lowlands and down south where it was monotonously flat. You get the transition zones, were rolling hills maybe before you get into the mountains. Of course, the big mountains could go anywhere from 2,500 to 6,000 foot about sea level, and do so very quickly. It was a very rugged terrain in the mountains. That dictated to a very large degree how you would fly the mission. When you're in the rolling hills, be they agriculture orientation or just grasslands, you were extremely vulnerable to ground fire because they could see you from a long distance and they could wait for their best opportunity. So you tended to fly a little bit lower and a fair bit faster when you were in that country. You also tended to fly a little more erratically just to confuse their target resolution or aiming solutions, if you will. When you get into the scrub, you would have that single canopy scrub cover on the terrain. It was kind of the witch's brew on that because, one, your visibility, your ability to see things on the ground was limited by the heavy scrub cover on one had. On the other, they had some confusion about how they would deliver fire to you because they didn't have unlimited visibility, either. You would have places here and there when they would have open ground on a hilltop or something that was real likely spots they'd have .50-caliber or the 12.7 millimeter guns set up for anti-aircraft fire. So you wound up maybe a little bit slower. You still tend to fly somewhat erratically. Very much contour flying, you didn't deviate altitude a great deal. You'd stay, oh, I don't know, maybe fifty-, seventy-five feet off the ground at most and keep things moving along. You saw something of interest, you'd come back from a different azimuth, take a second look and so forth. When you get over the more jungle covered terrain, or what was typically referred to as triple canopy jungle, you were dealing with trees that were anywhere from 75 to maybe 150 feet tall. Some quite healthy in the trunk diameter. I'm talking six, seven feet in diameter at the butt end of them. You were in a situation there where if you were not flying quickly, there was typically very, very little under storing in cover like that. You can see a lot on the ground. Their window of opportunity for seeing and engaging you was very limited. They had just little small gaps in the canopy cover where they would be able to have a clear view of you. That was

very much the kind of turf that was beneficial to us. We could see them much better than they could see us, and we could engage them much more easily than they could us.

KC: Let me ask you this real quick here, Dan. What type of altitude would you be flying at typically in this kind of environment?

DH: It was very flexible. I seldom got right down in the trees but more commonly I would wind up anywhere from 75 to 150 feet above the tree tops. It was beneficial because it gave you much more panoramic view of what you could see. Believe it or not, human activity in an environment like that is starkly obvious for a multitude of reasons. One, if they build a structure, be it a bunker or a thatch hut or anything, the geometry stands out. It clashes very strongly with what would be the normal background. If there's any foot traffic on the ground, it has the effect—and I don't know if this is the best way to describe it. But it has the effect of polishing the dirt. You'll have darker, undisturbed dirt in the main and then you'll find this white streak running through it and that's foot traffic. Which was, in the jungle trails that's what they used. They had, in some cases they would build something or improve something that would actually look like an improved trail which was where they would use their bicycle transport system. Where they would have a bicycle loaded down with I don't even know how many hundreds of pounds of cargo and they would just walk 'em down the trail. They didn't ride them. They were just so heavily loaded they just would walk the stuff down the trail. On some occasions out in the region of Laos in the A Shau Valley at Khe Sanh they actually had roads. We'd never see vehicles on those during the day time but at night they would move. They had camouflage revetments and parking places, anti-aircraft positioned around those and so forth. The higher altitude over the big jungle was good for a couple of reasons. One was the visibility you had. The second, if you had a problem with the aircraft it gave you more time to react to it. If you got shot at, the easiest way to get out of their line of sight was just a little short dive. Just drop it down and they wouldn't be able to see you anymore. Lastly, it's amazing, actually, how quickly a dead tree can grow. They did a lot of defoliation over there and killed a lot of those trees. When they're just a dead brown stick in the air, they don't always come to your attention until they're right in your face. That can be extraordinarily rude when you start trying to trim 'em with the rotor blades. So when you get up a little higher you didn't have to contend with that

issue. I think I might be one of the only scout pilots I ever knew that didn't run into one of those things eventually. It usually didn't cause a lot of damage, except to your ego. Sometimes it'd wind up on the ground in a pile but mostly it's scary as much as anything. So that's what's kind of the world that we had. It was, I don't know, it's kind of—you're sitting in an environment that provides certain advantages and disadvantages so you'd shape your operations around those particular metrics.

KC: All right, now, you mentioned that you got shot out of the air in this one episode where you were flying, I guess the first time that you went out. What's it like to be shot at in a helicopter?

DH: That's a good question. I think a lot of times it depends on what you get shot at with. How effective that is. Whether or not you're anticipating it. That first time that that occurs—was the reason why I had inquired of the crew chief if they were shooting, was that the first time I got shot at when I was with Lieutenant Burns. We had the circumstance where they were quite a ways away from us. What I was hearing was the sonic crack of the bullet which has a very different tone than muzzle blasts. Aside from that and the fact that there was pieces of canopy disappearing from the bullet holes, it was perfectly obvious that first occasion that we were getting shot at. When I was out there on my own that first day, the situation was that we were very, very much closer to the guys that were shooting at us. I heard the guns going off, heard the muzzle blast. I could hear the actions from the AKs cycling and it seems counterintuitive that you would be able to hear that but it's in a frequency range and order of magnitude that is perfectly obvious. It sounds like a sewing machine full of sand. That's something I heard many, many times over the following, you know, months when I was over there on that first tour. The AKs had that sound. The RPDs, which is their basic version or counterpart to the M-60 machinegun did the same thing. It had a different cyclic rate of fire and a little bit different tone to it but it was easy to hear if you were close enough. So that first time I was hearing a muzzle blast. I didn't hear a lot of the cracks and I assumed because they were just spraying bullets in the area as opposed to pointing them at us. We did not get hit by any fire. The subsequent of that, there was one occasion in the rest of my tour as a scout pilot when I got shot at that it surprised me. I think that that comes from a very heightened sense of awareness on a conscious level. Probably tempered by stimulus that

you're not aware of. Things that you're actually seeing but are not registering in your conscious thoughts. I'm not sure how to characterize this. You know, it's kinda one of those things—well, something told me this was gonna happen. Well, you get those clues. You get the visual and the audio clues that something is coming towards and you just kinda sorta know it's coming. Somewhere along the way you get—well, there's the obvious circumstance where you're seeing packs on the ground or you're seeing troops in the open and you would anticipate getting shot at. I think it is probably a perfectly defensible belief that sometimes you just see people and not recognize consciously that you're seeing 'em. You might see movement and not pick up on it because you're moving yourself and the background is a dynamic movement scene. So all these little cues and everything led me to—after that first day and that first experience on my own there was one time following that, and this was months later where I got shot at and I wasn't expecting that. The other thing that happened for the rest of that tour was just kinda odd, beginning with the first day that I was not hit. Every other time that I got shot at, I was hit. That lasted throughout that first tour. It was enough of that that the enlisted flight crew, the crew chiefs and observers and so forth, would always ask, "Did you get shot at?" every time I came back from mission. I'd say, "Well, no," or "Yes." If I got shot at and wasn't hit, they knew that the next time I got shot at I was gonna get hit. The second most curious aspect of that, with one exception. Every time that I got hit there was a bullet hole within about three inches of my helmet in the cockpit. I was getting a little bit psychic about that before I left. (Laughs) You get really tired of that scenery. They would come back and they had what they called ninety-mile-an-hour tape that fixed most of those holes for the short term. We had a relatively short lifespan on the Loach in the unit. I had been there for nine months before one of them ever made it to a periodic maintenance interval. Which was 300 hours of flight time. So, as a matter of expediency if you had a small bullet hole in a piece of the Plexiglas and it was convenient, they would just put tape on the inside and out and call it good. Because probably two weeks later that thing was gonna be a pile of rubble out in a field somewhere and nothing would be lost from that repair action. That kind of covers our mission briefings, if you will, some of the parameters of how we flew the missions. Understand that a lot of the pilots had a very, very different methodology than I did. We had pilots—

KC: Okay, tell me about that. Yeah, I'd like to know about that.

DH: There's a gentleman, a Lt. Lonnie Sanson, I mentioned him in the diary that's on the 2nd/17th Cav website. Lonnie was from Hawaii, as I recall. Heck of a decent guy. I flew with him one or two times early on. He scared me to death. His mode of operation was forward throttle, he went as fast as he could. He flew as many different directions as he could at one time. He was extremely violent with the controls. He tended to take a different approach to identifying a target. As an example, if I was flying along and I saw a complex that had a bunker or two or three or something like that, I generally speaking would just fly right by them. I would call the Cobras and say, "Five o'clock and 100 meters, there's three bunkers. Six by eight foot, two foot roof cover. Recent activity." Something of that sort. What Lonnie would do was have his observer toss a smoke grenade. He would keep on flying and when the grenade finally started to blossom, he would tell the team leader or whoever was taking the spot reports what he'd seen. Now, put yourself in the position of a North Vietnamese soldier that's on that ground. You may not really want to shoot at a helicopter because there's two Gunships with him. You know that. So you just sit there and bide your time and they'd meander on by and leave you alone. On the other hand, if you're sitting there and they come by and all of a sudden there's a smoke grenade fall in your lap, one of your best options may be to shoot that little helicopter down right in front of you. So the Cobras won't be shooting him, and by extension yourself. To say that Lonnie crafted or created a lot of the fire incidents that he experienced I think would be very true. He would very, very often get shot at just right after—soon after the grenade was tossed. Sometimes they'd see it coming and even before it hit the ground they'd start shooting at him. He had a—in those first few months that we were at Chu Lai, he got shot up so many times it was stupid. He was flying the worst possible kind of terrain. It was the rolling hills scrub country. A lot of ground fire from heavy weapons and .50-calibers and that sort of stuff. And so different strategies, different pilots. Some, I think, more successful than others. I couldn't prove that based on the number of birds that I brought back that were shot up, they were probably about equal but I never got shot down. Never got anybody injured as a result of gunfire. Which usually a couple of hits here and there scattered, light damage. Where some of these fellas would have everybody in the world gang up on them and get shot down. Mentioned

that, like there within the first two weeks I was there, we were down to one helicopter in a platoon. We started at—we lost one, Felix Knight got shot down on Hamburger Hill the day I got there. In the next couple of weeks we lost another eight. Either totally destroyed or substantially damaged and out of service, destroyed for the most part. I had been there for about—I'm gonna say it was somewhere around the neighborhood of three weeks, maybe a little longer than that. I got cleared by the flight surgeon. I got the perfunctory release in the area of operations as an operational combat pilot. The boys Zilagi and Jones from the sister troops were down there working with 'em. I flew with both of 'em a couple times and that's as far as it went. It may have been one of those that signed me off for combat ops, I'm not sure. But we were still taking it on the chin in a big way. The major got shot down in his Huey. We had a Cobra pilot come in one day, they had taken .50-caliber fire. The rocket sight for the aircraft commander had been hit by one of those things. A piece of it had deflected and hit the aircraft commander in throat. He survived that, it was a superficial wound but it took him off the trail for a little while. We had basically shown up in a unit that had not been in country very long. The 2nd/17th Cav showed up, as I recall they were in country perhaps less than a year prior to when I got there. I want to say about six months. We'd had troopers infused from other units predominantly down in the southern part of the country. They were flatland experienced but not mountain experienced. In that short space of time we had a pending Congressional Medal of Honor. We had a lot of injuries, a lot of, you know, combat injuries. We had lost a lot of aircraft. We were kinda sitting there going, "Woah. I'm not sure we signed up for this." We had been sent down there because Americal Division was overwhelmed in trying to deal with this. Like I said a while back, it was either 2nd or 3rd NVA Regiment that we were dealing with, I don't recall which one. They were serious. We had ourselves a major little set-to underway. It caused a substantial shift in tactical thinking. The basic premise where you'd go out and look for intel and report what you got and somebody would do something with it. They would send the B-52s or they have a tactical airstrike, or something of that sort. We were getting over that theory. Because we were doing a lot of that and we were paying heavily for it. I don't know what precipitated what followed. But somewhere along the way one day, somebody got angry. We were dealing with the situation where the NVA were entrained with the local population. They

were just basically had moved in with them. They were get sustenance from that circumstance in the form of rice and probably chicken and pork and whatever else that you might want to eat. It was all right there. We were sitting there looking at this situation. We're looking at a place that had been hit with PSYOP (psychological operations) so much it was stupid. There was leaflets laying everywhere all the time that basically said in very short form, "They're the bad guys, we're the good guys and we're trying to help you out. Unfortunately this has been designated as a free fire zone and if you hang around you're liable to get shot." And so a bunch of them left, some of them didn't. We started burning huts, or hooches if you will, the straw things. We started going through white phosphorous grenades like you would not believe. You know, a case in a mission. We'd go out and we weren't interested so much in the intel as we were in destroying the infrastructure. We burned the huts. If we saw a bunker and we could get fire on it we would blow it up. A lot of the huts it turns out, had bunkers underneath that were not visible until they had been burned.

KC: Are these the Cobras going in with the WP (white phosphorous rockets, or Willie Pete) rockets?

DH: No, this was scout pilots droppin' 'em—

KC: (speaking at the same time) Scout pilots dropping 'em, okay.

DH: —these grenades. We'd just fly over 'em and drop 'em. If we had a cluster of hooches together we'd try and drop it high enough to get an airburst so we could burn them all with one grenade. The Cobras—we didn't have the ordnance to take out the bunker. Sometimes the Cobras would do that if they could hit 'em. Airstrikes would work. We didn't do that—dedicate airstrikes to that purpose very often unless they were major structures. We started killing livestock, pigs, buffalo primarily. Occasionally—oddly enough, I didn't know this going in to it. You drop a CS grenade, CS gas grenade in a chicken coop, it'll kill 'em. So we were—it was kind of a Sherman policy. After that was initiated, it took about a month before it started to have an effect. By the time we left there we had basically removed the ability of that NVA regiment to support themselves and they left. It had nothing to do with how many of them we killed. We starved them out is what it boiled down to. They hit the road. They were replaced by another regiment that stocked up and well manned and everything but that was about the time we got there. In

the interim, or in the intervening time, we wound up—sometime over the span of the first month that we were there, scout platoon wound up with I think we had nineteen crew members that were to be pilots. At one time I'd wager there was nineteen crew members to include pilots, crew chiefs, gunners and observers. We had twenty-seven Purple Hearts, and that was before we left Chu Lai. This was in the span of the first, perhaps six weeks or so. Had one Purple Heart in the gun weapons platoon. We had a couple in the lift section. Suffice to say that we had been fairly well bloodied in the process. But we maintained, shifted gears, changed strategy and eventually wore 'em out. They packed up and left. We had one other incident that happened during that—we were there for about three months. In that first—one of the most significant things that happened. We wound up operating out near the border with, I guess I would say Laos, I'm not sure I'd have to look at a map. But we were somewhere near the western boundary of South Vietnam. There was a Special Forces camp out there that had been abandoned. I don't recall the name of it. I want to say something like maybe Hiep Duc or something like that but I'm not sure. We were on a sensor-prompted recon. They had a great propensity for putting acoustic and seismic sensors where they would have their best worth. For example, a seismic sensor could be airdropped adjacent to a known road network. When trucks rolled by it would trigger the sensor which would send a radio signal somewhere that it was being triggered. They also had acoustic sensors and in many cases, the people that monitored those could actually hear the North Vietnamese talking. They'd hear their conversations and they could record 'em and do all this kind of stuff. They had sensors out there. It triggered a B-52 raid. We were sent out—this is often the case. We did a lot of bomb damage assessments following missions like that. We got out there on scene and it was almost—except for where the B-52s had been, it looked like it was untouched by the war. The first thing that I found when I was first scouting then. First thing that I saw was just kinda unexpected, was bicycles up in the top of these 100-and-something-foot trees. And clothing, and packs, and there was—it was just carnage. There was stuff everywhere. There was what we called high speed improved trail. It was probably ten foot wide, and there was, you know, bike debris and just—and little bit of people debris and so forth, scattered everywhere. They had just by virtue of blind chance, picked the perfect time to drop those bombs. I followed that trail for quite a ways, I wanna say a

couple of kilometers, anyway. Leading up to a small stream and we got up to that stream. There was stacks of supplies, boxed supplies. As in large wooden crates, so on and so forth. These things were stacked up on the order of ten to twelve feet high. Probably covered anywhere from 100 to 150 foot on the side. It was a supply depot, is what it was. That precipitated getting the blue inserted to secure that site and to secure the supplies. Take 'em out of circulation. They started bringing in Chinooks and sling loading that stuff out. Somehow there was some intel value to it, I don't know what the nature of that was. It took them two days to extract all of the stuff that was in there. It was one of the largest cache finds that had been secured up to that point in the war. There was, like I said, there was significant intel. I don't know what the nature of it was. But it was just a twist of fate the way that worked out. The sensor went off, they were listening to it they dropped the bombs. The next thing you put a big dent in their supply chain, one of those things. I don't what else to add to that in particular. It was one of the more interesting missions that we had over there in the greater Chu Lai region. Couple of little anecdotal things that occurred along the way. I was flying—this was probably, I don't know, I probably had been flying combat for at least two or three weeks. Going over a couple of huts, scrub country, rice paddies and I got shot up. Fella with an RPD waited till I was directly overhead and he stitched my belly. So I flew on out of there, made a cautionary landing because I was leaking fuel. The fellow that relived me, his name was Johnny Sprott, warrant officer from Killeen, Texas, and he was a cowboy. One of our wild and crazy fellas. He went back from the same place and with the help from guns and TAC-ERA they successfully engaged the enemy and removed that threat. The major was very disappointed that I had decided to land before I got back to Tam Ky. Well, I didn't have any fuel left but he was still—he was not happy about that. That they had to stop their operations and sling load that thing back. I landed in a dried up rice paddy about two or three kilometers southeast of Burke's Hill. That particular spot would come back very soon thereafter. I was recon-ing on the south face of the terrain. Well, there was Burke's Hill, there was a run of rice paddies and the swale of a shallow valley, and then scrub country on the south side of that. I was going over that, got shot up again. This was just not but a few days later. In the process of that, I had seen—once they started shooting at us I saw a bunch of bunkers. Once again, Johnny Sprott was coming out to relieve us

anyway. I told him what we had found. He went in and located some bunkers, took a little fire. Keep in mind, this in a location that's probably no more than ten or fifteen kilometers from Chu Lai, which was the Marine MAG 13 Airfield. They dispatched. We had a FAC (forward air controller) on station, they dispatched two F-4s. They got the smoke mark from the FAC where the target was and lead ship rolled in. Now this particular aircraft had a history of hydraulic squawks and maintenance complaints, and so forth. They had never been fully resolved. They didn't know what was causing it. But this fella rolled in to drop his bombs, full of fuel, full of ordnance, and had a total hydraulic failure just about the time that he got the pipper on the target. In the F-4, the emergency procedure for that is to eject. So he and the guy in back punched out, and darned if that F-4 didn't stay right on target all the way to where the bunkers were. You had to kinda see it to appreciate the sight of the explosion that came out of that. There was no more hostile fire taking place from that site. His wingman, I'm no su—well, he didn't drop any bombs because his buddies were drifting down out of the sky on the parachutes. I'm not sure what he did with all that stuff but the shorter version of it was that Johnny Sprott flew in there and managed to retrieve the pilot of that F-4 very quickly. The guy in back, or the RIO, I'm not sure what the title was the Marines used for them. The other pilot was picked up by a Marine CH-46 just a few minutes after that. We had a rendezvous that night at the MAG 13 O-club and the Cav couldn't buy a drink to save their butt. (Both laugh)

KC: I would imagine so.

DH: They were plying us with liquor. We had a, by coincidence there was a floor show going on. They had an Australian band in there with a floor show. We had such a good time that we drank that bar dry. That was a huge undertaking just to get that done. Next day half of us were flying with hangovers. One of the Cobras, the guy, the aircraft commander got started up and passed out. The guy in front had never flown a Cobra before, it was his first flying day in Vietnam. He managed to get it out of the revetment, you know, just to cover everybody's back side. They flew up to Tam Ky together with the lead aircraft and got it on the ground in one piece. We all survived that except later in the day on the, on the second mission of the day I got shot at. The Cobra rolled in and he didn't shoot any rockets. He rolled in again and he didn't shoot any rockets. "What's the

problem?" He says, "Uh, I forgot to put my circuit breakers in." So there's the hazard of flying while hungover, I guess. We never let him live that down. I don't think he ever did it again. But you know, the fact that we were laughing at him even though it was a fairly serious thing, we were still laughing about it. You know, Kelly, there's probably, I don't know, a dozen or so other stories like that that all have their own merit.

KC: I would encourage you to expand on any of them that you would like, Dan.

DH: I'm sorry. I didn't hear that.

KC: I said, I would encourage you to expand on any of them that you would like to.

DH: One of the darker moments, our maintenance fella, I was talking about that big party that we had. We had a senior warrant officer, I believe he was a CW-3 and his name was Holditch. It was at that party that night. In the process of all of that he had enough to drink that he made it all the way out to the roadway out in front of the O-club before he passed out. Spent the night sleeping, or the balance of the night sleeping in the road. We, you know, of course we had some fun with that. He got up, got cleaned up. A couple of days later he was on a maintenance test flight in a Huey and he's doing this at night time which was very typical because the aircraft were frequently in use during the day. Had to work on them at night, test fly them at night. He had a Sergeant Hovey with him and another gentleman, another specialist, I don't remember his name right at the moment. They went out on that flight and apparently it was due to vertigo or a mechanical problem, I don't think it was ever resolved. They crashed near the shoreline of the South China Sea and they were all killed. In the process of that we had a search first thing launch the next morning which involved most of our assets. One of the Huey crews saw the wreckage in the water and it was just a scant number of yards off the beach where he found it. They recovered the bodies and so on and so forth. In the process Johnny Sprott rose to the occasion again. They had had him take some body bags and so forth to the crash, had one left over. He was flying back and he was in traffic to land back at Chu Lai, and one of those bags flew out and got tangled in his tail rotor. So Johnny and his observer went swimming there in the South China Sea, as well. He told me later on, he says, "Dan, you wouldn't believe how hard that water is when you hit it at sixty knots." Well, I guess not but I don't know what sidebar is to sidebars these things—it was

an extremely dynamic situation. Things happen quickly. They happen in very rapid sequence. It was easy to get lost in the maze, I guess you would say. It was, oftentimes it was especially violent. The fact that any of us got out of there without being functional alcoholics just surprises me sometimes. It was a very—well, I guess in today's world they say it was a hostile workplace. Best way I could put that. We had—I guess there's one other thing I'll tell you about Chu Lai that was kind of, it was kind of interesting. I did not get the punchline on this until later on. I had mentioned earlier on in our discussions that I had roomed with fellow named Ralph Clime when I was going through UH-1 IP gunnery school at Ft. Rucker. I was flying with Ted Burns, and this was almost certainly—well, it was before he got shot down. It was one of the first things that I flew over there, actually. We had just—we had come back off a mission and we had just refueled at a little refueling spot that they had at Tam Ky. There was a Huey flying from north to south to the west of us. There was a fire support base that was active in that immediate area. It was somewhere between the airport and where this Huey was. They had a fire mission going, we knew that. I wasn't thinking about it. I didn't even see the Huey until just at the very last moment. I just happened to look up and saw 'em and I heard the guns shoot. That Huey just turned into a fireball. Just blew up right there. They hit it dead center with an artillery shell. They had mechanisms in place to prevent that. It took diligence on the part of the artillery fire control people and the pilots. You had to get in touch with the right frequency to get the report on who was shot—who was shooting what and where. Sometimes you would fly under the max ordnance elevation, and sometimes you would just fly around it. But there was ways to contend with that. In this case the system failed. I watched that Huey go into the ground in large number of pieces. We took off, flew over what was left of it. There was a ground fire, grass fire. We saw several bodies laying in the ground. There was no indication of life. That was just one of those "wow" moments where something happens. You're absolutely helpless to do anything about it. I found out just before we left Chu Lai that one of the crewmen on that was Ralph Clime. That was very disheartening in a lot of ways. In retrospect it turns out that he was one of the early classmates from Wolters and Ft. Hunter that passed on. He wasn't the first but I don't recall who that was at this point. Ralph didn't last very long over there. I liked the guy and it was quite a shock when I found out that I had watched

that happen and didn't even know it. That was probably—that'd cover most of Chu Lai. We did have a pilot with us, showed up, brand new guy. About maybe not quite two months after I got into the unit we were flying down there. I was designated as the combat check pilot. This fella's name eludes me at the moment. We called him "Cherry Boy." I don't know why. I don't think he'd ever shaved a day in his life. But I was training him for combat and, you know, the same thing. I took him for a couple of rides in the left seat and then I let him ride in the right seat and I acted like his observer. One of the first days we were out there I was still in the right seat. We were flying back and I was angry about something and I don't recall what it was. It was just something about one of the missions or something. We were flying over the coastal flatlands back towards Chu Lai Main and, I don't know. I might have been a little low but that was my profession, flying low. I saw one of the local folks in the sampan paddling across the open water from one little spit of land to another. I figured, "Well, I bet I can come close to him." This was one of my few, totally immature actions over there. I did come close to him. Close enough that had I not pulled up just that last instance before I flew over the boat, I would have hit it with the skids. The Vietnamese that was onboard bailed out. He was just in the water and this fellow that was riding with me just about wet his pants. I think, "Well, that's a cheap education." Everybody got away with everything. That was one of the only times that I did anything that was totally lame like that. And probably, you know, I was young, I was, like I said, I was mad about something I don't remember what it was. I remember that fella that was sitting in the left seat trying to climb higher in the cockpit so his feet wouldn't get hit by the boat. But, anyway that was that—I don't know. That's just anecdotal sidebars and that kind of stuff. I'm thinking sometime—let's see May, June—sometime in August I think it was. We headed back up to Camp Eagle. Packed up and got out of the tents. We'd lived through a category one typhoon. My tent was one of the only ones left standing. We had survived countless bouts of alcohol and parties. One of our gunbird pilots, a guy named Rich Ashton. We heard about a party that the medical staff from the base hospital was hosting. Of course, there's doctors and they're mature and they're articulate and educated and clean. They got to live in mobile homes. They had a party which we crashed and it wound up with Warrant Officer Rich Ashton on one of their buffet tables tap dancing through the chicken and baked beans. He

tripped in the potato salad and went facedown. The whole thing collapsed. Somehow did not get court-martialed for the whole thing. So we put all that frivolity behind us and picked up and moved back to Camp Eagle. Got in to our original home.

KC: Let me ask you a couple of questions here, Dan, since you brought them up and it's kind of a recurring theme, I think. One, you mentioned, you know, seeing someone, I believe his name was Rich was shot down and killed. What is it like for you personally when someone you know has been killed? What kind of emotions do you go through? What kind of actual processes do you do as far as the unit is concerned? What happens when someone dies?

DH: That's an interesting question. Boy, how can I answer this? I had various reactions. It depended profoundly on who it was and what my relationship to them was. I hardly knew Warrant Officer Holditch when he was killed in that test flight. I knew who he was, I had spoken to him but I did not know him. I was somewhat detached from that. It did not have a great impact emotionally. I had thoughts of sympathy towards his family but I didn't know how to reach them. Didn't have their address or anything so it was—there was not much to do with that. Sargent Hovey that was flying with him, that had actually been with me when I went to Pleiku when I went to pick up that replacement aircraft, he was an old fella. He was quite old to be in a war zone like that. Decent as they get. I had a bit of remorse in my heart about that. I knew none of the infantry that we lost at Burke's Hill that day, didn't know any of 'em at all. So, I'm young, impetuous, full of myself and it didn't leave a mark, frankly. Later on, relationships develop, you know, you get to know people and work with them a little bit. A little bonding goes on and you lose of them and it can be gut-wrenching tough to deal with that. One of the ones that always comes to mind when I think about this was fellow named Louis Brewer. This was in my second tour. After the beginning of the spring '72 Offensive Louis had the bad, unfortunate experience of being on the early crews that was shot down by the shoulder launched SA-7 missile, it was a heat seeker. It happened not far from—it was between Lai Khe and An Loc during the offensive. You had to know Lou to appreciate, this guy was bigger than life. He looked quite a bit like Burt Reynolds, actually, with the mustache and the whole deal. He was a prankster. He was hysterically funny on a bad day. That kind of stuff, it makes you stop. It hurts. You look at people like this in that

environment and think if you're close enough to 'em you're never gonna get hurt. They were, you know, legends in their own time, in their own way. There's simply no easy way to grapple with that. I'm not even sure—I think about Lou today, even now. It's not often that I don't think about that moment. It's still like, what do you do? What do you say? I had the odd experience—I'll touch on this briefly because it relates in what happened to Lou. I was flying with B Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Company shortly thereafter. We were on that same stretch where Lou got blown out of the sky. You may have seen a picture, or an image, a painting if you will. Done by a rather industrious artist. Fella does a lot—has done a lot of Vietnam artwork. It shows a Cobra that has a little airburst close to the back end of it and the tail boom is just breaking off. Falling out of the sky and all that stuff. Have you seen that image?

KC: Yes, I have.

DH: I saw that happen with my own eyes. I was chalk seven in a flight of nine on the highway doing a combat troop assault with on wounded on the way out. We had been on the ground about, I don't know maybe thirty seconds and they had the Cobras flying high cover. We had, I think it was six Cobras on station. I heard somebody yell, "Missile, missile, missile!" I looked up and there was this white smoke trail coming out of the treeline about, probably about two, two and-a-half kilometers up ahead of us. They moved fast enough that I was always—I was just little bit behind the missile all the way up to where it hit the Cobra. He had banked over. The only defense they had at the time, this was before we got the infrared suppression kits installed on the Hueys and the Cobras. He was in about an eighty-degree left bank, trying to turn into this thing to hide his exhaust stack. Because if they did not see hot metal, they couldn't track and that was the strategy that was employed. It was not successful in that he was hit and he did lose his tail boom. In a wonder of all wonders is that everybody was sitting there watching something that was totally impossible happen right in front of our eyes. He did a vertical autorotation from an altitude of about 3,000 feet and survived. Both he and the front-seater lived through that. That was—like I said, it was vertical. The fuselage was rotating slowly in the same direction as the rotor system was turning. They went into heavy trees and as per our standard procedure at that point and time in the war, when somebody got shot down like this, it was the last Huey in the flight that would go pick them up if they

could. So the last one that was in the flight kicked out all his people that he could and he went racing over there, flopped down. Could not get to 'em real close so just took the matter in his own hands and chopped some trees down with his rotor system. Got close enough, got these guys on board and flew 'em to the evac hospital there at Bien Hoa. That particular crew actually was part of the, I think it was the 4th/77th ARA (Aerial Rocket Artillery), the well-renowned or, well-known Blue Max. I don't think the AC (aircraft commander) had any damage at all. I think the front seat guy had a broken ankle or something of that sort. Absolute miracle that they were able to do what they did. So you get the contrast of the average guy that survives, the legend that dies. There's a lot of irony in a war zone. I can't even begin to tell you how much there is. You see these things and it's—here I am going on fifty years later and it still doesn't make any sense. But that's what happens.

KC: Is there—what about the unit when someone is killed? What does the unit do to go through the process? I mean, is it the CO of the unit who writes the letters home? That takes care of the personal effects, what do you—

DH: (Speaking at the same time) Oh, you know, Kelly, I don't know. We were—the situation that I saw over, until very close to the very end of my last tour. There was very little that happened that I was aware of. Somebody went to the hospital, somebody got killed. Basically we'd clean up their personal effects, bag it up, and ship it home for 'em and that's as far as it went. Never, we had no memorial services until very close to the end of my experience over there. There were, on occasions, there would be a small group of guys who would get together and have something akin to a remembrance for 'em. But formally, as administered by, you know, management, no. Nothing happened. If they wrote letters I'm not aware of it.

KC: So then at that point after you've lost someone, you just wait for a replacement to come in and you run a little light until someone else comes in?

DH: Yes. That's pretty much the way that worked. We had—I mentioned earlier that we were at one point we had two pilots, one of which was worthless. That number would always fluctuate as would our—the number of aircraft we had. I saw one occasion lasted about one week were we actually had ten aircraft in the platoon. Our typical pilot strength was anywhere from four to six, or maybe seven pilots. My first tour—I'm

getting ahead of myself a little bit. We had, my recollection is, and I'd have to go back and look at the diary to confirm this. But something in the range of forty-four to forty-seven helicopters that were lost out of that unit. Two of 'em were Cobras. One of 'em was a Huey. All the rest of them were Loaches. If you stop and give that a little bit of consideration, that's just about one a week. We probably lost, either to going back to the States due to injuries or a death, we lost, I don't know. Maybe every time, every second or third or fourth time that a Loach went down we'd have somebody that would get shipped out for whatever reason, injuries or fatality. There was precious few fatalities. I'm very thankful for that. We had—the first that we had was on a last light mission out of Camp Eagle. I think that the pilot got in to a, what they call a Hughes tail spin. It's a situation where you try and hover downwind in a high altitude environment in the mountains. He lost command authority on his tail rotor and spun in. There was another pilot with him who was recovered. This particular fella's name was Partridge. He wound up either unconscious or trapped in the airframe. It was the first—in fact, the first and only one that we had that burned. The Loaches just hardly ever did that. He got burned and killed. We had some injuries in the lift platoon. I don't recall that we had any fatalities in the early days. Later on there was one of the fellows had been a scout pilot for a while. His name was Billy Byers, he was from St. Petersburg. He was moved into the lift section and not long after that he got shot in the spine, in the lower abdomen, and paralyzed. That was a sad day for a lot of us. Billy was a wildman but he was a good guy. We missed him. [It turns out that Bill Byers made a full recovery and had a career as an airline pilot and raised a family. I just found out about this about a year ago, 2018 sometime.] So our fatality numbers were few. Our injuries were quite high. Most of them were, you know, you'll hang out for a while and get well and then put you back in the saddle and go. Despite the carnage that we visited up on the helicopters, it wasn't equally conferred upon us. We were lucky in that way.

KC: Yeah. Another issue that's come up a few times today is the issue of alcohol usage. You know, in a warzone combat environment you've got young men. Tell me about alcohol usage as you saw it in Vietnam. In the purposes for, the extent of it, the effects of it. Take me down that road.

DH: I'll put it to you like this, my recollection is that a beer cost fifteen cents and hard liquor was a quarter to drink. We made enough money to afford a lot of that. It was our way of decompressing. I don't know that there was—there was one or two fellas that I knew along the way that I suspected had alcoholic tendencies. But in the main, they did not. We would—we played hard and we partied hard. It was not the least bit unknown for somebody to be just, you know, just blind drunk with they got back to their hooch or got back to wherever they were sleeping that night. But I saw no indication throughout that first tour that anybody ever flubbed up because of it, with the exception of the guy with the circuit breakers in his Cobra. It was—alcoholism was not an issue. You have to understand, we were Air Cav. We were crazy. We were highly motivated and very sure of what we were doing as far as that we were doing the right thing. I can say something like on an average night, if I had a mission, you know, if I had flown during the day, got a scare somewhere along the way. I could come back and I might put down seven or eight drinks and I might be fairly drunk by the time I got back to the bunk. But we weren't staying up till three o'clock in the morning or anything like that. It was usually, you know, ten, 10:30 at night you're usually crashed out. You'd wake up the next day. Typically if you had missions they'd get you up around six, 6:30. You get a chance for breakfast, cup of coffee, or whatever you might drink and you'd head back up the flight line and go. I don't know that I saw—or, I'd say that I'm not aware of any more than maybe a couple of occasions where people were flying with a hangover. The first would have been that event there at the MAG 13 Club when we rescued that pilot. I couldn't even tell you when the second one was. I'm sure it happened but I just don't recall clearly.

KC: Yeah. Well, another issue that I think is important. One that is perhaps overlooked, is maintenance. I mean, these birds are being put under a lot of pressure. A lot of strain, they're shot up. It's a diff—

DH: Hang on just a second.

KC: Sure.

DH: Try that again.

KC: Sure. I was gonna ask you about maintenance. You know, these birds are under a lot of pressure. They're being shot at. They're being flown hard. Like you say,

300 hours in the air before their—you know, the routine checks and everything scheduled. Maintenance checks. Can you tell me about the maintenance crews? The work they would do?

DH: Yes. The crew chiefs were responsible for, first and foremost for maintenance on the aircraft. They had in the case of the Huey, they had a 25 hour intermediate inspection and 100 hour period inspection cycle. The Hughes 500 had a 300 hour periodic. I'm not sure I know the answer to what the intermediate interval was. I think it was 100 hours, I'm not sure. It was a third generation helicopter with very much lower need for recurrent maintenance. What that said, crew chiefs were responsible for daily inspection. Pilots for preflight, post-flight inspections. The crew chiefs had a vested interest in making sure their birds were functional. They were flying in them. They did an excellent job. The recollection that I have is that they spent about ten hours of maintenance per flight hour on the Loach. Something in the neighborhood of twenty-five hours of maintenance per flight hour on the Hueys. The Cobras were a little bit higher. That's because their systems were more complex. In all the time that I flew over there, I'm aware of some of that aircraft that had incidents or accidents that resulted from improper maintenance, but it was just a handful of them. It was odd things that nobody had been fully trained on or briefed on, or anything of that nature. Something that just kind of popped up out of the blue. It'd be, "Oh, we didn't know that." "Well, now you do, and don't do that anymore." So we didn't. I held those people then and today in the very, very highest regard. They did a remarkable job in keeping the helicopters flying, and flying in a functional fashion. We did a lot of crazy things with the helicopters and they stayed together. I have been perfectly inverted in the Loach a number of times. I used to do a maneuver where I'd use the rotor system as an airbrake. I could go from 100 knots to 0 in about 100 feet and be looking at my six o'clock where I had just been. That was maneuver that was utilized with a minigun primarily. If you flew over a target and you were at high speed you could turn it around quickly enough to bring effective fire in very short order. I have a picture somewhere in my files of a Cobra that's inverted. They weren't supposed to do that but pilots knew how to do it if they wanted to do it. This one was done in the framework of a split S maneuver. I may have mentioned this previously, I'm not sure. The Hughes aircraft had a static mast with a very lightweight transmission

fasten up below that. The mast transferred the lift from the rotor system to the airframe, the transmission did not carry any load. The Hueys and Cobras were just the antithesis of that. The transmission and four attach poles were what carried that load from the rotor system to the airframe. There was also an item in there they called a lift link. It was like a big giant turnbuckle that was in the back side of the transmission. Ultimately, that was what carried the load in those aircraft. The other four mounting points were isolation dampers. Big giant rubber washers with a washer stack and so forth in the middle of all that. We had a Cobra come in one day, and during the course of a routine inspection by crew chief, found that the lift link was broken. There was never any guarantee offered by Bell Helicopter that those four isolation mounts would carry the load of a combat operation. It's an aircraft that could generate somewhere in the neighborhood of three to three-and-a-half G's on a pullout. Have no idea of how long it had been like that but it was snapped right in half. Don't know why it happened. I guess some of these things you never can figure. I don't have the words to heap enough accolades on the maintenance people over there. Both the crew chiefs and the maintenance detachments, maintenance depots and so forth, I don't know how they did it.

KC: Did you ever try to reward the guys? Case of beer, steaks, or breaks, or something?

DH: (Speaking at same time) on occasion. We had various ways and means of doing things with them. One of my favorite routines was actually to teach 'em how to fly. That was somewhat self-serving. I figured if I got shot and they could fly we might all get home anyway. But they always enjoyed that. When it was convenient I put one of them up front. Say, "Okay. Fly me home." They were very adept at it. The hovering part and so forth might take a little longer but we had several gunners and crew chiefs that were fully capable of flying those things from takeoff to touchdown. Sometimes there was beer involved. Sometimes there was small informal parties would develop, stuff like that. We did, and I say we, I did from time to time fraternize with them in the social environment. We had a line hooch out by the—where the Loaches were parked, basically it was conex. I spent more than a few hours out there jawing with those guys, talking to them. We'd talk about everything under the sun. I mean, it wasn't just about combat or the war or what we were doing. It was just, you know—the '57 T-Bird that their dad had or

something of that sort. Just whatever. Girlfriends, boyfriends, whatever. It didn't matter. There was some of the others in the platoon that were perhaps a little more aloof. I think maybe my reference to that would have been my father who had gone through the enlisted ranks and became a warrant officer. Which, in the Air Force was kind of a crossover and you got to deal with everybody on an informal basis or formal, as appropriate. That was kind of where I saw myself on that. On rare occasions I would invoke discipline as severe as any general could do it if it was appropriate, and it was on a few occasions.

KC: (Speaking at same time) can you give me an ex—can you give me an example of that?

DH: Well, we had a—I was doing guard duty one night and they had strictures of what was and was not acceptable on the perimeter at night. I would go around—working the northwest corner of Camp Eagle was the section that I had. Three or four times in the course of the night you get in a jeep and you go from one bunker to the next and just make sure everybody's awake and see if they need anything. Wound up with a specialist that was sitting on the bunker that had a magazine stuck in his M-16. That was a no-no. They were not supposed to be locked and loaded until given orders from myself or a superseding authority. I told him to remove the magazine from the gun, he refused. I told him again in the form of a direct order, he refused that. Rather than get into a gunfight, I went to the command bunker and I woke up the sergeant—the troop sergeant. I don't recall that he wasn't a sergeant major. He was one step below that. Senior master sergeant or something of that sort, I don't recall. Told him what was going on and he says, "Well, can I take care of that in the morning?" I said, "No, sergeant. You can take care of it right now." So that was probably the worst thing I could have done to that kid was have top come down on his case like a bolt of lightning, which he did.

KC: Waking him out of a sound sleep—

DH: Oh, yeah, it was about two o'clock in the morning. (Laughs) Well, you know, there's ways and means that are not always apparent to somebody that's not in the middle of that situation. I didn't have to do anything like that very often. We were—we had a common cause. We were, I think well bonded. It was something that was very much more apparent, I think, in a combat unit than it was perhaps a support unit. I know

that they had some of the organizations or some of the units that dealt with supply or maintenance on the division level, they had some discipline issues going on there. They had problems with drugs, all manner of things. It was not prevalent in my entire experience of the war in the combat units. That was very uncommon. I mean, it was rare. We just didn't have those issues. I think, as I mentioned earlier, that anytime that any one of those guys had been in jeopardy, had been shot down or something, everybody in that unit was willing to take a bullet to get 'em back. I know, you know, I say those words, I know you hear 'em. They don't represent the fidelity to that standard that I saw. When I say they'd take a bullet—well, just before I came back from my first tour, we went in to pick up a scout crew that flew that was flying—I was just weeks from coming home. I was flying, again, command and control because I was available, with the unit commander. We were in the A Shau Valley and one of our scouts got shot down. They were still alive and we went in and snatched them. For our troubles we took 176 bullet holes in that Huey. I'd have done it again right after that if I had to. I knew—we knew—everybody that was on that bird knew full well that we were gonna get hosed when we went in to do that. There was not a second's hesitation. That was the nature of our relationship. You don't develop that mindset if you're disposed to spend all your time whining about something. Or if, you know, you're picking lint out of your bellybutton and having disciplinary issues. Or maybe being sent to LBJ (Long Binh Jail). That's not the mind—well, I said that, that's Long Binh Jail, one of the reference points. A band of brothers. I mean, does that get it across?

KC: Yeah.

DH: Yeah. That's pretty much what it was.

KC: Okay, let's take you back to Camp Eagle when you returned here and kind of pick up the narrative of the story. Let you kind of pick up and roll forward with the timeline.

DH: (Speaking at same time) Yes, I will. It was civilized. We weren't living in tents. (Laughs) We had a metal roof over our head, plywood walls. We had an officers club, we had an enlisted club. We were nested in the very north end of Camp Eagle. A little bit of rolling hill country. Nested with other units, like I said, I think last time we spoke. We had Delta Troop, our ground troop was just next door to us. Immediately south

of us was the 326th Engineers. We had running water. It was paradise. Good mess hall, we weren't eating out of tents and everything. Covered facilities for aircraft maintenance. We had a PX (post exchange). What a shock that was, I can't even begin to tell ya'. We were living high on the hog. The next thing that was really, really neat about that was that when we got back, there was almost nothing happening. We flew for, I'm just gonna pull this number out of the air, I think it was about a month after we returned. Our combat operations resumed out in the A Shau Valley in the greater part of our area of operations. Including Khe Sanh and the A Shau Valley, and all the things—all the terrain between there and Camp Eagle. It was a big chunk of real estate. We'd been flying for probably close to a month before anybody took fire. It was like a holiday. You have to pause for a minute and imagine losing all of the aircraft and the people that we had lost in the preceding three months. Going into something where absolutely nothing was happening.

KC: What's that like?

DH: It was bizarre. It was absolutely bizarre.

KC: Explain that.

DH: The interesting thing about it is that we had, by that time we had quite a few new pilots and crewmen on board. We had a chance to learn the area of operation without fretting about our livelihood. We basically we were out there, we were running missions. We weren't seeing much but we were getting the lay of the land. Picking up a few clues here and there from the perspective of aerial—airborne surveillance. It was a time of rebuilding for the unit in a very big way. Kelly, it's hard for me to get across just what kind of cauldron it was that we were involved with down a Chu Lai. It was extraordinarily violent. We lost so many aircraft, so many people. Ultimately we prevailed, at least from my perspective, and acquitted ourselves honorably. We got back up to Camp Eagle and it was like R&R (rest and relaxation). I think it was richly deserved. We were most appreciative to have a breather. It gave maintenance a chance to catch up. It gave everybody a chance to just decompress a little bit. I'd have to go back and look at some of my records, but somewhere a month into it, it was getting to be—oh, sometime in September, perhaps. Or maybe even—well, it had been in September, I think, when one of our boys, he may have gotten shot at a couple times or something of that sort. Then we had the most remarkable thing happen. Last day of September 1969,

went to bed. It was clearer skies, it was warm. It was pretty much, you know, Vietnam. We had missions all laid out, everybody was ready to go. About one o'clock that morning on the first of October it started to rain. In the next twenty hours we recorded twenty-four inches of rain. It did not stop for two weeks. We had something in the range of fifty inches of rain in that timeframe and the war came to a screeching halt. There was almost no flying and no opportunity to do it. We were the (??) of our operation. We did have instrument qualifications in a lot of the flight crews. In fact, all of them, actually. The Hueys and Cobras were rated for instrument flights, the Loaches were not. Didn't have the instruments or navigation gear. So, first few days of that you just lay around and, you know, stare at the ceiling. Nap and sleep and catch up. Write letters and stuff and then you start getting bored. You go to the club, you kill a little time there. Then you come back and read a book and, you know, it was like "Oh, my god. When is this gonna stop?" Well, about two weeks. When that—about the time we got to the first break in the weather, there was a FAC—there was several forward air control units that we worked with. The most common one had a call sign of Bilk. B-I-L-K. One of those boys vanished. We started looking for him and in the process there was a Cobra crew that went down somewhere in that timeframe, as well. We never found the aircraft, nor did we find both crewmen. But we did find the pilot. That was about two weeks later and by blind accident. The fellow was still alive. In fact, he was lucky he didn't get shot because when we found him all he had on him was his pants. He looked a lot like a North Vietnamese, dirty, filthy. He was just standing by a bomb crater looking at the helicopter when it flew by. The guy saw him and started to shoot him and figured out "Well, it just didn't look right," so he didn't. Turns out it was this aircraft commander from the Cobra. He had been supporting a, what we referred to as an SOG mission. It was the sneaky Petes that were in Laos. I don't know what happened but they wound up crashing. Front seater was killed and he had spent two weeks, literally, going walkabout, avoiding Vietnamese and tigers and whatnot, and watching us fly by on a daily basis. But never quite knowing how to get in touch, and finally he did. That was some of the early activity following the big rainstorm there in the first few weeks of October. It would be a little bit later in the year before things started getting real testy again out there in that region, the A Shau and up around Khe Sanh and so forth.

KC: I wonder if you might be able to describe the A Shau Valley for me. It's obviously a nasty place. It figures prominently throughout the course of the war. Can you tell me what the A Shau Valley was, you know, the configuration, the—

DH: (Speaking at the same time) well, yes, sir. That particular geographic feature is, and I'm talking in very general terms here, somewhere in the neighborhood of about fifteen to eighteen miles long. About, I'm gonna say on average, probably about five miles across. It is rimmed on the east and west sides. It goes from low-lying grassland country with a river running up the middle of it, to very, very abrupt escarpments of ridgelines and mountains on either side. The stuff the Laotian side, and it was right immediately adjacent to the Laotian border. Had the higher elevations in the southwest and then again on the northeast side of the valley. It went from 1,500 feet to up around 6,000 feet above sea level. That was the home of firebases Berchtesgaden and Ripcord and Rendezvous, Tiger Mountain. Across the valley from Firebase Rendezvous you had Hamburger Hill that was sitting just shy of the Laotian border. It's called these days—the Vietnamese name for it is Dong Ap Bia. It was just a little scruffy knoll on a ridgeline over there. The southwest side of the valley, when you come up out of the valley floor, you get a couple of little short runs of very, very low hills. It looks like you're running into a wall. The face of the terrain is so abrupt in its rise. I mean, it's not vertical but it's not far from it. The Laotian border comes up to the geographic divide on the south end. If you flew off the south end of the valley and you went over the ridgeline you were in Laos. Boom, just like that. Back up on the north end there was a feature there called Tiger Mountain which was a very ominous foreboding piece of real estate. Imagine a, if you will, the prudential Rock of Gibraltar logo. You cut about the top third of that thing off so it's just flat across the top, and in the backdrop of the rugged valley and terrain that was off to the east and south side of it, it was a very imposing feature. In fact, the only time that I ever flew anywhere near that I got shot at, and I just didn't see any point in repeating that process. It was .50-caliber stuff and I was in a Cobra at the time. But it just wasn't something that I really wanted to repeat. There was a major component of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that skirted the west face of Tiger Mountain and worked its way down ridgelines not far from Hamburger Hill, and finally down into the A Shau Valley floor. There was the residue of a couple of Special Forces camps there. One of them was at the

A Shau airstrip. There was another one at the A Loui airstrip. That's A-space-L-O-U-I, I think it was. Those were notorious back in the timeframe of '67-'68, they were moribund when we were there. Had no particular interaction with those things at all other than the fact that you could land there if you needed to. There was a gap in the west side of the valley—I mentioned the rivers. There was river flow into the valley from the north and south. They joined just about at the middle right near the A Shau airstrip and broke to the west. There was a big steep walled notch in the mountain range there that let the river flow into Laos. Those were the headwaters of the Mekong River as I understand it. Or at least one of the major tributaries to the Mekong. It was high country, the water was fast-flowing. It was crystal clear on just about any day of the week. A lot of the streams in that region and so forth had gravel bottoms. It was very inviting. You'd see a lot of fish. I don't know—they weren't carp—I don't know what they were. They were fish that were very agile, very quick to move. The rate of flow in those streams was quick enough that we lost more than a few troopers trying to cross 'em. Trying to ford these things, they'd get tangled up and drown. Not in my own unit but it happened to several other units. We had some search and rescue mission related to that circumstance. It was—once you got past the fact that there was a lot of bomb craters in the valley floor, you didn't see much of that in the surrounding terrain, with the exception of Hamburger Hill. It's gorgeous country. It's stark, it's very contrasting, and it's just plain beautiful. It was one of the things that made me think—before I left I had the thought that when this war's over I want to come back and see this. I want to come back and do something here. That, of course, never happened. But that's the way it struck me at the time. It's majestic, it's wild, it's full of tigers. (Laughs) Those are pretty animals even though they like to gnaw on you a little bit. It was full of 'em back then. If you follow the trail of the valley north it kind of—it becomes ambiguous not far north of Tiger Mountain. The terrain morphology changes. You get a different perspective. But at that point you're never far from Khe Sanh, probably twenty-five maybe thirty kilometers to the northwest. That's a land of broad expanses of rolling hills covered with elephant grass. Interspersed with high terrain here and there, particularly as you go into Laos. That stretch up there was where they got into the Operation Lam Son 719 that occurred not long after I left over there. It, too, is beautiful country. Big rivers up there form the boundary between Laos and Vietnam. I

wish there was some way I could be putting some of my slides from my photographs on the wall while we're having this conversation. You'd be able to see what I'm referring to.

KC: Well, when you donate those to the archive eventually we will have them available. How's that sound?

DH: That would be great and I will do that. Actually, my sweetheart of a wife just got me a scanner so I can do that. I'll get that done here in due time. Probably I'm hoping maybe when you see the pictures you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. The mundane did not capture my memory circuits back then but the stuff like Tiger Mountain, oh yeah. It surely did. I go back today and look at Google Earth and I see all of the development and enhancements and agriculture and everything that occurred over there. You see almost no traces of the war at all. The craters are gone it's all rice paddies, it's all villages. Which is as it should be. But the historical archive like we're working on here, and what I have in my closet somewhere in those little boxes of Kodak slides that was the reality I knew back then. Very much a different world.

KC: I think that takes us to a pretty good place to stop for the day, Dan.

DH: It probably does.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [4] of [9]
Date: 11 February 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 11 February 2015. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Hilliard is joining me by telephone from his home in Inglis, Florida. Dan, we left off last time you were discussing your time there. You had just arrived at Camp Eagle and you described the A Shau Valley, kind of the geography, the topography, what's going on. So could you take me through your time there at Camp Eagle?

DH: Sure. It was, I think I touched on this in closing during the last interview segment. We got up there and started getting settled in. What, to me, was a perfectly new environment, essentially. I had been there once about three months prior just for a couple of days or a week or so, something like that. The transition, geographically was a matter of more of everything. The coastal plain in that area was quite a bit deeper than it was around Chu Lai. Probably, and this is just a guess on my part, somewhere between seven to ten miles of low, coastal flatland. Then we started getting into the hill country. It very abruptly converted into mountains, and some of them were quite large. I mean, they had elevations up in the 6,000 plus range. This had an influence on helicopter operations. We start getting density altitudes, which is a pressure altitude corrected for temperature. When you get DAs that are above, at or above 4,000 feet, the helicopter starts straining a little. They can't carry as much load, particularly if you're gonna be doing hovering out of ground effect like a Huey might over treetops when they're doing a snatch with McGuire rigs. Or jungle penetrator in the case of a medevac. Or if you're repelling troops into the ground instead of maybe the standard load of seven grunts that you'd put on one of these things, you'd have four. It compounds the difficulty of your operations quite a bit. When we were—had a mission of that sort, we were very much tuned in to the terrain elevation we would be working in. That was central to planning for the number of aircraft, how much of a load did it take, and so forth. On occasion, they would take off—if they had the option they would take off with reduced fuel. That was problematic because usually they would top off when you finished a mission, but if they knew

something was coming up, of course, they might not. The southern extent of our area of operations, and that would be for B Troop, was the Hai Van Pass on the south. That was a costal escarpment between Da Nang and the rest of I Corps northbound. An area where the coastal plain pinched in very sharply. I don't think it was much more than a mile, mile-and-a-half across before you hit the South China Sea. The south—err, the west face of that was a mountain called the Bach Ma. B-A-C-H M-A. It's an interesting thing to look up on the Google browser. They have a national park there now, it's a beautiful place. Used to be an old French resort on top of it. But anyway, had the QL-1, which is the main north/south highway went all the way up Quang Tri. That hugged the very threshold of the foothills to the west. They had a rail line whose primary job I think, was minesweeping because they used to get blown up frequently. They had always ran that thing for the locomotive in the rear of all the cars. Camp Eagle was located couple of miles to the west-northwest of Phu Bai. They had an airbase there and had the Charlie Troop of 2nd/17th Cav was based there, as well. Just south-southwest by a couple or three miles from the city of Hue. It was all very, very low rolling hill country. Probably elevation change within the perimeter of Camp Eagle was, I don't know, thirty, forty feet here and there. You know, it was easy walking and everything. Had some more quasi flatlands between there and the Perfume River. Which flowed south of Hue going into the mountains it jogged a little bit to the southwest. Then meandered—and all of its tributaries all the way out to the eastern rim of the A Shau Valley. We had multiple firebases in that area, some of which were active, some which were sporadically active. Many of them were—I never saw them in use. Birmingham and Bastogne were the two biggest ones, they had eight-inch and 175 millimeter guns at those. They were open all my first tour. They were actively participating in the war. At Bastogne they had 175s and they could reach close to the western rim of the A Shau Valley with those guns. They weren't terribly accurate at that distance. I think, probably if they could get within 100 meters of a designated target they were doing fairly well. If they fired enough rounds, of course, they would hit it eventually. The eight-inch guns were unbelievably accurate. I mean, at the maximum range it would take maybe one or two shots and they could bust a bunker for you without too much trouble. The terrain to the south of the general area of Birmingham tended to, oh, I don't know, we'll call it low mountainous terrain ridgelines,

rolling tops, real violent landscape. We had firebases down there at Rifle and—which was one of those that was open intermittently, and a few others down the line. That was a region that we never spent much time in. I mean, there was sporadic incidents. It was an area that we used to patrol on what we would call a last light mission. It was basically—it was to go out and patrol for—in search of somebody setting up rocket launchers for the 122 millimeter rockets that they used to fire at us sporadically. Not long after we got to Camp Eagle—and I think I'd have to check my diary, but I don't think it was very long after we had returned. We had a rocket attack one night. Well, late one afternoon, about chow time. They happened to drop one of those rockets on the mess hall for the 326th Engineers, which was adjacent to B Troop. I don't remember the casualty list, but there was a lot of fellows killed there and a lot more injured. I think the total tally was somewhere in the twenty-five to thirty injured and perhaps a third of that number killed. I don't remember precisely but they hit it right at the right time. Did that. We had other rocket attacks over the time I was there. Sometimes they would shoot long and they'd go all the way over. If we could hear 'em coming over and they would impact on the other side of the perimeter and blow up a rice paddy or something. They never were terribly accurate but if you happened to win that lottery it was gonna hurt. There were very powerful warhead on those things. The flight out to the A Shau Valley, which was—dominated our area of operations and our attention for a lot of reasons. It was about, I'm going on recollection, twenty-two to twenty-five kilometers. We would follow the road that went past Birmingham where we had a refueling point, and then Bastogne. You'd just—it was a dirt track that wound through the mountains and we just followed that out to the valley. You'd make your entrance into the valley overhead Firebase Rendezvous, which was not active during my time there. At that point you had an elevation advantage—a terrain elevation of about 12- to 1,500 feet over the valley floor. You could see what had been the A Loui Airstrip in the A Shau Special Forces camp airstrips down to the south. There may have been one other. I don't remember if that's the case or even what the name of it had been. But there was a couple of old dirt strips there. We typically worked to the south a lot in the valley, occasionally up to the north. Directly on the west of the valley from Firebase Rendezvous was Hamburger Hill. That was very close to the Laotian border. More to the point, the mountains overhead Rendezvous heading west.

The mountains to the right on the east rim such as Eagle's Nest and—I'm starting to think there was another one or two up there, Berchtesgaden was of 'em. They were very, very high elevation firebases. I mean, they're way up in the clouds. For that matter they were very easily defended because of the nature of that terrain. It was very steep to approach them. They had a pinnacle top that makes it tough on infantry, easy on the defenders. That kinda thing. A little bit to the northeast of there was Fire Support Base Ripcord. It was developed later in my tour, and over which the last great land battle in Vietnam was fought by American troops. I'll get back to that a little bit later on. Suffice to say it was a severely battle scarred piece of terrain. B-52s rained their weapons over the valley and the environs on a frequent basis. A lot of what they did was precipitated by intelligence reports that we passed on. What we called a spot report. Where I'm out flying around and I find bunker complex and report it. That goes back to operations, which in turn sends it up to Division G-2 who sends it to somebody else in USARV (U.S. Army, Vietnam) Headquarters in Saigon. Someone decides, "Let's bomb that place." Then here comes the B-52s. We also had a great deal of synergy with Air Force forward air controllers, who I never had quite figured out the magic of they worked. But very frequently they would monitor our frequencies. They'd never say a word unless they thought maybe we needed some help. Or they had a mission that had been scrubbed in Laos or North Vietnam or someplace, and these guys were returning with ordnance and they were looking for a place to drop it. Sometimes they'd just call up out of the blue and say, "This is Bilk-22. I have a section of F-4s with ordnance. Do you need 'em?" or you know, "Are you having trouble with this guy? Can we make a big hole in the ground where he used to be?" Something like that. It was kind of—I can't recall any times when we actually went searching for tac air. More often not, they found us when we needed it. Very beneficial thing to have handy. Obviously one or two people shooting a Loach with AK-47s was something Cobras could deal with. If there were .50-caliber machineguns in the mix it started getting a little more dicey. If there was two or more of 'em, or if there was a battalion of troops on the ground or something like that, then having tac air was a real good—it was a nice asset. We liked it because I don't recall that I ever took a round of fire after a tac airstrike.

KC: Well, let me ask you this, Dan. How would you coordinate something like this? Say that you've got troops in contact, you've got a forward air controller with say, some F-4s, you know, on station or nearby. How would the coordination for this sort of thing—take me through an instance.

DH: This is a little bit of a mystery to me. I have general understanding of how it worked. We did not have VHF radios, the FACs and the Cobras did. My radios were UHF and FM. FM was dedicated to working with ground troops, and the UHF for talking to the Cobras. But more often than not, when something like this would develop the announcement that I would hear from the Cobras, "We have a FAC on station. He's bringing in tac air." I never knew exactly how that transpired except that sometimes they were monitoring our frequency and they would offer a package for delivery. Or the Cobras had special operating instructions which was a code book and a frequency list for various assets. They could reach out to a FAC and see if somebody was on station if they needed help. We didn't carry those. I didn't have the ability to do it so it was not something that was front and center in my palate of options, if you will. In any case, flying like we were, single pilot, low altitude, I wouldn't have had time to do that stuff anyway. The general premise on an airstrike, when one of those came to the fore was that we knew they were coming. Flight lead would brief, or something to that effect. On occasion I would get the frequency that the FAC was on and I could listen to the conversation. But basically they would assume leadership role of the mission for the purposes of that strike. They would identify the target to the fighters, usually with a white phosphorus rocket. They would tell reference to where that white puff of smoke was, where they wanted the ordnance. They would define an inbound azimuth for the fighter strike package. They might say something like, "They'll be inbound on a 270 radial from the target," meaning they're gonna approach from the west to the target. The minimum descent altitude, the direction of their break when they're going to execute that after they drop their bombs, and their orbit altitude if they would be holding on station. What we did with that information was avoid those particular quadrants. We would—if they were coming from the west with a right break after a bomb drop, we would hold up to the north. Or modify that as necessary to fit the situation. While we were flying in Chu Lai, I came stunningly close to having a midair collision because of confusion over those

issues. Had a Marine F—or A-4, rather, pass close enough that I could count the rivets on his cockpit. It was unbelievable. I think he was probably within about twenty-five feet of us when he went behind. He was sitting there with his oxygen mask undone and he had his aviator glasses and he was kinda looking at me when he went by. I was just like—going, "Wow." He's doing 450 knots and I'm 80 pedaling as fast as I could—a competition. Anyway, the ordnance load varied a lot by aircraft. The A-4s were ordnance challenged. They didn't have a lot of weight bearing capacity. The A-7 Corsairs, the Corsair II, could carry a heck of load. The F-4 could carry a big load. I think both of them were up in the 14—12-, 14,000 pound range for ordnance. The A1-E Skyraiders, they carried a pretty handsome load. The thing that was nice about the Skyraiders is that they were slow and they had a lot of loiter time. They had cannons, they had bombs, they had all kinds of toys to dispense with. But they could stay on station for a long time. In support of troops, in support of us, that was a very valuable asset. You asked about close air support with friendly troops. That was a problematic issue with the—generally with the jet fighters. They had all their ordnance, their high explosive ordnance, has a casualty producing radius which is sometimes absolutely amazing. It is measured in terms of hundreds of meters for the larger bombs, the 500- and 750-pound general purpose bombs. That's based on point of impact for the ordnance. The fact of it is that most of those aircraft were not terribly precise in their bomb placement. Some of them—A-4s were more of an area fire weapon. I don't know why, but they just scattered ordnance everywhere. The F-4s, when they were—when they had been in country a while, could be very, very accurate with placement of their ordnance. Sometimes they were, sometimes they weren't and it just depended, I think, on experience. The A-6 Intruder could drop a bomb in your back pocket. It was more of a dive-bombing platform than a—just dive and drop and pull out kind of thing. I don't know that I ever saw an A-6 drop a bomb that wasn't within twenty meters of where he wanted it to go. It was just a stunning aircraft in that role. But you get back to the problem of the ordnance they're delivering. We had Cobras that would deliver friendly fire—or not friendly fire, that's not the term. Close air support, if you will, to friendly troops on the ground. That sometimes, within ten meters, and I'm talking about minigun fire, later on 20-millimeter canon fire. I've seen on a few occasions when the friendlies were in fighting positions, foxholes, if you will. Where we

would deliver rockets with that proximity. They were rockets with the ten and seventeen pound HE (high explosive) warheads with quick fuses, not the VT (variable time) fuses that basically gave you an airburst. But, the fighter jet—the tactical fighter jets and troops were not the right combination for close air support. They just had to back off. Those bombs, you know, either one of them could go off 200 meters from you and it probably wouldn't hurt you. But they're slinging chunks of steel that weigh three, four, five pounds at very high velocity, and it's not a risk that's worth taking—friendlies. So, I'm not sure what I could add to it. They never used napalm for close support. They carried a lot of that stuff. I'm not sure what else to say at this point about it.

KC: No, no, no that's great. I didn't mean to interrupt the flow of the narrative there but I thought it would be interesting. Because I've interviewed a number of forward air controllers, and obviously guys on the ground. But I kind of wanted to get your perspective on the record of what it was like to be in the middle of this. How the coordination was going on and you've given me a very thorough description of that.

DH: Well, I think the coordination thing is—you know, that's pretty much covered. The one thing I want to add to that now that I think about it, the command and control aircraft we have in the unit wasn't always flying. But when it was they had a radio suite that was impressive. They even had a forward observer whose ostensible purpose was artillery coordination. But he had a bank of radios that he probably could have to talked to everybody including Jesus at one point or another if he's so inclined. They could whip up all kinds of activity in very, very short order. To include getting a division level brigade commander or even the commanding general on the phone. That became very pertinent later in my first tour. I mentioned Ripcord earlier being the last big ground battle we fought over there. Sometime before that, I don't know exactly when, I'm thinking it was maybe December, January '69-'70, somewhere in there. An operational policy came into being that we were to take all measure to avoid starting large scale ground battles. Of the ilk of, oh, Hamburger Hill or the Ia Drang Valley. They did not want to do that. It meant that while we may insert our blue platoon to secure a downed aircraft, or the crew, or both. They weren't likely to get large scale reinforcements if there was any other option. They were doing everything that they could to avoid, you know, large scale ground engagement.

KC: Do you think that was a result of particularly Hamburger Hill and the negative press it received in the U.S.?

DH: I think it was more a result of standing back a little bit and letting heavy firepower deal with the problems rather than expending lives. I think there was a policy shift underway in the management of that war and what we were doing. They were trying to cut down on casualties on our end and generally speaking, it worked. The other side of it was that it made—well, it caused us to shift from having just like a heavy pink team on a recon in the early part of the war was routine. In the latter three or four months I was over there, they typically had a Huey flying with them as well. They had McGuire rigs set up in the thing. Their purpose there basically was to snatch a downed crew. To get 'em out as quickly as possible without having to commit troops to a ground engagement. I got involved with one of those personally, right at the end of my first tour. But I wasn't the only one. It happened quite a few times. I'll tell you about that story a little bit later on. The only thing that's constant in combat is change. It's always—everything is always evolving and it's not just on a tactical perspective. But it's operational, policy, and—just all the things that you do. To give you a little bit of an insight on that, I mentioned during the last interview segment that we went for, you know, some period of time after we got back to Camp Eagle with nothing much exciting happening. Very little. I mean, we were out flying missions at A Shau, and yeah, there was a couple guys that got shot at here and there. Maybe a hole in the chin bubble or something like that. But there was nothing really intense about it. It was a paradigm shift from our experience down at Chu Lai where we were just getting shot at constantly by everybody all the time. I mean every day. So it was almost like a vacation. As this proceeded in time, we started taking more fire and more concentrated fire. It was not as frequent as it had been in Chu Lai, but the trend was upward. Part and parcel of that was the things that we were seeing out there. Even though we worked primarily in the A Shau, we would occasionally would wind up out around Khe Sanh, or even up around the DMZ (demilitarized zone) to the north and west of Khe Sanh. We'd start seeing vehicle tracks on these road networks that ran through the valley. Or in and around the A Shau Valley, up around the Khe Sanh plain area. You see vehicle tracks and you go, "Whoa, somebody's got a truck." Then you'd see tread tracks and say, "Oh, somebody's got a tank. Oh, boy." We start finding

camouflaged revetments along these roads. This is where they would go—they would move during the night and they would put their vehicles into camouflaged storage during the day time. That worked in—to a degree, in concealing them from our visual recon if they maintained their camouflage. I think it probably—it might have worked with forward air controllers to some degree. It did not work against acoustic, or seismic sensors, which we had sensor strings everywhere out there. So, if they sent us out to look for vehicles in a certain segment of road network of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, there was reason to believe that there was something there. Know that we would focus on it pretty hard. One of the items that occurred later in my first tour, not far from Hamburger Hill they had an AC-130 Specter gunship jumped a convoy of vehicles on the western edge, the western rim of the A Shau, between Hamburger Hill and Tiger Mountain. I don't remember the vehicle count, but it was up in the thirty-five, forty, forty-five range, or something, that were destroyed. They caught them on a razorback ridge. They busted the lead vehicle and then got the back one and there was no place for them to go. They just basically, just one at time, just shot 'em up and that was that. We had a lot of fording activity on the streams and it was really easy to see where that was going on. But this was something that transitioned from nonexistent when we first got back to Camp Eagle, to suddenly a very serious issue as I was getting ready to leave, or come back to the States at the end of that tour. Right after—just to set the framework on this, perspective if you will. Right after I departed country, we had the Cambodian Incursion. I mean, it was just a short while after that. We had that, and then just—I was gone, I was out of country, or back in the States for a year and then I came back. Just before I came back on the second tour had Operation Lam Son 719, which was launched generally out of the area of Khe Sanh to the west into Laos. Both of those were significant media events, and they were significant from a combat perspective. What we were seeing, the ramp of activity in the A Shau Valley before I had left, reflected on the growing resources that were being funneled into Cambodia in the early stage and then in to Laos and northwestern South Vietnam. Which lead to Operation Lam Son 719. We saw tracked vehicles in country before I left in the daytime, nakedly exposed carrying 23-millimeter antiaircraft fire. When I saw those things they didn't shoot at us. I said, "That's fine with me," we left. You know, you pass the data then somebody sends a section of B-52s to visit 'em. That's

how we dealt with that kind of stuff. One of the real epiphanies that we had over there—and this was some time in the, I'm thinking February timeframe 1970. Was out flipping around out in the valley and I wound up, with the Cobra team, we wound up with two .50-caliber positions northeast of Hamburger Hill. The Cobras were engaging one, I wound up engaging the other. You know, everything worked out in the end, but in the process of all of that, using smoke grenades to identify targets, a fire got started in the elephant grass there. You have to see elephant grass personally to appreciate what it is. It's stuff that can be eight to ten, twelve feet tall. It's very lush. It's just big, giant grass. If you get a match it burns ferociously. Enough that I wound up flying through a fireball that I wasn't expecting as a result of that. But, we burned off, quite accidentally, about probably a couple thousand acres that day. The Air Force was complaining because they couldn't see their targets because of all the smoke and they asked us not to do that until the end of the day in the future. What we uncovered was amazing. We uncovered so many .50-caliber antiaircraft positions, it was a little scary. Camouflaged vehicle revetments, even a vehicle was found following that. This was all exposed the next day. You got and all that stuff is charred and black and you're seeing all this stuff, and you're seeing foot traffic trails through the middle of all the ashes and everything. You realize the magnitude of the activity that's underway on the behalf—or on the part of the enemy. The fact that we really weren't too much aware of that because of the cover that the elephant grass provided. They could walk through that stuff and never be visible. It was just, you know, like an underground subway. Big evolutionary process from day when we got back to Eagle to the very end. We had, oh, I don't know, odds and ends short stories of things that happened along the way. My friend Johnny Sprott and I wound up working an area at the south end of the valley. It was a little—it was like an amphitheater valley. It had a stream running out going to the east. Beautiful country. There was a couple little huts and a couple little cabbage patches growing there. I had been in and out of there several times, he had done the same thing. None of the other scouts in the unit had ever been tasked to operate in that area. I was flying out one day and Johnny Sprott got shot down there doing some of the things that he was prone to do. He had managed to hover down between some trees and get under the jungle canopy with his Loach looking around to see what was going on. He found himself something along the lines of a company-

sized position of North Vietnamese and they started shooting at him. He's sitting there taking it on the chin while he's trying to back out of this hover hole that he just created. He managed to fly off about a couple hundred yards or so before he crashed into the creek. I wound up picking him up and he says, "Oh, Dan, I'm never gonna do that again." I said, "I hope not, Johnny." But I think he got shot down three times before they made him a maintenance officer or something like that. He said, "I don't think we can afford him," the Loaches he was getting shot up or shot down with. We had a—he got shot down, I had the only aircraft that could get to him because this little creek flowed through such a narrow chasm. I wound up actually landing about twenty feet from him and balancing on top of a rock with my belly in the water. Got out, and I did this without crew, I dropped him off at the infantry that had come to try and get a hold of him, or get him out. They couldn't get in there because the water was too deep. Got my crew off with him, flew in, picked up his door gunner. Flew him back, he was hurt. Johnny—his back was bunged up a little bit and he started to get in the chopper. I handed him a thermite grenade and told him to burn his Loach, what was left of it, and he did. Then he got on and I flew him on out of there back to where the Hueys were picking up the infantry. That was kind of a lighthearted side of things that happened over there at that time. Wound up—I did, I followed some fresh foot traffic one day from the east side of the A Shau Valley down around the A Shau airstrip, all the way over to the west side. They finally went to ground in an old bunker complex that was right up against the base of an escarpment that had a trail running across the face of it. A couple of caves on top of that. I was looking at these troops in their bunkers—actually, they were big pits, they weren't bunkers. Looking at them with one eye, and I'm looking at other North Vietnamese that are watching me from above and then from the cave entrance. Kind of an untenable situation. I left that—you know, I called the enemy locations. The Cobra could actually see the guys that were watching me from the cave mouth above and put some rockets in there and quieted that issue. About that time tac air shows up out of the blue as we were discussing earlier, and they dropped ordnance on the people that were in the fighting positions. I went back and looked at it and I've got uniforms and parts and pieces of packs, underwear and skivvies hanging from tree stumps and everything, so you know, they did what they did. We worked with the 1st Marine Recon a lot in the period around,

I'm gonna say November through January, possibly February. Those guys were unbelievable. Their CO basically told them his policy was, "If you're not bleeding, I don't wanna hear that you have contact with the enemy." You know, that's just his mentality. We had, at any given time, a radio relay team from 1st Marine Recon would be on top of one of the high firebases like Berchtesgaden or Eagle's Nest. They would relay for these teams back to their base of operations. Your typical team was six to seven guys. They would stay out for as much as two weeks at a time. Primarily they're for intel gathering but I don't recall that we ever extracted any of these teams that were not under fire. On more than a few occasions, usually they were under fire. They got away with that for a while. One of the times that they did, and this was a classic maneuver on their part. They were down below—they had a team that was on a ridgeline below Firebase Berchtesgaden and there was a large scale enemy bunker complex upgrade from them. They were sending water boys in the morning down to the valley—down the valley floor to get water for their—whatever you use it for. For, you know, cooking, brushing your teeth, I don't know, whatever they did with it. So they were watching this situation. They set up an ambush, actually in two parts. We were flying out in the morning for the, you know, typical drill to do some recon. They knew that we were coming and they asked us to enter the valley down on the south end. They didn't want to be disturbed. They said, "We'll call you when we need you." I said, "Okay." So we went down the south end to dink around and chased monkeys or whatever we were doing. Then they said, "Okay, we need you." So we went up, and the short version is we provided cover until they got themselves organized. Then our slicks came out and they extracted them. What they had done, was they had dropped down off—down a little bit lower on this finger ridge and ambushed the water boys and that stirred up the hornets' nest. Here comes all the rest of these guys storming down the mountains looking for revenge or whatever it is they wanted. At which time they ran into the large scale claymore ambush that the Marines had set up. That really got them mad. Meanwhile, the Marines had gone back up the hill and gotten in the NVA bunkers and that's about the time that they called us. As we're approaching there we start seeing red smoke and they said, "Shoot our smoke." I said, "You're sure you want us to do that?" They said, "Yeah, we're in bunkers. Shoot our smoke." Well, the North Vietnamese had heard the choppers coming and they turned

around and started heading back to their bunker complex. The timing was flawless. Those guys, those six guys didn't get a scratch on 'em. I don't even know how many of the enemy was killed. It was pretty much a slaughter because they couldn't get in their bunkers because there was Marines in there waiting for 'em.

KC: What size of an enemy force are we talking about here?

DH: I'm sorry?

KC: What size enemy force are we talking about here?

DH: What was put to me at the time, was that it was a battalion sized force. In terms of my understanding of North Vietnamese TOE, that would have been a unit strength of somewhere between 150 and 200. The combination of cunning on the part of Marines, and the firepower on the part of our unit, was enough to just totally take 'em down. They fared very poorly in that particular event. They got to be, the Marines got to be a big enough thorn in the North Vietnamese backside that they brought in dogs to track these guys, to find them. It was effective. We had, over the course of about—memory serves, about two weeks, we lost all but four guys out of three teams. It was never something that was—it wasn't something that was done easily. There was one of 'em, on case where we had—we extracted one Marine that was severely wounded, another one that had minor wounds, four of 'em that were dead. Our blues were involved in the extraction. They went down on the ground, and I think they had something like forty-four dead, North Vietnamese stacked up around their little defensive perimeter. They never went quietly into the night. One of the other teams—in fact, two of the other teams that were lost, all but one guy were killed and was killed in each one of 'em. There was one fella there that—the legend I heard was that he had lost two brothers in the same unit, and he was the third to go. I don't even know what to say about 'em. They were magnificent. They were brave to the point of almost being stupid. They were fearless, there's no question about that. I think that they were unbelievably effective in so many levels. If you imagine what it might take to spur the North Vietnamese to importing tracking dogs from up north to deal with a problem like that, you appreciate how much of a problem it was for 'em. Not far from there, about sometime in maybe March of 1970, there came a fellow who was sitting just to the north of Firebase Rendezvous with a .50-caliber machinegun, and he was good. Somebody could fly over him, 1,500, 2,000, 3,000

feet above him and he'd fire just a couple of rounds and he was hitting people on a regular basis. It was obnoxious, to say the very least. So I got tasked one day with seeing if I could find this fella. Came in over Firebase Rendezvous from the east, from Camp Eagle, got down to low altitude right over the firebase and started working the ridgeline to the north. I don't believe that I had travelled more that perhaps 6-, 700 meters. I don't know that I found the .50-caliber gunner, but I found the whole battalion of NVAs that opened up on me at one time. It was one of those peculiar epiphanies where there was just a wall of tracers around me in all directions. My door gunner, fella name Mathews, was leaning out the side, and I was basically having one of those out of body experiences where time slowed down. I knew in my heart of hearts right there at that moment, that I was gonna get shot down. I've never seen such a volume of fire in my life. I was watching Mathews out of the corner of my eye leaning way out with his machinegun, and it was working in slow motion. People on the ground were dropping in slow motion, and I just kept going and going. Finally they quit shooting. The Cobras rolled in and they did a little shooting, and lo and behold, there was a forward air controller that was listening to this and says, "Hey, can I give you a hand?" It turned out that he aborted—there was a mission profile they called a Skyspot, and it was something they typically did in Laos and similar areas. Where they would—as I understood it, they would fly in under radar control and they would drop their bombs on command, rather than dive-bombing. The problem that they had—they had to have visual contact with the ground. They couldn't drop over cloud cover. I think they got covered with clouds that day and it wasn't working out for 'em so they were heading back toward Da Nang. Had a section of four F-4s fully loaded with ordnance and no place to drop it. Perhaps those guys had flown with the Thunderbirds, I don't know because they went in to target in a diamond formation. They pickled all of their bombs in one time, and created the largest blast that I'd ever witnessed in my life. Went back to look things over after the fact, and again, it was clothing and just stuff scattered in all the treetops and everything else. Didn't take a single round of fire. But it demonstrated a couple of shifts. They were no longer afraid of shooting at helicopters, they didn't have any reticence about doing that. They were building their forces, getting organized for something and we didn't know exactly what. You know, everything was changing, it was evolving. It was getting a little more serious

on a day-by-day basis. Things that we did on occasion for amusement, we'd get in to, oh, I don't know, last light rocket patrol. Or you're out in an area where you never see much activity, and even if there were some it would be difficult to discern. Frankly, it can get a little boring sometimes. You see a bunch of monkeys running across the treetops, well, there's a target of opportunity. We would try and shoot a monkey. I don't think we ever did hit one of them. (Laughing) I have no idea why. But we'd do that. We had a contest amongst the scout pilots to see who it could be that would be the first to shoot down their version of an eagle. They had, I don't know what kind of birds they were, they were a raptor. They were large or as a big as the American bald eagle and we'd see those things periodically. I don't think any of us ever shot one down. It wasn't for a lack of trying, we just couldn't do it. I did wear one out one day and he finally came to rest in tree over a creek. We dropped a concussion grenade in the water under him. It went off and gave him a total complete bath and he just sat there looking at me like, "So what? Is that all you got?" Lord have mercy, it was such a mix of, I don't know, it was a whole panoply of options over there. The things that could happen, or did happen, or might happen if you wanted them to. That kind of thing. Well, we started towards the end of my first tour. I would say that generally speaking, sometime around late January, we had a couple of losses that were kind of tough. We'd had people get shot, wounded. One of our scout pilots, fella name Bill Byers, had actually transferred into the lift section. He wound up getting shot in the lower spine, paralyzed. We had our troop executive officer that frequently flew missions with the scout platoon, name was Dave Livingston. He got shot down out at the east edge of the A Shau not far from Rendezvous. Had a new pilot with him, his name was Blake Shelters. They got shot up. Captain Livingston was shot in the head, they crashed. Mr. Shelters had a smoke grenade in his hand. After they crashed it went off and it was pretty close to his face. He ingested a lot of the smoke that came out of that. They were both evac'ed. I never did see 'em again after that. I am in contact with Dave Livingston at this time on an occasional basis. He's in his seventies, he's still going.

KC: After being shot in the head. So he survived that?

DH: He was headshot and survived it. Little bit unusual to be sure. But he's at least as cranky as I am sometimes so I know he's doing okay. (Both laugh) We had a fella, name was Rick Pinar, he was a scout pilot. It's interesting. I think I mentioned that I

wound up being the combat check pilot for the new scouts. For about the first six months of that experience, none of the guys that I trained ever got shot down. Which means that the guys that I didn't train were really taking it on the backside because they were getting shot down a lot. I think, I would like to think that I had something to do with that. If I did, it went to the extent of the tactics that I taught and not to indicate that I was blessed in any particular way.

KC: Would you care to talk about how you're going to check out the pilots? What kinds of tactics are you teaching 'em? How did it differ from what other guys were receiving?

DH: It's difficult for me to say what the other guys were doing. Except there was a set of pilots, a subset of pilots that never got shot down, just like myself. A guy named Bob Mullins, warrant officer. Another guy named Donnelley, who I had gone to flight school with. He got set back in the class because of an inadvertent discipline issue. He wound up in my unit again. We called them both the "Baby Killers" for two different reasons. One of which is, well, basically neither one of them shaved a day in their life, I don't think. But, what we did, in general terms, is we did not fly aggressively. We flew in a very, very casual pattern. We'd fly sideways, we'd do the same things that most people did. But it was not that kind of thing that looked like we were particularly enthused about anything, weren't exciting. It was just relaxed and doing what we did. If we saw something, we didn't mark it with a smoke unless we intended for somebody to shoot it. We would report it and just kinda keep on moving. We didn't visit the same spot repeatedly to look at it over and over again. If you put yourself in the position of the Vietnamese soldier on the ground and he's watching that, he might be inclined to think that the way I flew, and the way some of these other fellas flew, that we had not seen them. Whether that's true or not is irrelevant. They didn't think they'd been seen so they didn't shoot at us because dropping us in their midst was one way to keep the Cobras from shooting at 'em. The other fellas were a little bit erratic. They did things that would perhaps trigger ground fire. To give you an example, there was a fella named Barnes that—I may have mentioned him previously. He got shot down two or three times one day before lunch, and by lunchtime he was drunk. Congratulations to him. He didn't get hurt but he got shot up frequently on other days, to include having a helmet almost shot

off of his head by a .50-caliber. Thinking he was on fire, trying to abandon ship while it was underway, that's a whole other story. The fellas—to get back to Rick Pinar, he was the first fella that I had trained that wound up getting shot down. He actually got shot down a couple of times. The second time was up at Khe Sanh and it was the latter part of January. Had a fella named Jerry Gauthier fly with him, who was a gunner that I had worked with early in his tour to get him checked on what we were doing. They were out southwest of Khe Sanh and found a .50-caliber position, and Rick, I think largely due to poor judgement on his part, decided he was going to engage this thing. Wound up approaching from a different direction. He did not count on the fact that there was a second .50-caliber machinegun in place and they got him. For whatever reasons, and however this worked out, there was two Cobras. One of 'em had a maintenance problem and had broken station leaving them with just one Cobra and just one scout. The scout was on the ground. The returning Cobra relayed the message that he was—the scout was down. We scrambled and we went back out there. We got held up by weather right there at Khe Sanh, where there was a valley that comes up to the Khe Sanh airstrip, Firebase, whatever you wanted to call it. We were stuck there for a few minutes listening to the Cobra on the other end who was trying to provide cover to the scout pilot. The Cobra was out of ordnance and he was faking it. He was making dry runs on gun positions and just doing what he could to hold down the fort. Fella that I was flying with, the Cobra lead, fella named Scott Kerr. We finally decided that the fellow that was on the other side of the cloudbank needed our help more than we needed to survive. We wound up hovering from one tree to the next just south of Khe Sanh 'til we broke out in the clear, four or five kilometers to the southwest. It was day and night. We went from cloud bases on the ground to sunny, clear skies on the other side. Very quickly saw the Cobra making the dry run. Went in to pick them up, started taking fire. Fabricated an off-the-cuff plan to get in and snatch 'em. I had my crew chief start throwing ordnance and everything. We were trying to shed weight 'cause we were gonna pick up two full-sized men in addition to what we had onboard. I had just—we had just gotten that stuff tossed, and the Cobra lead that had been there by himself, that was out of ammo. Came in and landed right next to the burning Loach and Rick Pinar picked up the gunner who had been shot through the leg and weighed about twice of what he was. Jerry Gauthier was over 200 pounds easy,

6’2” maybe. Rick was about 5’9”, 5’10” and about 150 pounds dripping wet. He picked him up and placed him—while he was over his shoulder he opened the ammo bay door on a Cobra that was hovering on this slope, put him on the ammo bay door and got him comfortable there. Then went over and opened the other damn ammo bay door and climbed onboard, and they flew out like that. We flew along with ‘em. There was a river that divided Laos and South Vietnam up there, I don’t remember the name of it. We flew along that for a while and we got up north to the cloud cover and finally turned in—went into Khe Sanh where we had a medevac waiting and some infantry to reinforce on that. Jerry died a couple of days after that event due to a blood clot to the brain as a result of that shot that hit him in the fleshy part of the leg. It didn’t break any bones or anything but it loosened up something and got to him. That particular area out there spiraled downhill very, very quickly insofar as our sense of security and being comfortable flying out there. This is the place that not long after that, had occasion to see the tracked vehicles. I think it was PT-76 in retrospect, and other vehicles that were armed with .23-millimeter antiaircraft guns and so forth. We quit going out there; just says we’re not that tough and we’re not that crazy. We just wrote that particular area off our list of do’s and don’ts. Or I guess off of the do list. I guess the last thing, the last big item that I recall that was kind of a game changer for me. I got down to the very latter part of my stay over there on the first tour. Kelly, I hope you understand, I’m telling you this stuff and I’ve got so much stuff—so many things flashing through my mind, it’s hard to stay focused on it.

KC: I’m sure.

DH: It was at this point in time when I get in to the February-March-April timeframe. It was getting very wooly again. We were back—not so much at the frequency of fire that we had experienced in Chu Lai, but the volume of it was just stunning. When somebody opened up on us, it wasn’t just a couple of guys. It was a—it was huge. That’s all I can say. I had a short period of time when I flew Cobras front seat. They took me out of the scout platoon and I did that. Flew Cobras for about, I don’t know, a couple to three weeks, something like that. It was kinda fun.

KC: What was the transition like? How did you adapt to it?

DH: You know, it was a couple of little things—I’d pick up a secretarial responsibility, that’s taking spot reports and getting that information back to operations.

Learning how to use a flex turret in the front end of a Cobra was pretty easy. We had a couple of interesting missions. One of which I wound up with a jammed turret, so I was just watching, taking pictures. I'll send you some of those, too. Working out in the A Shau Valley with them, being up there watching the scout fly around and all of sudden seeing that little orange tail stick up in the air and hear him scream, "Taking fire!" I'd say to the guy behind me, "Did I sound like that?" and he says, "Oh, yeah." (Both laugh) Like a little school girl who just saw her first lizard or something. "Aahhh!" But for whatever reason, they had a vacancy open up with the command-and-control bird and I was at a point where I had about maybe a month or less to go. So I flew left seat with a Maj. David Larcomb, he was our CO. I mentioned earlier today about having the slicks fixed up for snatch operations, where we had McGuire rigs and everything else. We went out to—went up the A Shau, had a fellow in the scout bird, his name was Price. A warrant officer. He was an old, old man. He was—he might have been in his thirties.

KC: Wow, that is old.

DH: Yeah, it was. We called him Pappy. Pappy was out there with—had an observer gunner with him, can't think of his name right at the moment. We were operating at about 3,000 feet AGL (above ground level), the Cobras were down below us, of course. All of a sudden we heard Pappy scream on the radio, and by the time I got my eyes on him the Loach was just scattered about a 100 yard track. He'd been shot down. One of the Cobras made a very low high-speed pass, saw that both Pappy and the gunner were alive. They were clear of the wreckage and they waved to them when they went by. Pappy had shaved his head, and when he took off his helmet it was like a bright beacon in the sea of green down there. You could see him from a mile away. So the major and I had a conversation and it went something like, "You know, we could have the 1st Battalion or the 502nd Infantry land here and we could have a grand time." He says, "No, we're not gonna do that. We're not gonna start a big war or something." I'm going, "But aww geez, it's such a perfect—we've got an airstrip right there for 'em." But he was the major and I was the warrant officer and he says, "We're gonna go snatch 'em." So, "Okay." We dropped out of the sky and came in from the opposite direction that Pappy had been flying. We took very light sporadic fire on short final and we got down and settled down in the grass not far from 'em. Both of our gunners dismounted and went to help these

guys out. Pappy had a laceration just above the brow line all the way across his forehead. He was having to hold his eyebrows up out of his eyes so he could see halfway where he was going. Bleeding like you wouldn't believe. The other fella had, I think a broken ankle or something to that effect. He required some help. Got 'em into the aircraft. The major did something that even knowing—he and I have discussed this since then, been in touch with him, as well. He did something that just did not make any sense to me at the time. When he picked up to depart, he flew out over the inbound path of the Loach that had been shot down. I would have been of the sort to turn around and just come out the way we had come in since we knew we didn't get much fire there. But he took that path and it wasn't but a very few seconds after that happened that—the first thing I saw was—I was all hunkered down in the armored seat trying to hide because I knew we were gonna get shot up. I was looking out the right side and I saw a .50-caliber position come in to view. He started dueling with our door gunner who won that particular battle right there, very quickly. He shot both the guys there with the—they were behind the .50. They weren't fifty meters from us at the time. It was a very, very close thing. But everybody else in the world was shooting at us, as well. The Cobras saw this and they started putting down suppressive fire primarily to our right side. There was a couple of them that went off right directly under us. Which I didn't hear those as much as I felt them. They actually kind of boosted the Huey in the air a little bit when they went off. We lost—in the midst of a spray of pieces of instrument panel, and dash, and bandages from the first aid kits and everything, we lost everything in the world of communications in the cockpit. We lost most of our instrumentation. I mean literally the holes are shot up wiring harnesses and everything else. We kept on flying, got out the other side and major's looking at me, I'm looking at him and I don't see any blood. Looked back in the back and everybody else was sitting there and they were pretty much okay. Nobody had been shot. We found out that one of the gunners still had an active radio circuit and we let him do some conversation or communication with the Cobras to let 'em know that we were pretty much okay. We flew to the evac hospital in Phu Bai. I think it was called the 85th or maybe the 84th Evac. I don't recall which. They brought gurneys out, loaded up Pappy and the gunner, took them inside. We flew back to Camp Eagle and parked back at the troop area. Following that particular event, after I had a chance to, you know, settle down

a little bit. I went back and looked at that Huey and in a combination of shrapnel and bullet holes, there was 176 inbound holes in the bottom of that thing, in the sides and everything else. I can't recall precisely how many of them were bullet holes. There was an awful lot of them to be sure. Talking to the Cobra pilots who'd been shooting rockets under us, he thought he'd shot us out of the sky with one pair but he hadn't. Ultimately we all got out of there more or less intact. The Huey was scrapped. They didn't even try and repair it. It had more damage to more systems than they could even deal with at the local level like that. It did not meet the standards required to go to depot maintenance for a rebuild so they basically poured that one on the scrap pile somewhere. That was kind of an experience. It was the first thing that I—first time that I had been in a slick taking fire and my respect for the guys that flew those things, that flew the Hueys and doing the missions that they did went up immeasurably as a result. I flew scouts, we got shot at a lot. We returned fire, we always had the run option. We could always just leave. That's not something that a Huey crew could do when they were on a combat assault they had to sit there and take it. They'd take it going into an LZ and they'd take it coming out of it. They had to maintain integrity in the formation, less they either run into one of their buddies, or divided their fire and their ability to deliver fire in such a fashion that they became ineffective. It was quite an epiphany for me. Save some more of that for down the road because later on I flew slicks quite a bit on my second tour in a couple of different units. The last thing of any particular significance that I recall over there, was about, I'm gonna say it was sometime in early April, and this is a guess on my part. We started getting some activity around what had become Firebase Ripcord. They had just put the firebase into service and almost immediately started drawing interest from the North Vietnamese. Our missions out there were becoming more frequent and more prolonged. We were starting to draw fire. We had a new scout platoon leader at the time, a captain, his name was John Sensing. Just before I left over there he came back from Ripcord one day and had been hit in one of the main rotor blades with a .50-caliber round. Apparently it was an incendiary or armor-piercing incendiary round. About the last three feet of that particular blade—he was hit right behind the D spar and that thing had gone off inside of the hollow cavity of that blade and inflated it like a big sausage. He had an amazing vertical vibration in that thing. We couldn't understand a word he was

saying on the radios. If you, I don't know, get somebody to start pounding on your back at about forty RPM and then trying to say something intelligent while they're doing that, that's what he sounded like. But he came back, landed, and we all went, "Golly, gee." Somewhere in my film files I've got some pictures of that blade. You'll get a chance to see that down the road. It was kinda one of the last big stories that I recall over there. I left Vietnam, from the first tour, I believe it was the last day of April, the first day of May of 1970. Two or three days after that John Sensing was killed at the onset of the battle for Hamburger Hill—or, excuse me, for Firebase Ripcord. He gunner was a fella named Staton, he was a specialist fourth class. I had flown with him. We called him "Cherry" and I'm not sure why. But I flew with him a great deal. He was a good fella. They got shot down and John Sensing was apparently injured but not dead. They were taking ground fire and Spec Staton tried to shield John Sensing's body, or shield him from enemy fire. They were both killed. I found out about this—it wasn't long after I got back. I had a letter from one of the guys that I had flown with over there. Ripcord went on to become a—quite a fandango. It was in a reverse fashion somewhat of a reiteration of Hamburger Hill, only we were at the top of the hill and they were trying to climb up and kick 'em off. Superior firepower carried the day on that one at a great loss. I mean we lost a lot of people in that particular battle. It was probably the, I don't know, it was the apex of the whole idea of not getting involved in major land engagements. The policy thing that I mentioned earlier. They didn't want to do it but they did. They didn't have a lot of options. At that point the Vietnamese were really pressing the target, as it were. But it was, to my understanding, the very last major ground battle that was fought over there. Well, I was gone. I was back in the States and of course the war started changing. A few weeks or a month or so after I got back, they had the Cambodia incursion. Notable of that was the fact that they were opposed to American and South Vietnamese forces involved. They did whatever they did in Cambodia and then following that, and just before I returned for my second tour, they had Lam Son 719. Which on the ground was exclusively South Vietnamese forces, and in the air almost exclusively Army and Air Force assets. That would be a story probably for the next segment we have. I'll reserve that for later on.

KC: Yeah, sure. I would like to approach it that way. I do have some questions here about your first tour. Just to wrap up your first tour for the remainder of the time that we have today. One question that I don't believe I've asked you yet is about R&R. Did you get an opportunity to take an R&R?

DH: Bless you for asking about that. Yes, I did. I had forgotten all about it but, yes. October of '69, I think it was, I spent a week in Hong Kong.

KC: Why Hong Kong?

DH: That was an interesting experience. Being a much—being in the midst of an Asian population and not carrying a gun was unusual, to say the least. I enjoyed it, it was a novelty. I bought myself what then was state of the art Nikon 35 millimeter SLR and a couple of telephoto lenses. Got to take a nice hot shower and sleep on clean sheets for six nights running, which was unusual. It was a pleasant rest but—to just be out of a combat zone for a week. Sometime in the spring of—late winter, early spring of 1970, I took a second R&R to Sydney, Australia. I like Sydney. I like the people there. There was nothing to not like. It was quite a bit different from life in the United States, from a just day-to day-perspective. They had—we have a store that has many retail presentations. It could be like—you take Walmart, there you've got the grocery store inside of it, you've got the pharmacy, you've got the sporting goods, your gardening department, all these things. At that time in Australia, every business had its single focus and a single location. You would go to a camera shop if you wanted film, or you would go to a dairy story if you wanted a dairy product. Or, a clothing store if you wanted clothing. They didn't blend 'em the way we do over here in this era, or even the way we did back then. The people were quite congenial. I found the water at the beach because I was surfer boy. I tried to get in the water at Bondi Beach and it was ice cold. I wasn't doing that. We flew back—going to Australia from Vietnam, you wind up landing in Perth and you have to wait for the sun to come up before you fly on across the country. I don't know if they're still doing that. They just didn't allow commercial operations at night. So we landed at Perth and there was some Australian chopper pilots, actually, that were on the flight. They treated us to some beer and, god, that Australian beer is strong. It was—I don't know what the proof of it was but it was good beer. It was about two or three times stronger than American beer. They sell it in liter bottles. What a bunch of monsters those

people are. You can't hardly get around 'em without getting drunk. Sydney was a beautiful place then, I assume that it is today, as well. I don't know that it has changed much. As I said, I really enjoyed the people. It was, well, I would have been happy to just stay there. But I went back. You've sort of heard most of the story previously.

KC: Yeah. All right, now we're working toward the end of your tour and you're a short timer. One of the questions that I like to ask the folks that I interview is, how does that figure in to your day, your existence there, being a short timer? Is it something you're very cognizant of? Is it something that affects the way that you go about your business every day? What's life like for a short timer?

DH: I'm not sure that had a lot of impact on me. Frankly I'm not sure it bothered—or it wasn't something that other pilots or enlisted men dwelt on very much. When I was moved to the gun section, it was not done because I requested it. It was typically what they had done for people that had been there for most of a tour. Okay, you got to t-minus two months, or t-minus six weeks or something like that, you've had enough of it. You're out of the scout platoon, go shoot something up with a Cobra, or something like that. You know, just to get you outta that high-risk environment. It was something new, there was a little challenge to it. Different perspective, yeah, I enjoyed that. There was some funny times with that stuff, too. Got into the Huey thing with, you know, flying C&C. That was only a couple, maybe three weeks at the tops. It was very, very brief. But it was a transition. It wasn't something like, "Oh, my god. I survived the scouts and now I'm gonna do this, and then I'll be going home soon!" You just didn't think about it that way. I'm not sure I can explain it. It was just, you know, a little bit different business. Another day and just keep on going. We didn't have, during my first tour, we did not have anybody that fell into the category of, "Gee, he was going home tomorrow and he got shot today and killed." Didn't happen while I was there. I think we all knew that we were vulnerable anytime we were in a helicopter. Or, in the mess, for that matter. So, you're either in that environment or you're not. I can't say that everybody was immune to the short timer mentality thing. I'm sure there was some of that but it wasn't real obvious to me and it wasn't the way I thought about it at all.

KC: Take me through the process by which you leave Vietnam. When do you start to get your paperwork? Where are going to be leaving out of? Take me through the process of leaving.

DH: Somewhere along the way orders showed up and it says basically, you're gonna go to some detachment. In this particular case I left through—I left outta, I wanna say I left outta—this is interesting. I'm pretty sure I left out of Tan Son Nhut down at Saigon. I'm not sure if it was there or Da Nang at this point. I think it was Tan Son Nhut. Anyway, you get the orders and you get on a C-130 to Phu Bai and fly down to wherever you're going. There's something that's akin to barracks. Concrete block structures, up floors—upstairs, downstairs. Bunch of fellows you've never seen before, they're going through the same drill. I don't recall that we spent a lot of time there, maybe one night. You get a hot shower, get cleaned up, get on a jet, and go. I don't recall any particular debriefings or anything of that nature. They did—well, they didn't even check our baggage. Which is one of the things that was odd to me. When I came back to the States I had a duffle bag—probably weighed close to 100 pounds just full of all kinds of junk and it was never inspected. Like coming through customs. I could have brought back a couple of RPGs or whatever and I'd have been right on through with it. The most significant things that I remember about the return home, first, I may have told you about this during the last segment, I was sitting on a piece of railroad tie waiting for the plane, the C-130 to go south. I'm sitting over at Phu Bai. Plane finally showed up and tailgate drops down, people start getting off. I'm looking at a couple of, I don't know, a couple dozen fellas, they're all pasty white. They've got green uniforms, no fade or anything, sweating bullets and they come walking across the ramp. They finally clear out and there's two more that lag back behind 'em, and as they're walking off the plane behind the gate, a couple of guys are heading to get on the plane. Which is about where I was—I was about to get loaded up, too. I had the presence of mind to take an image as they passed—take a picture as they passed. They two guys that were leaving were about as big around as a pencil. They were walnut brown. They had the 1,000 yard stare in their look. Their fatigues were all kind of red from the clay that permeated the water that was used when they were washing clothes over there. It was such a contrast that one year could make in somebody. I knew full well when I was looking at this scene, is the plump little boys that

just got off the airplane are gonna look like the walnut sticks when they leave a year from now. So I took a look at me, I was one of those walnut sticks myself. I got on the plane and went home. The second thing, was when we were getting ready to take off, we—you get loaded on the plane and you've got a bunch of GIs that were there for a year. Maybe a little nuts, certainly want to be home. A lot of talk and gabbing going on and everything, finally they buttoned up the aircraft, the engines starts, and it get very, very quiet. I mean deathly quiet inside that jet, it was a DC-8. We taxied out, got to the end of the runway and we're sitting there waiting for a few minutes. Then finally, obviously we got clearance for takeoff. Taxied into the runway and they gave it the power and we're going down the runway, and except for the engine noise, it was still perfectly quiet in the aircraft. Nobody was—everybody was holding their breath, I think. As they do, somewhere down the runway the nose came off the ground, and then the main gear came off the ground, and we let out a cheer they probably heard in LA. We were on the way home. Leaving all the sweat and the smells and the blood and everything else behind. Can't say, even though you remember it vividly, can't say that you miss that once you've left it. It's a chapter you don't mind closing.

KC: Interesting that you should say that. The next couple of questions before we wrap up today, Dan. What did you think about the way the war was being fought? I mean, you've been there for a year. You've seen it from anywhere from on the ground to, you know, 2,500-3,000 feet up in the air. What did you think about the way the war was going over there?

DH: That's a fair question. What I had seen over there was that the enemy responded favorably to acts of extreme violence on our part. We did not, while I was there, nor did we ever, lose a set piece engagement with the North Vietnamese. Some were a lot more violent than others, carried a great deal more casualties than others. But when we decided to put our foot into it, and have an argument, and fight it to the conclusion, we always prevailed. I was in the Air Cav, violence was our business. It seemed to work. It had cost, if anything, I would have been kindly disposed to the convenient and well directed use of tactical nuclear weapons over there. I did not think that the piecemeal efforts that had been choreographed by Lyndon Johnson were the way to go. The biggest perspective that I had over there was that we were being

inappropriately constrained enacting and prosecuting that war. Put another way, we had the military power to bring it to a close but we weren't doing it for political reasons. I resented that greatly. It was costly in lives both on our side and theirs. Killing people just for the exercise is no way to do business, as far as I'm concerned. We had, I don't know if this is actually fair but it was a perspective, Vietnamese were not as sophisticated as we were. Militarily, technology-wise, I can't say philosophy. They're smart people. They think just like we do. But we had the means to prosecute the war that they did not. I was convinced when I left at the end of the first tour, that ultimately we would prevail. Even with what I thought was a misguided way of engaging the conflict. I had thoughts at the time that I would very much like to come back to South Vietnam after the war was over, just to spend some time and see it like a regular person. Instead of as, you know, a warrior. Of course, that did not happen. The truth as I saw it was perhaps best illustrated by what happened just before the peace accords were signed in '73. This comes to the point of what did we do? We cut off their supply lines, we blew bridges coming out of China. We blockaded their ports effectively, and they lost the means to win the war by any approach. They didn't have the tools to do it. One of the intel reports that I saw over there before I left, as a result of the operation—I think it was Linebacker II, the 52 campaign in North Vietnam. By the time I left over there, they had—the North Vietnamese had twelve surface-to-air missiles left in their inventory. Twelve rockets. That's what they had to fight the air war with. None of their antiaircraft guns would reach the altitudes the B-52s were operating at. So we basically had totally air superiority in every regards. The essence of what that did is this, "Well, maybe we can't beat 'em now but let's go ahead and sign off on this thing and get them out of the way and then we can do something later on." Because they knew that they could not defeat us in the mode that they were in. Whether or not we defeated them was up to us entirely. I think Nixon, despite his shortcomings, and the things that got him wrapped up politically later on, had enough sense to recognize that we did have the power to bring that thing to a conclusion. Whether it was successful or not is a matter of historical perspective. But he did bring it to a conclusion, something that Lyndon Johnson was not going to get done on any day of the week. It just wasn't gonna happen. For that, I'm thankful to Richard Nixon for getting us out of there. I firmly believe that if you're not in, you know, if you go to war without

the intention of winning, you need to be put in jail or something. I don't know what else to say.

KC: No, that's great. It takes us to a—

DH: Hang on just a second.

KC: Well that's cool, it's probably a good time to stop for today anyway, Dan.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [5] of [9]
Date 11 March 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 11 March 2015. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Hilliard is joining me by telephone again from his home in Inglis, Florida. Dan, last time we left off we were brining you home from Vietnam. You talked about, you know, being a short timer, some of the different things you were doing before you left. Different assignments that you were doing, flying with Cobras a little bit, and bringing you home. So, you're on the plane. You said, you know, the screams of—the hollering of the guys on the plane could have been heard in Los Angeles, I believe you said, once y'all got off the ground and out of Vietnam airspace. So let's pick up the story there. You're coming home on this flight, pick up the narrative there, please.

DH: Sure, Kelly. The flight back was certainly uneventful. We did one thing that was kind of peculiar to me. We landed on Wake and refueled there. We also refueled in Hawaii. I don't know why we had that intermediate stop, but it probably had something to do with the load of all that stuff—and headwinds or something of that sort. We went in to Oakland, of all places. That kind of surprised me, I really didn't know what to expect. We landed in Oakland—I had been largely detached from the peace movement that was underway in this country. Hell, I was thousands of miles away, and we knew about life in the US of A was filtered through the *Stars and Stripes*. AFVN (Armed Forces Radio, Vietnam) on the AM dial was largely all of our media feed in Vietnam. But we got back, pulled up to the gate, and started to unload. There was—I don't remember what it was. I had two bags, one of them was a duffle that probably weighed eighty pounds, the other one was just a carry-on. I came walking off the plane and head up is one of those articulated boarding gates that are pervasive now. They were kind of a new innovation at the time. I got about halfway up the ramp heading to the other gate for my connecting flight back home and was confronted—and I use that term mildly, more barricaded than anything, by a group of four Hare Krishnas. That was a novel sight to me. I had never seen the—I had been aware of 'em but I had never seen these folks in the flesh before. I was marching fairly fast going up the gangplank, as it were, and they kind of formed a

line abreast as if to stop me for conversation, which I was not interested in doing that so I just kept walking. They didn't yield so we kind of had a collision of sorts. Two of 'em wound up on their backsides sitting on the ground—or on the floor. I didn't even break stride, I just kept going. There was a lot of psychobabble in the background as I moved on down. That was my welcoming party back to the great US of A. I still chuckle about that when I think about it, it's not often. I made it to the next gate and got loaded up. My connecting flight—it's kinda curious how these things work. I went from Oakland to Chicago and somehow or another I managed to sleep for almost all of that flight. I woke up after we landed in O'Hare and don't remember a whole lot more about that. Picked up the next flight down to Atlanta, and from there to Orlando, and finally got a flight back to what was then the Melbourne Regional Airport on the east coast of Florida, there by Cape Kennedy where my folks lived. It was, as I recall, it was late afternoon when I got home but I'm not real clear about that at this point. Nonetheless I called my parents and they came out and picked me up. It was just a few miles from the airport. We had a, you know, a bit of a reunion of sorts.

KC: Can you describe that reunion for me? Your dad was a career military man, and of course, your mother was (unintelligible) reticent.

DH: (Speaking at the same time) Well, it was—I think in the main it was the—my dad wasn't terribly effusive. He was certainly pleased to see me back out of the zone. He was a very staid fellow, he didn't—he wasn't given to outbursts of emotion. My mother was quite a bit more effusive than that. We had a day or two of, you know, "Glad you're home," "Glad to be homes," and just general conversation. Few story tellings. I didn't get into the deep details of what I had been doing with mom at all. Had shared a little bit of that with my father. Shortly after that—they were actually, at the time, they were still living in Air Force family housing associated with Patrick Air Force Base. What was called Capehart and it was just a few blocks from the beach which is where most of my network had existed before I joined the service. In relatively short order, I looked up some of those people and suffered my second epiphany on my return. Is that they were still—they still had a small town surfer boy and girl mentality. Somehow or another I had taken a more global perspective on life and that was a disconnect that I had not expected. You know people in the form of the last time you dealt with them or saw 'em or, you

know, did any of that stuff, and I had changed a great deal and they had not. It didn't lessen the joy of seeing them again or having discourse with them, or even going surfing, which I did. But I fielded some curious question and one of them, there was a colonel that lived caddy corner across the street from who had three daughters, one of which I never really knew her. She was fair bit older and had already been to college and had a career and a family. And two younger daughters that I had had quite a bit of interrelationships with prior to joining the service. The first thing that one of these gals, the middle aged one, asked me just out of the blue was—I think she said, "Did you kill anybody over there?" I didn't know how to respond to that, I just didn't. It struck me—well, she's blonde and this was before blonde jokes were popular. But that was the question she asked and after some consideration I said, "Yeah, quite a few." She was like, "Oh." It had a—from that point on the relationship was somewhat muted and I never really figured out how to deal with that. It was just one of those odd segues that occurs, I guess. You move forward. I had a thirty-day leave, and in the course of that I ran around with old friends. Visited some of my old haunts, one of them was a surf shop up in Cocoa Beach, it was called Ron John's. I had family in town and the aunt and the uncle had decided to go along on a trip just to see the community while I bought some fiberglass resin to do a repair on a surfboard. I was checking out and there was a fella that worked there and I had known him for a great long while and he knew where I'd been. I was in line and there was mothers and father and kids, and everybody in line. I got up there and he says, "Hey, Dan! How are you doing?" I said, "Yeah, I'm doing good, Ted," and I put the stuff on the counter. He says, "Here, you need one of these for the front of your helicopter." He threw a peace decal at me, one of those peace symbol decals. My response was totally un-choreographed, unplanned, unexpected. I told him to go F himself very loudly. Just like, out of the blue like that I just sat there staring at him. You know, he finished the ring up and everything and I hadn't seen or spoke to him since. I don't know what happened to the guy. But I think it surprised me as much as him that my reflex was that instantaneous and graphic and heartfelt. I was not terribly tolerant of that mentality. I think largely because having been in an air cavalry troop, we were in the broad sense, we were frontline troops. We dealt with the violence of warfare on a daily basis. We paid the costs, they were paid daily. People that presented to the idea of—that could even be

loosely construed as supportive of the other side's endeavor were not well received, in the least. It didn't matter what their reasons for it. In fact, and I can discuss this in depth at a later point in this interview, I've come to have a change in perspective about what we were doing over there and why we were doing it that's quite different than what I had then. It was upfront and personal at that point. People were trying to kill us, we were trying to kill them, and that's about as basic as it gets in life. So, yeah, I had a little polarized attitude, so did some of the other people. I was perfectly willing to tolerate their views as long as they didn't put it in my face. After that sometime just before I left to my next duty assignment as Ft. Rucker, I wound up having a party. All the friends brought together, their parents found something to do with themselves elsewhere, I don't recall what. Had a little party at the house and there was probably a dozen or so people there. Nothing spectacular happened except most everybody got pretty drunk. A day or two later I jumped in the car and headed up to Ft Rucker. That was probably the next significant phase of my experience over there in the Army.

KC: Well let me, before we get you to Ft. Rucker here, Dan. Let's talk a little about this thirty-day leave. This is, you know, you've had very little decompression time coming home. You mentioned that you had changed, that your perspective was global—or a little more global than it had been before, and that there was a disconnect between you and your friends and this kind of thing going on. Could you talk about this change that you believe that you went through? I mean is it something you recognized at the time? Was it something that you recognized over the span of years? What kind of changes were there?

DH: That's an interesting question. I think my recognition of what had occurred was brought to very sharp by the young lady that inquired if I'd killed anybody over there. It was—I'm not sure how to say this. It was almost a lightning rod event because basically I had evolved a lot over the previous year. The question in itself, regardless of my response, the question itself illustrated the magnitude of the transformation that I had undergone. I had not had time to contemplate this, or even the inclination to contemplate what I'd experienced to any degree. My view before I joined the service, in fact even before I went to Vietnam, was I think probably pretty typical of the youth. You're largely naive, not the least bit savvy about politics or global policy, or you know, anything

defense security analysis. You just don't think about those things when you're a kid. You turn around and you go through that cauldron of a year of combat, and you start looking at the larger issues that are at hand. As an example to—and I'm not trying to necessarily be disrespectful to the participants in the peace movement. But it was profoundly obvious to me that there was many things that they did not understand on the front end, about their actions and the implications of those actions, and what it was doing. I've heard it said, as an example, that the peace movement in this country was largely responsible for North Vietnam's tenacity in that conflict. I don't have any way to support that or not. I have seen some quotes attributed to what were then high-ranking officials that have suggested that quite clearly. But, you know, you see this stuff on the internet you don't know if it's true. So you just make a note of it and move on. It was somewhat like, if I were to put a simple wrapping on this thing with a little bow, I would say I went through the uber graduate course level on awareness in a global sense, where the rest of my peers basically sat at home and did nothing. Maybe they went to school, or maybe they got a job or something, but their perspectives had not been substantially altered in the year that I had been away. That's probably the best that I can do trying to explain that. It was a quantum shift, and again, I was totally unexpecting of any—you know, these people I was thinking, you know they (unintelligible) with me, philosophically speaking. It did not occur that way. So call it a big epiphany, if you will. I'll leave it at that.

KC: What about the—you're home for a month. What about the news coverage, or just the things going on in the country that are kind of related to this? Are you aware of this? Are you following what's going on on television between, you know, the anti-war movement, between what's going on in Vietnam? Of course, I use that phrase "anti-war movement," and it's obviously not quite as cut and dried as that. There are people who, you know, support what we're doing but to some limited degree, there's some who support what we're doing wholeheartedly. There are some who had very legitimate questions, and of course you had the radicals. We tend to kind of box them into, you know, the anti-war movement was just this. But of course it was a lot more complicated than that. We have so many people, hundreds of millions of people who have varying degrees in their beliefs. Were you aware of that part of it, as well? I mean, what are you

taking in—I guess is what I'm asking. What are you taking in from Americans at this time?

DH: Well, when I—I think the first thing I recall that was perhaps significant, was the—and I don't remember when this happened or how I became aware of it—was the reference that Walter Cronkite made to the Vietnam War. I believe this was in the response to the Tet '68 offensive. I wasn't in country at the time, I was still in flight school. But he made the comment that the war in Vietnam may be unwinnable on a broadcast. I don't know that—it got stuck in my mind. To me it was a bit of blasphemy when I heard it. But as I mentioned earlier, I went on over there, did the tour. All the news that I got was *Stars and Stripes* and AFVN, and that was actually quite limited in scope and in serving detail. Not that I would accuse the military of filtering our news, but, you know, it was a small newspaper and it was an AM radio, and I didn't get to listen to that twenty-four hours a day. So when I got back to the States, I was basically inundated with the media even though at that time, this was before cable and you had three basic broadcast channels. We had—I don't even remember when it was I owned my first TV. I think it was probably in the late 1980s or something like that. So the TV media was not big in my life. I did read the newspapers a fair bit. The things that perplexed me, if anything, was the appearance at least of the growth of organized protests. I think that lead, ultimately, to the events at Kent State. Which I found—personally I found that very troubling on a lot of levels. It wasn't so much that the people were protesting, even then I—to me it was a First Amendment issue. We're a nation of rights and a nation of laws. I found it very disconcerting that a military force, be it National Guard or regular service, would engage civilians with gunfire. I didn't have—this will strike you as kind of odd, probably, I had more sympathy for the guys that did the killing than the people that were killed. Because the ones that died that day, their problems were over. The guys that were doing the shooting, that lived with that event front and center every day of their lives since then, that's a torture that I don't think anybody would, given a moment to contemplate, would want to inflict upon themselves. But that was a watershed event in the country. It had repercussions, I think, that sharply influenced how the war was brought to a conclusion. Because basically it was one of those things that we can't tolerate this for a helluva lot longer. We're either gonna have to walk away, or contrive a

fashion—or contrive a circumstance where both the sides of the conflict can walk away with some degree of self-respect and move on. As I said, the thing with Kent State, I don't remember what the calendar timeframe was on that and how it related, it's just something that came to mind. The environment that I was in when I got up to Ft. Rucker, it was a very cloistered affair. I mean, Army base, small Army communities, they were all very supportive, if for nothing else, that a great deal of their economy depended on the Army's presence and training programs there at Ft. Rucker. So I didn't see much in the way of protests. The first substantial satire that I ever saw while I was there, was the movie that made a lot of people famous called *M*A*S*H*. I saw that in one of the local theaters. I have to tell ya, I laughed my ass off when I watched that. As goofy as it was, it was funny, and in some ways it was very much spot on about the irony of war and everybody that's involved in it what they're doing. There's so many ways you could play that stuff and they played it funny. It was just like, "Wow." Almost like, "They let them show that somewhere within two time zones of Ft. Rucker?" I was amazed. Anyway, I don't know if that answers your question about the change of perspective or not, Kelly. It was a change I wasn't aware of until I got back and someone without malice and forethought slapped me in the face with it. I realized that things had changed and that I had changed a great deal. Well, I guess that's the nature of life. This stuff will creep on ya from time to time.

KC: I wonder, do you, looking back on it, do you think that your reaction to this was somewhat defensive of, "Hey, here I was in the middle of this. You're protesting it from here and I was there. I don't believe that I was a baby killer. I don't believe that I did these terrible things, and the guys that I was with didn't do these kinds of things." Did you—I guess you would have the years of perspective—

DH: (Speaking at the same time) You know, no, I don't believe—I don't think my response was defensive. I think it was very pragmatic. The reflex I had at the time, when the young lady asked me the question was, you know, what TV channel have you been watching? One. I can't believe that you're not more tuned in to what's going on and where have you been? It was more of a philosophical—I don't wanna say outrage, but it was like I was disbelieving that anybody could have their head buried in the sand that far.

If you stop and think about that for a second, asking somebody if they killed somebody in combat is a fairly bold question.

KC: Yeah, to say the least.

DH: I know a lot of people that did that. None of them tended to dwell on it. I don't care who or where you are, it's a personal event that tends to, you know, it changes you. When you pull that trigger that first time and that happens, it leaves a mark. Some people will make light of it. Some people don't. But the fact is, it's something that you're never gonna forget. You know full well that you did that, that there's some mother somewhere else that's never gonna see their boy again. This girl's question was so simplistic and so naively founded, that I was just—I was basically appalled that anybody could be so uneducated about what was going on there and in life in general. It was just one of those "holy Jesus" moments. Like I can't believe what I just heard. Maybe like asking Hillary, does she think it'd be a better idea to use the State Department's email system, or something to that effect.

KC: It seems like this is kind of a—this event obviously has stuck out in your mind. It's kind of a microcosm, you know, an intense moment of this question, but it's also representative, I think, of what you and a lot of other returning veterans are seeing at this time.

DH: Your choice of words there is very good. Microcosm, it is. I'm willing to bet that—because I don't think that I'm particularly unique in life. But I'm willing to bet that there's a whole lot of other troopers that had similar experiences when they returned. You get a little bit older and a little bit more disconnected from the social network you left behind. You don't hear that kind of stuff down the road, but when everybody's still young and fresh and they've got bubbling with questions and ignorance and everything, you will hear stuff like that. It tends to be a very crystalizing moment when it occurs. I've had similar things happen in other endeavors in life later on. Similar kind of epiphanies, if you will. But I can't recall that any of them were quite as profound as that one.

KC: And, of course, the people that you'd grown to know and depend on for your life, and depending on for your life when you're in combat, this is the kind of question that people that have that kind of understanding would probably not likely ever ask

something like this. So I would image that it really threw you for a loop coming into this, I guess, new kind of old environment and to have this kind of question thrown at you.

DH: (Speaking at the same time) Yes. Yeah, it was the 2.0 edition. I wasn't ready for that one.

KC: Yeah, that's what it sounds like.

DH: It's just one of those things, you know. I think probably everybody has some experience like that somewhere in their lives. I was a bit young when that one splashed me in the face. You know, you go into a combat zone and it doesn't matter where it is, you are, in a way your interests are very focused on a very fundamental need, and that's survival. You're also very isolated even though you're at the—you're on the front page making news in a figurative sense. You're not getting any feedback beyond your immediate circle of comrades and whoever else is around you. You're very, very isolated in a combat zone. One of the oddities of the Gulf War and the things that have gone on in the sandbox in recent years is, those fellas over there have pretty much—they have internet access and they can go back and forth, and they can do Skype and whatever with their family. We didn't have that at all. The first thing that comes to mind, if you wanted to talk to your parents they had—or talk to anybody, they had, I forget what it was called, but they had a phone service you could use over there.

KC: Yeah, the MARS (Military Auxiliary Radio System) System.

DH: Yeah, and the problem was I was there, my folks were here in Florida. There's a twelve-hour difference so if I wanted to talk to them at a rational time of the day or night, I had to make the call early in the day or perhaps very late at night. Their schedule wasn't always compatible with mine and that equipment wasn't always available everywhere I was. I would just go back and say you're very isolated in that environment. You're like living—I could say you're living in your own little fantasy world and I don't think I'd be far off base at that time and that place. You just don't know. You don't think about McDonalds and Burger King, and you don't think about driving on the interstate. It's just a different world.

KC: I think that's a good point that you make there. That as you believed that these folks you're running into, for instance this young lady and the Ron Jon manager or owner, you were believing that they were isolated from what your world was for the past

year. But then again, you were certainly isolated from what their world was the past year. There's going to be friction, probably, I would think. It sounds like—

DH: (Speaking at the same time) Well, there was some of that and there was a lot of 'em that actually tried to understand. There was a fella that was in that group of my old surfer buddies. His father was an Air Force sergeant and cut from the same mold as my dad. He had one brother that was a goofy hippy kind of guy, even in his youth he was just kind of like a goofball. I never paid much attention to him. The older brother who is my friend, his name was Mike Myer. About the time that I came back off the second tour he had joined the Army. Actually, I'm sorry, not the second tour. It was just before I finished my service with the Army. He joined the Army and started out as a private, then he got to staff sergeant and so on and so forth. Somewhere along the way he either got a direct commission or went to OCS or something of that nature. This is my goofy, left behind surfer buddy who finally retired from the service as a brigadier general. Which still to this day just surprises the hell out of me, because I knew him as the goofy surfer boy and I still do. Because I only saw him a couple of times between the date that I joined the service and the date that I separated. His younger brother went on to become a doctor or some kind of scientific discipline. I still can't even wrap my mind around it. I don't even remember what it was but, you know, things change. People do stuff you don't expect. Here old Mike Myer, not to be confused with the TV celebrity, retired as a general. Who'da thunk it? I certainly wouldn't have. He did some time in the sandbox. He did some time—I think he was involved in the Somalia caper to some degree. His MOS (military occupational specialty) was armor. I guess he chose well. So you never know.

KC: Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about in this thirty-day leave period before you move up to Ft. Rucker?

DH: Nah, I think that pretty much covers it. Nothing else comes to mind right at the moment. I got back in May so I got through most—I guess the merry month of May—as I recall, and this is a bad recollection, I had requested—I got in touch with Ft. Rucker and requested a one-week extension on the leave or something like that. But I finally took off and drove north and showed up at "Mother" Rucker.

KC: Right, right. You know, something comes to mind here, just about the dates that you mentioned. You say this is May of 1970, and you'd mentioned before the Kent State occurrence—the Kent State Massacre, as it's become known. The incursion to Cambodia there in 1970, I wonder if you might talk about that. Your understanding of it and what it meant.

DH: God bless you for bringing that up, Kelly. That was the first time I became aware of that. I think was very—just like maybe a day or two after I got home. That was something that started almost immediately with my departure from the first tour. I thought to myself at the time, I said, "Thank God I missed that one." You know, you tend to think logically that people involved in something like that were drawn from the local regions, like Military Region III and IV, perhaps Military Region II. But I don't know that that was the case. I think there was probably people drawn in—units drawn in from all over South Vietnam into that particular endeavor. I watched that one unfold in the media immediately after my return. I don't have clear recollection at this point how long it lasted. But I think it was still underway by the time I reported back to Ft. Rucker. You know, you get the media stories on it, we did not get any briefings or anything at Ft. Rucker about what was going on or what had been accomplished or anything. I knew it was a large scale incursion on our part. I assume that they would have engaged the enemy in many different places and probably disrupted a lot of supply channels, which I naturally saw as a good thing. But I tended to look at it, again as a perspective of this is a battle fought by the people in the southern part of the country against their local problems, being the Vietnamese Ho Chi Minh Trail and all that stuff that went on there. So I didn't have any particular emotional engagement with that, it was just something that I kind of watched and watched it go by. Things settled out, as I recall, it was after I had reported for duty at Ft. Rucker. I kinda watched it go by and didn't have anything particularly invested in it one way or the other.

KC: This is something that, and again, I think it's, like you mentioned, kind of a watershed moment sort of thing. From your perspective, did the incursion to Cambodia make sense?

DH: Well, it did and I'll tell you why. Not only that but later on Lam Son 719. There was a book written by Colin Powell following the first Gulf War, I don't remember

the title of it unfortunately. General Powell was a product of the Vietnam War and he was lieutenant and then I think a captain when he finally returned. But he was in the same position as most of the rest of us over there in that we were fighting what's generally viewed as a limited warfare with very limiting rules of engagement. The byproduct of doing something of that sort is a protracted combat experience for the troopers and for the country. It's debilitating from a physical standpoint and from a social standpoint. It's hard to—for people to be enthused about doing the right thing over the course of a decade or more. They get tired of seeing their friends come home in a box. So General Powell, the point that he made in the book was, if you're gonna fight a war, if the civilian leadership deems it necessary, then what they should do is basically define the objectives of that warfare and turn it over to the military leaders and let them get it done, as it were. The civilians do not understand warfare and any concept familiar to military leaders. To illustrate the results of his thinking, he was the commander of the Joint Chiefs during Desert Storm, he got his marching order from George Bush, the first president obviously, and Bush, Sr., stood back and said, "You take care of it." They did a big buildup over in the sandbox in preparation for booting Iraq out of Kuwait. My recollection is that they had about as many troops on station there as they did during the height of the Vietnam War. We were left with something akin to a thirty-day aerial bombing campaign and a three-day ground war and it was done. I can't think of anything that illustrates the validity of his view on this in any more of a pointed fashion than that. This is opposed to the Vietnam War which lasted well over a decade. On our current experience in the Gulf region with Iraq and Afghanistan, which apparently Bush, Jr., did not pick up on the lessons that his dad tried to teach him, so we've been involved in that thing for fourteen years. Give or take a little bit. They're diametrically opposed perspectives on how to wage a campaign. What we did Cambodia was an effort to disrupt supply lines. When you have—if you're going to fight an enemy in combat, you have to do two things at a minimum to bring the conflict to a halt. You have to destroy their will, or destroy their means to wage war. Destroying will is a bit of a chimera, it's hard to do that unless you destroy their means to wage war on the front end. You do that by disrupting supply lines and making the cost of war extraordinarily high in terms of casualties and so forth. Step forward just a little in time, in the aftermath of that and Lam Son 719, Richard Nixon

took steps to blockade the ports and destroy the rail links with mainland China for the North Vietnamese. It was very effective. That is, in my view, is the sole reason that the Vietnamese finally came to the table in Paris and agreed to sign the peace accords. They were backed into a place where they had no supplies left. They had to do something. We had, in essence, Nixon and his direction at that point had largely mangled the ability of the North Vietnamese to wage war. They had—at the time they signed the accords, my understanding from intel documents that I have subsequently seen, is the North Vietnamese had twelve surface-to-air missiles left in their inventory at the point that they signed those accords. That means largely that they were defenseless against aerial attacks. They didn't have much of an air force left. They had certainly not a great volume of AAA (anti-aircraft artillery) left available, they had nothing to feed it. They had no supplies coming from China, nothing coming in from the sea, the South China Sea. So yeah, Cambodia made sense to me. That was one experience—I can talk about Lan San 719 later on. It was an effort to disrupt their supply lines and their means of bringing the war to the south. Now, the one thing that was always problematic about that war, and I think anybody that any paid attention at all was aware of this, is we had a tendency to not hold terrain. We would capture something like a Hamburger Hill or anyplace else you wanted, the Ia Drang Valley, you pick it. We capture that, and then we would leave. So we did not, in that sense permanently disrupt anything that the North Vietnamese were doing. They'd get a bloody nose, they'd come back and say, "Let's try this again." So we would fight similar battles in the same terrain repeatedly. This is something that was an extension I believe, of the original policy set forth by Lyndon Johnson. At least in the early days, the Nixon administration followed suit on that. It's not how you destroy somebody's ability to wage war. I'm guessing that might answer your question, or at least my perspective on it.

KC: It absolutely does. Now I'd like to ask you, playing devil's advocate here, did you understand the—at the time, do you think you understood a lot of society's reaction against the movement into Cambodia?

DH: I'm not sure that I ever have. I think my perspective was that the protests against the Cambodian Incursion were based on more on the thought that it was an expansion of the war rather than a tactical maneuver. Which, when you think tactical or

strategic, depending on how you wanna look at it. But it was a—my perspective was that it was something that was done to address the greater benefit for the effort, our effort in South Vietnam. If the people that were protesting that were not arguing against the larger war theory, I don't know what they were protesting. I honest to God don't.

KC: Okay, good. Very good. Let's take you to Ft. Rucker.

DH: Oh, boy. Ft. Rucker.

KC: Yeah. When do you get to Ft. Rucker and what are you going to be doing? I mean you had a certain amount of time left in the Army. Are you embracing your time at Ft. Rucker? Is it something you wanna do? Do you want to continue your career in the military? Take me through your time at Ft. Rucker.

DH: Well, I wound up at Ft. Rucker. It was not high on my list of places to be. As my first experience with filling out a dream sheet, it bore no fruit.

KC: Why were you not crazy about going to Ft. Rucker?

DH: Well, I didn't want to be an IP, instructor pilot. I was line oriented and I viewed training as a somewhat of a menial job, if you will. I realize in retrospect that it's very, significantly important. In fact, wound up at my subsequent professional career with the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) doing a tremendous amount of training. It's a philosophy that I adopted with open arms later in life. But I was more enthused on the idea of perhaps, I don't know, let's say being an Army test pilot or, you know, something really with a lot of glory. I don't know. I showed up, don't remember a whole lot about the in processing. I showed 'em my orders at the gate, they sent me someplace and blah, blah, blah. Next thing I knew I had room at the BOQ, and little bit of—just a very, very brief time to contemplate my bellybutton and so forth. They gave me a duty assignment as an instrument instructor. Out of, I think it was the, I want to say Hanchey Heliport, I'm not real sure about that at this point, flying the TH-13T, which was put together purely as an instrument trainer. They had a brief training process for methods of instruction and certification, or check out on the H-13. I have to tell ya' at that point I was also not terribly pleased with the idea of being a piston-engine pilot again. Those things were a technology that had been founded just before the Korean War, and I was quite comfortable with turbine-powered choppers. Not the least bit comfortable with piston-powered choppers even though that's what I had been initially trained in. I said Hanchey,

I think it was actually Shell Field where I was flying out of when this was all said and done. I did the training out at Hanchey but eventually wound up at Shell. It was a brief course. I don't recall that I spent more than ten hours flight time before they signed me off on that. It was, you know, it was a bit of a blur. Got that done, turned right around, they assigned you to a flight. We had a couple of interesting characters in the flight, in the instructor side of it. We had a captain who was in charge of all things that we did. He had about as much military bearing as, I don't know, one of the characters from that movie *M*A*S*H*. He was a livewire. Another fella there, his name was Parker, he was a W-2. Had been a C-model gunship pilot down at the Delta. He was right out of that *M*A*S*H* movie, as well. Total—he was a wild child. I hadn't been there—been in the flight more than, I think just a very few days before we had our first class assignment. So, you know, things were moving right along at a clip. I wound up with two fellas. One of them was a guy named Barry Dragon and I can't for the life of me remember the other fella. But they were an interesting duo. Dragon was there to learn and the other fella already knew it all. He was the one that tried to kill me a couple of times. It's one of the things that I noticed in Southeast Asia, in Vietnam, was that most—not all the time, but a great percentage of the time when choppers crash there was pilot that had missed something along the way. You know, pilot-caused accidents were very common. Of course, you didn't have the hostile fire excuse when you were a flight instructor. They had quite a few accidents in that. Sometimes it was related to the equipment, or you know, equipment failure. More often than not, it was people just getting eat up with a case of the stupids and doing something they should not have been doing. Intentionally or not. I think usually it was not intentional. Case in point, I hadn't been there very long, I think it was about the first two weeks that I had been flight training with these fellas. Someone came in a little bit hot to the landing pad and stuck their tail rotor in the dirt. We all got to watch an H-13 do a very, very poor version of landing. Parts and pieces flying everywhere and pilot get and going, "Oh, my God! I'm done!" The students could do things that were rather shocking, as well. One of the—we flew in assigned training blocks. In my case I would take off and fly to the southwest to a little town called Enterprise. We had sectors that we flew in. They had geographically defined lateral limits and vertical limits. Typically the block that I had, I think went from like 2,000 to 4,000

inclusive. Within that box of airspace we would do basic instrument training. Which was attitude control, unusual attitude recovery, straight and level standard rate turns, greater than standard rate turns, just all the basic fundamentals to get these people straight on learning how to control the aircraft in inclement weather situations. This would begin sometimes, right at the pavement when you depart from Shell Field you would make instrument take offs. Generally speaking, airplanes don't do that. Airplane flight syllabus or training syllabus, they don't do that because you have to roll down a runway a little bit before you get airborne. In the case of the helicopters, we were doing instrument takeoffs from a dead start sitting on a concrete pad. So there was a very brief time when the student would have to transition from sitting on the pavement to forward flight. That first few moments had a potential for great risk because a very, very slight mistake in control input could have dramatic results. We, of course, used to see the accident summaries all the time over in the flight schools. The common catch phrase that we saw there was IP was late with corrective action. Well, let me tell you what, sometimes it would take a genius to be ahead of the curve on what some of these guys will do to you. Case in point, the other fella, the one that I could not remember his name, we were doing an ITO (instrument take-off) from Shell Field one morning. We took off, he did a good job getting off the ground and going forward. Then just out of the middle of nowhere, at an altitude of about, probably about 100 feet, for reasons I've never understood and he never could explain, he started pulling pitch without increasing the throttle and the rotor RPM bled down to a ridiculously low number in just the twinkling of an eye. I took the controls and he was slow to relinquish the controls. By the time I got full command of the aircraft, we were in a very, very precarious position. We were settling toward the trees and they were ahead of the departure lane. What they did at these helipads, or heliports rather, they typically had six departure lanes and when there was forest or what not off the end of the heliport, they went in and cleared these trees. It was, and I'll just say it's maybe 125 foot for maybe, I don't know, not any more than a half mile, probably close to a quarter mile. Would be just like a powerline ride away where they cleared all the trees out of the way. When I first saw that configuration I was little bit puzzled about why they did it. Then all of a sudden there I was getting a firsthand demonstration as to why. You have a piston-powered aircraft, they don't have much torque at low RPM. The situation I found was

that my RPM was way low and the only way that I could get the engine RPM back up was to relinquish pitch. Basically I had to accept the idea of settling faster and trying to build airspeed at the expense of gaining some engine RPM so I'd have more horsepower and more torque to try and recover the situation. To say that it was a tense moment is an understatement. Even the tower was going a little bit haywire about the time that I dipped below their view in this lane of trees that had been cleared. It was not until the very, very last moment that I finally got back up to normal operating RPM and had enough authority with the collective pitch, and enough forward airspeed that I could do a little bit of a climb. A speed reduction climb to get up above the trees. We missed a tree strike by perhaps fifteen feet at the end of that lane. I just let the student just take his hood off and sit back and admire the world on the way back out to the sector we were gonna be operating that day. My recollection was that the only thing that I said to him at that time was, "Don't you ever do that again. Ever." He says, "Well, I was"— I said, "I don't wanna hear it. Don't you ever pull your RPM down like that. I don't care what you think" "Yes, sir." Anyway, that was the first inspiring moment that I had as an instructor. Some of the other occasions that come to mind, it was not the least bit uncommon to have mechanical difficulties with these things, largely because they're near relic status. It could present in any number of ways. You could have problems with instrumentation. They were turbo charged engines, you could have a problem with that. In fact, I wound up making a precautionary landing one day at a private airfield because of a turbocharger failure. They would not maintain level flight without the turbocharger functioning. So there I was fifteen, eighteen miles or so from Ft. Rucker, couple of thousand feet I was gonna land whether I wanted to or not, so landed on the field. Some of those boys flew out from Ft. Rucker gave us a new helicopter. We got in and flew home. They did what they did and flew that one home. Sorry, I kinda forget where I was going before I told that little story.

KC: Oh, that's okay.

DH: The other thing I did, and this was my star student once again. This is one thing that he did that was probably far more frightening than the even that I just mentioned. We were flying—he was under the hood, we had done an unusual attitude recovery and credit to the kid, when he was firing all eight cylinders, technically he was

extremely proficient. If you told him you wanted a 500 foot per minute rate of climb and a standard rate right turn to a heading of 270, he would give you that right on the money. It's just his proclivity for doing the odd and unexpected at the worst time was just amazing. We were flying—he had just done an unusual attitude recovery, we were flying along straight and level. For some reason he couldn't explain nor could I, he did a full right input on the cyclic. I mean, we were just flying along fat, dumb, and happy, and the next thing I know we're rolling past ninety degrees of bank like we're getting ready to do a split S. Which with that type of helicopter is not something you want to do. So, real quick on the controls, and gently getting us back right side up, that thing was just shaking like it was gonna come apart. The mounts—the transmission in the H-13 and the Hueys and basically all the Bell helicopters at that time, were part of the lifting component. The rotor blades were tied—they were strapped on to the mast which was part of the transmission and that's what lifted the airframe. You may recall I mentioned that the Hughes did not—was not designed that way. They had a static mast that did all the weightlifting. So when you get the transmission of the Bell products, at the bottom at four attaching bolts that went to the airframe through, or via isolation, vibration isolation mounts. So if you got some type of abrupt shock or control input, you'd get a little bit of a—you'd lose harmony in the vibration train that the chopper normally operated in. It would take a couple of vibration cycles for that to damp out. In this particular case it took us probably a half a dozen or more and it was violent. We got it straightened out, I got it level again and once again I said, "What was that about?" He says, "I don't know." I said, "You were flying straight and level." He says, "I know," and no explanation. Well, somehow or another we managed to get him through flight school, or at least through my class. I don't know where he went after that. I ran into Barry Dragon later on, he was assigned to the 2nd/17th Cav when I was back over there on my second tour. It was kinda curious meeting him again. That was the nature of flight training and being an instructor pilot in the endeavor that I was engaged with. There were contact instructors that would actually be teaching people the likes of gunnery training or initial transition into this helicopter or that. They did a lot of initial certification on the CH-47 at Ft. Rucker. They had CH-54 training there. The first time I saw a—and this is while flying by on the way to something else. The first time I saw a Chinook paddling around in lake, I mean

literally floating in the late, I was just totally amazed. I had no idea they could do that. There he was acting like a tugboat just motoring around the lake. I have no idea why they were doing that but the first time I saw it I was just, "Wow. The things I don't know." So there was a lot of training activity, of course, Ft. Rucker was a training post and they had quite a diversity of it there. I was doing something that I took to be the—I was like the low man on the totem pole and it just was not inspiring. At all. Sometimes it was a little bit exciting. You'd have hours of boredom punctuated by a few moments of stark terror and the only release you got was at the O-club at the end of the day. Or going to see a movie at the local theater, that kinda thing. I had been there for approximately six months and I started—well, heck, maybe less than that. I had probably been there four or five months as an instructor and I started getting the itch to get out of that environment and I didn't care what the alternative was. Which included going back to Vietnam. I initiated contact with the Warrant Officer Branch, Department of the Army and my first contact was not real positive. I was talking to a crusty old CW-4 that had probably, he might have helped Jesus carry the cross, I don't know. The guy had been around a while. He says, "Well, you have to be back in the States at least a year before we can you send you back over there." I said, "Oh." This was the first time in my life that I ever made a pest out of myself. I kept calling this guy up periodically and talking to him, and finally he said, "I tell you what we can do, Mr. Hilliard. We can send you to a training school and you can graduate from that school just about the time your year is up and we can send you back to wherever we're gonna send you." I said, "Okay. I wanna fly guns." He said, "What else do you want to do?" And I said, "I wanna fly guns." He says, "How about being a safety officer?" "I wanna fly guns." He says, "Well, okay. We'll put that down as your second choice." (Both laughing) That was a battle I had already lost. I said, "Well, how about safety school and fly guns?" He says, "We'll think about that." So it went back and forth and, lo and behold, I finally received orders—keep in mind I had reported for duty in June and it was about the second maybe third week of December when I got my orders and it was for almost immediate departure. I was set up to attend the Army Aviation Safety Course at the University of Southern California, which that particular course was set to begin sometime around the third, fourth, or fifth of January in 1970. I'm sorry, 1971. So I basically turned in all my—all the appropriate stuff at Ft. Rucker. I processed

out and said goodbye to my latest batch of contemporaries and hit the road. That's when it got interesting. I mean, if there's anything else you want to talk about as far as Ft. Rucker, I'd be happy to examine that to the extent that I can.

KC: Sure, just a couple of things here. One, as an IP who has spent a tour in Vietnam, were there any things that you would offer to your students? Now granted you're in a TH-13, you're flying instruments. You're training on instruments, you're training other pilots on instruments. Was there anything that you could bring from your experience in Vietnam to your training methods there at Ft. Rucker?

DH: Actually, there was. But what I did when I talked to these fellas about this, I talked to 'em in a context of something beyond what I was training them. Basic instrument training is just stupid simple, and it's an effort to teach people how to control an aircraft without external horizon. While that may seem complicated, it really isn't. If you keep your wings level, metaphorically speaking, of course, and do everything else, keep your power set. You're gonna maintain straight and level. Until you get to the point where you're navigating on instruments, it's not terribly complex. Power, cyclic, and—pretty much covers all of it. So I talked to them about what they were doing and one of the things that they seemed to enjoy the least of all, was partial panel work. This is where you would basically cover up the horizon or pull the circuit breaker on it. They were left to function with just a turn indicator and a turn slip, and maybe a heading indicator. You'd turn that off and they'd have to rely on a magnetic compass. Then it got a little more vexing because magnetic compasses do not—it's not an immediate response. They will—as you turn the aircraft, they will either lead or lag depending on which side of north you're on. You have to know that, like if you're turning from east to due south, as an example, you have to stop your turn at a heading of about 150 indicated for it to finally stabilize on 180. But this is very, very simple stuff. So what I put to these boys is that your next phase of training is advanced instruments. Where you're gonna be doing navigating and you're gonna be making approaches and this sort of thing. That's all well and good. It's more complicated than what you're dealing with here. You're gonna learn how to juggle cats and chainsaws, in a matter of speaking, because they didn't give you that kneeboard that straps to your thigh just because they were feeling funny. You don't have enough hands to do what need to be done when you're flying instruments.

Particularly if you're by yourself. I flew by myself, as a pilot for virtually all of my first tour. I had occasion to—on a very few occasions, to fly into IFR (instrument flight rules) flight conditions in an aircraft that was not rated for IFR flight. It was not equipped for IFR flight. We did not even have navigation ability in the Loach because the ADF (automatic direction finder) antenna tended to break. It was just a single strand of wire. They basically removed all of 'em from the aircraft to avoid entanglement with the tail rotor, which could cause another kind of emergency, obviously. But the fact that you don't have the equipment necessary to do a standard issue instrument approach or anything like that does not mean that you can't survive. You just have to control the aircraft. So doing a partial panel was a trick that even the advanced students would be practicing. In a combat zone you were as likely as not to have to rely on that methodology to get home. I don't know if I mentioned this earlier on, but during my first tour we came back out of Khe Sanh one day. Had a number of Cobras, several Loaches, and a Huey or two involved in this. When we got back to Quang Tri, the field was solid IFR. It had a ceiling down to about 200 feet visibility. Quarter mile it was coastal fog that had moved in for odd reasons, whatever it wasn't common. It turns out that most of the flights—most of the aircraft in the flight did not have approach plates with 'em. I wasn't instrument rated—or, I mean I was instrument rated but the tactical environment of the aircraft was not. I certainly didn't have an approach plate. There was one guy on board did, he had been an Eastern Airline pilot before he got drafted. His name was Bob Shrader. He was just more than disappointed with the state that his peers had allowed themselves to get in to in this situation. He took the time, told everybody to "Get out your grease pencils and write this on the Plexiglas beside your head so you can look at it again." He described the ADF approach into Quang Tri. The guy that was working approach control at Quang Tri was just beside himself that a pilot would take over his operation the way he did. But he tolerated it. Mr. Shrader got all the particulars that were significant laid out for everybody else and says, "We're gonna do this one at a time and I'm gonna be last in line." Basically we were above the tops of the clouds in a holding pattern over the beacon. He just had everybody go in one at a time and he delayed the next inbound until the first one had called a runway in sight and was out of the way. We got an entire flight—and as I recall, it was seven choppers. I did this—what I did was

pretty simple. I flew a magnetic heading for the approach path because I did not have any navigation aids on the chopper. I just flew it and descended to the minimum descent altitude, saw the runway, and that was the end of it. So we all got on the ground because one guy had the wit to equip everybody else to do something they were totally unprepared for. The lesson being, that just because you think it can't happen to you, you're wrong. It can and will. So I emphasized a lot of these anecdotal experiences to the student body, as it were. I don't know if they had any play later on. I mean, there's no way that I would. Sometimes I think the lessons learned can be as valuable or more valuable than the curriculum you're teaching. To this day I believe that to be true. People can do stuff and get away with it sometimes without realizing what they have done and what they got away with. They just don't make that intuitive leap that somebody that's been though it firsthand might be able to understand. That would, I think, cover the nut of the whole thing.

KC: All right. Now, the second question I had for you, and this may be one that you can't answer all that well, I don't know. Now you come back, you've seen what society is in your perspective, then you go to Ft. Rucker. Now, are you too busy here at this time to be cognizant of what's going on in the war in Vietnam and what's going on at home in response to the war in Vietnam? Are you following the newspapers? Are you keeping up with what's going on?

DH: I was somewhat closely tuned in to media outlets. Again, I didn't watch a lot of TV in that environment but I did read the paper. I was aware of it. For the most part it was largely irrelevant to me. I think the reason was that I was where I was, doing what I was doing and I didn't have a whole lot of option about what I was gonna be doing the next day or the day after. At that point I was largely undecided as to whether or not I wanted to make a career out of the military. So I was just—I was kind of biding my time trying to do the job. The affairs at—you know, outside of the thing that happened at Kent State, generally speaking, I didn't put a whole lot of weight or thought into the protest movement. Because I had no ability to influence that. I think that's one of the hard lessons the youth has to learn. It doesn't matter what the topic is, if you're gonna spend time trying to change things you have no influence over, you're wasting your time. That was one of 'em. I understood that at that point in life. So aware, yes. It did not precipitate

any—I mean, it didn't hoist the battle flags or anything like that for me. I was just watching it go by. It was like kinda detached from it, actually.

KC: Well, what about the war itself? Were you keeping up with that?

DH: You know, not a hell of a lot. The events in Cambodia, certainly. I followed that in the news, and to some extent I got some updates via mail from guys that I—you know, my first duty, first duty tour unit. One of the fellas that I flew with as a scout, his name was Ron—I can't think of his last name right now. He's a scout pilot—Edwards. Ron Edwards was his name. He got shot down shortly after I left over there and then in somewhat of a brutal fashion. He wound up trying to jump a .50-caliber position and it'd shot at him once already. He cleared the treetops coming back to hit him with a minigun, and somebody else fired an RPG and they separated the rotor head from his Loach. That wound up into a huge donnybrook of test of wills, if you will. They used a coup—or used one Huey to snatch these guys, and they used something like twenty-five, twenty-seven Cobras from the 101st to keep the North Vietnamese in a polite state of mind while they did it. He wound up with numerous injuries. In fact, he was still—he had broken ankles, which imparted a little bit of a limp. He was still passing blood through urine, they never had figured out what the problem was there. But he came back to Ft. Rucker and they made him a TAC officer. I had known that TAC officers frequently came from that experience. Being basically grounded but they were still in the service. I ran into him one day at the O-club and we talked a lot. You know, he brought me up to speed on what had been going on over there. But beyond that, no. I didn't get a whole lot of news about what was going on there. It was—again, even being in a place like Ft. Rucker, it's somewhat isolating. You've got a purpose in being there, you carry that out, and your peers are people that have already been over there. Most of them have not been recently returned, they just—they've been there for a while so you may have more recent knowledge than they do. Anyway, that's about that.

KC: Okay. So we've got you—you finished your time at Ft. Rucker and before I took you off on that little sideline there, you mentioned it was just about to get interesting. So then, of course, I changed the subject to make you talk about something else. So you pestered your way out of Ft. Rucker.

DH: I did indeed.

KC: Pick it up there.

DH: It amazed a lot of people that I was able to do that, but I did it. You want me to go into the adventure that was USC and the Army Safety Course?

KC: Yes. This seems like it's pregnant with possibilities.

DH: Well, I got in my car at Ft. Rucker and left—I'm going to say recollection has it that I was somewhere around the very last few days of 1970. I headed west. I drove through Ft. Worth, drove past Mineral Wells, and kept heading west. I was taking what I thought was the southern route. I subsequently learned that wasn't the case. But one of the notable things about my car was that the heater did not work. The fan motor was not functioning. I didn't think much about it because I was on the southern route and in any case I had a flight jacket so I was just rolling along. I got somewhere out in West Texas and I started seeing this odd stuff on the ground. At first I thought it was sand then I finally slowed down and looked at it and it was snow. I thought, "How about that?" I hadn't seen snow in forever. I hadn't driven much further and there was a black guy hitchhiking there on the highway. I thought, "Well, he's probably cold and I don't know if he wants to sit in my car." But I stopped and gave him a lift. Before he got in I said, "My heater doesn't work" and he says, "That's okay," and he got in. We took off. This was, I think, probably around the second day of the journey. We got in to the eastern part of New Mexico, and I don't recall the town necessarily. It was dark, I think we were probably somewhere, oh, I don't know, maybe 100, 150 miles into New Mexico. Time for a hotel. So we got a hotel, you know, I got a double room. I wasn't gonna make the guy stand out there on the side of the road in the middle of the night like that. Took a hot shower, woke up. The next morning it felt so good I took another one. Went outside and in about thirty seconds my hair was frozen solid. I thought, "Well, this is interesting." I found out my car was pretty much frozen solid, I couldn't get it started. Eventually wound up getting a jumpstart. We went down the road and had some breakfast and pushed off. Got to Albuquerque and it was getting downright cold at that. Sufficiently, my breath was condensing on the inside of the windshield and icing up. I thought, "Well, this is unique." I bought some windshield washer de-ice fluid, would periodically splash some on the windshield so I could see where I was going and decided to stop for lunch. The guy that was with me decided he would see if he could find a better ride somewhere.

I said, “That’s fine.” I watched a part of a football game there at a, I think it was a Holiday Inn or something of that sort. Had lunch, pushed off. I had driven about three or four miles, I was just going under an overpass and there was this guy standing there ass deep in snow beside the road with his thumb out. I stopped to pick him up and he almost did not get in. To this day I think that was the Hobson’s choice right there (both laugh) and whatever he was gonna do. You know, he had the opportunity to make miles or freeze to death and he eventually got in the car. We pressed on and I just kept on going. I was, hell, I was young. I was chopper pilot, I wasn’t impressed by hazards to say the least. Everybody—we were on an interstate and everybody was hanging to the right lane because that’s where the trodden path was. I thought it was kind of stupid they were doing thirty-five and forty miles an hour so I pulled into the left lane where nobody had driven and pretty soon I’m up close to about eighty miles an hour. We got a snow rooster tail behind us that probably about 300 yards long. Absolutely amazing. We kept going and kept going. Finally, wound up in Flagstaff, Arizona about two o’clock in the afternoon. I decided that maybe I should see if I could get the heater fixed because it was twenty-two below zero outside. Son, I gotta tell you what, I was cold. While I was negotiating repairs, the fella went inside and stood by their heater. The shop telling me they couldn’t fix me up that day and I said, “Aw, hell.” I said, “Where’s the nearest road to Mexico?” and he said, “Well, just down here and turn left.” I wound up going through what is called the Black Oak Canyon State Park. It takes you down off the plateau that Flagstaff sits on and it’s a very windy road. It was ice covered. How I managed to get through there without sliding off the cliff or sliding into the rock wall on the other side, I don’t know. But we got down low enough and eventually dumped down on a—what I would characterize as a desert valley floor. The ice started melting, it was under the wheel wells. I hadn’t even thought about that. I knew that when I hit a bump the wheels were bottoming out on the ice that was packed up in the wells. I had, I forgot to tell you this, I had picked up another fella that was hitchhiking as well. He knew where—he was very familiar with that area. He was trying to get to this little town called Jerome and it was up on the face of this next ridgeline up ahead up us. We’re driving along and these blocks of ice that probably weighed 100, 150 pounds were falling out from under the car. When they did, the people that were coming the other way or following me, were

dodging ice blocks to avoid having some kind of disaster. I was warming up. We actually wound up rolling the windows down a little bit just to enjoy the balmy air of Arizona. We got up to Jerome, which had been a mining town at one time and was then just kind of a large scale hippie community. Dumped this fella off that had hitched a ride, and pressed on. Got in to—got right up on the California border not too long after that. I mentioned there was signs about checkpoints going in. I think they did that for agricultural purposes. The fella that was hitchhiking, the black guy, wanted to know what that was about. I said, "Well, it's an inspection station. They're gonna check the car our and everything." Somewhere in the desert east of the California border a few miles, he asked to be let out of the car. I assumed that he was probably running from the law at this point, I don't know. But I dumped him off, went on through the inspection, and wound up—I had a friend that I had lived—he was neighbor when I was living on Guam as a kid that was living in Riverside. He had gotten married. I gave him a call and he invited me. I spent my first night in California with him. Then got in to—reported in to USC the following day. Which was the first time in my life that I had ever been in a major metropolitan area. It was intimidating in a lot ways. I had never seen a freeway network like that. I had never seen building density like that. Before I got there, they had, and I don't remember when this occurred chronologically, but there had been a lot of riots in the community known as Watts. Which is immediately adjacent to the Southern Cal, the University of Southern California. As it turn out, I wound up driving through Watts daily to get to class there. It was a curiosity. There was no signs of the turmoil that occurred when I showed up but the historical residue was still on my mind. I thought later on, I still didn't understand what had happened at Watts. As it came to pass, some of the best friends who I met out there were black and I found LA ultimately to be a very conservative city, politically speaking. Much more so than some of the more notorious places like San Francisco or UC Berkeley, or any of the places that were famous in the protest movement. But I got settled in. We had our first day of class and I realized right off the top of my—just right there on the spot that was way the hell out of my league in what we were doing. Ultimately I did well with it but I never had a—other than geometry, I never had much fun in high school with math. Didn't care for algebra. Didn't care for just much of any of that. They start telling us well we're gonna being stuff like structures analysis

and going to this whole menu of mathematical exercises which I was not qualified to deal with, at least not in my perspective at the time. We would be going through the processes related to autopsies, human systems integration, and just a whole bunch of stuff that was pretty much over the top as far as I was concerned. But not to show my timid nature in front of my peers, I just kinda sat there and shut up and decided I'd pay attention. Which is a tactic that served me well in flight school. Got to know some of the guys that I was there with. There was just a few of us that were there as warrant officers, mostly it was commissioned officers. I found out later that they generally reserved squadron-sized assignments for commissioned officers, and the warrants would generally go to individual units. Which meant that they didn't do much in the way of safety. But, I played along. We had an interesting collection of instructors. One of 'em—several of 'em were actually doing the job somewhat as consultants under contract. One of 'em had been an F-8 pilot in the Marine Corps and he had retired from the Corps and had this job there. He was an interesting fellow. Very sparky. He had a lot of interesting insights, one of which I'll share with you. He says, "You guys think that landing in an LZ at night is hard." He says, "Have you ever thought about what it would be like to take off from a carrier at night in a storm?" I thought about that a second and said, "Oh, my god." Everybody thinks about the landing but nobody ever thinks about getting slung off the deck of a pitching—a pitching deck of an aircraft carrier in a storm. Or if they happen to have you on the down cycle, they're gonna shoot you out of the water like BB. One of the other fellas was a—did not have any combat experience but he had a great deal of experience in the context of aviation—I'm gonna say aviation management, which is very broad and it's not very specific. He had a background in what I would say probably was systems integration into operations. You take a, oh, let's say a B-52. What are you gonna do with it? What kind of mission package options do you have? You know, what's the thing capable of doing? That kind of work. He was interesting and very insightful fella. The thing that I got out of this in the very short term was that I'm probably gonna learn something from these folks. They were brighter than most of the people I had been associated with to date as pilots. The curious thing, you make choices in life and in the process you surround yourself with a certain level of intellect in so doing. You go to college and you're probably, you know, accept on the face of it that your professor or

instructor is relatively bright. But there's no guarantee that the students are. So when you get to the Army, they cull through the masses that have made an application to go to flight school and they tend to pick the upper level of performance based on tests. So you've got a little bit of brighter bulbs to deal with. When you get into something like the Safety Course, that process is repeated and you're culling more and more chaff from the wheat bucket until you finally get to this position where there's some pretty bright people here. They know stuff I don't and I might be able to learn something. So I applied myself with a fair amount of diligence and did fairly well in the course. Along the way, and this is where I thought it was kind of interesting being in LA, I got hooked up with some guys down at Marina Del Rey that were in the one had boat builders, on the other hand they were boat racers. Sailboats, I'm talking about. They went all the way from what was then would have been considered very radical multihull sailboats that were designed purely for racing, to the old conventional school of things. Such as the big twelve meter yachts and so forth. Their popular endeavor was around Catalina Island Race. They did not care how windy it was. When they had the Santa Ana winds start blowing, people are almost—there's always construction going in the greater LA area. There would always be stuff being blown off the top of these skyscrapers, and condos, and bank buildings, and everything that was being built. That were always killing people that happened to be under it driving down the road or walking on a sidewalk or something. They'd get hit by a sheet of plywood. That did not deter these maniacs about sailing their boats at all. I'm talking winds that were running forty, fifty, sixty knots sometimes. The race was scheduled and they were gonna go. I had the opportunity to participate in one of those on a twelve meter yacht called *Soliloquy* and as inspiring as it was to see what that big horse would do in winds like that, it was also quite terrifying. You have to imagine the sheets and everything that control the sheets—the foresails and such and they have wenches and they're using one-inch, double braid Dacron on it. You see one of these things loaded and you reach out and touch it and it twangs like a banjo string. Those are ropes that have breaking strengths of a range of 20,000 pounds. You put your foot on 'em, stand on 'em and it doesn't deflect, not a fraction of an inch. You realize the forces that are involved, and by extension suddenly you realize what kind of forces are involved in keeping your helicopter together in one piece while it flies. The amount of reliance that extends to

fundamental structures in helicopter. When you start getting a bit of an insight as to the loads that they work under, and how they keep working, and continue to work day in day out, it's humbling to some degree. The rotor blade on a Huey, I don't recall what they weigh but its several hundreds of pounds. They're going around in circles with a great deal of speed and there's—essentially there's two bolts that are probably, I'm gonna say maybe three-quarter-inch bolts, that hold all that together. The fact that they do that month in, month out, they do it until hell freezes. As far as I know, there's not any scheduled replacement on them. You say, "How can a little bolt like that put up with all that?" Then you go to class on structures analysis and they start explaining that stuff and they take you to the lab where they show what it takes to break one of 'em. Basically they have hydraulic presses that—or devices that are designed to do just that. They put 'em and they start putting tremendous loads and you watch it go up to 40-, 50-, 60-, 70,000 pounds of pressure before something breaks and you go, "Wow. I had no idea." So that particular course was very educational for me and it lead me to understand a little better some of the things that I had witnessed during my first tour in Vietnam. I don't mean the combat losses so much as I do the odd accident that happened here and there where people crashed and the question raises, "Why did it crash?" The investigation ensues and you maybe did or did not hear the results of it. But accidents detract from the mission and it's something that's best avoided. Combat units such as Air Cav troops and squadrons are very much at the front of those kinds of trends. The line operations tend to not be terribly influenced by safety concerns. Safety to them is just an abstract concept that has no merit whatsoever. They're there to meet the enemy head on and deal death and destruction from above and all that stuff. Safety, eh, that goes about as far as it takes 'em to hover out of a revetment and get underway, or maybe not overload the helicopter. They'll be aware of that but only because they're gonna be sling loading—or not sling loading, repelling troops out of a Huey at an altitude of 4,500 feet up on the side of a mountain. So the really significant things that they had attention to, but the not so significant, not so much. We had—and I go forward in time just a little bit. In my second tour, 2nd/17th Cav had fourteen aviation accident investigations in the nine months that I was there. We had three ground accident investigations with fatalities. So it gave us a total of seventeen in a space of nine months. Not much happened in the last month. So we

were basically running two major accidents a month. That's a hell of a case load, and it's a hell of a waste of resources. Whether or not I, you know, I can't say that would have been worse had I not been there, I'm not that egotistical. But it was the goal, it was to maintain integrity in the unit. To maintain integrity of combat operations. That kind of became my new mantra by the time that I got through with that course. Graduated and got my orders to Vietnam a second time.

KC: It sounds like this was a very useful episode in your career.

DH: I think it was. I didn't realize it at the time, again. But it paved the way for some things that were very, very beneficial. I'll tell you one, this is a sidebar. I seldom think about this. While I was there, one of the fellas brought in—an employee of the FAA, who described how that there were tests available that would allow military pilots to get civilian ratings. It was called a competency test. In the process, if you had an instrument ticket in the military, you would get one for the civilian world. I took that test, it actually occurred—oh, lord. I don't even remember where it was done at this point. I took the exam and wound up with a FAA pilot's license. Civilian rotor craft—single rotor commercial instrument. It was a commercial ticket as well. That was kind of interesting because what I had at the time was a tactical ticket from the Army. Fella said that if they were aware that you had a tactical ticket, they would not give you a commercial license. He said, "These people out here are not real bright. Just keep your mouth shut." And I did. So I got the commercial helicopter single-rotor, single-engine instrument ticket out of the whole deal. That would later wind up being my entrée in the world of the FAA as an air traffic controller. There's no way I could have foreseen that. It wound up being a subsequent event that the path that I followed to. The license upgrades to include airline transport, multi-engine land and several other aspects of civilian certification. I wound up—before I quit flying, accumulating a total of something—I wanna say around 37- or 3,800 hours of flight time. About half of that was flying helicopters, the rest was fixed wing as a corporate pilot between tours with the FAA. That's kind of a side bar that doesn't need a whole lot more explanation. But, to kind of restate what you said, Kelly, the benefit of preventing an accident is—I think it far outweighed the effort that was put in to it. I can—we get into talking about the second tour, I can provide a couple of little anecdotes that would address some of that. It's not—I was known—I'll say this. They

always referred to me as the "Ass-O" when I get to my second unit, that assignment. Wound up being the squadron safety officer, which is also ASO, or Aviation Safety Officer. All of my loving peers referred to me as the squadron "ass-o." I was okay with that but it's a contentious position to be in.

KC: It would be. It would be a thankless position in a lot of ways, I would think.

DH: Well, I don't know if thankless is exactly correct. In the perspective of some, yes. But in the larger scheme of things, I think guys knew what the underlying purpose was, what we were trying to achieve. Some of them would joke with me, some of them would snarl. I never backed down from any of that. If they wanted to joke I was ready to joke. I they wanted to snarl, well, I could do that, too. It was an interesting endeavor by any standard that I'm familiar with. I don't regret any of it. I will never have a clue if anything that I said or did kept an accident from happening. You can't prove a negative. You just don't know. Occasionally one of the pilots from one of the various units would offer a thanks or "Gee, I didn't know that" kind of thing. So I'd like to think that it was a positive exercise. Know that subsequent to that era that aviation safety has come to be much more center point with the Army. Part of the reason for that had to do with the accident rate as compared to the other services. I don't remember precisely what the numbers were. But in the civil aviation community, in the world of transport category jets, you could interpret that to mean airlines, their accident rates are very, very low. I'm talking sometimes zero over the course of a year or more. That's been done several times with no fatalities. Typically it runs more like about maybe .75 to maybe one and a quarter fatalities per 100,000 flight hours in the industry. Well, you get into the civilian world, light aircraft, and that number might be eight or nine fatalities, or ten per 100,000 hours. You get in to military, the Air Force has always been low man on the totem pole, they typically would run something in the range of five to seven fatals per 100,000 flight hours. The Marine Corps was a little higher. Then there was Uncle Sam's Army. Holy Jesus. We'd run eighteen, twenty, twenty-two fatalities per 100,000 hours and that was not acceptable by any standard. While we could crash a lot of Hueys and still have it wind up being cheaper than crashing a B-52, the fatalities were in and of themselves still expensive. Insofar as you've lost the money invested in training, you've lost the capability. It's a losing proposition all the way around. They started—the Army started

addressing this during the Vietnam War. I think, while I was not a plank holder to that, I was one of the early participants in it in the scale that it came to exist. It was frustrating, it was demanding, it was vexing. It was at one point, one of the most amazing things happened to me. I was sitting there doing my very best trying to keep up with all the carnage that the 2nd/17th Squadron was creating for me. I got a phone call from division headquarters, the safety officer there, who were my immediate communications pathway. I had been in country for a while in the second tour and basically what they said was, "We wanted to thank you for what you're doing." I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "You're the only unit in the division that gets their reports out on time." I said, "Really? "You understand what I was saying?" He says, "Very well." I had virtually no experience at all in technical writing when I started doing this. I just started putting it out the way I saw it. That has ultimately led to somewhat of a mediocre writing career. Which I do more for novelty than anything else. I get published frequently in the local newspaper for a variety of topics. Which has nothing to do with what we're talking about today. Overall, the experience at University of Southern California was a positive thing. It was a challenge. LA was an interesting city back then, in a lot of regards. I haven't been back since. I have no interest in going back. In fact, I don't even have much desire to see anything that resembles a major metropolis anymore. I don't have anything bad to say about the experience in retrospect. Glad I did it. Hopefully it left a positive mark somewhere along the way, somebody didn't have to bury their son. I'll never know but I'd like to think that's the case.

KC: Well, Dan, I think that takes us to a good point to stop for the day.

DH: Okay.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [6] of [9]
Date 25 March 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 25 March 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Hilliard is kind enough to join me by telephone again from his home in Inglis, Florida. Dan, we left off last time—we discussed your time back in the States and you're going back to Vietnam. This is in the spring of 1971, I guess. Were you—give me your—what were you feeling? What were you thinking about going back to this war for the second time?

DH: I was very relaxed about the whole affair. I had been through the mill once and it hadn't been that long prior. I had been gone for almost precisely a year. I had—of course there's always questions about where you're gonna wind up being assigned. I was hopeful that I would be able to get back into country that I was familiar with. That being the mountain regions and the I Corps, II Corps, as they were known at the time. I didn't have any particular angst about any of it or preconceptions about what was happening. I was somewhat—well, I'll say maybe one. I was under the impression that my recently learned trade in the business of aviation safety might have a bearing on where I was—what I would be doing on the second tour. It turns out that it did but in rather fortuitous fashion before it finally occurred. I arrived at Bien Hoa and—or actually Tan Son Nhut. I got sent over to Bien Hoa, to the replacement center for the second stint on that. Made it known very early in the process that I would be pleased to go back to the 2nd/17th Air Cav Squadron at Camp Eagle. I don't have much of a recollection about what followed that. I think there was another brief in-country orientation exercise. Within a very few days I was dispatched back up to—it was the basic assignment was Headquarters Troop, 2nd/17th Cav, which I would get further assignment once I arrived at that location. Basically I showed up, as I recall, it was in the afternoon. Started getting—well, somewhat organized or disorganized, if you will, about where I was going. They assigned me to B Troop a second time. I questioned that in the context of the training I'd had at USC. Didn't make an awful lot of difference to me at the time. But was reassigned to B Troop and somewhat to my surprise had a very similar experience from my first tour. I met the commanding

officer, Major Albright was his name, as I recall. They sent me to the scout platoon and I was a little bit baffled at that two times running. At that point I had been trained for a higher purpose, if you will. The first tour I was a rated UH-1 IP gunnery pilot instructor and the second tour there I was as safety officer, which was getting a lot of impetus from the DOD (Department of Defense) back in the States. There I was back in the scout platoon again. Well, I'd been through that drill before. I settled in and started meeting a few people and so forth. Nothing real exciting right off the bat.

KC: Was there anyone there that you knew from before?

DH: No, there was not. Well, let me take that back. There was a fella there that I knew. His name was Leqeiu, as a recall. L-E-Q-E-I-U, I think. He was a platoon leader and he had shown up right at the very end of my first tour. Never really got to know him very well. His near-term future would have a very pivotal influence on my future with the 2nd/17th Cav just a few days after I arrived, however. The first event that occurred on the, I think the first day after I'd arrived. I think I had the chance to sleep one night. The crews were out flying out—and I want you to understand, or the listeners to understand, this was not too long following the Lam Son 719 incursion into Laos. B Troop in particular had taken it on the nose in that adventure, up to and including the loss of the commanding officer, Major Gros. Gros was the last name, G-R-O-S, I believe. I'm not certain about that. He had been shot down with large caliber antiaircraft weaponry somewhere between Khe Sanh and Camp Eagle one day at relatively high altitude. They were, as a group they were certainly battle-hardened and focused on what they were doing. So that first day that I was there, they had a scout crew, and I don't remember who it was, didn't know 'em. They were out in the general region of the A Shau Valley, they got shot down. The commanding officer, Major Albright, was onsite. Apparently did a low pass over the crash site and decreed that there were no survivors. That was pretty much the end of that particular exercise as far as they were concerned. I tell you that that was very unsettling to me. You know, I knew—I respected the framework of their operations and their experience, certainly. One of the things that never occurred in my first tour was leaving our comrades in the field. We never did that. Even at sometimes at the expense of additional losses. It was one of the reasons that we were ready to basically fall on our sword for our peers, was that knowledge that we would not be left in the

woods if we got shot down. It was one of the things that gave us the fortitude to do what we did sometimes in the face of insane odds. It was one of those events where I just kind of made a note of what had occurred and didn't dwell on it a great deal.

KC: Now, was this perhaps a change of policy or a change of attitude? What was the—

DH: (Speaking at the same time) Well, I don't know if you recall when I was talking about the events toward the end of my first tour. There was a conscious decision made to avoid large scale engagement with the enemy. That was one of the reasons that we were flying missions with a high cap, if you will. The Huey that was set up with McGuire rigs and a couple of boys to man those if we had to snatch a downed crew. It was a transition time of sorts. We still took some relatively insane risks to get people back but we took the risk to the point of—I think I mentioned in our last or maybe the previous discussion. One of the fellas in my unit got shot down shortly after I left. In the process, even though we didn't put any troops on the ground, he had been shot down in the midst of a helicopter trap. He had a couple of .50-caliber machineguns. It was just about in the middle of the A Shau Valley where it occurred. They were having trouble getting in to get these guys. They knew they were still alive but they kept working on it. Eventually they had the entire available Cobra assets of the 101st Airborne on scene to perhaps adjust some attitudes on the part of the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese. That amounted, and from what I was told, it was something like twenty-seven or twenty-nine Cobras that were out there. As they showed up, they had a convoy of North Vietnamese vehicles started coming up from the south end of the A Shau Valley. So about half the Cobras went down there and had those fellas for lunch and the rest of them that were up there apparently were successful in softening the attitude of the North Vietnamese that had shot this fella down. They went in with a Huey, picked him up with no harm. There was no shots fired at that point. Early in first tour they might have committed a company-sized unit if necessary to retrieve downed crews, air crews. Toward the end they were avoiding that. I think primarily because of policy decisions that were made in Washington. I don't know if what I experienced in that first day there at B Troop was part of a continued evolution of that policy or exactly what it was. But I thought it was fairly cavalier, and I say that because I had seen downed choppers in the past, Loaches, Hueys,

Cobras, you name ‘em, and the condition of the crewman that were onboard was extraordinarily difficult to ascertain unless they were up and mobile if they’re on the ground. One, you might not even be able to see ‘em. If they’re severely injured, it’s difficult to tell if they’re alive or not when they’re just laying on the ground. That was kind of the framework that I was looking at in what had occurred. Didn’t say much about it. Day two, and this based on my recollection. I did not—for some reason I did not do the diary thing that I had done on my first tour. I just didn’t even get started on that. Another day passed and on the third day I was there, they had another crew go down. This was the Captain Leqeiu that I had mentioned earlier, and whoever his observer/gunner was. They went through the same thing and left them out there. I think if you check on the—check the casualty list you’ll find that Leqeiu and the other crewman are still listed as MIA (missing in action). I was looking at that point a—what became—I made jokes about it in the first tour, I was part of Nixon’s kamikaze tour and that kind of thing. It was, you know, somewhat tongue in cheek. At this point, what I was looking at was a mission profile that made me perfectly expendable. I didn’t dwell on the fact that I might not really care if I was in fact dead somewhere and they left me out there. But it was not something that I wanted to do to my parents. I certainly thought that it put a little dent in my courage meter knowing that I was expendable. I mulled that over a little bit and I went—walked up in the geometry of how the squadron was laid out just to refresh memories. Our Alpha Troop was based up at Quang Tri. Charlie Troop was at Phu Bai just a few miles east of Camp Eagle. We had Bravo Troop and Delta Troop, which were the ground troops, on either side of the headquarters troop located at the very, very north end of Camp Eagle. So I walked—just walked right up to the Headquarters Troop, went to see the personnel officer there. Name was Dance, as in “Let’s dance.” He was a good fella. I had a heart-to-heart with him and I said, “I’m not liking this very much. I’d really like you to reconsider my assignment possibly back into squadron safety officer.” At which point I was informed that squadron staff jobs were generally reserved for commissioned officers which was a concept that was kind of alien to me. However, the lieutenant that was running that office at the moment, at that particular point in time, was only about two months from rotation, or maybe even a little bit less, back to the States and he had taken it under advisement. There too went by—I still had not flown with the

unit and I was still sitting there a little bit grumpy about what was going on. Captain Dance came back down and looked me up one day just shortly thereafter and said that they were going to leave me in B Troop. I said, "Captain, well we've got a problem here." He said, "Well, what's that, Mr. Hilliard?" I said, "Well, I'm not gonna fly for these idiots." He looked at me like I had just committed the most—I don't know, like I was the ultimate heretic. I was quite sincere about it. There was a little back and forth and I finally got to the point where I said, "Captain, you can send me to Long Binh Jail if you want to, I am not gonna fly for this unit. You can have my wings, you can have my bars, I don't care. I'm not gonna do it." I think perhaps the contrast from what I had done in my first tour as indicated in my records, and what my position was at that time may have been a little bit vexing for them. I don't know. But rather than create a potential—I don't even know what to call it. A train wreck, if you will. They did as I requested. They took me out of B Troop and they put me into the squadron safety office. So that particular issue was resolved. My only—just for clarification, it wasn't that I was afraid of what they were—of flying the mission. I had done that for a long time in the past. What I had a problem with was the idea simply of being left out in the woods for no good reason, and without certainty that I was in fact dead. That was just a—that was a concept I could not wrap my mind around. I didn't mind dying for the cause, I just wanted my mom to have something to bury. That was all it boiled down to. That was a big issue through the war, I think pretty much across the board. Certainly following that, we still have people flying the POW/MIA flags all over America. The concern of that has gone to promote recovery of remains as far back as World War II, maybe even World War I if my reading is correct. That's where that stood. I was initially turned over to the lieutenant for cross training, or hands-on OJT (on-the-job training), whatever you want to call it. We commenced to get me up to speed on handling that job. We had very little to do other than the basic administrative things like the paperwork, attending staff meetings, occasionally going out to other units. Just walking around talking to people, just kind of the stuff we didn't have any accidents for a while. The lieutenant left and they left me in charge of the 2nd Squadron, 17th Cav air safety. I don't know, I'd had some training wheels for a while and all of a sudden I didn't. I was taking stock of that. I was looking at a cubicle office and one of the hooches that they used for—I was adjacent actually to the

personnel offices in the same building. I had a typewriter and a file cabinet, and a little bit of paperwork to look at, and that was squadron safety. The honeymoon probably lasted about three days and one of our Cobras crashed at Firebase Rendezvous. Based on the limited information that was available to me prior, in the very short term after the accident occurred—or I should say the crash occurred. I got the impression that there had been a problem with the weapons systems on the Cobra. There was a cannon plug that had become disconnected on one of the rocket pods. This fella decided to land there and lock down that cannon plug and then continue the mission. Be it due to high loads or high density altitude or a combination of all these factors, he had an RPM loss when he was on a very short final, and wound up rolling the Cobra up into a wad. They recovered him, they recovered the—oh, no, they did not recover the Cobra. They burned it in place. They brought me a single blade from the tail rotor and that was presented to me and I'm—"What do you want me to do with this?" The squadron commander, his name was LTC Rider, he came down to visit. Said, "I want you to tell me if this was a combat loss or an accident." I'm looking and I said, "Well, Colonel, what I'm looking at on the hub of this tail rotor indicates that it was low impact separation, low RPM impact separation. I don't know the cause of why the RPM was low." He says, "But was it combat related or an accident?"

KC: How could you tell just by looking at this piece?

DH: He was playing a game, is what he was playing. I recognized that in retrospect. He didn't want to get involved in an accident report and he was looking for support to identify this purely as a combat loss. After his second inquiry as to the cause, he was sitting there staring at me like a rattlesnake looking at a bunny. I said, "Well, sir, my humble opinion is it was a combat loss." He smiled a little bit and said, "Thank you very much, Mr. Hilliard," and turned around and walked away. That was my introduction into accident investigation with the 2nd/17th Cav.

KC: So is this a reflection, do you think, of his and perhaps the unit's lack of willingness to embrace this new safety—the new safety protocols? Or this new emphasis on safety? What do you think it was?

DH: That's a good question. I think—and I have to frame this in the—what followed after that. I held that position for nine months and in the course of that we had

fourteen accidents that were reported, that was air accidents. We had two fatal ground accidents, which we also investigated. I think it would be a bit of a stretch for me to say that they just didn't—they didn't want to embrace it or they were resistant to the idea. But I can't dismiss that categorically. I don't know. I know it's a unit that, like I said, only a very few months prior to that, had been right up to their ears in Operation Lam Son 719. Things like that tend to focus your philosophies in a different way. I called it a draw and went on about my merry way and left the colonel to whatever philosophies he wanted to—or policies he wanted to promote in his squadron. I will note that I was in the unit for nine months and I think it was about five months, perhaps six at the most, after that he was relieved of command. I don't know the reasons for that. I did have some ancillary conversation with the squadron XO that made me think in general terms it had to do with the colonel's oversight in management of administrative issues within the unit in the squadron. I was way out of the loop on those things, certainly as relates to A Troop or C Troop or even B Troop was doing at that point in time. It was not my job nor was I in the communication loop with those things. I'll take that for whatever it's worth that that's what happened. I can say unequivocally the gentleman that—help me out. Lord help me, I can't remember his name. The colonel that replaced him was very much a different creature. He was a very staunch advocate of aviation safety, I think primarily because it helped protect the assets that we had in place to carry out the mission. He was, I think a forward thinking individual. He also went on to become a general, I don't know how many stars he had when he retired, but he made at least brigadier general before he got separated from the service. There was several aspects of the job that were kind of interesting. I was a one-man band in this discussion—or in this exercise, for about three or four months. Initially—well, actually not initially. Throughout my stay in that job assignment I found the environment during the day in that hooch, which was dug about halfway into the ground and had very poor ventilation. Between that and the background noise, I couldn't get a lot done during the day. It was uncomfortably hot. It was a lot of background noise and distraction. That was somewhat irrelevant in the first month or so of my involvement there. But then we had some accidents and had to start developing the reports. Just for the record, the squadron safety officer is not the individual that develops the report. It's other pilots or officers from the squadron that do that. Protocols at that

time required that the accident investigation board be led by an officer of superior rank to whoever the aircraft commander was. This came into play later on when the Colonel Rider, he picked up some contaminated fuel up at Quang Tri one day. On return, or attempted return back to Camp Eagle, had an engine failure. They splashed down in a rice paddy, did some moderate damage to the helicopter. The fellow that investigated him came from outside the unit and he was full colonel. Came from division headquarters, something like that. But what the safety officer does is to facilitate the administrative process of getting the investigation completed. To include explanation of administrative protocols as appropriate to the board, the head of the board. In many cases, once they completed their report and put their handwriting, if you will, on the accident report itself, they would deliver that to me in written form. I would wind up typing their information onto the form in proper format, and hopefully with the proper style of English and punctuation and so on and so forth. There would be photographs that would be incorporated into the report. I recall one of the big ones they always wanted was an aerial picture, one or more aerial shots of the crash sites with a north arrow on it. Just so everyone would be oriented to what the crash site looked like, what the investigating team was looking at and so forth. I would sit in on interviews with the crash survivors or other people that were essentially witnesses to the accident or the aftermath. Then transcribe the recordings of those interviews into text for the board—the accident board to utilize as they saw fit. It was generally a very smooth process, but albeit somewhat time consuming. There was one occasion when I had a captain that was doing an investigation on—it was a Huey or something that crunched in a little bit. He absolutely was not going to take any advice from a warrant officer. I don't know exactly what got him so spooled up on that, but I just sat back and let him roll. When he brought the final report in, it was—and I'm the most generous as I can be, it was pathetic. I told him as politely as I could that he was gonna have problems from the squadron commander with that report and I made some suggestions. I got braced up against the wall and chewed out for about five minutes and he left. So I put his package together and gave it back to him and he signed it. I put a cover letter on the report recommending that the—and I forget the term actually, the unit commander would either accept or reject the findings of the accident board and forward his own comments with that. I put a letter—suggested letter

of non-concurrence on the cover of this thing and it probably wasn't but a couple hours later after it was forwarded up to the executive officer of the squadron that the captain was in the office getting a—probably one of the most royal ass-chewings that I've ever had the pleasure to witness. Even if it was only through my ears. I think everybody in the troop area could hear that going on. He was read the riot act. Anyway, that got dealt with in time. We had three accidents that were a little bit outside the box that were kind of interesting. One of 'em involved a fella who was a captain, his name was Maurice Garrett. He had been over there for an extended period of time, longer than a one-year tour. I had actually had very minor dealings with him during my first tour. But it was very—it was transient and there was no particular bond there. I got into the unit and the captain was flying in Headquarters Troop, slick pilot. I think we had seven Hueys assigned to us and we would periodically and mostly do ash and trash missions, administrative support. I flew frequently with a squadron XO on these things. Mostly it was because I was available, and B, I had to stay current. Sometimes they would assist in combat assaults if they needed B Troop or one of the other units needed some additional lift capacity. But Captain Garrett was somewhat egocentric. One of the things that he started doing when he transferred out of Headquarters Troop up to the A Troop, he was put in a weapons platoon up there. Turns out he developed a habit pattern of when it was cloudy, he would go ahead and fly in the clouds and then get in touch with the GCA, ground control approach, which used radar up at Quang Tri. He would get in touch with them and get back to his forward GCA approach into Quang Tri. This all came out during the investigation, I had no idea it was going on at the time. So he did that one day, had a fella flying in the front seat who had been in country just a very, very short time. I mean just a matter of weeks, as I recall. Lieutenant Danny Cowen was his name. Somewhere out around the Rock Pile, which is a notorious Marine base back in the late '60s, perhaps even early, very early '70s, I'm not sure about that. Captain Garrett flew into the clouds and he apparently had not taken into consideration the terrain elevations, and he flew his Cobra right into the side of a mountain. That became quite an interesting investigation, if you will. The squadron commander ranked Captain Garrett, he was given the responsibility of doing investigation. We had the witnesses in this case were comprised of the infantry people that had gone in to pick through the remains and so forth. The found

Captain Garrett's body, they found Lieutenant Cowen's body minus his head. They never located that. They found and photographed anecdotal information that suggested that just before impact the captain had seen the mountain. He tried to do a cyclic or speed reduction climb to avoid impact and was unsuccessful. It was an investigation that took probably close to a month to complete with everything that was said and done. Somewhat to my surprise, right about then several things happened. Well, Colonel Rider got relieved. We got our new CO. Because I had already handled, I don't know, probably eight or ten investigations at that point, I got a note from the division safety office, which surprised me no end. They said they appreciated that I was one of the few people in the division that would get reports to them on a timely basis, or within the prescribed timeframe for such things. We had to submit reports for incidents, accidents, precautionary landings, just basically anything that was out of the norm for normal operations. We had to submit for review by the chain of command. So anyway, they sent that, we got a new CO, the majors working on that particular accident report. What do you know? That we have a fatal ground accident in C Troop. Which illustrated one of the very curious aspects of that job and what was going on over there. I mentioned that I was assigned contrary to my expectation on both the first and second tours. This particular accident was somewhat in the same vein as far as how people wound up where they went. C Troop, based at Phu Bai, had a Cobra that had gone on a mission and that had a rocket that had failed to ignite, failed to launch. They had test equipment to do that, to sort out what had happened. The armorer that was doing this—or taking care of this, had two OJT trainees with him. One of 'em was in country just a few weeks. He was—by training he was a dental technician. The other fella was also way outside of his MOS, and I don't remember what his was, but neither had any great experience. When you hook up one of these test kits, or test sets, it could identify break in continuity of circuits, and this sort of thing. It also came with its own battery pack and it generated enough voltage to launch a rocket. He had plugged in the test set, had to get some other piece of equipment, left. Told him not to fiddle with anything, and of course they did. Unfortunately, they were both standing right in front of the pod when they lit that rocket off. It went through them and it went through the six-foot-thick revetment right in front of 'em. Then lost the tail fin and spiraled up through the air over the main runway at Phu Bai and came to rest and

detonation. We had a location on the other side of the field where they kept all the fire equipment. Two fatalities, and that started putting a bit of a burden on my ability to deal with anything competently. As if that wasn't enough, about two weeks, three weeks later, had a Cobra up in A Troop, up in Quang Tri that had refueled when they were getting ready to go back to their home pad. As they were hovering back, they launched a rocket. All their weapon switches were off and cold, and they launched a rocket nonetheless. It went off the end of the runway, airborne. It was a flechette rocket. When it discharged it killed a young Vietnamese girl that was outdoors somewhere in the—in harm's way, if you will. So it was fairly busy at that time. We also had a move going from where we were at Camp Eagle down to the southeast corner. I don't know why we did that but we physically relocated within the division compound. Another fella came to work—they assigned him to the office. His name was Blue, he was a captain. Frankly, I was real glad to see him. He had a lot of experience in the past in the job. He was able to hit the ground running. Helped a great deal in many, many ways to get things percolating again at normal speed and a normal fashion. He had been a transferee from the Navy, had actually been deployed on a nuclear attack boats. He got the opportunity to get his wings and a commission in the Army and he took it. That's how I got to know him. We worked together for about two months, I guess. This is just before the 101st stood down and went back to the States. At the time they did that, they had provisions that if you had—I think it was less than three months left to go in your tour, you would be sent back to the States with the 101st. If you had more than that then you'd be reassigned within Vietnam. I had, for reasons that I don't recall at the present time, I had extended my tour six months at that point. So we got through the wrapping of affairs with the 101st, I jumped on a C-130 and headed for Bien Hoa where I joined up with the 1st Cav—or 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cav Division.

KC: Let me—Dan, if you don't mind. Let me interrupt you here before we get you down there to the 1st Cav. A couple of questions come to mind here dealing with your role as a safety officer. One is that you mentioned that a Vietnamese girl was killed by a flechette rocket. Obviously that's an ugly, ugly incident there.

DH: Indeed.

KC: What became of it? I mean, how was that particular incident handled? Was there payment to the family? You know, the public affairs people are probably gonna have to get involved. What all took place there?

DH: Public affairs was involved in that. I don't know what their disposition was when it was all said and done. We handled it within the squadron, as far as reporting, we handled that like we did any other investigation. Again, I guess it went to my need to know what was required of me and what was expected of me. That was reparations to her, or compensation to the family, I have no idea. I know that the public affairs was involved in it. I would assume that there was some financial dispensation, but I don't know that to be a fact. The girl that was killed wasn't but about nine years old. I have to make clear that kids got killed over there. Nobody was ever happy because of it, not even in the least. We had a clear vision of who and what our enemy was and it did not include kids. Even though, on occasion, kids were prompted to do silly things and dangerous things by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. We tried to avoid—to great lengths. If you go back, recall the first day I flew on my first tour and I got the Purple Heart. We were looking at women and children and old men in front of this hooch. It was a free-fire zone. We did not engage them until we got shot at and shot up. To cover our departure from that point, the Cobras engaged the target. I'm quite sure some of those people were injured or killed. With that said, we tried to avoid that at every turn. Sometimes at great cost to ourselves. So, I don't know how that turned out in the end. I really don't. I wouldn't even know where to start looking if was gonna go back and reexamine that. But there's several things that I would like to go back and just bat around for the sake of perspective on the duties of the squadron safety officer.

KC: Well, I wish you would do that, for one. Number two, if you don't mind and perhaps this will work into the way you want to do this, perhaps not, but I'll ask anyway. When there was an accident, something that you had to go through, you had to do the research, you had to investigate this thing. Can you take me through the whole process of what a safety officer or—the role of a safety officer would be in an investigation? How does the investigation start? Who's involved? Take me through it in as much detail as you can because I think this is interesting. I don't think a lot of people probably understand this.

DH: Well, that was kinda what I wanted to do. I spoke—got into the conversation and the first thing that I was talking about was the trail of tears that I got involved with. I was putting a broad stroke on that, I wasn't looking at a lot of the detail except for those three accidents. In the particular aspect—I mentioned that we had a precautionary landing or some other incident, we had time constraints on what was reported and when, and to who. The basic food chain for accidents, or for aviation accidents, ground accidents for that matter. The basic food chain was something like my immediate supervisors or division staff in the office that they that had handled a great many of those—I know that they probably had a dozen or more accident reports pending at any given time. After that it went up to USARV command down in Saigon. They had a vessel that was anchored down in the general vicinity of Vung Tau that we referred to as the FAMF (floating aircraft maintenance facility). F-A-M-F, and I'm not sure what the acronym stood for but it was something along the lines of a floating aviation maintenance facility. It was one of our big resources. Sometimes you had to have basically a forensic investigation of a given component that had failed and you needed to know why. They had the ability to do metallurgical examinations and stress analysis and a bunch of other scientific analysis that we were not equipped to do at the local—well, the scene of the crime, if you will. So basically I'd be sitting in my office and the phone would ring and somebody would say, "Well, we just had a Huey crash at Phu Bai." I'm going, "Oh, good. Charlie Troop?" They'd say, "Yes." So I would either beg, borrow, or steal a ride. Get in a Huey, whatever, go to the scene. I had a camera with me, I started taking pictures or would get somebody onsite that could take pictures. Generally division staff, if necessary. And do an initial take on what had occurred and what classification the accident was. In the case of non-aviation related accidents, it was either—basically it was fatal or non-fatal accident. Then the investigation moved forward in somewhat of a different format than they used for aircraft investigations. If it was related to an aircraft, then the next thing you needed to look at, is it an incident? Was it a minor accident? Meaning something that could be repaired and put back into service in fairly short order. Or was it a major accident? They had a cascade of thresholds that would delineate between minor and major accidents. I'll give you an example. If you flew your Huey into an LZ and in the process your blades hit a tree, and you go, "Well, okay, the blades damaged." You start

looking at the damage to the blade. Is it a dent? In which case most everybody would say, "Well, okay, I'll write that up in the flight logs," and life would go on. Did it break the skin of the wing—of the rotor blade? If it did, it was automatically a major accident because it required replacement of the entire—of the transmission and all of the components that related to that, to include rotor blades, rotor hubs, drive train, everything. So there was to some degree a fiscal trigger attached to this analysis. But they had, in many cases, like the rotor blade, they had several metrics to determine one from the other. In other cases, eh, maybe it was a little more problematic. Like the Huey set balance stopped at an LZ and it dented the skin. Well, the first question is does it impact future operations for the aircraft, yes or no? If it does then you have to get an idea of what we required for maintenance to repair it. If it is something that can be done locally you'd generally characterize that as a minor accident or even an incident. If it was something that had to be—the Huey had to be flown or sling loaded to depot maintenance, then—we had an intermediate depot quality maintenance available at Camp Eagle. Or we had the big one that was down at Saigon. If it had to go down there it almost always translated into a major accident. So, we'd get the preliminary report up to division. If they had anything to say about it they'd get back in touch, otherwise it was just acknowledge receipt. The appropriate paper trail would be developed from that point. If it was in fact an accident, or classified as an accident, they would have to designate an investigating officer and/or parties to assist with that. Just to show, you know, on a timeframe—or on time schedule. Following that, things would develop as we went along. My job, largely, was to assist the board chairman. If he needed a photographer, I got a photographer. He needed forensic investigation, as I mentioned, through the FAMF I could gather up the materials and ship them by any one of several means. It could be a direct flight if know somebody was going down there, or it could be shipped by mail. An example of that would be, Charlie Troop did have an example, it had an accident. A Huey coming out of a revetment one morning, getting ready to go on a mission. He lost tail rotor control. What happened was very simple, the cable that controlled pitch in the tail rotor failed. It failed in the tail boom due to abrasion. There's a stainless steel wire that was multi-strand, probably about an eighth of an inch in diameter, maybe three sixteenths of an inch. It went through—they had little tabs that were—aluminum tabs that were intended

to keep that cable where it belonged. Keep it from vibrating and flapping around and so forth. That series—as I recall, there was two or three of those in the tail boom, I don't recall exactly. This first one, where it failed, they had nylon inserts that would preclude metal to metal contact. This insert was missing. It had worn the cable sufficiently that it failed under load. The people were saying, "Well, aluminum can't abrade stainless steel." Well, yes it can. We had to get that cable to the FAMF for analysis. So after maintenance removed it from the airframe, it was coiled up and shipped down there for their investigation. They had, from the time they received it, they had something along the order of two weeks to get us a response as to what their take on it was. Nothing particularly magical about the process, it was just somewhat time consuming and it was the way we did things. I think that generally, generally speaking, that format followed throughout all the investigations. The distinctions would be made whether or not it was a minor accident, major accident, major accident with fatalities. One of the common—I shouldn't say common, but something that happened from time to time. As an example, people would walk in to tail rotors on helicopters that were operating. That always became almost instantaneous major accident with fatalities. When you're doing one of those, you get what is essentially a medical examiner's report as to the cause of death and the nature of the injuries, and so on and so forth. That was something that for which we had specific training in the aviation safety school. I think that's a big part of the art of being a—of overseeing accidents of this nature, is knowing what resources are out there and understanding what the implication is from the reports. I alluded to that a little bit in my first experience with that tail rotor blade from the Cobra. I knew generally what the evidence suggested, I did not know the why. You know, whether it was a combat or just simply an accident. I remained relatively convinced that it was an accident but it doesn't matter. Certainly not at this point in time. So once the report was completed, it was submitted to the squadron commander for concurrence or non-concurrence. The only occasion that I am aware of when they did not concur with the report was the one that I referred to just a little while ago with the captain that was obnoxious, perhaps. Otherwise they generally would concur. It would go up to division staff who would, at that time, make similar recommendations to the commanding general. It would go across his desk and he would do the same thing as the squadron commander. He would either concur or

not. From there it went to USARV and it followed the same process all the way back to the States. It went through Hawaii, and there was an intermediate level of command there, I don't know what it was called. But from there it went back to, of all places, Ft. Rucker, where they had the nexus of all aviation safety enterprises in the Army came to focus at Ft. Rucker. There was a title, or name if you will, for what transpired there. I don't recall what it was. But that's kind of where everything ended. There's more I should say on this and it eludes me at the moment—what I'm looking for.

KC: Well, I wonder if, were there any issues that were commonly occurring or recurring that you had things passed down from, say, division, saying, "Okay, this is a problem. We need to check in to this. We need to change the way we operate in regards to this particular issue." Anything like that come down?

DH: You know, that's a good question, too. We generally speaking did not—what came out of my office and other similar offices in South Vietnam were—it was very seldom that they precipitated a change in operational practices. Particularly in combat operations. With that said, there were things that would change that would have influences perhaps on maintenance procedures. I'll give you an illustration on that in just a second. I think I'll do that right now. After I left the 101st I wound up briefly with 1st Cav. A little bit later when I finally finished my tour with the—what was it? It was the 7th/17th Air Cav Squadron at Camp Holloway. I said squadron, actually it was the remnants of that squadron. There was one troop left. We had a Cobra one day—and while I was there I was the troop safety officer. We had a Cobra there one day that was on a mission. Flying along just northwest of Kontum and all of a sudden he lost all fore and aft control authority on the cyclic. His Cobra pitched up, they were about 3,000 feet above the ground. He commenced to doing something that was highly unusual and that was kind of a bit "U" shaped descent, where it would climb and then lose speed and it would settle. Then it would start to back up in reverse, also trying to like climb. In the whole trend of things it wound up going back and forth like this in a descent 'til impact. Both crewmen survived. They had made rather panicky calls for their emergency on the way down. We got into investigating this thing, found the control rod that regulated pitch command authority to the rotor system had failed. It had just broken right at one of the joints where it was—they had a pitch change, link if you will. Kind of a universal joint. It

failed at that location. Ultimately, investigation led to the determination that the maintenance practices for recurrent lubrication on this joint were insufficient. Not to say that the crew chief, who was charged with this, was doing it wrong. It was to say that it was not addressing the need. So, following that determination—and this was another component that went to the FAMF for evaluation, just to show you what they did there. There was a message that was distributed to all aviation units over there. They had a name for it and I don't recall what it is. But it basically said, "The way we've been doin' it's not working and you're gonna change the way you're doing it. Here's how you're gonna do it." So basically they had to go in and instead of just putting a grease gun on the fitting and pumping some grease in, they had to unbolt it from the swashplate, the control architecture up on the rotor head. As it was being lubed, they had to rotate the top of that control rod to ensure that they were getting even grease distribution around the bearings on the bottom. So it went from being a one-man job to a two-man job. I saw a couple of things of that nature occurred. I had mentioned that the Huey that had had the cable break coming out of the revetment at Phu Bai, that led to a notification for everybody to ensure that all their nylon bushings were in place. So, that format was not all that different from what happens here in the continental US today with the Federal Aviation Administration. When they identify a deficiency in design or maintenance practices that has caused an accident, subject to review and developed remedial action. They may send a notice out to aircraft owners and maintenance facilities to do it this way instead of that way and here's why. Fairly simple and straightforward. It addresses concerns that are system wide, if you will.

KC: I wonder if—would it be anything big enough that it would force, say, you know, Bell Helicopter to make these sort of changes. For example, with this universal joint to where they could take it back to a one-man job with a grease gun to take care of it? Or was it something that, you know, this is just the way it is they're not changing it, we're just gonna have to change the way we practice it. Anything at that level?

DH: Good question. I'll give you a very definitive yes and no in response. It depends on the circumstances. On occasion an event such as—or variations of an event such as I described, might lead to a fleet grounding, if you will. I don't remember the cause. There was a circumstance of this nature when I was an instructor at Ft. Rucker

flying the TH-13. They grounded the entire fleet for a couple of days until something had been done to all of them. I don't remember what it was. So occasionally you could quite literally with a, you know, politely typed piece of paper, stop the war, if you will. Until they got these thing straightened out. I saw that happen a few times over there, not because of anything I was involved with in the second tour. But I saw it happen when I was involved with combat operations when we gotta fix something and, there you go. As far as promoting design change, they would evaluate these things on their merits. To give you a simplistic perspective on that, if you have system—an aircraft system such as the Huey that's about to be replaced by the Blackhawk, and you're looking at something that's going to be very expensive, very time consuming. They would look at this and say, "Well, it's not worth doing it." Maybe they will put a restriction of flight operations notice out, I couldn't characterize what that might sound like. They would basically, I think a cost-benefit analysis to decide whether or not t—decide what they had to do in response. I can't say I ever saw anything like that because most of the technology that I was dealing with was pretty mainstream in its day. The Cobra was relatively new in that timeframe and was destined to be around for a great many years. The Huey had been around for a while and it was gonna be around for quite a while longer, at that time. So, generally speaking if something came out that required substantial modification, kits could and would be developed by Bell Helicopter. They would be distributed to units for installation. Undoubtedly there would be changes made in the production line to address that issue. But I can't give you any real specific examples when we were—when I was over in Vietnam that may have occurred. At least not to my knowledge, I don't know the background on 'em.

KC: Well, Dan, that—it kind of exhausts my questions on this part of your second tour there. Is there anything else that you wanted to address before we move on down to the 1st Cav?

DH: There was—I guess there were a couple of odd and ins that might be of some interest. The tone of the war had changed a lot at that juncture. I was, you know, I got to the point that—and I'm putting this in the perspective of the sunset of the 101st Airborne's involvement in that war. The nature of the war had changed a lot, the nature of our strategy and tactics had changed quite a bit. I had spent a lot of time in between

accident investigations, going around to the different units just looking around and me making people uncomfortable. Which I didn't have the legal authority, but I had—my presence could make people squirm a little bit because I was the ASO and I think sometimes that label was taken sincerely by the people that used it. I sometimes would have brief interludes with the pilots. I mean they'd actually have an organized meeting, said "Dan's gonna be here, he's gonna talk to you about how not to crash." So we'd have these little presentations and so forth and sometimes I would address particular aspects related to, I don't know, aerodynamics, or powertrains, or maneuvers, or anything that may be pertinent to what they were doing. An example would be with the Cobra gunships, one of the things that they would—and I don't think it was infrequent. But target fixation was always a problem with them. They're starting at relatively low altitude and their altitude diminished quickly, and if they get too sharply focused on the target, they might fail to initiate a pullout in a timely fashion and wind up sticking their Cobra in the dirt. So we talked, you know, I talked to 'em about techniques that were used successfully to avoid getting into that little corner of the world that you didn't want to be in. I think that was generally well received, sometimes I think maybe they got a little bored by it. I will note that from the time that I arrived to the time that I left—as I said, we had fourteen aviation accidents in the squadron. That was actually a decline from the previous—the year previous to when I took over the office, I think they'd had a total of eighteen or nineteen aviation accidents of major magnitude. The Army basically was putting some grease on the squeaky wheel, and in my limited experience it somewhat of a positive effect. It's not only are we warriors, but thoughtful warriors. We need to avoid sacrificing our assets because of stupidity, and the fact of it is, in almost all endeavors in combat—this goes all the way back to World War II. The biggest cause of aircraft loss in combat operations, is not mechanical failure, and it's not always hostile action. More often than not, it's pilot error leading to the destruction of the machine, if not the crew. There was a great focus being given by the Army in trying to preserve those resources. I think it was having a positive effect by the time I left over there. But, your question earlier about—you know, I was talking about that first experience I had with Colonel Rider, and I just made the call and said, "Well, it was a combat loss." I had in my last—actually it was when I was with B Company, 229th Assault, this was my next to the last

unit over there. We were involved in the relief of An Loc, and that was a very hotly contested environment. I'll talk to that in some length in one of the later sessions. But with that said, we had occasion one day to pick up air crewmen, a pilot and copilot, of Cobra that had been shot down by an SA-7. In the process of doing that, the aircrew of the Huey had basically cut their own LZ with the rotor blades, destroyed a number of trees and their rotor system in the process. They did get the crew out, everybody lived happily and got drunk later on in the O-club, I'm sure. We were all like, "Hoorah!" A couple of days later, I just happened to be operations and the phone rang. The clerk picked up the phone and talks a minute, looks at me. I was the troop safety officer at that time. They handed me the phone and he says, "Its brigade safety, they want to talk to you about that incident." I said, "Okay." So here I am talking to a colonel. He says, "We haven't received an incident report on that Huey that had the rotor system damaged when it was picking up the crew from that Cobra." I said, "Incident report?" And he says, "Yes, mister. We're—blah, blah, blah." I said, "That was a combat loss." There was a long pause and I have to tell ya' at that point in time—one, it was done intentionally. I even said that to the colonel. I said, "This was not an accident. It was done on purpose." He digested my concept for a minute and he says, "I like the way you think," and that was the end of the conversation. There was no accident investigation. It would have been largely pointless. At that time everybody knew exactly what had happened and why. It had a very successful outcome. So maybe my career as a safety officer went full circle at that point, I'm not sure. But that was the way that went.

KC: Okay, now one of the questions I should have asked you a while back, just kind of came to my mind. While you're the ASO here, are you continuing to fly at all? Or are you working as a safety officer solely at this point?

DH: No, I did fly. But as I suggested—

KC: Just actually ash and trash, and things like that?

DH: —earlier. Yeah, it was primarily ash and trash. I did, when I was with the 101st, I did get involved in a couple of combat operations. They were few and far between. In fact, there was one of them that was kind of comical. We had a—we were putting in infantry on what was known as the A Loui airstrip, it was an old Special Forces camp in the A Shau. Dirt strip, oriented pretty much north and south, maybe 4,000 feet

long, something like that. We took off, we had all of the—we had some of the B Troop assets and all of the Headquarters Troop assets. This being a group that did not have a lot of ongoing combat experience, mostly they were masters of the ash and trash. So we're flying out there in trail, perhaps echelon left or something like that, some kind of formation. About the time that we got over the eastern rim of the A Shau Valley, for some reason unknown to maybe even God, everybody was looking at this airstrip that was oriented perpendicular to our approach, and everybody started kind of moving forward. Until ultimately, we had the formation of, I think it was nine Hueys that were lined abreast, roaring towards this airfield. The squadron commander didn't realize this until everybody was just on short final and he just said, "Holy shit! What are you people doing?" Because he had expected everybody to maintain formation integrity and land on the long axis of the runway. Good reason for that is because all the helicopters on the interior, the use of their door guns was suppressed because they were looking at their wingmen on either side. They really couldn't use their door guns if it was necessary. But we landed, dropped off the troops. There was some counseling on the part of the—by the colonel on the way back. I don't know, a few hours later we went back and picked these people up, and I'll be damned if we didn't land to pick them up the same way. I never did figure that out, I just didn't. It was comically funny. But no one was harmed or injured in the making of that memory, so you can sign it off as whatever it was. One of the most intriguing missions that I had in that timeframe, was actually with the squadron XO, his name was Langley Chavis. There was a film that was made some time back then, and I don't remember what it was. But there was interspaced throughout the film there would be like a church chorus that would, you know, (singing) "Hallelujah," it was topical at the time. Langley Chavis was black, he was somewhat portly, he reminded us of a guy, a black actor, his name is Jones, as I recall. Not real sure about that. But there was a resemblance. Major Chavis was also very, very well-liked by headquarters, by anybody that knew him. He was just—he was a good leader, he was very competent, and he got along with everybody. It was the kind of that if he walked into the O-club at night, the entire place would stop, and everybody would go, (singing to the tune of "Hallelujah") "Langley Chavis!" They would go on with this drill for a couple of minutes, it was funny. But I flew a lot with him on the missions when he was going to other units for various

administrative reasons. One night we were coming from Quang Tri and he had me flying. I don't recall if I mentioned this earlier, there's always a hazard with the visual flight at night in an environment like that. There was not a lot of streetlights, or anything else. The city of Quang Tri was just vaguely lighted at night, as were the other places. You get to the coast, and the horizon just disappeared into blackness, except there would be fishermen out in their boats at night and they'd use oil lamps hanging over the side, ostensibly to attract fish, I guess. Their illumination was very similar to what you would see in a star, so the horizon would artificially be shifted to a much lower plane than it really was. I had read of this occurring, and on one particular night on the way back from Quang Tri, I fell victim to it. Next thing I know, I've got the Huey right up at VNE (velocity never exceed) diving for the horizon and I wasn't computing what was going on. It turns out that the major was actually—he was a master aviator, which is a great deal of experience in your credentials, higher than what I had at the time. He corrected what I was doing in very diplomatic terms. We talked about it on the way back, and we had several follow up conversations about that it. It was something that became incorporated into my two-bit spiel to other airmen in the squadron from time to time. So, yes, I did do a little flying, not a great deal. Probably in the nine months that I was in that capacity with the 101st, I might have garnered a total of 200 flight hours, something like that, certainly not much more. So mostly a desk job and that was the nature of it.

KC: All right, so is there anything else with the 101st before I move you down south?

DH: I'm sure there is, and it just doesn't come to mind at the moment. Well, yeah, I'll tell you what, there is one thing in particular. I had mentioned how the office was hot and the noise was distracting when I was trying to prepare these reports that were going up to division headquarters. As a result of that, my lifestyle changed a little bit. I started working—I would fiddle around during the day and do minor things, and then I would get in there after everybody else had had chow. I would go in to the office, they would all go to the club, and I would sit there in the office and start typing uninterrupted. One, I was not a master of the keyboard at that time, or the typewriter. Even though I'd had some training with typewriters it was not my friend. So there was always the—they had the sheet version of whiteout, which you could go back and make corrections with and it

was very laborious. But it was better than typing an entire legal-sized page over again because of one error. So I would work, sometimes through the night on these reports. That it worked for me was evidenced somewhat by the comment that I made earlier about division safety office had forwarded a note of appreciation about being timely on these things. I wasn't being timely because I wanted to, necessarily. I thought it was a requirement, so that's what I was doing to meet those deadlines. The framework of existence had changed in the year that I was gone from Vietnam. When I left, there was the use of marijuana was not unheard of, it wasn't real common in the 101st, but it was not unheard of. When I got back, the problem was heroin and a lot of it. Guys, you know—people such as myself, and other—for the most part other troopers in the 2nd/17th were pretty much restricted to the combat environment, or Camp Eagle. We didn't get to go out and mingle with the population on a routine basis. But with that said, people were gaining access to heroin, locally known as China White. Also, legend has it, it was clinically pure, which made it extremely powerful and dangerous. As I recall, the cost for a gram of Chine White was five dollars at that time. Which by today's standards is relatively insane. But it facilitated a number of people developing habits that were just absolutely crazy in volume. I'm talking in some cases, you know, ten, fifteen, twenty grams a day habit. And going to extremes to avoid being obvious about it, such that some of these guys were injecting themselves between the toes, or in the penis, or just any number of places they could do to avoid visual detection. I had a clerk assigned to me after I'd been there about three months, and he was a junkie. I spent more time correcting his errors than I gained by having him present in the office. I ultimately wound up in a philosophical sense, I fired him. I just told him, I said, "Stay out of trouble, do what the first sergeant says, and don't bother me anymore." I got a lecture from Major Chavis about that saying I couldn't really fire people in the Army. I said, "Well, you tell me what to do." I don't know what happened to the ki—I think he—well, actually I do know what happened to him. It was about the time that this was getting to be a front and center issue, that I was exposed to the first random urinalysis that was my displeasure to be exposed to for the rest of my federal career. Sitting around one day and some people showed up in the unit, troop commander comes, says "Okay, everybody's gonna have to pee in bottle and you can't go anywhere until you've peed in a bottle. If you've got—if you were

supposed to catch a flight to Bien Hoa for R&R and you haven't peed in a bottle, you don't get to go on R&R." So everybody's sitting around going, "Oh, this sounds like fun." We go through it, everybody, including the squadron commander, Colonel Rider. We all took our turns and when it was said and done about two or three days later, they came and gathered up a number of folks, they were all enlisted personnel that had been dancing with heroin. The fella that had been my clerk was of 'em. They shipped him down directly to a detox center that they had at Long Bien. I don't really know the nature of what happened there, I know that there was occasional reference to it in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. There was one fella that actually went down there, he had such an insane consumption rate of this stuff when they tried to detox him he died, due to withdrawal. I think the legend had it that he was doing something like forty or fifty grams of pure heroin a day. I don't know how you even survive that, but apparently he had adjusted to it or something. So that's where my clerk went. On somewhat of an interesting sidebar on that, I had been doing what I had been doing. I had a continuous dialogue going with Major Chavis. I very, very seldom had any discourse with Colonel Rider. Minding my own business, get up one day and find out that Colonel Rider has been relieved. The nature of how they do that in the military, it's very abrupt, it's just all of a sudden the colonel is not there. Nobody got to shake his hand on his way out the door or anything. Boom, he's gone. Within a few—a very short period of time, the new colonel shows up to take over. Well, I—because I didn't have my radar turning at long range, and did not concern myself about things that were really not of my affair, the one thing I would say about Colonel Rider, he was a very—he was very adept at combat operations, and choreographing synergy between—with assets from different units. He was good. I lamented his departure to—and this in the presence of Colonel—or Major Chavis. He kind of rocked back in his chair and said, "Well, this is—I think you should know that Colonel Rider's departure is probably the best thing that ever happened for you and your military career." That came as a very, very big shock. I asked him to explain that, and apparently someone had suggested that during my myriad of flights, typically at night, outside of the Camp Eagle perimeter, to places like Quang Tri or Phu Bai, or whatever, that I was actually picking up loads of drugs and flying them in to the squadron helipad, and distributing that stuff to a variety of users in the squadron, and elsewhere.

When he told me this, when Major told me this, I just about fell out of my chair. One of the pieces of evidence that was used in this charge, was the fact that I was always going around in the course of the day, with my sleeves rolled down. That was to hide track marks, allegedly, in my arms. Because not only was I a dealer, I was also a junkie, at least in theory. Well, the reason I had my sleeves down all the time, was because when I worked in the office at night, the mosquitoes would still bother you through the screen doors. And on occasion when I flew, I had my sleeves down. So generally speaking, I just left my sleeves down all the time. The heat didn't bother me that much, and it was just how I rolled, if you will. But the colonel had it in his mind that I was in fact bringing heroin into the squadron and distributing it. I don't know where he—I don't know the source of that information. Major Chavis gave it no more credence than I did. He just told me that, you know, "His departure is good for you." I went, "Wow. Holy wow." I mean, I didn't even know how to act. I had mentioned that the—I wish that I could remember his name, the new colonel. One of the first things he did was to sit me down in his office and we had a long heart to heart about my function in the unit and what I was trying to achieve. Like I said, I worked for him for about an additional three months, maybe a little bit longer. He was in the parlance of today, he would be considered a progressive in that particular topic. He was an ardent supporter of safety in combat operations and general flight operations. He was very focused on it. I did perceive, following his arrival and a short honeymoon period, I did perceive a great deal more support for what I was doing than what I had experienced previously. I mentioned that this fella, Captain Blue, came on board. That was some of his doing. So I was working with the equally qualified player in the office, who obviously ranked me, and I had no problem with that. I was perfectly content being his clerk and taking care of, you know, the menial chores, if you will. Which I did a lot of. So it was a night and day transition, as far as my function as the safety officer. With the benefit of hindsight, of course, you see things you didn't see on the front end. I know there was a reason that gentleman became a general before he left the service, good reasons for that. It's not enough to be a brilliant tactician, you have to be good at the whole thing if you want to be a successful commander. That would be my two cents on my first nine months of the second tour.

KC: You brought up the issue of heroin use. Availability is one thing, but there has to be a desire to use on the other side of it.

DH: There does.

KC: Where do you think that came from? We typically think of this as a breakdown in morale or discipline within the Army as we're going through the latter stages of the Vietnam War, and into the '70s and things. What did you see in terms of morale and discipline, and attitude toward the war, and all of these kinds of things taking place here?

DH: Kelly, I think I touched on that. Maybe just a glancing blow in one of the previous sessions. One of the things that I got in my second tour, I got to see the antithesis of being aligned—well, being involved in frontline combat. First tour I was a scout pilot and it was, "Yee haw! Here we go!" Second tour, I'm working an administrative function. That was a very salient line of demarcation amongst military personnel that were in Vietnam. I think the folks that are involved in frontline combat were too busy dealing with that concept to necessarily get lost in drugs. I know that there was some deviation from that, in my minor form. Mostly amongst, from what I saw, the occasional crew chief but more often door gunners would wind up getting caught in that. I don't recall that that occurred within the 2nd/17th or—well, most of the other units I was in. I didn't see it from any of the air crewmen. But people that were doing the staff jobs are—well, they're not getting shot at on a routine basis. They're perhaps spending more time being introspective and listening to the music of the era. Or perhaps feeling—I don't know what they felt, but they may not have had been real supportive of where they were. Their morale may not have been good. I do recall quite clearly, that there was a much higher incidence of drug abuse over there the more one was dislocated from combat operations. Meaning perhaps, by the time you got down to Saigon it was a serious problem. The Cav troops, not so much. Maintenance support, at the division level, some of the other support operations—yeah, there was some of it in there. I can't speak to what necessarily—what they were thinking. I know that—I'm relatively convinced that the line—the people that were in harm's way on a routine and almost daily basis, were too busy celebrating being alive to get caught up in that crap. It was like, "I survived the day and I want to make sure I survive tomorrow. I've got better things to do with my time

than ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’,” if you will. So, that’s probably the best read I can give you on that. It’s a question that’s very pertinent to that era. There’s no question, absolutely no question at all about that. It was—I know that I flew with guys, with crewmen that from time to time smoked marijuana. Don’t have any question about that at all. I did not have that experience with anybody that did heroin, but I saw people that were caught up in that and they were pretty close to worthless in any endeavor over there. That perception clashed very, very strongly with the imperative that the rest of us were seeing. You know, the fact that we were going out the next day. Other people were depending on us for their well-being. It’s, you know, it causes—it gives pause. It instills a little higher responsibility, if you will. I don’t know the why those people got in to that—those guys did. I don’t know. When I got over my first tour, I don’t know if I mentioned this or not, I was writing home to, as I recall, nine different girls. I liked them all to varying degree. By the time I left—or, well before the time I left to come back to the States, they were all either married or engaged. It didn’t dent me at all. I mean, it was like, “Good for you,” you know? I think perhaps sometimes guys would get hit with one of those “Dear John” letters, and take it a little bit more to heart than I did. That could be one possible thing. This depression associated with dislocation from the family, or the normal routines of life; Burger King, a day at the beach, just being around family and stuff like that. That’s a hell of a big change. I had the occasion to spend close to a year and—well, actually over a year in the service before I got to Vietnam the first time. A lot of those guys, they got half of that if they were lucky. Get through boot camp, AIT, they’re in the infantry, Shazam, they’re in Vietnam. So they didn’t get that leisurely transition. I don’t know. It’s a lot of speculation on my part, but I don’t expect to ever really fully understand that mentality. I don’t think it’s prevalent in today’s military in large degree because there’s not any draftees involved. That could be an interesting debate in its own right. We have a volunteer Army, which is something that started right after Vietnam. Or, you continue to place a burden on people by virtue of a responsibility for service to the country, I don’t know. It is what it is and I don’t know.

KC: Well, I think that probably takes us to a good point to stop today, Dan.

DH: Well, okay.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [7] of [9]
Date: 1 April 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 1 April 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Hilliard is kind enough to join me by telephone from his home in Inglis, Florida. Dan, we left off—last time we were getting you down to the 1st Cav Division down in Bien Hoa. The 101st is packing up, going home. You still have some time left on your tour. So you weren't one of the lucky ones, I guess, to be brought home. So tell me about this move down to Bien Hoa and the 1st Cav.

DH: It was pretty straightforward. We finished up closing out affairs with the 101st Airborne. I'd never seen official paper to say this was the case, but my observation was that they sent—the 101st Airborne went home in total, which was kind of odd. When I got down to the 1st Cav, and as I recall that was in late February, early March in '72. They had sent everybody home from there except the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cav, and the B Troops, or B Companies of the various aviation assets that they had there. One possible exception might have been the 4th of the 77th, their rocket artillery battalion, I'm not sure which company they left behind there. But anyway, this is from my following—the subsequent experience, this is what I saw throughout the country. At the time—I got down there and I just, for general purposes let's suggest this was in March or very early March. It was an uneventful trip down there. Got relocated without a lot of commotion and bother. The terrain down there was extraordinarily alien to me, I was used to having mountains for landmarks and so forth. Of course, down at III Corps, it was, with very minor exceptions, it was flat. They sent me to what had been B Troop 1st/9th Cavalry, it had been re-designated as, I believe F Troop, 9th Cavalry, or something to that effect. It was F Troop something, I believe it was the 9th. I was directly assigned to the air scout platoon. The living accommodations there quite a bit nicer than we had had in Camp Eagle. The company area or troop area had been around for quite some time, it was well established. The buildings were higher quality, certainly more comfortable. They were all air conditioned, as an example. We had a flight line that was—it was not exclusively ours, but it was to a very large degree. One we shared with B Company 229th Assault—

or, Aviation Battalion. I got to the—started getting to know people, got a quick orientation in-country. I flew a fella—forgive me. I can't remember his real name. He was a warrant officer, we called him "Turtle." Little, short blonde fella. In fact, he was the first vertically challenged guy I'd ever seen that flew scouts. He was quite a character. I flew with him on several missions right off the bat that were quite interesting. One of which involved a lerp (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) team, or recon team insertion to the northwest of Bien Hoa. They were almost immediately ambushed. We wound up going back and picking up one fella who was—he was actually alive when we got him to the hospital. He passed later on. Subsequently picked up one of the NVAs that had been wounded in the—from supporting fires from the Cobras. He also died after he got to the hospital, which is not remarkable. What was remarkable, that he survived all the way to the hospital. He taken somewhere in the excess of twenty hits from a minigun, and like I said, he was still alive when we picked him up.

KC: How? I would wonder.

DH: That's what I said. (Laughs) I have no idea. But we worked out of—in very general terms, we worked the area to the north and east of Bien Hoa. Off to the east there was a small airstrip, and I wanna say—well, I can't remember the name of it right now. We worked—we staged out of this place and work east—almost east and south a little bit, sometimes almost down toward Vung Tau. There was a couple of small hills to the north of that airstrip, and there was a village associated with it. If I was looking at a map I could figure it out quick enough. I just don't remember what it was called. We got involved with—very much unlike what I had experienced with the 101st. We had a lot of interaction with other aviation assets, and other ground forces that were not organic to the unit. We worked quite a bit with the 4th/77th ARA and some of the other lift companies. We did a number of things there that I had never seen up in I Corps. As an example, gas missions and fire drops. They would have Chinooks that were organic to the brigade that would go out and drop large tanks of fuel—or fuel oil, or napalm, or something. With detonators attached to it, and they were using this to clear out residual trash to facilitate security around firebases or odds and ins like that. The gas drops were—as in CS gas, were done at very large scale. I'm not sure what the objective was for those, but it was the first and only time that I had the occasions to fly with a gas mask on helicopter which

was—the gas mask had a communication—had a microphone in the mouthpiece and so on and so forth. They were quite awkward to wear with a flight helmet, but we did some of that. I had been there for perhaps—oh, I don't know, probably about a month, and they decided that they needed an instructor pilot for the scout platoon. They dispatched me over to Vung Tau. Interesting experience on a lot of levels, and I'll tell some—what to me now are somewhat humorous stories. But I'll tell some of those on myself. Of course, Vung Tau was known widely throughout Vietnam as kind of a secondary R&R site. If you didn't get a chance to go out of country to Hong Kong or wherever, a lot of people would go to Vung Tau for a couple, or three days. It had nice beaches, was relatively secure. I got down there—I had been, actually at this point, I had been checked out for several—or at least a week or so. Had flown a few missions, nothing in particular to report about those. But I got down to Vung Tau, got signed up and introduced to the flight instructor, who I had never met. You have to put this in the context that I had quite a few hours in the aircraft, I was quite familiar with the Loach. I didn't look at it from the perspective that I knew everything there is to know about it, but I thought I had explored the limits of what it was capable of. Oh Lord, was I wrong. We went out, and I don't remember this fella's name, but we went out on the first day. We did some pattern work, and did a few autorotations at an abandoned strip that was, perhaps ten/twelve kilometers north of Vung Tau. It was right on the coast. We did some of that and we left to come back. The IP said, "Well, we're gonna do a simulated forced landing, and do an autorotation to touchdown." I was looking around for pavement and there wasn't any to be found. So he got the throttle and says, "You see that little path over there that just goes over the dune down at the beach?" I said, "Yep," and he says, "I want you to put it down right there on that path." I'm looking at sand. For those that are not familiar with the dynamics of autorotation to touchdown in a helicopter, you're relying solely on the energy stored in the rotor system to cushion your landing. It's very much an affair of technique and timing to do so without breaking anything. When you have a paved surface, it allows for what would be characterized as running landing to some degree. Typically, you wouldn't slide very far on asphalt or concrete, but you slide a little. They even had what they called skid shoes that were bolted on, and they would allow you to do this repetitively. At some point when the skid shoes were worn out, you replaced them

instead of replacing the skids, because they would wear on that environment. Well, if you're gonna land on a surface that does not facilitate a slide or running touchdown, one, it requires much more finesse and timing when you cushion the landing. Of course you have to have zero airspeed. You have to do this basically as if you're touching down from a hover or your helicopter will trip and stumble, and probably nose over. Of course that gets messy after the fact, you know, when you stick the rotor system in the dirt that just never has a good ending. So, I had done landings of that sort in Hueys on asphalt during training, I had done anything of that nature with a Loach instantly, and he said he wanted me to land on the sand path. I took it to mean, "Well, okay. He wants me to get generally close to the sand and I'm going to rap on the power just before we touch down, and terminate at a hover." But you go through the motions, and one of the motions that you go through there when you get down to the altitude, which in the case of a Loach was thirty to maybe fifty feet off the ground, you start a decelerating flare. The difference is, if you're gonna go a zero ground speed when you touch down, the flare might be a little more pronounced and/or a little more prolonged. You get to the point where you have little, if any forward speed, nose forward, and at about three feet off the ground, you'll pull a pitch to cushion the touchdown. At the point that I started to pull pitch to cushion the touchdown, I also started rapping on power. Well, this fella knew I was gonna do that and he locked up the throttle so I couldn't and there was very little other options except to touch down. Which I did and didn't bend anything or warp anything, and I was just totally amazed that I had pulled that off. But at the same time, it instilled an understanding about the aircraft and myself, and what we were capable of doing that I had never experienced. This after nearly 1,000 hours of flight time in the aircraft, I finally had that experience during my second tour. It went on, from a technical perspective, we did things with the Loach that I had never imagined. This fella had been in-country for a great long while. He had extended through multiple tours, and apparently he was sufficiently valuable to what they referred to as the USARV NET Team. I don't know what—I know USARV was the US Armed Forces Republic of Vietnam, I don't recall what the "Net" stood for. It was N-E-T. He was one of their premier instructors and I was privileged to be flying with him. But some of the things that he taught me to do were not only the old dreaded 180 degree autorotation. Well, anybody can do that. But doing it

with a low altitude entry at 100 knots and 50 feet off the ground is another story entirely. He taught me how to do that. He also taught me how to—I don't know why, but he taught me how to do a 360-degree low altitude high speed entry through a successful touchdown autorotation. I still don't know how I pulled that off. I don't know why he thought it up. But he basically expanded the envelope of my understanding of what the aircraft was capable of doing, and in ways that I had never imagined. Of all the training courses that I attended in the service, that particular one was the jewel of the—the crowning jewel of all of 'em. It was very intense, there was a lot of humor involved, there was also very high standards and expectations of people that participated in this. Not to be—I'm not trying to represent myself as some kind of a superman, but in the course of all this, I stepped out one night into downtown Vung Tau to have dinner. I wound up doing this by myself at a local restaurant that probably had French origins. I had a few drinks, and then I ordered up some kind of shrimp dish, and they brought it out. I thought to myself at the time the shrimp tasted kind of odd. So this was about the second or third evening that I was there, early in the evening. In the AM just before sunrise following that, I was down in the men's room in the latrine taking care of business in just stunning fashion. This continued on into the next morning. I had the onset of a classic case of dysentery by virtue of that meal. I asked the class lead, I said, "Well, what do you wanna do?" He says, "We have no provisions for sick leave." I said, "Okay." He says, "Get a roll of toilet paper and take it with you." I'm going, "You've gotta be kidding." But they weren't. We commenced to continue the training program with the roll of toilet paper on the console between the seats—the cockpit seats. Fortunately, the airstrip where we did most of our autorotation work was—when I say it was abandoned, there was nothing else around it. It was just a long strip of asphalt in the middle of nowhere, close to a scenic place on the beach. We typically, for the next three days, we would get in a couple of autorotations or maneuvers of some sort, and during the course of all of this, I was reciting the—part of the training syllabus was learning methods of instruction and how you teach other pilots to do what you want them to do. So I would be prattling on about, you know, the entry requirements or expectations for doing a forced landing simulation, as an example. We'd do that and then we'd come back, went to do something else. Or he would suggest what he wanted me to go over. After a couple of three of those, I would typically finish up my spiel with

the maneuver, would touch down on the strip, and I'd say, "We're gonna take a five minute potty break." I would get out and drop in the middle of the asphalt somewhere—I was sensitive and I'd get back behind the helicopter somewhere, and squat right there in the middle of the runway. Take care of business and sort of clean up, and then get back on the chopper and we'd start it up. Do it again. I looked back on that whole thing and I have to smile. But we typically would get about fifteen to twenty minutes of flights between major events. Somehow we did all that without any Biblical disasters. I got through the course and I was actually, to some degree I was recovering quite nicely by the time it was all finished. I did not dine at the restaurant, or any of the other local restaurants for that matter, after the fact. So we got completed—or I got that completed. Went back to F Troop and got back into operations. One of the things that I did as a platoon IP was to get standardization rides as required, or check out new pilots that weren't familiar with the Loach. I did some of that, not a great deal. The situation, one of the big changes at that point in the war is there were very few, if any, people over there that were new to that environment. In fact, I think when I went over on my second tour, they were no longer sending first tour troopers over there. You were second tour. One of the exceptions may have been volunteers. I'm not sure about that. But there wasn't a great demand for my time as an instructor pilot. So I wound up flying combat missions.

KC: Okay, I was about to ask you about that.

DH: In an area—and I say this because my crystal ball was not—my crystal ball was clouded at that time. I did not perceive any great threats down in III Corps. Certainly not in the context of what I had experienced up in I Corps in the A Shau Valley and Khe Sanh. It was rolling flat lands. There was still some residue of the Viet Cong network in existence and they were at play in that area. We dealt with them in and around the area where I mentioned that little airstrip was. There was a lot of French rubber plantations in that area and they would wind up doing something. We'd get a call about it and we'd go out and start poking around. In fact we had occasion—one day we chased a bunch of 'em into what had been a French-built structure. It had barrel roof tiles—quite a pleasant looking spot. When they ran into it and a local provincial chief, or whoever was coordinating through them. We had to do that there in III Corps, we had the province chiefs and whoever that we had to coordinate missions through. So to make sure we

weren't shooting the wrong people, or what have you. We had never done this up in I Corps at all. But we got clearance on this and the Cobras totally levelled that house, and presumably anyone else that was inside with it. But in the main, it was a very benign environment. I don't recall that at the time that I was flying with them. I don't recall that anybody got shot down. I don't even recall too many of us getting shot at. It was just very—to me it was an extraordinarily peaceful environment. And just one that I could cap my career in Vietnam with that with no problem at all. There was a couple of folks—I mentioned Turtle earlier. He was a character. He actually had some post-Vietnam reputation that followed him around and that's indicated—you'll see comments about him occasionally in the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association newsletter, stuff like that. There was another fellow there, a captain who was a platoon leader. Lord help me, I just—his name was Luther Lasater, and it was spelled with one 'S.' Actually, the heliport where we were at was name Lasater Heliport. I don't think that there was a tie-in there. I had flown briefly with what was then, Lieutenant Lasater when I was in B Troop 2nd/71st, my first tour. He was one of the folks that came in to help us out when we wound up with just a couple of pilots and a couple of choppers in that platoon. Had not seen him since, but there he was. He was—so a little bit of a ghost from the past. He was an easy guy to work with and around. We had another fella in the weapons platoon, his name was Lou Brewer, he was a lieutenant. Actually looked—I've spoken about him previously. He looked a bit like Burt Reynolds when Burt was young. He was a very gregarious fella. He was funny, he was one of those bigger than life people. Good Cobra pilot. Always looking for, you know, room for a practical joke. We had in the troop—we had our own little private O-club, and it was staffed by a couple of Vietnamese girls that worked the bar. One of 'em was generally—it was generally understood by everybody there that she was working as an active agent for the Viet Cong. The reason that was the case—or the reason that was considered, was that she was always asking questions about our missions, most pointedly about what we would be doing the day. She was very incessant about doing that. She never stopped even if someone asked her our told her to stop asking questions like that, she wouldn't. So, we took it upon ourselves—and it had been policy, actually before I got there, to recognize, one, she's a good bartender. Two, she's kinda cute, we were young. We used her as a pipeline, or at least our perception was, that we

used her as a pipeline for disinformation. She says, “Where are you flying tomorrow, GI?” And I said, “We’re going down to Vung Tau.” She said, “Okay.” You know, we may have been going to the other side of Nui Ba Den which is completely in the opposite direction. But we’d always just make up something and tell her something else, and you know, that’s how we dealt with that. So Lou, in his infinite state of disarray and with his complete lack of decorum, was up to playing jokes on these girls, and particularly this one. He was in there one day and she asked him a question, it was late afternoon, he was in the bar. She asked him a question and he says, “Well, if I tell you that I’d have to kill you.” She says, “Oh, you no kill me,” she says. “Well, no,” he says, “I wouldn’t kill you.” Then he paused for a second and says, “I hadn’t killed anybody in two or three days.” And he was going back and forth with her, and she—finally, she went out from behind the bar to go into the storage room to get something. And Lou had brought in—I didn’t even know he’d brought this thing in. He had been to someplace and he bought a stuffed cobra, and this was a fairly common thing—a very accessible thing there in the market. There was a lot of king cobras over there. The local taxidermist would mount these things in the form of a cobra that’s reared up and ready to strike. My perception was that the local Vietnamese were very much afraid of snakes. They had three poisonous varieties there that I’m aware of. The cobra, the krait, and the bamboo viper. The krait was one that local GIs called the three stepper, which is not exactly correct. You might get four or five out of ‘em after they strike you. And of course, the cobra was its own beast. The bamboo viper was a fairly small snake, but it had a nasty habit of dropping on you from trees above, and particularly bamboo. Looked a lot like a domestic green snake here in the US, except the tip of its tail was ruby colored. Anyway, he had this cobra and she went to the store room. He brought this cobra out and put it on the floor inside the bar area where she would have to, when she went back in, she would have to step around, over, or whatever she was gonna do when she saw this thing. It was a very realistic looking mount. She came back around and she raised up the bar counter to walk through, she had something on her arm, she saw this thing. She made a funny little squeal and dropped her case of beer or Cokes, or whatever it was, and did the most peculiar thing. She squatted right down there and wet her pants and it got real quiet in the bar. She was just sitting there trembling, right—almost face to face with this little mounted cobra. It

was one of the few times that I ever saw Lou do anything that resembled an act of contrition, or however you would describe it. I mean, he was somewhat embarrassed at the way it had turned out. He actually got her back up on her feet, picked up the mounted cobra, and she saw what it was. Then she got angry at him and blah, blah, blah, and this all went on. But he was prone to do stuff like this all the time. I don't recall that that particular event slowed him down very much.

KC: Well, let me ask you while we're on this topic if you don't mind, Dan. In your first tour up there in, you know, with the 101st, you were somewhat isolated from the Vietnamese—native Vietnamese population there to some degree. But was it—it sounds like it was different down south, at this part of your second time over there. What was your interaction like with them in general? What was your opinion of the Vietnamese that you encountered?

DH: Well, you're right about the first part. We had—the only interaction we had when I was with the 101st, is we had a very, very small number of people that came in on the compound to, and at the risk of sounding crude, we called 'em "shit burners." They literally maintained the outhouses, and they would drag out the cans of waste, pour some JP-4 on it, burn it off, put 'em on, and they went on. We had a couple of gals that did something behind the scenes in the cafeteria—or the mess hall. I don't know what they did. But down in III Corps, and subsequently in II Corps when I went up there, they were very much more common on post. They were doing like the, the girls', or ladies', actual function is maids. They would take care of laundry, they'd make your bed, they would sweep the floors, they would just do all the things that your mother would do here in the States when you were a kid. They had men doing, you know, they had shit burners down there as well, and other things that they did. But the numbers were very much more apparent, and their interaction was very much more apparent. I didn't have any problems in the main, philosophically, with any of that, or interactions with them. I found—and I'm not judging who has an easy language or not, but so many of the Vietnamese that I ran into spoke English to various degrees of perfection. For the most part, what we called the hooch maids that would, you know, take care of your bed and laundry and so forth were quite gifted in their ability to talk to you in English. The men, not so much. Probably because they didn't have as much direct interaction with everybody. Later on,

up in Pleiku—there's another story I can tell about that, about some of them that had been around GIs for a long time, and probably understood English better than we did. But, it's kind of interesting. Down in Bien Hoa, I had occasion to intermingle with the local community—people in the local community much more so than with the 101st. What I found, in general terms, when they were on our turf, such as on post or something, they were very polite and cordial. Easy to get along with. When you got into some of the deeper, darker parts of their environment, like downtown Saigon or something of that sort—or Bien Hoa, which also was a metropolis of its own nature, it was a little bit darker. You get into that environment, you're typically having more interaction with the males, and they were Vietnam's version of the inner-city males. They drove motor scooters, or little 50cc motorbikes, or whatever they had. Sometimes they had the three-wheeled taxi Lambrettas, you'd run into 'em. It was easy to have something stolen right off of your body, and that could be a watch or firearm. To give you an example, we typically, as pilots, a great many of us wore shoulder holster rigs, with either a .45-caliber 1911 Colt auto pistol, or a .38 Special. When we were going into town, we would take those and put them on under the tunic for our flight suit. So you could see the bulge, and everybody knew they were there, but they didn't have ready access to 'em. We referred to the people, the boys that would typically—there was a bit of a gang mentality with the younger ones. We referred to 'em as "Cowboys," and they sometimes were quite violent, to the extent that there was casualties on the US side. They would be down—they might be in Saigon, they might be in Bien Hoa or something, and they would have a cluster of these little monsters come after 'em for what money, or watches, or whatever they could get. They weren't the least bit reticent about seriously hurting somebody. In that particular environment, we always were armed, and some people chose a different type of armament. One of the funny stories that came out of that, one of our guys got chased down an alley, wound up being a dead-end alley. He couldn't get to his pistol real quick, but he had a flare kit, a pen flare kit that he carried in his pocket. There was a couple of different types of those. The one that he had used something akin to a gyro stabilized rocket, they weren't terribly common and I don't know where he got it. He wound up in the back of this alley with several of these kids bearing down on him, and he let 'em get in close enough, and he shot him right in the chest with this thing. And because it was a

rocket, it had the ability to stay in place because of the thrust, and it also had the stability, from the spin stabilized by offset of the nozzles. So this little kid gets shot in the chest, and he backs up and he's looking at this flaming beast trying to drill a hole through his chest. Between him and the rest of 'em that was all they wanted and they ran off and left him sitting there going, "Hoo, boy. I dodged a bullet on that one." But I didn't view that particular perception—I didn't view the Vietnamese gangs, the Cowboys, if you will, any differently than I did gangs here in America. We had 'em back in that era. When you would think gangs, you would think about the Sharks and the Jets from *West Side Story*, or something of that sort. We didn't have the large degree of gang development that we have today, like the Bloods and the Crips, and MS-13 and all those people that are running all over the country. I didn't have any particular animus toward the Vietnamese population in general. Most of my dissatisfaction was directed at the North Vietnamese and VC, and almost perfectly because of their intent, while they were there, was to cause havoc and carnage, and kill people. Well, it was our mission to keep 'em from doing that.

KC: Let me look at, before we move back on to the—our other topic. You talked about the Vietnamese civilians. You talked out the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, what about the third group here? Did you have any encounters with the South Vietnamese Army, with the ARVN? Again, as we mention before we started recording today, you know, this is—we're Vietnamizing the war, and had been for a few years now. Do have much interaction with the South Vietnamese military forces? Are you training anyone? Are you working with anyone here?

DH: Kelly, I did not at that point. Now this would be an appropriate time to go back and talk about something we had up in I Corps very briefly. There was a division—I knew them as the 1st Marine Division, not to be confused with the US Marines, but the ARVN, the Vietnamese Army, or I don't know why we referred to them as Marines. But it was a division that was based up in the general vicinity of Hue. They were, at least initially, compromised of, to a large degree of sole surviving sons of the Tet '68 debacle in Hue. They were equal to the best that we ever put in the field over there. They were a terror. We had liaison people that would go with their, you know, the smaller units, the companies, or the battalions, or whatever. They would go on combat operations and after their first experience or two with trying to keep up with these guys, they generally would

have to put extra pants, or what have you, in their pack because they were wearing out clothes, getting uniforms ripped off. They had a vine over there, it was called a "Wait a minute," had very hooked, like cat claw thorns on it. GIs would pick their way through that methodically, the Vietnamese just said, "Hoohah" and went right through it. Of course, you're leaving pieces of skin and fabric, and everything else behind you when you're doing that. They were quite impressive. They were successful to a degree that was equal or higher than anything we put in the field over there. I had, particularly toward the end of my stay up in Phu Bai, when we were getting ready to head back, or I was getting ready to head down towards Bien Hoa. Had a lot of direct interaction with the command authority, I mean, they're colonels and generals and so forth. They were, as much as you can be, the military officers and so forth in that environment, they were quite excellent folks. They were—you talk to them just like I'm taking to you. They were very well oriented to the mission. There was thing—one of 'em—I was just talking to him—here I am an aviation safety officer, and I said, "Is there anything we have in particular that you might want to facilitate further operations?" And he says, "I need some flight helmets." That took me about twelve minutes to round up a dozen or more leftover flight helmets. I just took them out in a big bag and said, "Here you go." You know. So they were good people. I enjoyed working with them, they were a hell of a military force. I get down into III Corps with 1st and 9th, and our mission there was not geared at working with Vietnamese forces, and yeah, that process was underway. But it wasn't something we were doing. Not in the hands on, upfront style. We had—sometimes we would work around them. I mentioned a little while ago, having to coordinate with the village or province chiefs about fire clearance for missions in that area. We had very few areas down around Bien Hoa that were characterized as free fire zones. Up in I Corps, we had—it was rare that we had to coordinate with anybody. Our general rules of engagement up there were fire for fire. Or, in some very select cases or locations, it was could return fire. If we were fired upon we could return fire without even hesitation. That wasn't the case down around Bien Hoa. With few exceptions. I mentioned the lerp team that got ambushed, that particular location was a free fire zone, and that was a rarity. Otherwise we would get engaged with, in whatever circumstances, and then the call goes back through troop operations, who in turns coordinates with someone in, you know,

some village or what have you. That was just the way that went. Other, as I would find out in the not too distant future, where we did work with the Vietnamese forces quite a bit, it was an eye-opening experience. In the case of F Troop, 9th Cav, we didn't do it. All of our interaction was at the local beauty salon where you get haircuts or a massage, or something. Which is something we—got haircuts at Camp Eagle, we didn't get massages on post in that area. So, I have to go just a little bit further into the telling of the story before I can start getting into details about working with the ARVN troops and so forth.

KC: No, that's terrific. I mean, I didn't mean to take you so far off the last ten minutes or so. But I thought it was an interesting subject to broach there, given where we were. But we can take you back with the 1st Cav again. I'm wondering, your first tour you're a scout pilot. Then you go back with B Troop again and the aviation safety officer. But you're back with scouts again with the 1st Cav. Were there any changes, any differences, whether it's procedure or whatever it may have been, flying scouts with the 1st Cav as opposed to the 101st?

DH: I would say no. There was a couple of variations that I can't—I can't—I'm not even inclined to deny. As an example, when I had last flown with B Troop, we were flying a lot of missions with the pilot and a gunner, and a minigun. Which is an evolution from being with a door gunner and an observer, or an observer and a minigun. It evolved into that particular presentation. For one reason, it was a lot lighter, and we had a lot more agility early in the mission. It also provided more firepower. They had not seen the light on that down at 1st Cav, with first F Troop, so we had typically a crew of three. We have a door gunner and an observer, we did not fly many of the aircraft with miniguns on 'em. I'm not sure what the rationale was on that. So, you know, it was a variation, but the operation of the mission is typically with two gunships and that sign as a search box would work in that area and see what we were looking for. Sometimes we were supporting US ground operations, like the lerp team that I mentioned. Or, working with other air units to—such as the gas missions or the fire drops, and that kind of thing. It was a different geography, a different mission profile, but the operations were about the same. There was no particular magic in any of that that I could relate.

KC: Okay, now having been up in I Corps and seeing the war earlier, in the way that you saw the war. Then going down to Bien Hoa as the war is winding down, in

different circumstances, in different geography, and to some degree, different climate. What sort of changes do you see in the way the war is being prosecuted down south as opposed to what you saw up north earlier?

DH: That's an interesting question and I hadn't even pondered it that much in that past. But I can tell you that the missions, the mission profiles, the overarching actions that followed some of those missions in I Corps, tended to be much more violent. There was—there wasn't much huggy kissy type of operations up there in I Corps. There was no friendly turf, as soon as you left Camp Eagle heading west, I mean one of the first things you ran in to was a firebase, and then another firebase, and they were active—carrying 8-inch guns, 175 guns, and so forth. You didn't have the cratered terrain down in III Corps that you had in I Corps. The missions, very often to me it seemed like, we're going on a recon mission and we're gonna look in this particular area. But as often as not, there was very little indication of overt combat, not a lot of bomb craters. In fact, they were kind of unusual, actually. You're working agricultural landscape, you know, a lot of rice paddies, grass huts in the tree lines, and so forth. Kind of thing that around Chu Lai, in the hill country out there, was deadly country for scouts, it really was. We didn't have that in III Corps. We were basically, as often as not, we were out sightseeing and, you know, it was very low key. I didn't mind it, as I said earlier, it was almost relaxing to be flying that particular mission in such a benign environment. In the time that I flew scouts with the 1st Cav, which was a span of—a total span of about three months, I never took the first round of fire from anyone, anywhere. That's far, far different than my experience up in I Corps. It was kind of a, I don't know, kind of a vacation, if you will. By the way, I remembered the name—I mentioned a place that was east of Bien Hoa that we used to stage out of a bit, it was called Xuan Loc, X-U-A-N-L-O-C; two words. I don't—just wanted to get that on the record that was the place that we flew out of a great deal. We'd stage out of there just like we did, and go on there from Chu Lai up to Tam Ky up in I Corps, same general thing. And we had fuel there and so forth, blah, blah, blah. I didn't—you know, it was—I'm thinking that the purpose of—at the time I was thinking the purpose of F Troop being there and doing what we were doing was more of a backup contingency than anything else. We did the missions and there was occasion when we would—like the day they shot up the French plantation house, there were times when

people got engaged in something that was a little nasty. But we did not ever face a 12.7 millimeter anti-aircraft gun, as an example, there was no .50-calibers that we were dealing with. I think it may have been, if anything, just due to dislocation from the supply networks that the North Vietnamese had. So, it was AK-47s and SKS rifles, and scattered engagements. This as opposed to, perhaps, running across people with—I saw tracked vehicle tracks up by Khe Sanh one day. We had—the .50-caliber guns were as common as mosquitoes up in that area. So, it was a very different environment. The mission profiles, not so different. A relaxing atmosphere, if you will.

KC: Yeah, and like so many things in Vietnam, it depends on where you were and when you were there. If you were there in ’66, ’67, ’68, it would be a very different story, but you’re down there in ’72.

DH: Exactly.

KC: I’m assuming, and perhaps I shouldn’t, that the most—or, I’ll ask you instead of me saying it. Were you facing more VC or more NVA down in III Corps?

DH: I would say, in the main, we were dealing more with the residual VC population. We did have some encounters with NVA, but mostly it was VC. That in itself, probably, is very telling. The NVA—and I came to appreciate this not too far down the road when the spring offensive started in ’72. They could not carry the fight very far from their supply lines, and that’s not unique in the history of warfare. Getting from, you know, supply sources in Cambodia and taking it that thirty miles or so to the east or south, getting in close to the coastal regions was quite a hurdle. They had to get past Vietnamese forces and they had to get passed US forces. We had a maze of sensors out there along known travel paths. I mean, acoustic sensors, seismic sensors, I mean it was just—there was so many hurdles for them, I don’t think that they, in the main, tried to move main force units, NVA units, into the fringes of the coastal environment. There were VC. One of the groups that we dealt with, with some repetition, in the general area of Xuan Loc, was—these guys wore yellow scarves. That was kind of like, oh, that’s, you know, the Cav wears yellow scarves. Well, so did these guys. They would be not in uniforms that were typical of the NVA, they typically had black pajamas on and maybe a bush hat or something like this, but they had yellow scarves. Anytime you got some of them moving across the ground, well, “Hoo-ha.” Here’s an interesting sidebar on this.

Our commanding officer, don't remember his name, and that's typical of my experience in the closing months of the war. I was moving through units so quickly, I didn't get to know a lot of people. He was married to a Vietnamese gal and he took great exception to anyone calling them "gooks," or "dinks," or any other term that he viewed as derogatory. So everybody called all the Vietnamese "dudes," and it was something like, "Oh, I got dudes in the open." That could be VC dudes, or North Vietnamese dudes, or I don't know, whoever. We just didn't use any of that vernacular in that unit. One day my friend Turtle got a bunch of 'em running out in the open, and these were the VC dudes with the yellow scarves and I had occasion to listen to his commentary while this was going on. He was going totally haywire chasing these people around and firing them up and everything. But it was always dudes, you know, "I got one dude in the bunker" or, "I got one dude running across the rice paddy. He's down." You know, just dude this, dude that. It was just, you know, boom. Just a different way of dealing with the same old story, I guess.

KC: Right. Prohibitions on the language like that, although well intentioned and we certainly understand where they come from, really doesn't change the connotation. I mean gook—or, dude becomes gook very, very quickly in that kind of context, I would think.

DH: Absolutely.

KC: But if it makes the commanding officer feel better, then there we are.

DH: Well, we were—if anything we were flexible. You know, you tell us that we can't paint the barn red, well, okay. We'll paint it some other color and call it red. You know, whatever. We were lateral problem solvers, I think would be one way to look at it.

KC: Well, Dan, I think I need to take a break here real quick.

DH: Okay.

KC: Okay, Dan, before we took that little break there, one of the questions that I wanted to ask you, moving from the 101st down to the 1st Cav. Talk a little bit about the environment that you were in, in terms of changing from one storied division to another storied division in Vietnam, but in 1972, and down south. What was the leadership like? What was the morale like? The discipline? Any problems or challenges that came up? I

wonder if you might talk about the different units, kind of compare and contrast them for me.

DH: If was gonna put it in a nutshell, the comparison that I would make is that the 2nd /17th up in I Corps, there was a little bit of cowboy mentality. Gunslinger mentality, if you will. It was a very coarse environment, it was very hazardous. People tended to be, once they got past some of the fear factor, it was generally people would deal with this in the early part of the tour, they were facing just, you know, probability of extreme violence at virtually every turn when they were out doing missions. They didn't bend to that. They had sometimes some rather surprising responses. I don't know if I mentioned this to you or not, when I had come back for my second tour and I went back to the 2nd/17th, this is something that illustrates this perfectly well. There was a—in a concrete pad, the receiver and two barrels of a ZSU-23-2, which is a two-barreled 23 millimeter anti-aircraft gun, that had been captured by 2nd/17th, and most pointedly by a fella named Bob Donnelley, who I had been to flight school with. He got setback for administrative reasons, excellent scout pilot. When I ran into him again he was transferred into B Troop about midway through my tour. Shortly after I left, he came across this thing out in the western reaches of the A Shau Valley, reported it, division did not believe it and he engaged the gun. Now, doing that is a rather cheeky attitude indicated, if you will. The ZSU guns were extremely agile, and of course they were quite powerful. The sighting mechanisms used for that gun did not promote a lot of error on the part of the gunners. They were capable of tracking a near sonic aircraft overhead at 500 feet, and staying with them through the entire transit from the horizon to horizon, right over the gun. They were, like I said, they were very agile. But Bob engaged this gun, division operations did not believe it. The troop commander said, "Balderdash," and they went out there with infantry. They didn't have enough lift power in the Huey to bring the entire gun back so they blew the weapon and receiver part off of the chasse and they slung load that back and dropped it off at division headquarters and their pad. This is what I mean by a "gunslinger mentality." Down in F Troop, 9th Cav, they were generally cordial, if unloving. They were very disciplined. We were not under a great deal of pressure from an operational perspective. Yeah, there was always the possibility that you would get into some affair that was hazardous and not particularly enjoyable, if you will. But it was

there nonetheless. So it was—it was, what? It was different, but it wasn't. I know that the troops in the 2nd/17th Cav would have had a different mentality about them in that same environment that F Troop was in. This is reinforced by my meeting with the 2nd/17th troopers up at camp—or, excuse me, at Fort Campbell a few years ago. They had just—the squadron had just returned from the sandbox and I met a number of 'em, and with the exception of a different style of flight suits, they were the same people that I knew in Vietnam. They were, you know, they're quiet, professional, straightforward, in so many ways. Just for what it's worth, and I don't mean to sidetrack that particular conversations, I have Google Earth up here on the computer. I brought that up so I could find—remember what the name of that airfield was east of Bien Hoa. I went over to Vung Tau, and if you bring that up, there's a lot of change there. There's a—it looks like an eighteen-hole golf course just up the beach from the city proper, by Nui Ba Dinh. If you go just a little bit further up the coast, you'll see that airstrip that I was talking about. The one where we did all of our—or, did a lot of our training. There's a lot of development around it and so forth, but it's right there on the beach just like it always was. I've seen that in visiting Vietnam via Google Earth in the past. The A Shau Valley is highly developed with both population and agriculture activities. There's some of that up around Khe Sanh. There's been a tremendous amount of change since we left over there. But just to get back on track, birds of feather, I think is the way I would describe the two different units. We're always a product of our environment, and I think the people in F Troop, had they been up in I Corps, would have been pretty much like 2nd/17th Troopers. You do what you gotta do when you gotta do it. We weren't stressed down in III Corps very much. We did some things down there that were kinda a little off the wall. We used to have an occasional run down to Vung Tau to pick up shrimp, which I never ate the second time. (Laughs) They'd fly down to pick up some seafood. We did the same thing in III Corps that we did up in I Corps, we occasionally—we would take wild game, in the course of a deer or a hog, or something like that. Picked up and bring it back, get it butchered up, and serve it at the mess hall. I had occasion to work around Nui Ba Dinh a couple of times, which is a very curious geographic feature in Vietnam. It was down there in III Corps, it was just this big mountain. I assume that it was of volcanic origins, I don't know that to be a fact. Just a big cone mountain in the middle of miles of flatlands.

Flew down one time, down toward Can Tho. They had another cav troop down there, I think it was, I wanna say 3rd/17th Cav, I'm not sure where we even went down there. But it was very laid back, flying down through the delta. Of course, I was lost the whole time because there was no landmarks to navigate with, it was home to the other people that I flew with. But all in all, to that timeframe and my experience with that troop, it was very laid back. No stress whatsoever. And then, it came time for my thirty-day leave between my regular tour and the extension that I had, somewhat foolishly, asked for in my tour.

KC: How did this extension come about? What happened here? You mentioned it was foolish.

DH: You know, I don't—well, I'll tell you what my mindset was, it was pretty simple. I had incurred a liability of sorts when I went through the safety course at USC, and that extended my obligation to the Army two years. I did not have a problem with that. What I was looking at at the time, if I had gone back to the States, and I would have when the 101st stood down I would have gone right back to the States then had I not extended. But what I was looking at was, if I extended, I probably would be able to leave the service at the completion of that extension because I'd only have like six months left. Otherwise, I would be obligated for the balance of the year. What I had learned when I was in Ft. Rucker between tours, I did not perceive myself as high-quality spit-and-shine material for the US Army. I had a, somewhat of a warrior's mentality and I was not amused by pomp and circumstance, you know. Parades and that kind of stuff just did not work for me at that time. So, I put my name in the hopper for a tour extension, and of course, it was accepted. That extension would go from early May or June, I forget exactly what the cycle time was. Must have been, I'm gonna say, early June is when that would have been. Probably it began at the time that I got back from my leave is the way that worked out. So, I—right around sometime toward the end of April, or maybe very early May, I don't recall precisely, I got on a jet there at Tan Son Nhut and flew home for a thirty-day leave. I fully anticipated when I came back, that I would be right back to F Troop, 9th Cav and would continue with life as I had for another boring six months. Then I would go home and probably be out of the service. Left all my stuff there and loaded up and left. I was so profoundly shocked when I got to, I think it was Oakland again, where I flew in to. Had a little wait before I picked up the flight coming home, looked at a

newspaper and they were announcing the onset of the Spring ’72 Offensive. I was reading what was going on and just going, “Holy shit. What have I done?” I got on my flight, went home, and spent interspersed with, you know, the things that I enjoyed doing, watching the evening news and the print news in the paper, and seeing what was going on over there. I knew enough about the environment and what I was involved with to realize that there was a major shit storm underway over there.

KC: What is that like for you? You’re back for thirty days to, you know, to kind of rest up and relax a little if possible. See family, drink some beer, do some surfing, whatever it’s going to be, and this is going on. I mean—and as invested as you were in what was going on here, what do you spend—

DH: Well, it was—it certainly caused, or sparked a lot of introspection and a lot of concern. I had been somewhat lucky previously in my timing over there. I got over there after Tet of ’68, I missed the Cambodian Incursion, I had missed Lam Son 719 which was a particularly bloody affair, and the Vietnamization thing was underway. It didn’t matter what I thought of it, it was taking the burden off of US troops, and we were disengaging from the battle, if you will, we were backing out of it. So, you know, life was looking pretty good. Yet here I’m reading these headlines knowing full well that there were things not in the paper that would have bearing on my future. But seeing plenty to realize that the US troops, in particular the aviation assets, were very deeply involved in what was going on. It was a little scary. There’s a limit on how kindly statistical probability will treat you. Like in my first tour we lost forty-something Loaches from the platoon. I contributed one of those due to gunshot wounds, one or two of ‘em anyway, and a Huey. But I hadn’t been shot, and neither had anybody onboard with me. You know, I defied odds quite a bit, is what I’m saying. Here I was getting ready to go back into a situation where it seemed painfully obvious that I would not be defying those odds much longer. I had mentioned early in our discussions during my first tour orientation at Bien Hoa, that I become convinced that I was gonna die over there. Those thoughts returned. You know, I had survived a couple of years of this, and very abruptly those thoughts revisited. I had very mixed views about the military capabilities of the North Vietnamese, but it didn’t mean that I disrespected what they could do. I didn’t see them as a sophisticated enemy, they relied often on main force and sacrifice to achieve their

objectives. But, every time they had met us in a set piece battle, we handed them their ass. That would continue, to a large degree, throughout the balance of our involvement in the war, but the casualties on our part were quite high. They were very much focused on the aviation assets. We did not have, in country at that time, anything of significance in the way of ground forces. We had the infantry platoons for the cav troops, we had somewhat limited other ground forces, but I think, as I recall, at that point our numbers had dwindled from an excess of 500,000 at the peak of the war, when I first got over there, to something in the range of 65,000 at the onset of the Spring '72 Offensive. Virtually all of that was dedicated to aviation and support roles. By support I mean supply and maintenance, and that kind of stuff. We had been, even as I—we shut down the 101st, a lot of our aviation assets were transferred directly to the South Vietnamese as opposed to taking them home. We had a constant exercise of taking Hueys to the laundry pad and flushing them out, washing them out, pressure washers, the whole thing, just cleaning them up generally before they were turned over. That would continue down in III Corps, as I would later find out. It was very unsettling. I did nothing in the course of that extension, I was staying there, once again, I was staying with my folks. Dad was fully cognizant of what was going—he understood the implications of all of this. My mom was wringing her hands again. I was going, you know, "Holy shit." But as was always the case, the time came when it was time to go back. I loaded up my bags, said farewell to the friends that I had seen over that period of time, and headed back. I recall next to nothing about the return flight, except that it was interminably long. I went—there was no layover in California or anything, I just off one plane, got on another, and I kept doing that until finally I got off the plane there at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. Got ground transportation to F Troop, and the first thing that I found when I got there, one, that I was no longer assigned to F Troop. I had been moved over to B Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion. On top of that, I found out that Captain Lasater had been killed in a rather curious circumstance. I don't—I wasn't there, I don't know the details. I know there was a lot of internal angst developed in the unit. There was a number of people that thought—he was trapped in the aircraft and caught on fire, and his gunner either did not or was not able to get him out and that caused a lot of hostility. You know, right or wrong, it was not a pleasant event. Lieutenant Brewer had been shot down in the general

vicinity of An Loc, with the SA-7, shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile. He and his front seater were killed. That was one of those things that was not in the paper, the use of the heat-seeking missiles against choppers. It was like, you know, that can't be true. Lieutenant Brewer was too big to die, I mean he was just one of those people that just would never—the guy was bulletproof, but he wasn't. I had to digest all of those things in about the first thirty minutes I was there. Quite literally I picked up my bags, and it was just a very short walk. They gave me a jeep ride down to the headquarters there at B Company. I bid those guys farewell, and I don't recall there was any of them that I had any issues with. I liked them and respected them, but there I was, going to a new unit. I wound up in a place that was almost like a campus sorority house, or something of that sort. It was—it had been a medical facility previously. They had concrete sidewalks, they had covered walkways, all the sidewalks had roof covers, the hooches were just stellar. It was very much upscale, even from what I had experienced at F Troop, which was an upgrade from my previous existence in the mud with the 101st. But I was gonna be flying Hueys, doing the original, I guess, airmobile type operations that we invented over there. It would be the first time that I had, other than ash and trash and a little bit of sea flying, that my dedicated purpose was gonna be flying slicks. I didn't really know what to make of that. I was still current in Hueys, and of course, was comfortable in 'em. But this was gonna be the opening of a whole new chapter of my aviation career. It was quite daunting before it was over with. As it turned out, at that point in time I had about six months left, and I don't know this going in to it, but I was gonna have about three months with B Company and then I was gonna be sent up to II Corps in Pleiku. But I met—we had a couple of platoon leaders, we had very competent array of aero men and crewmen there. Couple of oddities, and I use that phrase "oddity" loosely. We had one fella who was our own version of Odd Job from that—*Kelly's Heroes* was the name of that movie and that part was played by Donald Sutherland. This fella had been over there about four years or so, he was married to a Vietnamese gal. He was—to all appearances he was not terribly disciplined. In reality he was, but he didn't have that demeanor or presentation. He had a big gold chain around his neck with a little pagoda that was filled with some kind of gray material. I said, "What is that?" he says, "That's my father in law." Really. Apparently it was, you know, his wife had wanted him to carry ashes of the father in law with him as a

good luck token, or something of that sort. He was a crewman on a Nighthawk bird, and that was one of our little sidebar missions, and something that, for reasons known but only to Christ and the commanding general, I was assigned to that role very shortly after I got there. We ran the Nighthawk, was an interesting exercise of nighttime surveillance and reconnaissance. The two birds would fly this, one was basically for radio relay, it was a standard configuration Huey that would fly up at 1,500, 2,000 feet above the recon bird. Which had the standard belly search light that came from Bell Helicopter. It had a xenon search light on the aircraft commander's side. When that gentleman had the search light, he also had a standard mount M-60 machinegun. This nonstandard camper we had, that was the crew chief of this bird, had built his own array of firepower and lighting from parts that was compromised primarily of seven Huey landing lights that were arranged into an articulated system that would allow him to focus the light beams on the outer circuit. There was six around the circumference, and one of the middle. Those things would actually flex in and out, and allow him to focus the beam. He had, when I first met him and started flying the missions, he had a twin-60 mount that he had configured with a single trigger. By the time I last saw him, he had a quad-60 mount that he had put together for this whole affair.

KC: Pretty inventive guy, imaginative guy.

DH: He was indeed, and he was also—he was amazingly effective with it. He probably produced about ninety percent of the kills that that mission ever created. He was flying on the off sides, would always because generally speaking, the aircraft commander would orbit to the left—excuse me just a second, Kelly. It was not unlike the scenario with the Loach where you've got the gunner and the pilot on the same side, so you tend to orbit in a right orbit with that particular thing. This one went left. So our own Odd Job with his downtown LA lighting system and quad-60, M-60 machinegun, was covering the right side. He still managed to do an awful lot of, well, depending on your perspective, either good or damage to the cause, depending on where you sit. He was—because of the mission, he did all of his work at night. You'd never see him around during the daytime. He was a creature of the night. And also, it came to pass that when B Company finally went home, he did not. He went over the hill to stay with his family. As far as I know, he was never accounted for, and I believe he's actually listed as MIA at this time. But I—

just knowing this guy, I would not just immediately conclude that he was—became a war casualty in the short term. He was far too creative to fall into some of those traps. I stayed in that role, I mean it was—the Nighthawk mission is interesting. Getting out, flying in basically river channels, is what we were patrolling.

KC: Can you tell me a little bit about what these Nighthawk missions would have consisted of? Their purpose, their configuration, the time out. What are you doing out on one of these?

DH: Well, what we were doing, basically was riding herd on the river courses that came in, or through, or to Saigon, Bien Hoa, and the larger metropolitan areas in the south of Vietnam. There was a lot of 'em. If you start looking at the maps, or images, a lot of rivers and streams in that area. They were major transportation corridors for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, and they used them primarily at night. So we're out there with armed, light-endowed helicopters, and we would just fly around in the rivers. For whatever reasons, and I never understood this, the enemy seemed always somewhat slow to pick up on the presence of helicopter sounds when they were approaching. It may have been that they were just so numb to hearing helicopters, it just did not cause a reflex. I don't know, but I saw this happen many, many times. You come around a bend in the river, and all of a sudden you see a sampan. Well, there weren't supposed to be any sampans on this river at night, so they just almost immediately got shot to pieces, and that was the way that went. I don't recall that we ever engaged any enemy forces that were already feet dry. It was all sampans of various sizes, anywhere from a one- or two-man canoe, up to something that could carry some freight. Generally when they got shot up, and they would turn over or something of that sort, they would—the cargo would go to the bottom like a rock. Presumably it was arms, ammunition, I don't know that to be a fact. It was kinda fun. It was kind of, not so much for us, being in—I hardly ever flew the cap mission, I was always down on the ground, or down in the mud with the armed Huey. It was—how would I say this? It was light entertainment, if you will, from my perspective. Yeah, it was serious and it was hazardous, and it was a bunch of other things, but it was not scary stuff. However, one night one of our cap birds got a case of vertigo, got into some unanticipated low cloud cover. What they call inadvertent IFR, or entry into IFR conditions, and he lost visual contact with the ground. There was a little bit of a

garbled message on the radio, the bird that I was in, the AC, called him up and said something like, “Say again?” The guy says, “Stand by,” and then he says, “We’re IFR, stand by.” I happened to look up and I see this guy diving out of a cloud like he’s an Air Force strike bomber, and as soon as he got out of the clouds he saw where he was, and of course he pulled up severely. The next thing, I’m looking at this thing is going up like a Saturn 5 rocket, and he went right back into the clouds. Our AC started talking to him, and we saw what had happened, we knew the guy was in trouble. There was some back and forth and clipped conversation. Eventually the fella got it back under control and descended out of the cloud base, and we all went home and lived happily ever after. But that was the general framework of the mission. We did a few other things from time to time, there was a flight crew from a brigade, OH-6, that crashed one evening—one night in one of the local rivers. The crash site was identified, the passenger was recovered, couldn’t find the pilot for some time. We spent several days looking for him, and I ultimately—I said, “All you gotta do is wait two or three days and he’s gonna float.” He had an armor plate vest, that’s thirty pounds, give or take, of ceramic that he was wearing. Sure enough he finally came to the surface and was picked up. So, you know, there was little sidebars, the oddities of things that you would get involved with. This was a mission that I did almost exclusively for the first few weeks that I was with B Company. It was also a time during which I was assigned responsibility as a safety officer for B Company.

KC: So that comes back to play again.

DH: Yeah, it did. Being a company safety officer was like, “Yeah, okay. I can do that standing on my head with one hand tied behind me.” You know, it’s no big deal. I didn’t have much to do as far as proactive, you know, cheerleading sessions with the pilots or anything like that. I was basically there to handle paperwork that might develop from incidents, accidents, or whatever there was. I mentioned earlier there was timelines on the reporting cycle. I would be responsible for that, but the company commander says, “What do you think about taking that job?” I said, “No problem.” And boom, there I was so I had that. I don’t recall precisely when it occurred, it wasn’t long, it was like I said, a couple or three weeks, maybe a month following my introduction to B Company. We were in a phase of formulating response to the incursions that the North Vietnamese had

launched for the Spring Offensive. You have to understand that, in the context of my previous conversation about them being able to extend their fighting to distances outside of their supply chain, they were fighting furiously in countryside that was not far from the border with Cambodia, and as I'd find out later on, Laos and so on and so forth. In some places they had transportation corridors they could utilize, in some places they did not. III Corps was a place where they didn't have a lot of that, but what they were able to do was to push in to a provincial capital called An Loc. There were three major focuses in the Spring '72 Offensive. One of them was provincial capital up in I Corps, Quang Tri. Another was an attempt to take over, as they did initially in Quang Tri, to take over Kontum, which was up in the II Corps region, up in the big mountains. Then An Loc that was also a provincial capital. The North Vietnamese focused all their efforts on those three locations.

KC: Dan, let me interrupt you right here. Before we go any further into An Loc, I know that's going to take up a substantial amount of time. Let's stop there for today and we can pick up with An Loc next time. That sound okay?

DH: I would be happy to do that.

KC: Okay.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [8] of [9]
Date 8 April 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 8 April 2015. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Hilliard is joining me by telephone again from his home in Inglis, Florida. Dan, we left off last time we had you on the verge of the Easter Offensive here in Spring of 1972. You've changed units, you've changed a different part of country that you're in, kind of a background for this. So what I'd like for you to do today, is to take me through your experiences of the Easter Offensive. An Loc, of course, figuring prominently in this. Take me through what you knew, what you know now. Give me the context, the background of what's going on here. Take me through your experiences.

DH: I would be happy to do that, Kelly. As I recall during the last session, I had gotten to the point where I had described my first month or so with B Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Company, or Assault Helicopter Battalion, excuse me, with the 1st Cav in the Nighthawk mission. Which is something that I did a fair bit right off the bat. I made a comment at the time that I thought—and understand, this was in the general timeframe of May of '[72], I think the Offensive, the Spring Offensive started somewhere around very end of March or early April. I had gone home for thirty days' leave for the extension, and saw the headlines when I arrived in Oakland. So that started in that general timeframe. I was back in country in late April, early May of '72, reassigned, and did the Nighthawk thing. I made the comment that, in my perspective they were—they being USARV, the command authorities in South Vietnam, were trying to develop strategies to respond to the offensive. It had been thirty days—been underway for thirty days, but there was nothing indicated in the unit actions that I was in, that we were addressing that in a pointed fashion. I say that because we were flying Nighthawk, we were flying in the opposite direction of the offensive from An Loc. We were flying—doing little spot missions here and there around Xuan Loc and still in the lift capacity. But we weren't heading into Indian country at that point. Couple of things that I commented on previously, Lieutenant Brewer from the F Troop 9th Cav, my previous unit, had been shot down with an SA-7 missile. Much to my surprise, even in the short

interlude from the time when those things were utilized first in South Vietnam against helicopters, to when I arrived back in country a scant thirty days later, they already had infrared suppression kits being installed on the helicopters. Basically what they looked like for the Cobras and the Hueys, was a large commode that was made out of—had a fiberglass casing, metal interior, it fit over the exhaust stack and directed the exhaust upward so it was out of the visual field from the ground. The SA-7 missiles were—they required hot metal for tracking, they could not track exhaust gas, which is perhaps illustrated the technical split from the Communist bloc nations to the US. Because we had a similar missile called the—I believe it was called the Red Eye, that could track exhaust gas. They didn't, so we were hiding our exhaust pipes, as it were. I thought at the time, and somewhat bitterly, that they obviously knew that this was going to be an issue, but they had—should not have waited for the use of that missile to become common before shipping the kits and getting them installed. I mean, you could not fabricate anything that quickly under contract with the federal government or the Department of Defense, get them shipped to Vietnam and have them installed in such a quick cycle. So that was one of the things that fueled my cynicism about what was going on over there. But suffice to say, we kept those things mostly installed when I returned, and it was just a matter of a few weeks and they had 'em completely installed. All the Hueys had 'em, all the Cobras. They even came up with a modification kit for the OH-6. I did not see that being installed until sometime later. One of the reasons of that is the mission profile for the Loach did not put them at great risk from the SA-7s. They generally were flying at low altitude and the missile system had an operational envelope like any other device for war that was such that they had to track a helicopter for a period of time until they got a system lock, or targeting lock on it. They had to be within, well, they had to be able to see it at low altitude, or any altitude for a time, and they were limited to a vertical height of about 9,500 feet above ground terrain elevation. They had a lateral range of about three to three and a half miles, it was as far as they would go. But they got their IR (infrared) suppression kits installed, and about the time that was complete, our entire mission profile for the B Company changed. We went from the warm, huggy, touchy-feely stuff that we were doing in the direction toward Saigon and Vung Tau and so forth, to An Loc.

KC: Let me interrupt you here real quick, Dan. I've got a question again about these kits that were installed. You were flying Hueys with the kit installed, is that correct?

DH: Yes.

KC: Okay. Can you explain a couple of things? One, you explained that basically you're just hiding the exhaust, you're blowing the exhaust out. Does this in any way, shape, or form, affect the performance of the Huey? I mean, if it's blowing straight up it would have to probably impact the rotor system. How did that work?

DH: It did not affect the performance. What it did, it wasn't a straight pipe, it was a diffuser. It attached there, caught the exhaust stream that was coming out of the standard exhaust from the T-53 Lycoming L-13 and Lycoming engine. In the process of making a ninety-degree turn upward, the diameter of the diffuser increased. So it was kind of like a megaphone. The velocity of the exhaust gas was very much reduced by the time it came out. That also incorporated a cooling aspect, in that it wasn't tightly bolted to the exhaust stack, and it would allow for airflow from the forward of the diffuser to blend with the exhaust gas, as I recall. It was a two-pronged approach, very simple in concept, and very, very effective. I don't—I'm not aware of any helicopters that were shot down that had those things in place, or installed, if you will. For the balance of the war, they had about a thirty-, forty-five-day window when they were able to employ them successfully. They also employed them against some fixed-wing aircraft. There was one instance I recall where an OV-10 Bronco was shot down up near Quang Tri. There was a C-130 gunship that had the—one of the crewmen had the unfortunate joy of watching one of those tracks right into its—they had an infrared search light, a xenon search light, it could work with visible or infrared wavelength illumination. They were up somewhere in the greater Quang Tri/Hue areas, somewhere in there. Their weapons systems operator saw one of these things launch and watched it track right straight to their xenon search lamp on the IR mode. It did not shoot the aircraft down, but it made a mess out of the searchlight. I had said I was flying with them, for the most part I was and we still had—it was a process that was underway. I had on occasion of flying without 'em. Notably in the Nighthawk mission, we didn't have those. Not all the Cobras had been modified, but again, it was an ongoing process. In the very early days, when our mission profile altered,

we started going to An Loc. There was still some gunships that did not have those. A photo, or a painting, if you will, that's been fairly—been commonly circulated online, shows a Cobra the 4th/77th Aerial Artillery, Aerial Rocket Artillery, that is in the process of losing its tail boom from a missile strike. That's an example of an aircraft that had not had the modification, and he—the tactic up until the time that they had this kits, if one of them was launched at you, you know, they best course of action you had was try and turn toward the missile to hid your exhaust stack, so it would break tracking lock. He was trying to do that, but it was unsuccessful. Lost his tail boom and then he's got a heck of a war story when it's all over with. The only crew that I'm aware of that survived a strike by one of those missiles in the course of the war. But I'll tell that story a little bit down the road.

KC: Sure, sure. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I just had a quick question.

DH: (Speaking at the same time) Nah, that's quite all right.

KC: Okay, An Loc.

DH: An Loc, well, there was—first mission that we took out there, our basic orders were to go out to Lai Khe, which was an Army airfield. Probably made more famous by Bob Hope than anybody else. Big long PSP mat, they had fixed-wing and rotary-wing assets there. When we started using it the strip was abandoned, the unit had withdrawn. I don't even know who had been based there previously. Lai Khe sat on the—in near proximity to what was called QL-13, all of the major traffic or road network arteries had a QL designation. I don't know what that meant. The coastal road that went up from Quang Tri, actually on down south through Da Nang, Chu Lai, and all that area down south was called QL-1. It was QL-13 that ran from, I'm gonna say generally Saigon, Bien Hoa area, northbound up through Lai Khe. Then a little, very small village called—we called it Chothon, it was spelled C-H-O-T-H-O-N. It may be properly pronounced otherwise, but that's what we called it. That was about twenty, twenty-five clicks north of Lai Khe, and about the same distance north of that was An Loc. We did not jump right into the relief of An Loc in a direct sense. When we got up there we started doing missions that progressively grew closer to An Loc. An Loc was a provincial capital, it had been largely overwhelmed by the North Vietnamese assault, but it was never—it never fell completely. Their perimeter shrank, of course, and once surrounded,

like anybody else, the South Vietnamese forces were quite capable of waging a fierce resistance. I guess all a matter of motivation. Our primary mission was to insert fresh troops, South Vietnamese troops, to extract wounded and dead, and resupply ammunition, food, and so forth. That was the root basis of all the missions we had in the relief of An Loc, for the balance of my time with B Company. We—how would I put this? At least down in III Corps I should qualify that, because we did have a mission—we did relocate up into I Corps later on. It was my first exposure to working directly with the South Vietnamese troops. I will say candidly, they weren't really enthused about going into that meat grinder. We never had any particular problem getting them to unload when we arrived at a drop off point. Which was typically QL-13, is what we were using for LZs and TZs and so forth. At the same time, when we would pick up wounded, that being a priority over dead, but we did both. We'd pick up wounded and dead, they'd be loaded by South Vietnamese troops who frequently wanted to climb onboard with everybody else and get out of there. That got to be a bit of a sticking point because their zeal for getting out of the combat zone was quite strong. It got to the point where one of the—a little argument that developed between a Vietnamese soldier and a crew chief; he was trying to get them off the Huey and this guy was adamant about staying on. He shot and killed the crew chief, which resulted in a whole bunch of nasty activities right off the bat. Shortly after that, the crew chiefs were issued enhanced cattle prods that they used to basically clean off the sides of the Huey for people that were not supposed to be boarding the ship. They worked fairly well. Some crew chiefs were a little hard headed about that, they just preferred to use big wrenches or a piece of pipe, or whatever they could get their hands on. I don't think they made a habit of shootin' 'em but it was a very contentious situation for quite a while. As I indicated earlier in the first few days of this—a few weeks, if you will. Most of our missions went to the general region around Can Thanh right out of Lai Khe. We would load up troops or supplies, or whatever we were taking out there and basically fly right up the road. It wasn't a long flight, ten minutes perhaps—fifteen minutes maybe. We would land at the given—or designated landing zone on the road in trail formation. We would unload troops or supplies, if there was anything to pick up, wounded, we'd pick them up and basically turn right around and leave. We did not take much, if any, ground fire in the early phases of this thing. But somewhere along the

way—as this developed, I guess, what I should say is we kept inching closer to the little village of Con Thon. I don't remember the precise date when this occurred, but probably—well, almost certainly it would have been in May of '72. We went in with, I think a five-ship—or, excuse me, nine-ship element of Hueys. We had, I think it was four gunships in escort all from 4th/77th ARA. Understand that there were still tactics evolving in how we dealt with the threats. Previously I had mentioned the shoot down of Lieutenant Brewer, Lou Brewer, and his front seater. I don't know precisely where that occurred, but it was not far from where we were landing at that time, just south of Can Thanh. So, the Cobras were at a decided disadvantage carrying out their mission if they were at low altitude. They were also at risk in the intermediate flight stratums, too, invulnerable to the missiles. If they were down low they were vulnerable to small arms and .50-caliber anti-aircraft fire. So, as a general matter of course, and because I think we were just getting our feet wet with ramping up the action, the gunships were still flying in the general realm of 1,500, 2,000 feet above ground level. Which was—made them extremely vulnerable to the missiles. We had landed—standard protocol at the time, if anybody got shot down or was forced down for any reason, the last ship in the formation would be the designated pick-up aircraft. They would go to the crash site, or whatever had happened, pick up the crew if they could, and then get 'em out of there. So we had nine birds sitting on the ground at just south of Can Thanh. I don't think we were—I don't think we were two kilometers south of the village at the time. My recollection has it that I was sitting in what we'd call "chalk seven," seventh of nine birds in the formation. We had, in that particular mission, we were picking up troops and bringing 'em back. We had just loaded up and I was looking at something on the dash and I heard somebody scream, "Missile! Missile! Missile!" on the radios. I looked up to twelve o'clock and I saw the smoke trail from the missile and I turned to follow it as quickly as I could, but I never caught up with the missile until it struck one of the Cobras. What I saw at that time, was the Cobra was in about a ninety-degree left bank, or very close to it, and it's tail boom—there was a puff of smoke and the tail boom was just separating from the aircraft. I fully expected to see that aircraft just fireball, just go right into the ground. But it did not, and this was profoundly unexpected on my part. The Bell helicopters had what was called a semi-rigid rotor system, and it was on a teetering hub. Which meant that if you—

what that translates to, is that the flight—if the path of the rotor system is changed enough relative to the mast, that the hub can actually start bumping the mast. The general legend was you get to feel about two or three of those bumps and then your rotor head would separate from the aircraft. Which, of course, will always result in a letter or visit from DOD to inform the bereaved family. In this particular case, fella lost his tail boom, which causes a profound shift in the center of gravity, and certainly well outside the prescribed limits. The nose of the aircraft dropped, he was in a left bank. So it dropped about sixty, seventy degrees downward. Then the entire aircraft rolled upright and at this point, began doing a slow rotation to the left, in the same direction as the rotor system was turning. It was oscillating somewhat like a pendulum in just a random pattern as it came down. I was absolutely dazzled. By this time, the flight was departing. We were pulling power and starting to leave in the formation. We did a—my recollection has it that we did a right turn out toward the aircraft, and he was still coming down when we did this. We did a right turn in his general direction, there was a brief conversation between the flight lead and the designated clean up man at the end of the flight, who broke out of formation and was heading toward the aircraft as it went into the trees on the—probably, I don't know. I'm gonna say about 6-, 700 meters from us. At that point in time, my focus went back to flying and getting us out of that area. I did not see any of what transpired after that, but the story that was told after we got back to the base camp that night at Bien Hoa, was basically that they had watched the Cobra go in, they flew right in to it, to the site. They did not take any ground fire. There was some trees around the aircraft where it had gone in, and not a convenient place for them to set down. Particularly not with the load they had. They had typically—we'd carry C-level conditions, we'd carry about seven US GIs in the load of a Huey. I think we carried nine to eleven Vietnamese because they were quite a bit smaller in stature. So there was a rice paddy about fifty, seventy-five meters from the crash site. He went over there and they tried to get the troopers off of this thing so he could go back and get the crew, and they weren't gonna get off of it. He finally said to hell with it and picked up. They went back over, the aircraft commander was out of the cockpit. He had just helped the front seater get out of the cockpit, he had—I think he had a broken ankle or something of that sort from the crash. Otherwise they were pretty good. The Huey aircraft commander made a

call, which was basically to clear the trees out with his rotor system and get down in close enough to pick ‘em up, and they did that. They did not land, they got down to a very low hover right over the fuselage of the Cobra, and through hook and crook managed to get the Cobra crew onboard. They flew ‘em directly to the evac hospital at Bien Hoa, then returned back to the company helipad there at Lasater Field. I mentioned, I think, in the last interview, the call that came a day or two later from the brigade safety office wanting to know where the report was on that incident with the Huey, and the major damage that occurred from the tree strikes on the blades. The colonel was pleased that I said there wasn’t an accident, that it was done on purpose to pick up the crew in a combat operation. He seemed happy with that and life moved on. But, that was a, I don’t know, that particular event was—it was, I think, a fine moment in aviation—Army aviation history. It illustrated the synergy that the different operators had in the broader scope. The fact that they had different capabilities they would and could utilize them. They were dedicated to their peers. They were, you know, the Huey crew was from my unit. The Cobra was people we had never met, didn’t know ‘em, and they still pretty much rolled the dice right out looking for sevens to get these guys at risk to their own well-being, and did it without any question. Got them out, and it was, I believe, the last time that an Army helicopter was brought down by one of those missiles. Ultimately we got all the rest of the IR kits installed across the span of the country. There was numerous attempts at shoot downs, but they were basically using the SA-7s like an RPG, and it takes quite a bit of skill to shoot a helicopter down that’s a long ways off and moving at an unknown speed. If it doesn’t have a tracking system it’s basically a worthless system, and we got to that point. Their existence, that being the SA-7, was complimented to a very, very large degree by intense volumes of ground fire. When you had a missile site in existence, they always had a lot of supporting fires to protect that missile operator. Typically .50-calliber machineguns, and there was an awful lot of those in country at that time. I used to make jokes, you know, everybody used to have an AK, now they’ve got a .50-caliber. So flying at low altitude protected you from the missiles, among other things, and the only recourse you had against ground fire, was to get even lower. Just lower, and lower, and lower. We were basically flying Hueys at altitudes that Loach pilots were comfortable with, and I don’t know that Huey pilots were uncomfortable with it. But we were down low and as

fast as we could go. We didn't loiter around. Not long after that occurred, we go in to the particulars of direct relief of the provincial capital and the people that were basically trapped in that location, at An Loc. I remember very well, the first mission that we had flying in to An Loc was somewhat ominous in a great many ways. It started out—we staged up to Lai Khe, we didn't know exactly what were gonna be doing that day. We never did. We'd get a briefing before we took off from one of the senior officers or commanders. This particular day, the commanding general of the 3rd Brigade showed up on the flight line. We had—recollection has it there was somewhere between twenty-five and thirty Hueys dedicated to that mission. We had six or eight gunbirds. It was obvious to me we were going someplace we weren't gonna like, and it was An Loc. The general gave us the general overview of what the mission was gonna be like. He gave the flight lead the option of flying low-level to An Loc, or getting up high to stay above the missile effective range. We were to—we were dropping off supplies, taking out wounded, no healthy troops were to be extracted. The mission had been assigned initially to Vietnamese Air Force, who had declined to prosecute the mission. As a result, the general said that, "Any one of you that wants to walk away from this can do so without any repercussions, you'll never hear another word about it from me or anybody else in staff." Everybody's standing there and looking at each other and looking at the general, and said, "Well, hell." You know, somebody's gotta do it, and nobody walked away. The only time I heard that—a spiel like that in the war. Forgive me, I can't remember his name. He was a black general, he was an amazing commander. He went on—I think he went on to—he was brigadier at the time, he ultimately retired with three stars. I had the highest regard for his sense of tactile applications, because what he did—we ran this mission on a very tight time limit. When we exited the LZ, we were gonna fly right straight down the middle of QL-13, and he cautioned us to not deviate from that regardless of ground fire or anything else. The reason being, is that our exit was going to be covered by airstrikes that would be on either side of the highway, and not just your average airstrikes. They were gonna be B-52 arc lights. So this was the thought behind the navigation and the timeline. We needed to just be right on schedule with this. We were all ready to jump off into that brave new world, and flight lead opted to run the mission at altitude—at high altitude for the mission. We were going to in turn, you know,

at least ostensibly, we would do some kind of maneuver when we got to the other end, and land on the road just south of town. Couple of things that were interesting at that point to me. I had never been that high in a helicopter before, or since. We went up there somewhere around 11,500, 12,000, something like that, it's quite high. It was comfortable up there, it was quite cool, which was an anomaly in South Vietnam by any standards. It's about fifty clicks from Lai Khe to An Loc. Because of the disposition of enemy forces and so forth, we were going to go in at altitude, slightly to the east side of the landing zone, and then descend. In my simple mind at the time, I assumed that they meant we were just going to make kind of straight end descent or something. We were above scattered cumulus cloud tops, and it was, you know, it was very scenic. It was comfortable. We were just going, "Wow, this is neat." I was sitting in about the twelfth of something in excess of twenty Hueys. I was like chalk twelve, or so. As we approached, we went to our IP to the east of An Loc, and we turned in toward the landing zone. I'm thinking to myself, "We're awfully high to be making an approach." And I don't care how you do it, you know, it wasn't—it was too steep even for an autorotated approach. The lead ship started his descent, and he had not gone very far, and he began a left-hand spiraling descent. The guys in front of him followed. Pretty soon, we've got twenty-something Hueys in a corkscrew maneuver descending toward the landing zone. It was the only time in my flight career that I ever got vertigo. I was just—Lord, that made me dizzy. I'm sitting here—my view, it was very—from a pitch perspective, it was very steep, and our angle of bank was very, very high. So we're all following each other in this corkscrew pattern of descent. We probably made, I don't know, three, four, maybe five complete turns—360-degree turns during the descent. Through sleight of hand and what have you, we wound up rolling out, on a moderately short final, to the south of the town. Toward a smoke grenade that had been pitched out by—at the LZ. Oddly enough, by my reckoning, we all got down in one piece. I mean, it was—in retrospect I'd say it was very well considered as a strategy, but it was a big surprise to me. I had no idea it was coming.

KC: It would have been nice to have been able to prepare for that maybe once or twice.

DH: I kinda got the impression that the flight lead was making this up as he was going along. I think some of the other fellas had the same idea, but you know, it worked.

Since it worked we weren't inclined to try and fix it. You know, getting away with it was everything, and we did. We got down and kicked off supplies. A lot of food, a lot of munitions, lot of medical supplies. We did pick up some wounded. We had just a couple of the South Vietnamese guys try to board up and come home. One of 'em was about two choppers up from us, about chalk nine, I guess. Or ten, something like that. The flight lead called for a pitch pull and we started to depart. About the time we did that, this guy got kind of booted off the Huey. It had just come off the ground so it wasn't like he was, you know, terribly abused. He just kinda got pushed off on his butt in the roadway. He jumped up, very indignant, waving his hand—his clenched fist at this Huey as it took off. The Huey that was immediately ahead of him happened to hit his helmet with the right toe—or the sk—the toe of the right skid. At that point in time we were probably doing about fifteen knots. If you were—I don't know, if you were playing horseshoes you would have got a max score for this one. He got him dead center in the back of the helmet. He got a face plant that was fairly profound, but the guy was resilient. He jumped up, and he starts his fist waving again. He was getting ready to get another tap from our skid, and by this time we were up to probably twenty, twenty-five knots. We were starting to roll. I was just looking at this going, "Oh, my God." At about—we were probably within thirty feet of him and for whatever reason he sensed we were there. He crouched suddenly and turned and looked at us. We went right directly over his head. I don't know what he was doing after that, but we all left. We're coming out—coming up above the tree tops, and it was all rubber plantations, particularly to the west side of QL-13. I mean, it was just miles and miles of the old French rubber plantations. We had just cleared the tree tops, and the first strike from the B-52s started going in on the east—let's see, it would be the west side of the highway, our right side as we're exiting. My recollection that there was another one to the left, and then a third strike to the right, but I'm not real sure about that third strike. That may have been tac air or something because I know that they were part of the equation, as well. As we got down closer to Can Thanh, we started getting artillery support. I don't know where that came from, but they were striking about 150, 200 meters off the side of the road, to the right side it was scattered fire. My point in telling all of this was, that two or three times in my experience in Vietnam that I saw examples of firepower choreography that just left me speechless, and

this was one of ‘em. Everything went off exactly on time, as advertised. No friendly forces were hurt, that I’m aware of. No helicopters were dinged, and all in all, it was a good day. It was our first touch going into An Loc. I don’t know this to be precisely true, the North Vietnamese had waged a three-pronged offensive into South Vietnam up in I Corps around Quang Tri toward Hue, secondarily to II Corps. Going after—well, basically they were trying to divide the country in half, which they did successfully in ’75, but they failed on this occasion. I think their first real target in that area was the city of Kontum. They came into An Loc, and they had a lot of problems there. One of which was were able to bring a great deal of firepower into play very quickly because of the proximity to Saigon, Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, any number of other military bases there. They did not have the travel access and road network in that region that supported their efforts as much as supported ours. There are not a lot of roads coming over the Cambodian border. They had, as I recall, they had some armored vehicles, I don’t think they had a lot of success with those. As I mentioned earlier, the South Vietnamese forces, and I believe some US advisors that were there, had been surrounded. They had no place to go and nothing to do except fight to the very end. They were doing well at that. The supply missions—after we did this first one, I think the level of resistance began to diminish somewhat. We didn’t have any further missions that were quite so exquisitely planned or supported. Smaller formations of Hueys—be six, seven, eight birds, maybe. More diverse flight planning. We started using the low-level motive of ingress much more than we had—than we did high-level. In fact, I don’t recall doing a high-altitude entry following that first one. The Cobras started flying down with us. So we’d have, you know, maybe a half a dozen Hueys in trail, a few inches above tree tops. The Cobras were well off to the side, generally behind us. They were doing, basically a weaving maneuver. Their most effective weapon in that altitude—in that environment, was the chin turret, it was a flex turret. They willed them to fire downward and laterally. Their rockets—eh, couldn’t use them much at that altitude because they couldn’t get their site on target because of their altitude, but we started doing that more frequently. We took a lot of ground fire, I think largely because of the altitude that we were operating at. It was difficult for them to bring their weapons to bear on us. We did take some hits, we took a lot of .50-caliber fire but we didn’t get hit much by that, which always surprised me.

Perhaps one of the most telling things that I saw in that—over the course of that next month or so, was the bodies that had been left on the battlefield. Almost entirely North Vietnamese. We used to see them in the rice paddies, all in the surrounding environs around An Loc, all the way down toward Can Thanh. We used to see that all the time, and it wasn't—these weren't fresh contributions all the time. There were some times—what we saw was a skeleton inside of a uniform with an AK-47 laying by it. It was kind of—if I was gonna paraphrase my perceptions of what that time was like, I would say twelve o'clock high. A period when all of the joking and comradery in the unit was very muted. We had taken a couple of hard hits, everybody knew that what we were doing was extremely high risk. At that stage in the war, there was about 65,000 American troops left in country and nobody wanted to be the last guy to die there. It wasn't that they were—we were being cowardly about it, we just did not want to do that. In some cases, in some ways—and people found ways to deal with that. I'll be the first to admit that alcohol was a common ally in that endeavor. I did not—I had gotten to a point in my life when I actually didn't drink like I did on the first tour. Yeah, I would drink but not to get pie-eyed drunk. We had a fella—one night we were—we had finished up one day's operation and we were going back the next. He was a warrant officer, I don't remember his name, but we were sitting in the hooch. Back in F Troop, 9th Cav they had their own O-club in the compound. We didn't have that, but we did have a small space in one of the hooches that had been set aside for that purpose. They had like a community liquor bar and so on and so forth. We were drinking and carrying on, just talking and everything and this kid—I call him a kid, he was as old as I was. He started babbling about not wanting to go back to An Loc. I says, "Well, you know, what are you gonna do, Lucy?" I mean, it's what we're doing these days. He says "I don't wanna go back." He said, "I've had I all I want of this." Well, we all empathized for him—with him on this but we were gonna do what we were told to do, and there was no question about that. All of a sudden—and I don't know where he got it, he pulled a claw hammer out from under the bar, put his hand flat on the counter, and commenced to beating the crap out of his hand with that hammer. The first couple of blows we were all just incredulous. Like, you know, we're not really seeing this. We couldn't imagine what this guy was doing to himself. He managed to hit the back of his hand three, four times, maybe five times, before some of the other guys

got a hold of him to stop him from doing that. Back of his hand had big red welts all over it and we're talking as best as drunks can talk. It was kind of a—and I remember it was a very curious multipronged conversation. But he just—he's says, "Well, I can't fly tomorrow. My hand I use for the collective and the throttle's screwed up so I'm gonna go down to the flight surgeon." I don't know how this worked, I really don't. He got up the next morning and there was no visible sign that anything had happened to his hand at all. So he went flying back with us to An Loc and survived all of it. We had—I'm going purely on memory here. Probably somebody could access the archives they would—they could provide definitive dates on when all this stuff happened. We flew in and out of An Loc and around Can Thanh, and that general area for about, I'm gonna say three or four weeks maybe. Then we got new orders, and this came out of the blue, nobody was expecting it. We were gonna be reassigned up to Da Nang in support of the relief of Quang Tri.

KC: This was quite a change. I mean, was there—

DH: Just kazam, I mean big time. I could not help but imagine the irony of what was going on. Because in the entire unit, there was—I think there was one fella that had flown briefly up around I Corps in Da Nang and north of there, in the distant past had been over there some years previous. I had just left, I mean it was my stomping grounds. We had I think a couple of days to get our act together and get coordinated, and we flew up there. It was—we had one fuel stop along the way and we flew up—were actually were based at what was called Marble Mountain. It was a parallel runway that was just east of Da Nang main, it was pretty close to right on the South China Sea. They parked us there, we had actually pretty fine accommodations. It was about three days, maybe four days after we got orders that we were in place. The troop commander went out of his way to put me in the right seat with flight leads for the first few spins in this washing machine because I was familiar with the geography. I knew where things were and so on and so forth. I, you know, I understood that. Didn't mind it in the least. The first, I don't know, first week or so was dedicated primarily to the getting people familiar with where they were. You know, where the pitfalls and geography and everything were. And therein commenced about a month to six weeks of operations in support of the recover—or the relief of Quang Tri, if you will. That was a particularly bloody little caper.

KC: Yeah, I wonder if you might compare and contrast this with what you saw down in An Loc. Give me as a good a description as you can here.

DH: Well, An Loc—like I said, there was a lot of rubber plantations to the south, a lot of agricultural lands, a couple of small rolling hills. An Loc itself was on, what I would call, a knoll. I mean, it was a fairly broad base geo-feature, but it was elevated terrain. Not the kind of stuff you fly into unexpectedly in weather or at night, or anything like that, but there was some rolling hills. Mostly pretty open countryside and some tree lines here and there. The area that all our operations took place, with very few exceptions, were all out on a coastal plain that ran from the DMZ down to what was called the Hai Van Pass, and it was a feature of geography that separated the northern part of I Corps from the southern. It was coastal—very, very large coastal mountain that went right up to the—very close to the edge of the South China Sea. You had to fly over that or around that to get in to Da Nang from there. It was all agricultural land, everything east of QL-1 was flat as a pancake. Sand dunes, rice paddies, that sort of stuff. Everything to the west was where the foothills started and it was a place where there was no tree cover of any sort anywhere. I mean, it was just all single canopy scrub, if that, and bamboo along the paddy lines and that kind of thing. There was also a railroad that paralleled QL-1. I didn't emphasize this much earlier, but that rail line was a frequent target of saboteurs and so forth, sufficient that they started running a locomotive at the back of the train stack—or the cargo stack just to avoid getting the locomotive blown up. This was common during my first tour. I did not see that rail line in function, in use, during this particular phase of the war. The road was, or course. We had been flying there for about, I'm gonna say maybe a week or so, and we started getting into operations. One of the first operations that we had went in to support of the forces that were trying to wrest Quang Tri back out of North Vietnamese hands. They had made some progress, I mean, we had been two months or so post onset of the Easter Offensive. They had made some progress up in that region as well, and they had taken some of it back. There was an R&R center on the beach that we had used when I was in the 101st, it was called Eagle Beach. It was located up fairly close to Quang Tri. It became a hub of operations for a lot of missions. One of which we could go there, pick up people, drop off people, drop of equipment, whatever. We used to do that a lot. The first mission up had us going to, as I recall, Eagle Beach or

some other place along the coast that was in close proximity to Quang Tri. We left—the profile called for us to fly up QL-1 to some particular point and then break off toward that spot, and it was gonna keep us over friendly terrain for the balance of the trip. What we were told, and it turned out to be true. What was a surprise is we went up to—we flew over Hue and we went up to—up QL-1 just north of Camp Carroll we saw what was very—I don't know, maybe it was a prototype for what happened in Desert Storm when the Iraqi forces were trying to leave Kuwait. They wound up getting hit by US Air Force—or, air forces I should say, on a highway and there wound up being a turkey shoot. The North Vietnamese had one of their own versions of that. They had put up tanks on the hills just to the west of QL-1, and when the people started evacuating Quang Tri, as a result of the North Vietnamese advance, there was every vehicle under the sun that you can possibly imagine; little three-wheeled taxis, Lambrettas, the duce and half Red Cross trucks. Just every kind of vehicle imaginable coming down QL-1. They had obstructed the roadway by targeting the lead vehicles in this thing, and then they set back and just destroyed the entire mélange of vehicles that were jammed in this roadblock for a long ways up the highway. They had been back—before I saw this, they had been back and they had cleared the road. In essence, you had three vehicles abreast on both sides of the road for about 2 to 2 ½ minutes of flight time in a Huey that was making 100 knots up the roadway. That's several miles of carnage. I don't know when this happened, but it was a very disquieting thing to see. I mean, I had flown that road hundreds of times in the past, and here I was seeing a different face on the Street without Joy. It was a mess. We worked in the short term, all of our missions up to Quang Tri were shuttling cargo and sometimes people—troops. We were moving a lot of American advisors back and forth. We did not—in my recollection we didn't take any ARVN forces up there or bring any back. It was mostly in the cargo transport and the resupply, and that sort of thing. We did not get into any hostile action in that particular mission profile, and I was quite thankful for that. More pointedly, as time went on people started to relax a little bit, and they were starting to get a little more comfortable in that environment. We started breaking up into smaller flights, smaller operations. We never—with one exception, we never went west of the mountains. We stayed out there in the coastal plain. We had—we were supporting ARVN forces elsewhere, and with single- and double-ship missions that were basically

you would drop off supplies, or you know, pick up wounded or something like that. We were doing this without gunship cover. In fact, I don't recall that we ever had gunship cover on any of the missions that we flew up there. Which I felt was kind of odd in retrospect. But the truth of it was, there wasn't a lot of gunship cover to be had up there. All of the Cav troops had gone home, and if there was any ARA left up there, I don't know. I mean, I really don't know. When we started working the single- and double-ship missions into the foothills in support of Vietnamese, we started taking fire. Again, it was mostly small arms. I don't know that it was ever a serious threat to us. Sometimes it was very disconcerting to go into—land on a little hilltop that's got a bunch of ARVNs on it and you're, you know, a seventy-five yard final and you start taking AK fire. That's one of the points where I had a little bit of an emotional issue with sitting there and just gritting your teeth and taking it, continue to the landing objective.

KC: What do you mean by that when you say emotional issue?

DH: To a large degree when I was flying scouts and somebody shot at me, I cried like a little girl and left, and the Cobras would shoot 'em up. Then I would come back and look at 'em. When you're flying in slicks and—imagine this, you're a flight of seven and you're sitting in the middle and some guy starts rattling at you with an AK-47. What are you gonna do? You're gonna sit there and take it, that's what you're gonna do. Because if you disrupt the formation, you have disrupted your counter-fire capabilities and you put other aircraft at risk, possibly from midair collisions or any number of things. So you basically—you just reach down and grab a hold of your jockstrap and hang on and go. My respect for slick pilots grew a lot as a result of my time in B Company. I had never been terribly introspective about the burden they carried. But it takes a great deal of courage and focus to be able to fly through enemy fire as you're decelerating through thirty knots or so, and not be able to do anything about it other than just tell somebody, "Well, we're taking fire from three o'clock." If they could hear that—if the gunships could hear it, if you had gunships, they might not understand it because of all the background door gunner noise that's going on. They might figure it out, but they wouldn't know exactly where the fire's coming from. So hats off to the slick pilots that did that for a full tour over there. It's a—it took a lot of courage to do that, courage that was not always required of myself as a scout pilot. That was one of the—I guess the

evolution of the missions that we ran there. While we were there we had an OV-10 that I mentioned earlier, was shot down by an SA-7. We also had that even with the C-130 gunship that took the hit while it was on a night mission. It was—countryside was very much different from what I had known when I was there the first time. Most of the coastal mountains, where the mountains stopped or started, when you're coming out of the coastal plain, had been denuded by airstrikes. They had never been like that in my first tour. Just west of Camp Eagle we had a couple of firebases that were—one of 'em was Firebase Birmingham and there was another one called Bastogne. Other than the fact that they had artillery parked on 'em, there was nothing exciting going around there. Their particular mission was long range. They were shooting much further away, they did not get assaulted by Vietnamese forces as a matter of course. So, seeing that change in the landscape was kind of daunting. We had—those firebases, I don't even think were active. I think they had been totally abandoned. But there were still Vietnamese forces out there. When you leave the general area of Camp Eagle just south of Hue, you're looking at a rather broad—it presents as a broad opening to a box canyon. When you get a little further in to it—and I say broad, it was just three or four kilometers across. When you get further into it, you see the road network that was going out to the A Shau Valley where the terrain got more steep and more rugged, and so forth. So, one of the hills south of Birmingham, which always had nothing more on it than elephant grass, had converted into a—some locus of operation for Vietnamese. They didn't have artillery on it, I'm not sure what they were doing there, but we had a resupply mission for 'em one day. They had built a landing pad out of logs that were stacked in a crossed fashion. Basically they made like about a—probably fifteen- to twenty-foot square pad. It was elevated enough that it would give you—give your rotor tips clearance on the upslope side. I guess that kind of indicates how steep that terrain was. So, we had a mission there one day. I was flying with a fella that was one of the platoon leaders. He was captain, a very good pilot. I don't remember his name, either. We're flying up to this thing and he was rattling on about the nature of the terrain up there. You know, he didn't like it. I said, "Well, it's my home turf and I like it a lot. There's always something to hide behind up here," unlike down in III Corps and IV Corps and that area. So, we're sitting there, coming in to this place and he says, "How would you do this?" I said, "Well, I would approach it from a

forty-five-degree angle from the—relative to the terrain backdrop. And I probably would not come into it from a much higher elevation than the pad." Basically I would make kind of a level approach as opposed to the classic steeper angle approach where you have to add a lot of power when you land. Because basically, we were heavy and the elevation of this place was somewhere in the 2,000-2,500 foot range, something like that. So he went along with that and we went in. We landed and just before we set down he turned and faced the slope head on. We're sitting there unloading the cargo, which basically meant the gunner and crew chief were pitching this stuff out the side, and it was falling about ten feet before it hit the ground. That was fine, too. I was sitting there in the right seat with not much to do except twiddle my thumbs, and here comes this Vietnamese soldier walking downgrade towards us. I'm watching him and the blade tips on the Hueys were painted white so you could see 'em. It makes kind of a white band on the rotor disc that was visible when you're up at operating RPM. I'm looking at this guy through the rotor disc, with his feet as he walked down the hill, likewise above the rotor disc. The tips of our blades were probably passing about two and a half to maybe three feet above terrain. This fella seemed totally oblivious to our presence. I could not—it didn't even occur to me initially that he could not see us, or was not aware of us. He kept getting closer, and he kept getting closer. Then it became apparent that he didn't realize we were there—or didn't realize the dimension of our rotor system, something of that fashion. I start waving my arms and I start squawking and yelling. As it finally turned out, this fella—I'm guessing—I know he probably didn't see me and I know he couldn't hear me, but just at the very last moment, I think he probably saw those white blade tips flickering in front of his eyes. He stopped and went up on his tip toes trying to backpedal and get away. He was teetering there and I was just going, "Oh, my God. Any second now he's gonna fall forward and we're gonna have a big mess." But, it didn't happen that way. He got his balance and he retreated. I think he was probably within about eighteen inches of those blade tips. That would have been ugly. So many times—what he did was so very typical of people that walk into rotor system. I don't mean just Vietnamese. I mean US personnel, Vietnamese, just—it happened with a sadly common frequency over there. The rotor systems are not highly visible. You get used to working around a Huey, the main rotor's seldom a problem on flat terrain. Tail rotor, well, there's a tail boom in your

way so you're gonna walk around that. Then you put somebody in that mix with a loach, and the rotor system is much, much closer to the ground. The tail rotor is, you know, easier to walk in to. Bad things happened over there because of it. It was never—it never had a good ending. This fella managed to dodge a bullet and it was just one of the most curious little sideshows I experienced over there. Just one of those things you're watching disaster unfold, there's nothing you can do about it. Fate intervened in a positive way. I was pleased at that for some reason. But to get back on track, that was the nature of our mission profile up in I Corps. We were there, as I recall, about six weeks, perhaps a little bit longer. We had good quarters. They even let us hang out with the Air Force pilots at the—what was called a DOOM Club. It was Da Nang Open Officers Mess, or their version of an O-club. You may have—have you ever heard of the DOOM pussy?

KC: No, I've not.

DH: Well, they had a ritual at the DOOM Club. It was the home base for—I don't remember the unit designation, but we knew them as the Gunfighters. They were the F-4 squadron, Air Force squadron that worked out of there. For quite some time they flew missions up in to North Vietnam in support of air strikes. Their Gunfighter moniker was not just one of, "Let's call ourselves Gunfighters." They were actually—they were supporting tactical weapons delivery. Their job was to keep the MiGs" off of everybody's backside. Later on in the war they did do some airstrikes and operate in the tac air mode, as I recall. But whenever they left on a mission, the ritual was somebody had found a—I don't know if it's ceramic or what it was, but it was a little statue of a cat. They had something akin to a mantelpiece in the club. I don't think it was for a fireplace but they had something there on the wall. Someone one day got the bright idea when this mission launched, they turned the cat around to face the wall. I don't know what the significance of that was. When the mission came back and everybody was accounted for, they would turn it around to face the bar. Of course, everybody would, you know, be drunk and immature and, you know, shout in the devil's face and all that stuff. But it was a long-time tradition there. I had—even though I had flown in and around that area for a great long while, until I showed up with B Company I never had the opportunity to actually go inside the DOOM Club. It was—even by stateside standards, it was a nice bar and a nice place to eat. It was fairly popular for us being used to Army rations and Army quarters.

And particularly where we were there, it was good but it wasn't great. It wasn't as nice as the stuff we had at Bien Hoa. So, that side of life was good. The scenery around Da Nang was always good. Nice beaches. The stuff on the other side of the Hai Van Pass was kinda ugly. In general context, when I visited An Loc, I visited a place that was already decimated. I had never seen it before, so there's a question of—you know, I didn't have anything to compare it to. Even though I knew it was a dark and violent place, I had never seen the sunny side of An Loc, if there was one. The terrain up in Quang Tri, on the other hand, I was quite familiar with. And to see what had happened to that area as part of the North Vietnamese Easter invasion, was—it was humbling. It was a thing that gave me perspective on just how nasty that whole thing was and what had been done. There wasn't—I don't think there were three buildings left standing in Quang Tri. I mean, the whole thing was just—it was gone. It was destroyed. There was—I had mentioned all the vehicles that had been taken out in the Vietnamese ambush there on QL-1. What I didn't mention too much of, was all the North Vietnamese tanks that were littering the countryside, as well.

KC: Yeah, tell me about that.

DH: There was a bunch of that. One of their favorite vehicles—I say tanks, and I'm talking about armored vehicles in general. One of the things they brought down most commonly was the PT-76. That was a, perhaps somewhat more robust version of our armored personnel carrier. It was no more resistant to significant concentrated fire than our APC was. My understanding is that the APC—the US APC would stop small arms fire, it would not stop .50-caliber fire. I'm not sure about that. The PT-76s, well, there was a story that came out—actually something that occurred. I don't know if it was in I Corps or II Corps, but there was a Cobra team that was out flying somewhere doing something. They saw a PT-76 coming up a road, and there was a cross—four-way intersection, and the roads were down below treeline. One of the Cobras got down in the crossing road at a hover and waited for this fella to show up. When he did, he fired a pair of rockets at him. The rockets—he was sufficiently close the rockets did not arm before they hit the PT-76 and they punched right though it anyway. They punched in and they punched out. In the meantime, when the exhaust nozzle was inside that cabin on that thing, it got pretty ugly for the tank crew. In fact, it pretty much blew up right on the spot.

There was a lot of that kind of debris around up in I Corps and just when I thought I had seen it all, I was about to get my comeuppance and see where there was a whole hell of a lot of that stuff. I don't know comparatively what North Vietnam expended in the assault on Quang Tri, as far as manpower and equipment. I got a better idea what they paid down around Kontum. That, as an example, was an area where they lost something in the range of forty to forty-five armored vehicles, to include the PT-76 and actual tanks. I don't know the—I'm not familiar with the designation on the Soviet tanks other than the PT-76. But they lost quite a few of those there, as well. It was not—the whole scene in the Easter Offensive, it was no longer asymmetric warfare. It was not hit-and-run tactics. It was not guerrilla fighting and ambushes and booby-traps. It was flat out major unit direct engagement. Primarily between Vietnamese forces, North and South, with American support. The North Vietnamese had greater expectations of what they would gain out of this than were realistic. Particularly in regards—they substantially underestimated the influence of airpower. And I mean logistic support and direct combat support in the form of, you know, applied weaponry. They paid a horrendous price for what they achieved there and I don't think—I guess it's a credit to them that they can move laterally in their position. I think they wanted to seize all of this terrain and these provincial capitals, to give them a better bargaining position at the Paris Accords. What they did was seize a lot of terrain that was easy, and they lost all of the stuff they really coveted. They did not prevail of An Loc. They did not prevail in Quang Tri, and they did not prevail in Kontum. Because of that they lost Lord knows how many people, how much equipment and everything else. But they managed to take control of an awful lot of lightly or thinly populated countryside. That became significant later on. Somewhere along the way, when all this was going on, and again I'm not real sure about the timeline, Richard Nixon took it upon himself to begin Operation Linebacker II. We had been several months into the Spring Offensive, and despite some of the lighter mission profiles that I have discussed already, there was other parts of the country and other scenarios where things were still brutally violent. Nixon initiated Linebacker II and the mining of the ports up in North Vietnam and the destruction of rail bridges between North Vietnam and China, and basically cut off their supply lines. The results of this were felt in South Vietnam almost instantly. I don't believe that we felt these results as a matter of a breakdown in the

supply lines because the timing was too swift. I think this was a change of orders. The North Vietnamese recognized that they weren't gonna be getting any backup and supplies, and they needed to conserve what they had. So, to a large degree, they started to disengage. That's my perspective, I don't know that military historians would support that. It's just that when the bombing up north started again and the all these other things took place, the results were very abrupt in South Vietnam. It did not—was not consistent with the thought that they just didn't have any more supplies. I know that they did. It suggested a change in tactics or strategy that I still think is very pertinent to what was going on there. So, just to bring this particular saga to a close, at least from what I'm recalling of it, we had—I had spent about a month and a half or a little longer actively with B Company down in the relief of An Loc and we got relocated to Quang Tri. Actually, up to Da Nang, and we were in the relief of Quang Tri and the operations in northern I Corps. Actually, that's not even the right designation. They changed it to Military Regions at that time. I kept calling—keep calling it I Corps, II Corps, they had changed it by then to Military Region I, II, III, and IV. Which never really resonated with anybody so you can take that for historical perspective or hysterical perspective, whichever you like. I spent about the same time—same amount of time, up in the I Corps region with B Company. Perhaps a little bit longer, I don't recall. I just don't have a clear time reference in my mind on that. Ultimately, we left there without sacrificing anybody or any helicopters, which I found totally bizarre and almost as unexpected as the fact that we got out of the missions at An Loc without any significant losses. I mean, yeah, there was damage to equipment and there was a few bullet holes, but nobody got hurt on our side. I was quite thankful for that. We packed up and flew back to Bien Hoa. We got there and the news was that B Company was gonna be going home, along with the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cav. We entered into a—I don't know, a period of—I'm gonna say perhaps a month. By this time it was on into June or perhaps early July, I'm not really sure. We entered into a period where we were basically bundling things up and getting ready to depart. At least, most of them were, I knew I wasn't going to depart. They still had a three-month timeline of obligation as to whether or not you went home. That was their metric at that time. We started cleaning out Hueys and they were giving all those to the VNAF with some qualifications. We did not give them any Cobras. We didn't give

them any loaches, it was all Hueys or nothing at all. The VNAF never had gunships in the sense that we had. They had—and I saw this a lot at play down around An Loc. They had taken Hueys and configured a lot of the H models, and configured them very much like the old B and C model gunships. Where they had rocket pods and flex-minigun turrets on the sides. In fact, our Cobra pilots down around—that were flying down around An Loc, were jealous because they had a platform that was actually useful in that environment. But that was what was happening to our equipment. I honestly don't recall exactly where things went from there, timewise—on the timeline. I know that I didn't—after we came back from Da Nang, I did not fly any more combat missions with the company. I don't even think anybody in the company was flying combat missions. We were done.

KC: Are you training with the Vietnamese at this point? You're turning the aircraft over, are you working with them in any sort of capacity in terms of training or—

DH: (Speaking at the same time) No. It was one of those, "Here's the keys and come and pick them up." One of those deals. It may have been that some of them were—they we delivered them to someplace like Bien Hoa or whatever. Hold the line for just a second, Kelly. I had no interaction with them at that point at all. So, how that was handled? I do not know precisely. By the time we got back, my old friends at F Troop, 9th Cav had already disappeared. So we had the only operational aviation assets—or combat aviation assets there in the 3rd Brigade. Everybody was packing up to go home. I left the unit prior to their departure, and I was reassigned up to what was called H Troop, 17th Cav up at Camp Holloway. They had been part of the—I want to say—oh, my memory. They had been part of what we joking referred to as the Rolling Doughnut Division. They were longtime players in II Corps, I don't remember what their designation was. That had been as 7th/17th Cav. What was left was B Troop, which had been renamed H Troop. That was a whole new environment, and kind of weird in its own special way. I don't know, do you have any questions about the 1st Cav debacle through the Easter invasion?

KC: No, I don't think so. Really, you've given me a great perspective on two different places where you were and what was going on. And the comparing and contrasting of them, I think was very, very useful. Now, you mentioned before that, of course, the second tour that you were on was much darker. I'm sure that the Easter Offensive and what you saw certainly played a part in that. You mentioned that when,

during the really busy times especially around An Loc, that a lot of the joking, you know, and the more lighthearted moments weren't there when you were that kind of busy. Flying those kinds of, you know, that kind of mission pace that you were keeping up with there.

DH: Yeah. There wasn't a great deal of humor in what we were doing. Yeah, I may have mentioned earlier, Kelly, about the, you know, the twelve o'clock high thing. That goes back to the old TV show of the same name, in black and white. I think it began back in the '60s sometime. About B-17 missions over to Europe during World War II. It was always, you know, very serious and men were dying and all that stuff. When I say that—there's a couple of things when describe my second tour as being dark. This Easter Offensive is when that attitude really came to the fore. I did not especially—I didn't find my job as a squadron safety officer of the 2nd/17th as particularly inspiring. It was work, and I get that. I did it for a good reason. But, back in the combat ops, by the time I did that, the population of GIs in that country was getting sparse. We were down close to ten percent, maybe twelve percent of what we had had the first time I was in country in May of '69. It was kinda lonely, quite frankly. There was one occasion—I don't remember precisely what precipitated this. I wound up spending a night at Chu Lai during this particular timeline. It may have been when I was B Company. We were maybe hauling something back down to III Corps. I don't know, I really don't recall. But, it was not—I didn't have a great feeling of security. We were sitting in old GI structures, there was a couple of ARVNs that were in the area. They were cooking rice, they didn't seem concerned about much of anything. Me and the crew—rest of the crew were sleeping on concrete. Not happy to see our accommodations, we were very happy to leave. There was just not a lot of—there weren't a lot of comrades to have comradery with. What it boiled down to. We didn't, in the main, have great faith in the South Vietnamese forces would come to our aid if we needed it. We had a very high level of respect for the carnage that the North Vietnamese were inflicting, and capable of inflicting. They were using weapons that were much more high terror tech than what we had been accustomed to. I mentioned the plethora of .50-caliber guns down around An Loc. Well, they had multi-millimeter anti-aircraft scattered throughout the country. The .23-millimeter, typically the ZSU-23. They had some .37-millimeter guns in country. I'll tell you about this later on,

we had—they had tube artillery in-country. One of their favorite guns was the .130-millimeter howitzer. They had those things and they used them a lot. So, that was kind of the setting that we were—they were in. We went through the panic mode about the SA-7 when it was first getting used. For all of that, one of the lighter moments that I experienced over there came in the middle of all of my time with B Troop—or B Company before we went up to Da Nang. I was getting ready to turn in one evening and we came under a rocket attack from—obviously from outside the perimeter. We didn't have bunkers at this place. I'm not sure why. But I had a steel helmet, and I had flip-flops and a flight jacket. And my skivvies. I came racing out of my room and realized that the only place I could get any cover from anything was just a little ditch that ran right in front of the hooch. So I belly flopped into the ditch. These things—rockets were going off at very close proximity to where we were. I belly flopped into this ditch and crawled into the culvert that ran in front of the hooch. Laid there for a while and thinking, "Boy, this is fun." Finally the all clear siren went off and I backed out of this culvert. Took stock of myself and went immediately to the latrine to take a shower. I was covered head to toe with mud and God knows what kind of exotic tropical infections I picked up from that. It was—everybody there still had the same—I think the same mentality that we had had from my first tour. But we also realized that the cards were stacked much, much higher against us. It took some of the fun out of it. Took a lot of the fun out of it, actually. Personal survival was not something you thought about occasionally, spur of the moment. It was something that was pretty much on your mind all the time. When you were flying and when you weren't. I mean, it was just like, you know, the story about the guy with the hammer in the bar. He was the only overt player that I ever saw do that. But there probably was a lot of people that were thinking that. You know, if they had found a convenient way to just not have to fly that mission, they would have been perfectly comfortable with the concept. So, we went through all of that and much to my surprise, I got shipped up to Camp Holloway there in Pleiku. That's where this stuff got really kind of screwy. In its own special way, particularly nasty. It probably would be best if we got into that on the next session.

KC: Yeah, I think so, too.

DH: There's a—each one of these places was different; An Loc, Quang Tri, and Kontum. There's highlights, lowlights, and everything in between that went with each particular episode. I think the one that was the most troubling for me was probably at Pleiku. That's where I saw a lot of stuff that I just—we were in very close proximity to the Cambodian border in that locale. There was a lot of long time history of warfare in that region. I mentioned—now we were talking earlier before this started that there was, you know, maybe we had won the war after all. With the benefit of hindsight. There was people over there that didn't. The Montagnards were a large population base segment in that particular region around Pleiku. They faired very poorly in what followed. So, we could get into that on the next chapter, I suspect, and go from there.

KC: All right, that sounds good.

Interview with Dan Hilliard
Session [9] of [9]
Date: 24 April 2015

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with Mr. Dan Hilliard. Today is 24 April 2015. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Hilliard is joining me from his home in Inglis, Florida. Okay, Dan, last time we left off you were gonna pick up the story again at Camp Holloway. You talked about how things were a little bit darker in this part of your tour. You said that things were particularly screwy, or some different things were coming up while you were there in Holloway. So, can you pick up the narrative there?

DH: I certainly can. The unit was H Troop, 17th Cav. It was the residue of what had been B Troop, the 7th of the 17th Cav. Camp Holloway, and again, it was new country for me. It was something that I was quite a bit more comfortable with because they had mountains. It was easy to navigate. Camp Holloway sat on the southern outskirts of Pleiku. It was, from a historical perspective, it was quite interesting countryside. To the north had the provincial capital—I think it was provincial capital, of Kontum and then Dak To, which was a famous place in US military history, particularly with the Special Forces. There was a broad mix of Montagnard populations in the area. There was small towns, one of them was Polei Kleng. I think there was another one called (???), I'm not sure about that particular one. Interestingly, having the ability to look back on the geography of Vietnam through the likes of Google Earth and other places where you can access maps, those communities are no longer listed. They're not shown on the maps anymore. I don't know what happened there precisely. But not far to the southwest was the South Vietnamese equivalent of West Point. It was at Dalat, which was in high plain in hill country. I understood, actually, that they had occasional subfreezing temperatures there. I don't know if that's correct. I know that it got kinda cool around there from time to time in the winter months. Down to the southwest, a little place called Cheo Reo which had a little airstrip there, I'll talk about that in a little bit. To the east was the Mang Yang Pass. I had a particular interest that was sharpened quite a bit after I'd been there a while. The pass comes off of the plateau that Pleiku sits on. The roadway, it's a very, very abrupt drop. I don't recall precisely what the elevation change is. But the pitch is very

steep, and the road meanders around the ridgelines and so forth as it drops down to the coastal plain and leads to Qui Nhon. The countryside around there is—the first word that comes to mind is gorgeous. It's very scenic, a lot of triple-canopy jungle on the mountains and so forth. Oddly enough, in contrast to what I had seen up around Quang Tri and some parts out around An Loc, and the A Shau Valley and places like that, there was not a lot of overt indication of large scale battle damage. Not a lot of signs of B-52 raids or anything of that nature. I thought that was kind of curious when I arrived there. But, arrive I did. In very short order I was assigned once again to the scout platoon. That was a, I guess a label in my personnel file that I was never going to escape. They saw also that I had been through the IP course, and they needed a standardization pilot for the scout platoon. So, I got in to that. I ran—flew a very small number of scout missions. I don't recall that I ever saw anything of significance while I was doing that. They kept us out of the hotter zones, which is something that had happened when the Spring Offensive started in '72. The use of the OH-6 in the scout mission as it had been classically performed previously was very, very sharply curtailed. They did not want to precipitate crew losses and aircraft losses on recon in the circumstance where they very largely knew where the enemy forces were located. It had become a more classic set piece battle engagement. There was little reason to be doing that. So, as had been my experience with F Troop, 9th Cav and—it was a very benign mission. I did that for a period of about—I'm gonna guess a couple of months. Was administering check rides per USARV requirements. I think it was an annual event for scout pilots. It was a bit of a—it was an interesting thing to do in a lot of ways, and in and around Pleiku, because the elevations were so high. We were proscribed from doing touchdown autorotations if we had a density altitude in excess of 4,000 feet. Which was pretty much any time after nine or ten in the morning, that's what you had around there. So, that part of the check ride that you might normally apply was sharply curtailed. It became more of a bureaucratic ritual than anything of great meaning. All the pilots there were either deep in their first tour or second tour pilots for the most part. So it was like shuffling paper as much as anything. One of the more curious things that occurred, actually, was because of its proximity and it was what was considered to be a relatively passive zone. I would take—to get away from the traffic—the jet traffic at Pleiku—it was an Air Force base. I would go down to

Cheo Reo, which had a small enclave of South Vietnamese forces. It was, you know, it was quiet. They had a long strip there, which we would use for check rides and stuff. You know, we'd get down there and nobody would bother us. One of the—about the second or third time I was making that trip, when we came back, we would basically fly low-level up to the highway that led to Pleiku. We got about halfway back and started coming across masses of civilians on foot that were moving toward Pleiku. I first saw this—it struck me as kind of odd. They were highly motivated people, they weren't lollygagging around. They were fleeing from something, and I wasn't sure what. This bunch of people wound up being several kilometers in length and they pretty much choked the road. Following, I reported that to operations. I'm not sure exactly where that went after that, but the next time I went to Cheo Reo, we did a shutdown for some reason. Wound up with a hot start, which turned into a big maintenance pain in the butt. They had to fly somebody down there to check it out and get it started up again. It wasn't long after that that I was moved in to the C&C (command and control) position. It was not flying with the unit commander, per se, but I was back in Hueys and flying a lot of—I forget. I was flying—I was flying with one of the platoon leaders or one of the—you know, the XO or somebody like that. We were just basically overseeing operations on a day to-day basis. I had mentioned back in the first tour, we sometimes had slicks that would fly with the hunter/killer teams with the intention of snatching a crew if they got shot down. We would do that, although we weren't working with loaches anymore. Not in the deep, deep woods. But more significantly, perhaps, we were working as radio relays. Because mountainous terrain in the form of the terrain, was such that even though we were fairly close to Camp Holloway, it was easy to lose communications with operations and we had to maintain that at all cost. It gets kind of interesting when you get out of the immediate area around Camp Holloway and start moving north. Yet get up to Kontum, one of the first things that I saw there was quite literally a city divided. When the offensive started, my understanding was that the Vietnamese—the North Vietnamese, came in with armor and they took a large portion of the city. There was quite a contest there. This occurred before I arrived. But in general terms, the runway at Kontum was oriented east and west. Everything on the north side of that runway was obliterated, and everything to the south side was relatively intact. Except there was a C-130 that was on the ramp that had been

probably hit by artillery. One of the wings was broken off and it had burned a little bit, and it was sitting there. In fact, it was being used a lot of times as a place to get out of the sun. We would stage out of Kontum, on occasion. High ridge country to the east and south. The valley extended to the west toward Polei Kleng and some of the Montagnard villages to the west. If you turned north and went up a ways, you wound up at Dak To. Quite curiously, the style of operations of H Troop were such that they were not—or did not feel threatened by the SA-7 heat-seeking missiles. We routinely operated at intermediate altitudes of 2 to 3 or 4,000 feet above ground level, and we would do this for protracted periods of time. As an example, on one occasion we had a mission where Dak To was—at that time, I believe was manned strictly by Vietnamese, and there may have been a couple of American advisors there, I'm not sure. But, they were getting hit by tube artillery from the North Vietnamese. We were out there in a Huey, at altitude, flying around trying to find out where the artillery was coming from. We flew, and we flew, and we flew. After about perhaps an hour and half or so, the fella that was the aircraft commander was looking down to the side and he saw a muzzle flash. We quite literally found about twelve clicks north of Kontum, just a little bit to the west of the highway that lead up to Dak To, a battery of, I believe three .130-millimeter howitzers that the North Vietnamese had brought in there and they were using to pummel that camp. That, of course, led to almost an immediate airstrike. After, you know, we found the thing we got a location on it and so forth. Turned around and we were flying back that day, and we were about 3,000 feet AGL. North Vietnamese .50-caliber position opened up on us, and we were out on the fringes of their effective range. Curiously enough—I had mentioned previously how the South Vietnamese had turned their Hueys into gunships and put mini guns on the (???) and so forth. At H Troop, a lot of the Hueys had .50-calibers, they had the Browning M-2 mounted on the sides. This was pretty much nonstandard configuration. Prolonged use of that gun would damage the structure of the aircraft. But it gave us the standoff distance, and this fella on the ground started shooting as us. Next thing you know, we got two .50s shooting back and, you know, everybody was just having a fine old time. We flew on back, we didn't hit, I don't—they probably didn't get hit. But it was just the way things went at that time. One of the things that happened throughout my experience over there, and it continued at Camp Holloway. We would

periodically get books in boxes sent from the States. They were just distributed, I think, at random to the different units. I would always—when that occurred I would grab a couple of two or three books, I'd read 'em. We'd just pass 'em around, that kind of thing. I had been there a few months, and one of these showed up one day, and there was a book in there by Bernard Fall called *The Street without Joy.* Refers to the region just north—between Hue and Quang Tri, place of one of several debacles that the French army experienced over there. Aside from Dien Bien Phu, they did not fare well on the QL-1 north of Hue. Because of terrain and North Vietnamese tactics. Another place they fared very poorly was in the Mang Yang Pass. They had a force, I can't testify to the size of it, I think it was probably a company-sized unit that was traversing that roadway to or from Pleiku. I don't know. They were ambushed by what was then the forces aligned with the People's Republic Army, or whatever they called themselves. (???) forged and pretty much annihilated. They were buried subsequently—and my understanding is there's between 90 and 120 of them that were killed. They were buried off the side of that roadway, and because the limited space—I had mentioned earlier the terrain was so very steep, that they were actually buried on their feet en masse. Not in a single point of interment, but they were—if you would imagine any memorial, burial site for military forces downsized simply because they were buried vertically as opposed to horizontally. We could see that on the occasion that we flew by there. So, I was sitting in a position where we're getting toward the end of the conflict. We all knew that, but our numbers were dwindling. There was perhaps less zeal on the part of everybody that was there in offering up your life and sacrifice for the cause. I guess that's the kindest way I can put that. I ran across this book, and I don't know Bernard Fall from anything. I didn't know who he was, didn't know anything of his background. So I started reading the book. As I recall, I started in the afternoon and it was riveting to me. Because I was intimately familiar with the places he spoke of and wrote about. The book did not discuss just the *Street without Joy,* it talked about the broader issues at play in the French experience in Vietnam. What I was seeing was that we were in fact committing many of the mistakes that the French had made. Oddly enough, so were the North Vietnamese. They were slow to learn, as well. I wound up reading that book right through the night. Got up the next morning and I spent a week or more trying to get my gauges readjusted after I had read

this book. It was the first thing that gave me pause as to the reasons we were over there. It made me stop and really consider if what we were doing was right, wrong, indifferent, well considered, misguided. It's one the seminal events in life, I guess, that makes you just stop and readjust your compass a little bit. I didn't fully digest this until I was home and separated from the service and everything else. But, as a result of that initial catalyst, I have come to believe that—and as I've stated previously, we should not have fought that war. The reason we should not is in part because of the way we fought it. In large part for the reasons we fought it. They were very misguided. Having said that, it does nothing to diminish the honor or valor of the people that took part in it. The country called, they did their country's bidding. For the most part, they did exceptionally well. Our troops never lost a set piece engagement with the North Vietnamese. We had some times where we slowed down a little bit. We had to pause and regroup, but every time they did that they lost, and they lost dearly. That's a testimony to the training and equipment and the determination that was displayed by the US forces there during that engagement. There was an event that occurred—it was late October of '72—that has stayed with me for all these years. It was very disturbing to me for a lot of reasons. There was a fella in the unit, his name was Carlos Pedrosa.He was a lieutenant, first lieutenant. He came in to the unit from where, I don't know. I assume that he was a lateral transfer, somebody else had gone home. He was a good guy. He was from New York, as I recall. He was a ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) graduate, some university, I don't know. But he was, you know, like the rest of us. He was flying Hueys. He was trying to do the best he could, like everybody else, and not go home in a box. We were staging at Kontum one day—I mentioned that there was high country to the east of the airport. It was a high ridgeline. The North Vietnamese set up a mortar position there and they started mortaring the field. We had, probably, seven or eight, nine Hueys parked there on the south side of the field. Everybody started running for bunkers except Carlos. I don't know what caused him to do this. But he was running for a Huey, and I think his intention was probably to try and save the aircraft. It didn't work out. He took almost a direct hit from one of the mortars and was killed instantly. It led to what was one of the only memorial services that I ever had the—had occasion to participate in. I think at that juncture, the number of Americans that were getting killed had dropped from the

sometimes hundreds per week, such as back around the Tet Offensive or some of the other major battles that were fought. Down to just a trickle. During the service, one of the—there was a chaplain there. He offered up a prayer that perhaps Lieutenant Contreras would be the—or, I'm sorry, Pedrosa—would be one of the last, if not the last, American casualty in South Vietnam. That set very poorly with everybody that was in the audience. There was just almost a—just a collective sigh that just left everybody at one time. I think because we all knew that wasn't the case. But at the same time, we knew that his loss was so unnecessary. Even though it was, from all appearance, it was appropriate to recognize his apparent intent to save our assets and resources, it was unnecessary. That, I think, bothered—it bothered me certainly, and it bothered a lot of other people. So, I read Mr. Fall's book and I watched this happen. I'm getting introspective. I got chastised one day by the—one of the platoon leaders for the lift company that I was flying with. Actually, he was—the guy was the platoon leader. He was concerned that I was more concerned about my wellbeing than that of my crew. That came about because we had spent about six hours straight flying and I needed to piss in the worst way. To the point that I was willing to step out on the skids. He wouldn't have any of that, and we had quite a big discussion about that in the front end of that Huey while we were flying around one day. At a counseling session that followed shortly thereafter in his office—or what passed as his office. We left—pretty much I had the general theory that if I came back okay, the crew would come back okay with me. There were some things that were just distracting as hell for me when I was flying. On of 'em was bullets, and the other was if I had to pee. In this case I had held it as long as I could, and I was pretty close to wetting my pants. So, things were just looking kind of, you know, just not looking all that nice right then. We had the losses—we had a Cobra that we lost one day due to what turned out to be a maintenance error in the way they were lubricating the control rods to the main rotor system. One of 'em seized up and it broke the mounting bracket. The Cobra wound up doing—it was flying along at relatively high altitude, and he started doing a big—for lack of a better term, a dipsy doodle. The nose dropped, and as it accelerated, eventually it pitched back up. Then he went backwards a little bit and the nose dropped. He dove, and he kept doing this all the way to the ground. Both of 'em survived. I was involved—again, I was the troop safety officer, and I was involved in the investigation, and so forth.

We found out very, very quickly what had transpired there and there was—a notice went out to the remaining units in Vietnam to adopt a different methodology of lubricating those control devices. So, you know, I was a scout pilot forever, I was a safety officer forever, and once in a while you do something good. Maybe save somebody else in the future. The things that were going on around there were kind of—we were starting to see a little bit of a general downturn in morale. I had mentioned that, you know, people were not so eager to fall on their sword. Perhaps, as they would have been two, three, four years earlier. We had—as had occurred to me at Camp Eagle during one night of a—when I had officer of the guard and I was challenged by a—one of the enlisted men about whether or not he should have a loaded weapon. We had one of the guards at Pleiku—or, Camp Holloway there actually, shot somebody one night. Again, he had a loaded weapon on the line, he inadvertently shot someone. Subsequent of that, I had the officer of the guard one night, and wound up in a direct confrontation with another enlisted man that refused to unload his weapon. This was a standing policy that had been in South—that had been in Vietnam as long as I had been there. Unless ordered otherwise, the perimeter guards did not have weapons locked and loaded. Just for the obvious reason. Potential for shooting each other rather than the bad guys. We had a tear down inspection, if you will, amongst the troop searching for drugs. When this started, me being somewhat naive because I didn't anticipate that we would find much of anything, the drugs that were hauled out of the quarters of enlisted personnel were mind boggling. Both in terms of pills and in heroin, and pot. There was a lot of it and it just—it was disheartening to see things like this occur. See these things laid bare for everybody to see. In that particular event what happened, with one exception, the drugs were politely collected and politely disposed of without another word being said. The one exception was there was a specialist that took exception to somebody taking his stash, and he got physical about it. He wound up in the Long Binh jail. Disposition unknown to me, beyond that. I mean, they shipped him out the next morning. He was gone. So, you know, you're surrounded by these things. You're seeing the downside to having been someplace too long fighting a wrong war for the wrong reasons. People are starting to get a little bit off the chosen path, if you will. In the midst of all of that, I had something very interesting happen that I enjoyed immensely that I'll never forget. We had a loach that crashed. I don't remember

the reason that he was on the mission that he was on. But he was down south not far from an Air Force base called Phan Thiet. He crunched it a little bit. I was dispatched with another pilot to sling load that—pick up that loach and sling load it down to Tan Son Nhut, or someplace down south. Da Nang, maybe. I don't remember exactly where we went. It was a long flight. The thing didn't have a tail boom, and we couldn't do but about sixty knots before it started to oscillate. We didn't have a drag chute to put on it. So, we just putted down the coastline at about 6,000 feet. Just, you know, talking and stopping to fuel up every once in a while and continue on. We got the thing dropped off, we turned around. I didn't know this fella that I was flying with real well. But I could tell that he was not one of your standard campers. He was always looking at angles. He mentioned along the way, he says, "I've got a girlfriend in Qui Nhon." I said, "Really?" I went, "How much did you pay for that?" He says, "No, it's a real girlfriend." I said, "Oh." He says, "I'd like to stop in and visit with her." I said, "Well, you're the aircraft commander, whatever you want to do." So we get up toward Qui Nhon. He diverts the flight and we land. I had never been on the ground there, it was a lovely little town. It was secured by the army of South Korea. It was no time at all before I realized why it was such a passive region. Why it was so easy to enjoy. I watched what was obviously a senior NCO administering discipline to one of his privates, or whatever their equivalent ranking is and so forth. After all the screaming and shouting was over with, there was a couple of right hooks and an uppercut. He beat the trash out of this fella. Who immediately jumped back up, stood at attention, just so he could get some more. I thought, "Wow." But it was very peaceful. I met this fella's girlfriend and it was agreed that we would have dinner that night in one of the local restaurants there in Qui Nhon. So I was like going, "Whatever." We went down to a beach and they had a—not far from the hotel that we stayed at. They had beach for the—they had the VNAF O-club and right next to it they had Republic of Korea, it was an NCO club. There was a fence in between them, and I didn't understand why exactly right off the bat. But all the professional ladies were hanging around, on the beach, with the—on the Vietnamese side of the fence. All of the South Korean soldiers were on the other side cat calling and hooting, and jumping up and down and having a grand ol' time. So, one thing led to another and I wound up with a date for the dinner. We went to this restaurant, and the whole thing just struck me as

totally bizarre. I'd already had that one experience down in Vung Tau that did not end well with Vietnamese cuisine. This fella says, "Nah, I've eaten here before. It's good food." So we went up there, sat down, and had an honest to God genuine kind of double date with no big excitements or thrill. It was open air, kind of a covered patio type of environment. They had chain-link fence on steel, angled off the side of the open openings on the side of the building to keep grenades from sailing in. Which was kind of interesting. It was about—we were on the fourth or fifth floor of this building. I had never met anybody that could throw a grenade that high, but you never know. We had a, as I recall, a seven-course meal that included some of the best orange juice laced with alcohol that I've ever had in my life. We had what they referred to as "dove" or—yeah, I think it was actually some type of pigeon. We had a rice dish, and we had salad, and we had just all these other things. It was excellent food. The service was impeccable. We got through four people, seven-course meal with a couple of drinks, and it cost us like fourteen dollars apiece. I'm going, "God bless 'em." That was quite an experience. Quite a positive one. We woke up to an escort who had been dispatched to take us back to the air base there at Qui Nhon. The CO had gotten in touch wondering where we were. I gotta tell ya, I didn't care. This other fella was—maybe he had career ambitions. He was a little contrite but we got in the Huey and we flew on back. We got obligatory ass-chewing and, like I said, I didn't care. I was down to quite literally getting close to days left in-country at that time. I just didn't care. I had—when I say days, it was actually weeks. I had a—in previous times, generally speaking, when fellas got down to a couple of weeks, or maybe three weeks from their DEROS (date estimated return from overseas) date, they were pretty much taken off flight duties. Just, you know, told to stay out of trouble. Sit back, you know, just do a little sunbathing or whatever. This wasn't happening in that particular environment. Conveniently enough, however, I had a wisdom tooth that was bothering me. I went over to the Air Force base there at Pleiku, found a dentist. Told them about that, and he says, "We can take care of that right now." I sat down in his chair, he numbed me up, and it was an impacted wisdom tooth. I wasn't making it up, it was bothering me. He got in there, he had to break the thing into three pieces to get it out. Took him a couple of hours. I went back to the troop area on some kind of wonderful pain killing medication, and I was grounded for about a week before I recovered I

recovered from that. At that point, they didn't even bother to put me back on flight status. I took my last flight in an Army aircraft on, as I recall, it would have been about the second or third of December. That was sitting in a cargo compartment of a Huey with my legs dangling over the side. They flew me over to Pleiku where I got on a C-130. Flew down to Da Nang, was where I departed from. Went through that process and so forth. Got on board and went home.

KC: Well, let me ask you a question here. We're just gonna sum up what we're looking at. You've seen the, I guess the decline in morale. You've seen the decline, perhaps, in the (???). While we're here, what we're doing. The Vietnamese are taking over more of the fighting. You know, you talked about the North Vietnamese with the tube artillery, and they've got the, you know, the heat-seeking missiles. Things seem to be rolling on their side. You're reading Bernard Fall's book, which obviously had a big time impact on you and how you're viewing things. You mentioned—

(Editor's Note: Narrator had technical difficulty, dialog not relevant to the interview)

KC: You've got all these things going on. After your wisdom tooth is taken out, you have some time. Are you reflecting on what you are going through? What you are seeing? You know, it's—you've got some conflicts, I think, in your mind, obviously. And some very reasonable doubts here. Do you take the time, at the time, to process all these sort of things? Or is these things something you think about later on when you kind of draw some conclusions, you know, in the months or years afterward? What's going on as you're winding down you tour there? How do you feel about what's going on and about what you've done?

DH: Well, that's a good question and it leads to a couple of short stories. Yes, I was getting introspective about what was going on. I was looking, knowing, expecting, to go home in the very near future. I was basically recapping my experiences and I had seen a paradigm shift. In our tactics, you know, our marching orders, everything else had just changed profoundly over the course of two and a half years of my experience there. It was obvious to me that the fate of South Vietnam was no longer in our hands. It was gonna rely on the South Vietnamese, of which I had very little faith. With the exception of the 1st ARVN Division, the Black Panthers. I was not optimistic, and it was to a point

that it was in my mind, at this point it was their war, not mine. I had very sharply, very quickly, come to the conclusion that I really didn't want to die over there. Even though I started on my first tour, before I ever flew the first time, convinced fully that I would die over there. I had reached a point where I was no longer that fatalistic and I was not interested in adding my name to the list. I spent some time at the O-club, there in Camp Holloway. It was a very big place, it was well staffed. We had—there was several Vietnamese girls that worked there. One of 'em called herself—or, we called her Charlie. She was the comic of the group. There was another on that we referred to as Little Annie Fannie. She was as pretty as woman ever has been anywhere in history. She was, I think, part Japanese, maybe a dash of French. She had been working in this bar for seven or eight years. She spoke English as well as anybody I've ever met. She understood the—every aspect of the English language. She knew how to skewer people verbally more gracefully than most, she was (unintelligible). And sometimes not so gracefully, as was deserved. She was always reticent about talking about the war. I was sitting there one afternoon, and there was nobody in the place except her and me. We started talking and I finally pinned her down talking about the war. She finally admitted, under some pressure from me, that she thought, perhaps, that we should not have been there. That was, in her own simple words and her own (unintelligible) at the time. That probably stopped me as cold and in my tracks as Bernard Fall's book had. This was a gal who—she was educated. Well, she was supporting her family of, as I recall, twelve or fourteen. She had gone to what passed as a college there at Pleiku. I don't know what she had graduated or was—I don't even know what she was studying. But she was an intelligent person. She had consorted with GIs, although everyone there fell in love with Annie half a dozen times a day. Or, whenever they saw her. I don't think she had ever had any relationship with any of the GIs. So, that kind of made her untouchable in many, many ways. And perhaps, at least in my mind, increased her standing a little bit. She was more credible than some of the others. She was not your average Saigon mean girl, at all, and she says we shouldn't have been there. So, I'm thinking about that on one hand, and on the other, I have to go back to Kontum for just a minute.

KC: Dan, let me interrupt you here.

(Editor's Note: Interviewer briefly stops the interview).

KC: Okay, Dan. Before that little break there, you're talking about the—you know, what's going on with Little Annie Fannie, as you called her, and some other things that are taking place. So, pick it up there again.

DH: So, I had suffered a couple of epiphanies along the way. I start looking at the contrast that I had experienced, and there was a lot of 'em. Vietnam is a country of contrasts in so many ways. Geophysical, I mean, the northern part of the country is, you know, big mountains, gorgeous. The southern part of it is, perhaps, gorgeous from the air. It's not from the ground. It's flat, it's monotonous, it's hot. It's just nasty. The people, the difference between the rural folks, the city dwellers, the Montagnards. Even within the armed forces of Vietnam, the ARVNs, as we referred to them. There was mediocrity and greatness, all in the same place. After the book and my conversation with Annie—I think her actual name was Hoa, H-O-A, but I don't remember that to be precisely true. Anyway, one of the things that I had seen up in Kontum when I first arrived, and I asked about—of course a lot of French influence throughout Vietnam. Dalat was a place that had a lot of French history in it. Kontum, on the north side of the runway that was decimated, they had a supply storage area and ammo storage area, and they had a water supply for the city in the form of a water tower that was built by the French. It was built out of concrete. It had three—it's common in America to use four legs for a municipal water tower, and this one had three in the form of a tripod. The early days of the Spring Offensive, the North Vietnamese forces had destroyed the ammo dump and so on and so forth. They had taken up position in the water tower for machinegun nests. This is where, you know, great expectations had a head-on collision with technology. That technology existed in the form of the—what was called the UH-1 Mike model. I had mentioned previously that the Cobras had vulnerabilities at low altitude, and a lack of effectiveness. Because the rockets were largely of little use when they were down low. Their chin turret was the only thing that was truly useful. If they went to higher altitudes and able to use the rockets, they were vulnerable to the heat-seeking missiles. One of the responses to this, and in the spirt of dealing with the armor threat that the North Vietnamese forces had presented, was the Mike model. Which was nothing more than a C-model Huey, the old gunship style that had been upgraded both in terms of electronics, weapons systems, and power plant. They had the Lycoming L-13 engine in there, which gave them the

same power as the Cobras and the Hueys were using that day. They were armed with the TOW missiles, which is a tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided missile. The place, as far as I know, that those had ever been employed in combat. They had a range of about 3,000 meters, give or take a little bit. They were very, very accurate because basically they would be launched, and the gunner or copilot, in this case, would be tracking them on an optical device that basically had crosshairs. They would try and keep the crosshairs on the target, and keep the rocket on target—or, on the crosshairs. They had a shape charge intended to penetrate armor. At the time there was no armor existing in the world which would withstand this strike. They were quite potent. So, they had this machinegun nest on the water tower, which was terribly inconvenient for everybody on the south side of the runway. And no real immediate way to deal with it except they had some Mike models available down at Camp Holloway. They dispatched a few of those. Now, I want you to know that the average gunship pilot is, in my estimation, they're probably just a little twisted. They're not as bad as scout pilots, but they have a sense of humor that's probably a little odd around the edges. But the average person would look at a situation like that and think if you're gonna hit that water tower with a missile, you by god, would hit the tank where the gun position was and done with it. Well, not this guy. He aimed his rocket at one of the legs supporting that tower, and he hit it. A tripod will not stand on two legs alone. So he blew out the leg, and the thing very slowly at first, started to teeter and then it finally fell over. End of the water tower. It was all laying there just north of the runway in silhouette form on the ground as a pile of rubble. When I heard that story I just—I had to laugh even though it's kind of a—it's dark humor and I understand that. But, the conversation with Annie, Bernard Fall's book, that particular event right there, the irony, the contrast, everything about it is something that sticks in my mind. Even though in the very darkest of times, in the Spring Offensive of '72 was one of those time across the board. It was—it reordered life as we knew it. Because of its violence, because of the change in tactics, the change of equipment, and the losses that we suffered. Even though they were smaller in number, we were a smaller community. Many of them were extremely personal. I mentioned when I was with the F Troop, 9th Cav, the loss of Lou Brewer and then Carlos there at Kontum, and so forth. You can get numb to the losses in war, just simply because of the volume of them. But that doesn't

mean that you're gonna remain numb. As those numbers drop, and the rush of that experience recedes, it makes the remaining events that much more painful. So, I got through those circumstances. Looking back and seeing all the things that had happened and so forth. I was remarkably happy to be leaving that country when I did. I did not see a good end at play. I had at one time envisioned going back after the war, if not with any particular agenda in mind, but just be able to experience it in a peace time environment. Given circumstances today, I know many of my peers have gone back. I know a lot of guys that I flew with, my first tour particularly, have gone back over there. I won't make that trip. It's behind me. I have no interest in reopening some of the wounds that I experienced over there on one hand. On another hand, I think there's areas over there—if I was to go, I would want to see. I don't think I could get in to see them. Like I understand, Khe Sanh is a large-scale Vietnamese military base. Travel in that area is restricted, as I understand it. It's one of the places that I would need to see if I was there, but I'm not gonna do it. So, it's kind of a moot point. I don't know if that answers your question, Kelly, but that's kinda—those are kinda my thoughts on the whole thing.

KC: Yeah. No, that's a terrific wrap-up of that time. Obviously, you're aware of when you're going home. Are you aware of the exact date? Are you aware of—"eh, pretty close, within a couple weeks I know I'm gonna be getting my orders." How did that work?

DH: I don't remember with great precision what the timeline was then. I separated from the service on the 8th of December, '72. That followed my arrival—with some degree of irony here. I out-processed at Oakland. I arrived there on the 7th of December. On the way back we flew from Da Nang to Wake Island, Honolulu, and then into Oakland. They're a day ahead, so I probably left Vietnam also on the—well, I would have left Vietnam, I guess, on the 6th of December. With stopovers, it was probably about a fourteen-hour trip, give or take a little bit.

KC: How was that trip? How was that flight? What was going on?

DH: That's a good question. I mentioned my trip home from the first tour, you know, we made takeoff roll, everything was kind of hushed in the cabin until the wheels left the ground and then there was a mighty cheer. When we left on the second trip, I would say that it was hushed as we started the takeoff roll. We took off. It stayed quiet.

There was no cheer, there was no "hoorah." It was kind of an end of affairs, I guess, for everybody that was on that plane. We all knew we wouldn't be coming back. In my case, and I think in the case of many others, there was simply little ahead of us except for separation from the service. Which I knew was on the menu for me. It was quiet. It wasn't long before some of us started, you know, catching up on sleep. There was a couple of fellas that had a bottle or two of liquor. They managed to corral some cups with Coke, or whatever, and distribute that. But there was no celebration. Frankly, I don't think there was much to celebrate at that point.

KC: You come into California, what's the next step for you? Take me through the process of being separated here. This happens really quickly for you.

DH: It does. I arrived on the 7th, we were—I was put up in what passed, I think, as a BOQ. I have very little recollection of that. Out-processing the next day was relatively quick and painless. Went to—and I don't recall if I walked or got a cab. But it was somewhere in close proximity to where I was. The center where all that paperwork was handled, and so forth. We signed on the bottom line here and there. I was probably through that by noon. The instructions I had at the time was, "Continue to wear the uniform until you deplane at home." I said, "Okay, fine. I can do that." Got a cab to Oakland—the air terminal, civilian air terminal. Waited for the flight. I wasn't there very long. Took off, as I recall, it was late afternoon. We took off for, of all places, Chicago O'Hare. We got in there late evening. We had—in fact, I was asleep when we landed. The flight attendant had to wake me up. Got off the plane, had a couple or two or three hours delay. Picked up another flight, they took us down to Atlanta. Actually, let me correct myself. Did not go home directly. I went from O'Hare to Indianapolis. Turns out that I had a young lady waiting for me there. I stopped off in Indianapolis for about three or four days, and then I picked up a flight from there to Atlanta. Then on down to Melbourne, Florida, where my home was. I'd like to offer a couple of comments, for whatever they might be worth. I had occasion to fly a lot of transport aircraft during the course of my experience in the Army and Vietnam, and so on and so forth. The C-123 Provider, which was a common transport over in Southeast Asia, is the noisiest airplane that anybody ever created in the history of mankind. The Navy had several—they flew a lot of administrative missions up and down Vietnam on their version of the C-47. I don't

know what they call it. Or, the DC-3, if you will. That was one of the most enjoyable flights that I ever had. The last flight that I took on the government dime, was from Orlando International to Melbourne, Florida. On a—oh, lord. I can see it but I—the Navy calls them the Orion. It was the Lockheed Electra, four-engine turbo prop, remarkably pleasant airplane to fly on. But I arrived in Melbourne, still wearing the military muftee. Was picked up by my parents there at the airport. Their house was only—it wasn't but about two miles from the airport. That's when the unwinding process began.

KC: I wonder if you can take me through this. You've been two and a half years in Vietnam. You've seen a lot of the world. You've seen a lot of humanity. You've seen a lot of inhumanity, as far as that goes, as well. As soon as you come back from Vietnam you are out of the Army. You're a civilian, no one's shooting at you. You're not shooting at anyone. The war is still going on, although it's in a winding down phase for the American side of it. The war's still going on for the Vietnamese, obviously. You're turned loose in American society, so to speak, in 1972. Take me through that process. What was it like for you?

DH: Well, it's in contrast to the first time I came home. With very few exceptions, all of the friends, or social network, that I had from my days on the block and the ones that I knew between tours, were gone to the four winds. I doubt there was but maybe a couple of people that I still knew in that area. I was kind of at loose ends, on one hand. On the other hand, I was in a somewhat unique position in the community in that I had managed to save an awful lot of money while I was over there. Well, I had no place to spend it, particularly in the second tour. The large bulk of my paycheck went right into the—I forget what they called it, but it was a savings plan that you could put money into. I did that with every intent of just stockpiling as much as I could. One of the reasons that I wanted to do that is I was still interested in perhaps getting a sailboat, or something of that sort. I came back into a community that was economically depressed. The Melbourne area is in Brevard County, which is home to the Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral, so forth. The last Apollo mission was launched when I was in Indianapolis. They went, as I recall, they went to the moon and came back. The economic downturn hit that community as a result. It was just unbelievable. My parents had—this downturn had started before the last lunar launch. I mean, there was nothing—no following programs.

A lot of exceptionally educated, talented, and intelligent people were left looking for jobs. Brevard County was pretty much a one-horse town, as far as, you know, what they depended on for economic well-being. So, there I was with a little bit of money, in a place that was having one of those "WTF" (What the fuck?) moments. I looked around, took stock of my situation, got past the, you know, the first few days of reacquainting myself with Mom and Dad, meeting the neighbors, and so on and so forth. I started prowling around the marinas, and in very short order I found a boat for sale. It was an old—it was a Wheeler, a wooden boat built up in the Northeast in 1938. It was mostly in sound condition, had a couple of issues and so forth. I purchased that boat for a song, as I recall it was $1,500. Set about doing some restoration work on it. Eventually, within a matter of just a very few—very short period of time, I had the thing out on the water. Did some repair work on the bottom. Was up a few days before I planned to put it back in the water. I was up in the boat while it was still on land, on blocks. Doing some cleanup work, I was getting ready to go home. I had lowered all of the stuff that I was taking off the boat over the side with ropes and everything. I had to step over the side of the gunnel on the side onto one of the barrels that the boat was blocked up on, then hop off. Then the ring on my left ring finger got snagged on a screw that was sticking up on the rub rail on the—in the aft cockpit, and it ripped my finger off. That hurt. A lot. (Laughs) I mean, a whole lot. It took me off my pace there for a short while. I don't remember the exact—this happened in February. Probably took me about—I don't know, couple of months to get somewhat adjusted to not having that digit any longer. It made a mess out of my guitar playing. Most people don't realize how much you depend on that finger for things, other than sporting a wedding ring, if you will. Early part of summer, I was approached by a fella—I'm not sure what triggered this, but I was approached by a fella wanting to know if I could—if I was dive qualified. I was. I wound up with a job on a treasure salvage boat as a diver. In 1715 the Spanish Plate Fleet, returning from Central America, got caught in a hurricane right there on the coast of Florida. All but one of thirteen or fourteen vessels in that fleet crashed on the coastline. They were loaded to the gills with silver and gold. So, I had a job that summer—during the day I would be under the boat. They had ninety-degree elbows that would fit over the props. The prop would blow the sand off the bottom, and we would pick up the coins and other artifacts as they became

visible. Which sometimes included human teeth and horse teeth, and bones, and muskets and sabers, and pewter cups and plates, and just all manner of things.

KC: Must have been fascinating.

DH: Yeah. Then we'd get back. I was the low man on the totem pole, so I would fill up the air tanks again and then go home. Go out and chase girls, do what, you know, what young fellas do. So, that put me in to the early, you know, the early to mid-part of '73. Now, it was in, as I recall, it was in the first quarter or so of '73 that the Paris Peace Accords were signed. They were—I had this view at the time—Nixon and Kissinger were bound and determined to get us out of Vietnam. That was crystal clear. The question that occurred to me, at the time, was, you know, what were they willing to sacrifice to do that? What were the North Vietnamese willing to sacrifice, if anything? I don't think they sacri—the North Vietnamese, I don't think they sacrificed a darned thing. They realized we wanted to get out. We had hurt them seriously in the North through the B-52 bombing campaign. I think it was Operation Linebacker II. Their country was blockaded effectively. They weren't getting any support they needed from China or Russia. They were basically an economic stepchild. There was no way they could reach the outside world. So, they signed on the dotted line. We signed on the dotted line. The country was somewhat partitioned. They let the North Vietnamese troops stay in place wherever they happened to be in South Vietnam. Which I thought was terribly misguided, and as it turns out, it was. We officially withdrew our—the balance of our combat forces. This was—these were things that I was digesting as I was learning to live life with a digit short. I had some fun with that, I have to admit. I'm not even going to begin to describe the ways you have fun with that. So, I was rebuilding the boat, I was treasure diving, and I was watching this thing unfold in Vietnam. Recollection has it that this was getting about the time that life was heating up for Richard Nixon in regards to Watergate. This was an unfolding event—and I say—it may have occurred—I think '72 was the year of the election that—I think he had just been put back, or, reappointed, if you will, as president for a second term. Watching in the news, from a distance—somewhat of a detached perspective of the daily report of allegations of truce and treaty violations between the North and South Vietnamese, that were occurring inside of the geographic bounds of Vietnam. I knew full well at the time how that was gonna end. That eventually the North

would prevail, they would take over South Vietnam. Lo and behold, I wasn't wrong about that. That came in '75, as I recall. It came at a predictable fashion. The lacking obstruction to their ports, and access from other resupply channels, the North Vietnamese got their supply line hooked up again and they took advantage of it. They got their forces in place. They brought with them more determination to succeed than the South Vietnamese had will to defend against. They started something I would kinda paraphrase as a "blitzkrieg" attack. They divided South Vietnam in the general vicinity of Pleiku, which had been one of their intentions during the Spring '72 Offensive, in which they failed to accomplish. But they did it in '75. After that, it was all over but the shouting. They drove into Saigon, they took Saigon. They took everything else that was—that had any meaning at all from a tactical or strategic sense. We were left with the infamous pictures of Air America Hueys evacuating people from the roof of the US embassy. Helicopters being pushed off the flight decks of the various ships—US ships that were collecting the flood of refugees heading to sea to get away from South Vietnam and what was coming. One of the things that—I think one of the things that I found most disheartening about the outcome of that, there was, in fact, a bit of a—and short-lived guerrilla campaign against the North Vietnamese. Ostensibly it would have been the South Vietnamese troops. That battle was engaged. The North Vietnamese undertook a campaign, that I will describe as little more than ethnic cleansing, in a broad scale attack against the Montagnard people. Which I think was probably pretty effective, and I think that's why I can't find any of the Montagnard communities or villages, or what have you, on maps anymore of South Vietnam. There was the POW/MIA issue over there. It has been slowly being resolved in time for what, the last maybe fifteen, twenty years. I'm not sure how long that's been underway, but I know it's getting to the point now where it's very, very difficult to identify remains if they are found. Due to just decay and degradation that occurs over time in that kind of environment. We're always gonna have people that are missing over there. Some of them I know or knew at the time. We have a list of 58,000 plus Americans that laid down their life there. You know, the last time we spoke, you made a comment about a Marine general that had been back over there with his son. His son—the general was downcast because of the sacrifices and what we lost over there. The son made a comment, says, "Look around you. We won." I think there's a

lot of truth in that. It's a left-handed way to get there. I'm not sure that it justifies what happened. I'm not sure that it denigrates what happened. It'd be fair enough to say that—I think both sides were wrong for a lot of reasons. With just a little bit of luck—I have faith in America. We won't commit those mistakes again at some point in the future. At the same time, we probably won't commit them with—such errors with the Vietnamese. They are becoming an economic ally of no small stature. My recent readings indicate that they have gone from being an agrarian bit-player in the world scheme, to actually being quite an aggressive economic force, despite the small size of the country. Their cost of living has gone right through the roof because of their prosperity. To that end, I would say, you know, "Godspeed to 'em." I always thought, when I was over there flying around looking at the country, that it had remarkable economic potential. On so many levels. I couldn't even begin to describe 'em. I thought so at the time, I still think so. Obviously, it's happening. If I could undo it, I would. In having said that, Kelly, I don't have any personal regrets. You do things based on the metrics that face you at the moment. You know, you make your choices, you make your decisions and go. None of us have a crystal ball. I look back on it, I was looking back on it before I left my second tour going, "Well, maybe we shouldn'ta." I think we shouldn't have, but we did. I don't disparage anybody that served over there. I just—I don't. It was—in real simple terms, it was a shitty little war that was fought by good people for, I think—I think their intent was pure, for the most part. I can't speak to that of the forces in Washington that controlled that. I would be very pleased to run into LBJ in hell, when I get there. (Laughs) I got some words I want to put on him, if not a little bit of ass-kicking. He's not one of my heroes. Neither is Robert McNamara. God bless Simon and Garfunkel for their song—er, yeah, I guess it was Paul Simon and it was McNamara'd until he was blind. Well, here we are thirty, forty years after the fact, you know, benefit of twenty-twenty hindsight. We didn't have that at the time. It doesn't make us wrong then, right now. It just makes us a little wiser. You get to step back and take a second look at it.

KC: You mentioned McNamara and LBJ. Give me your reasons for this less than generous way you look at them and their legacy.

DH: Oh, you're too kind. The problem that I had with McNamara goes to a couple of issues. The first of which is that this was a war—in the very, very early phases

of it, it was Truman. We were there doing—providing the French with some assistance, for better or worse, this is what happened. Eisenhower followed, he was largely hands off, status quo kind of guy. The war just sort of—the conflict, such as it was, just kind of sat there and simmered at a very, very low level throughout his administration. Kennedy got involved and he started ramping up things. Started sending advisors over there. I mentioned early in this dialogue, I was living on Guam, I was watching the troops come by. Trying to put the pieces together in my mind of what was going on. He had the lack of grace to wind up getting assassinated. So, I'm not sure that JFK would have done, necessarily, the right or wrong thing on the path that he had chosen. What happened was it was handed off to LBJ and McNamara, and it wasn't long after that—in fact, I think 1965, if I recall correctly, that we had the Gulf of Tonkin incident. That was something that, as far as I've been able to ascertain in the historical record, it was completely fabricated by Robert McNamara. It did not happen in the context or sense of what was portrayed in the media. In fact, he took some actions that were, I think, illegal. Both in terms of testimony and subsequent actions that he promoted. He took steps that were the rightful purview of LBJ, the president of the United States at that time. He did it unilaterally, with not much in forethought. The Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred at a time when the people of this country were a lot more trusting of elected officials, and perhaps a little more American pie than they are today. If we needed to go to war to stop Ho Chi Minh and his hoards, that seemed like the right thing to do. I hope he rots in hell for that. He was the one that got the ball rolling. He's also—and this is kind of a side bar on it, he was the one that promoted the F-111 project. Which was a horribly misguided adventure by any major I'm familiar with. Not that it had a lot of influence. It ultimately was used in Vietnam, but very sparingly. It was used in the application of the early generations of smart weapons, and just during Operation Linebacker II. But the problem that I have with LBJ, was that he had a war on his hands. He inherited it; I'll be fair about that. But he was not a friend of the Joint Chiefs—er, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs at all. He micromanaged the war. He had daily targeting lists that were put at his desk that he would approve, or not approve. He had great reservations about the possibility of the Chinese entering the war, which were horribly misguided. The Vietnamese and Chinese had been at each other's throats for over a millennium. In fact, right after Vietnam was

reunified under the North Vietnamese rule, they went to war with each other. So, Johnson was sure of himself, and gave short shrift to anybody that might give him qualified advice on other aspects or decisions that he might make. He wouldn't have 'em. He was extraordinarily incendiary and condescending toward the military staff and intelligence network, and so forth. Sure of himself, I mean, hell, he was the President, after all. I don't mean that in the broad sense of it. I mean it more like in the, oh, I don't know, the TV series *Dallas* context, if you will. He was a J.R. Ewing kind of guy. His actions precipitated the death of millions of people, mostly on the part of the Vietnamese by a large margin. That was heavily weighted toward the North Vietnamese side of the boundary. I think if you have people in a position to provide qualified expert testimony or recommendation as to what your capabilities are, what you can do, what you could not do, or should not do, I think you need to listen to 'em. I don't know very much at all about cancer research, as an example. I listen to people who do that or qualified to do that. I'd hear what they have to say. I might make a decision or come to a conclusion as a result of that. I'm not an aerospace engineer, but if one of 'em tell me that this thing is gonna fly, I generally will believe that. If they say it's not gonna fly, I'm not gonna buy a ticket. Simple as that. So, I hold the McNamara-LBJ team in very, very high contempt for what they did to lead us into that debacle. They were misguided. They had great authority, and I think that authority was misused in so many levels. I don't even hardly know where to start.

KC: Let me change the course of the questioning here, now. You get back at '72, you've found what seems to be a cool little job. You know, diving for buried treasure essentially is what you're doing there. It seems to me that this would be a nice way to kind of mold yourself or blend yourself back in to society. You're out on a boat with other guys. You know, you're spending hours, you know, in kind of a solitary existence when you're under the water like that. You did this for, you know, you said from some time in '72 through 1973. What did you hope to do beyond that? What were your goals? Did you have any goals?

DH: My long-term goal—I mentioned earlier that I was drawn into the boating thing. That was where I wanted to be. That's what I wanted to do. I had generally assessed what I would need to basically become self-sufficient on a small sailing craft.

Sufficient to get myself back into the South Pacific and live in that environment for an indeterminant amount of time. I read people that did that—and actually had some neighbors here in the local community that made two circumnavigations in sailboats. Elderly couple, when I met them, name was Carl and Jean Mosely. They wrote for over two years for *Sailing Magazine* about each leg of their journey. What they experienced and what they did. I enjoyed the readings of not only people of that sort, but Sir Francis Chichester wrote a book called *Along the Clipper Way,* which was just inspiring. Mostly about the harrowing tales of life around Cape Horn in a clipper ship. You can't even begin to image the horror that those people experienced. But that's what I was wanting to do. What I found as I progressed, I was always a little bit behind the curve on the race between inflation and what I had available to achieve that need. I took a sailing trip into the Bahamas that was initially slated as—an older fella had purchased a boat and he wanted to sail around Cape Horn and I signed up with him. One of my friends came with us on the trip. We wound up spending about six months in the Bahamas. We had a number of high adventures. Got back to the States—the occurred over the, as I recall, over the winter of—and spring of '73-'74. It whetted my appetite. It's an amazing place out there. You think about people—they see a TV show, or movie based on sailboats going somewhere and, "Oh, that looks pleasant." It's more than pleasant, it's electrifying. Nighttime in the Caribbean, there's nothing but you and the stars. It's black, it's so black until you look over the side and you see the fluorescent flashes of fish below you. The tuna, the variety of pelagic species that live in that environment. You have occasion—there's a device that's used on boats of that sort, it's called a taffrail log and it logs your mileage though the water as you move. It has a little torpedo shaped device with fins that trails behind the boat on a rope. If you get the calm, it will almost guarantee it will get fouled up in the stern gear, the prop, or the rudder, something like that. So, you put on a mask and you go over the side to clear that, and you see water so clear that you think you can see infinity. I mean, it's just remarkable when you get into the deep oceans how the nature of things change. You get to navigate by, I don't know, at the time we didn't have GPS, or we didn't have a Loran set on the boat, even though they had Loran, that navigation system. So, you do dead reckoning. You know, you stay—you're offshore for a week and you hit your target right on the butt. Well, that makes you feel good about

life. There is land on the horizon, and you get to think, “Well, maybe I get to walk down the dock like a drunken sailor when we land.” And you do, because you’re used to the motion of the boat. You get off and you can hardly walk on solid ground. And you meet good people. But like I said, I was wanting to do this. I never quite tied to capital into the dream. I never got that put together. One of the things I found in that experience, that my idea of doing it in a small boat, was somewhat misguided. Reason is that sailboats, with the exception of catamarans or trimarans, are limited in speed by their hull length. That’s 1.3 times the square root of their waterline length, defines how fast they will go in saltwater. I’m talking about a displacement hull, be it a sailboat, a tanker, or anything else. You could make them go a little bit faster at the expense of a lot of energy expenditure, so it’s really not worth doing it. So, if you want to not spend a month going between two small islands to the Pacific, you need a boat that’s got a little longer hull on it. Something that will—instead of letting you average four and a half knots, maybe you can average six and a half or seven knots, or something like that. It makes passage a little more expedient. It also makes it a little safer because you get to avoid storms in one scenario that you might not avoid in the other. Having been through some major typhoons and hurricanes, I can assure you, you don’t want to do that in a small sailboat. It just would not be any fun at all. Nothing much to write home about, I guess is what I would say. Just to step back a little bit—I was doing this primarily in the interim of my separation from the service and my initial employment with the Federal Aviation Administration as an air traffic controller, which occurred initially in the spring of ’76.

KC: So that happened pretty quickly, then, relatively.

DH: Yeah, I saw Vietnam fall, which I knew it would once I saw the terms of the treaty that had been signed. I saw Nixon basically thrown out off office. Kissinger became a footnote. The country survived that and marched forward. I got to the point where it was obvious that I wasn’t going to achieve my dream in the near term and started casting about for a job. I went to—I had an interview with a fella that was the head of a flight service station at Melbourne Regional Airport. I was interested in applying for a job as an accident investigator with the FAA. It turns out that the National Transportation Safety Board handles all fatal accidents in civil aviation, but they have the authority to delegate nonfatal accidents of what they call Part 91 operators—that’s

noncommercial operators. And in some cases, fatal accidents in that same venue to the FAA for investigation. They don't like to mess with the, you know, the day-to-day humdrum things that, you know, somebody can assess a 172 lands on the fronted lawn of a church and they don't care. Approach the FAA on that, the NTSB had already told me to take a hike because I wanted some appointed position, I didn't have any political traction to speak of and I was not a doctor of some specialty that they found useful, such as structures analysis or forensic pathology, or something of that sort. I went, "Well, geez. It was good enough in a combat zone, why not here?" But they didn't see it that way. Fella at the FAA, the chief of that facility, said, "You know, you could do this but a quicker way to get picked up is to become an air traffic controller." I said, "Oh, well, what then?" He said, "Well, if you wanna transfer to the Flight Standards Office and become an investigator after that, you can. But it will always be collateral duty. It's not a first responsibility." I thought about that a few minutes. I made an application to the FAA, at the same time, I made an application to Bell Helicopter, who was doing a lot of training at the behest of the Shah of Iran for his armed forces and helicopters, they needed instructor pilots. I flew out to Ft. Worth on their dime, got a job interview. Got a flight check ride in a Bell Jet Ranger, which I had never flown one of those before. Had the dubious pleasure, not long after I returned from that trip, of having the choice of either job. I thought about it a minute. The pay for the job in Iran was quite a bit higher, but there was also a lot of uncertainty associated with that. On one of those rare occasions in my life when I made a brilliant decision, I decided to go with the FAA. It wasn't long after that the Shah's regime crumbled under pressure from Khomeini and became a historical footnote. But I started going through the training process with the FAA. So that involved going to their academy out in Oklahoma City. I did that and began the certification process down at the Miami Air Traffic Control Center. I got through a bit over two years of that. In the process, met some other people that were in the aviation business. One of 'em offered me a job to be the chief of operations for a tourist-oriented helicopter operation in St. Thomas. I thought about that a bit because frankly I was finding the air traffic business a little bit humdrum. I wasn't too enthused about it. I had another one offer me a corporate job in fixed-wing aircraft. They had a Ted Smith Aerostar, it's a high-performance reciprocating engine pressurized twin. The pay was

actually better than what I was getting as a controller, so I resigned toward the end of 1976 from that job as a controller. I went to work with the corporate job flying the Aerostar. I did that for, well, up until—oh, as I recall, it was about September of 1981, after President Reagan had fired all the controllers that went on strike. That was a circumstance that I found somewhat odious, too. I didn't care for the union mentality that was in play there. They all got fired, and when that happened, of course, my job as a corporate pilot just took a swan dive because you had to get reservations to fly anywhere on instrument conditions. You can't fly anywhere in the United States of America 900 to 1,000 miles, except maybe 1 trip out of 10 that you don't fly into instrument conditions. It's just the nature of that game. My boss had the entire Eastern Seaboard south of Virginia, all of the Gulf and Caribbean regions as—and I forget the name of the company he was affiliated with. But he was doing Halon fire suppression installation on ships, oil rigs, and large-scale computer complexes. So, you know, we covered a lot of ground. We were busy. Then they had the strike and it just drove a stake right through the heart of that operation. FAA called me up and says, "We've got a couple of vacancies. Would you be interested in coming back?" I said, "Funny you mention that." That is where I ended up the balance of my professional career. I had gone on to get an airline transport pilot rating in multi-engine land aircraft along the way. Which the boss appreciated. I did it on my dime, but he appreciated it because I wound up chopping his insurance rates by about seventy-five percent. I did in fact fly all over the Caribbean. Flew up to Green Bay, in that area. Boulder, Colorado, for a variety of reasons. Wound up going into JFK, Washington National, Dallas International, all over the south. I mean, I can't even think of the little peckerwood airports I've been into. Probably one of the funniest was Houma, Louisiana. A lot of oil rig operations down there. A lot of helicopter operations dedicated to that. Met a fella there that had been a Vietnam helicopter pilot, and now was running a seaplane support operation of the oil rig companies. The one that particularly were working inside the coastal marsh regions of the Mississippi Delta. He wasn't going offshore with these slow planes, he was landing in the middle of the channels and canals that were next to their barge platforms to resupply and so forth. After his experience with flying choppers in Vietnam he had gone to work with the CIA. I thought, "Wow, what a small world. I mean, here you are crashing seaplanes on a daily basis." It's interesting the

way our paths diverged after we separated from the service. I'm still in touch with a great number of the people that I flew with, both enlisted and pilots from my first tour. For reasons I've never—and it's probably because of the transitory nature of my duty assignments in the second tour. I'm not in touch with any of those folks, at least not that I'm aware of. But, the gunners, the crew chiefs, other pilots—there's a fella that was a gunship pilot, I mentioned him earlier, named Bob Shrader. He retired a few years back from the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. He had been in charge of their flight department for a while. He's living in a place that's about thirty miles southeast of me right now and we talk occasionally. He was the one that his call sign was 2-2, and whenever we flew a mission together we'd take off and he'd just out of the blue he'd say, "1-2, this is 2-2. How are you?" and that was the way we started our missions all the time. We still do that. If I pick up the phone he'll say, "How are you doing 1-2?" Some things stick with you, I guess. It's good to stay in touch with 'em. We don't talk much about the past, or we talk about the current. About today, about tomorrow. You know, what's coming. A lot of us are having health issues and we're getting fairly advanced in our seniority. Some of 'em have already passed by the way. When one of my favorite crew chiefs over there, was a fella named Bruce Carroll from my first tour. He died at a very young age from cancer. Happened about twenty years back, as I recall. Some of the rest of us are a little more, you know—what, I don't know. We've got our anchor set. We're not leaving Dodge anytime soon. One way to put it, I guess. I wanna tell ya, I very much appreciate the opportunity to talk about all this stuff. It refreshed memories that I perhaps had forgotten about to some degree. Made me realize some of the things that I had just forgotten completely. And pointed out a few things where, you know, obviously the memory's getting a little fuzzy about this, that, and the other. When I was working down in Miami at my second go around as a controller, I had a supervisor down there who was—who criticized me once when they had an annual appraisal that they did for employees. He was critical because I have a—what he characterized as a "photographic memory," and it made him very uncomfortable. And also, because I had a hyperawareness of my surroundings, and that made him uncomfortable, as well. I understood what he meant about the hyperawareness, because there was very little going on around me in the control room which I was not aware of. The reason for that was—is

the actions of adjacent sectors and the controllers that were working those sectors would almost invariably have an impact on my sector. If I heard something cooking that was gonna hurt me, I would get in touch with him and let him know I needed something else. I could go two, three, sometimes a month—weeks or, you know, a month after the fact, and there would have been some incident that had occurred involving traffic in the control room. I did not need to listen to the tapes to know what had happened. If I was involved in it I knew precisely what I had said, when I had said it, and so on and so forth. To the point that I was criticized on one occasion for not doing something that was appropriate with traffic. I defended myself in the face of three supervisors, what we called an area manager, which was one step above a supervisor, and four controllers from an adjacent area of specialization, who all said I was a bad boy and I had done wrong. They played the tapes, and they said, "See? There it is. You see—blah, blah, blah." I said, "I think you need to play those tapes again and listen to precisely what I said. I did not deny your request. I approved it with one condition." They went back and listened to the tapes again and said, "Well, gee, Dan, you're right. Sorry, we'll shut up and go away now." That kind of thing made the supervisor uncomfortable and I'm sorry about that. He would be relieved to know today that my memory is not quite that acute and my awareness of things around me is not so sharp.

KC: (Laughs) It's been very good for the purposes of this interview.

DH: I would like to think that those were the things that kept me alive in my first tour, and to some degree in my second tour. I've read of this subsequent to that experience, I've heard people speak to the issue several times. That you perceive things both on a conscious and subconscious level. I think I mentioned early in this discussion, there was one time in my first tour, as I recall, possibly two, that when we started getting shot at, it came as a surprise. All the rest of those occasions when it happened, and there were many, it was never a surprise. It could have come—that mindset could have come from the perspective that I had an overarching perception of what the situation was and recognized the potential for that. Or, I was seeing things on a subconscious level, I was aware of things subconsciously that my conscious mind was not registering. That part of my brain was adding up the token real quick and giving me a warning. I think that's probably more—my perception is weighted more on the latter than the former. Hell, any

day in the world they could fly in the A Shau Valley in a loach, or out in Khe Sanh, the likelihood of you getting shot at was pretty high. That's the broad brushstroke on that. But when you get down to the point when you know seconds in advance, and I mean like three, four, five, ten, fifteen seconds in advance that you're gonna get shot at, there's something else at play. I don't know exactly how to define that in terms of sensory perceptions, psychology, and mental function and so on and so forth. But with just those very few exceptions, it was never a surprise. Generally speaking, in my second tour it wasn't a surprise, either. It was not so finely honed, but we knew when our stuff was weak. We kinda knew what to expect, particularly during that Spring Offensive. There was hardly ever—er, never a question of were we gonna get shot it, or even where. It was just a matter of how much, and are they gonna hit us, and with what. I saw everything from small arms in the forms of, you know, AKs and SKSs right on up to triple A used against helicopters. And the missiles. Most of us got through it. I'm sorry for the ones that didn't. I miss some of 'em. I'm sure somebody, somewhere, misses all the rest. That's war and that's the way it goes.

KC: Well, let me ask you just a few—I won't say lighter, but perhaps, lighter questions. One of them is, with all the generations of movies, books, and public perception about the Vietnam War and the Vietnam veteran in this era, what sort of books do you read about the Vietnam War? Do you watch any movies about the Vietnam War? Are there any songs that come to mind when you think of the war?

DH: I've read a very few books about it. One that comes to mind was called *Chicken Hawk,* I don't remember the fella's name that wrote it. But it was about helicopter operations in Vietnam. It was not a bad book. I had the impression that perhaps there was a little bit of liberty taken in describing some of the events that were there, but maybe not. I've seen some pretty crazy, wild things happen in combat and I wouldn't argue against any of it being true. In the main, I've had—I sent you a copy of this thing that I wrote called *Roll of the Dice.* I've a lot of people say, "Oh, Dan, you need to finish that! You need to finish it!" Well, I don't know that I do. Or don't. I mean, I don't have that visceral motivation that makes me want to finish it up. There's been so many books written by rotor heads on the war, I'm not sure that I'm gonna offer any gift of insight to future generations by doing that. Hell, it's out there on the internet. If somebody wants to

find it, they can find it and read it. So, I'm mixed about that. The movies, that's an interesting question. There's a couple that I've seen that I thought had some merit, but not in a literal translation. A classic example on that would be *Apocalypse Now*. If you take that as a metaphorical exercise—

KC: Which is kind of the point.

DH: Yes, and that was a statement about war in general, much more so than the Vietnam War. There was a couple of things in there that were kind of funny. There were some things that were very dark. I don't know of anyone that ever had an experience exactly like what was portrayed at any point in that movie. Yeah, we had riverine patrol craft. We had choppers hanging in trees, and we had some crazy sons of bitches in charge of stuff doing some crazy things. I don't know that any of 'em set up their own armies deep in Cambodia, or whatever. But as a statement of war, it was an interesting movie. *We Were Soldiers* was, I thought, a pretty good movie. I think there was some artistic license taken there, of course. Most people, through my perspective, were totally unaware of what happened in the Ia Drang Valley. It was, as I understand, the first major battlefield engagement between North Vietnamese and American troops. It was bloody. I think both sides left that thinking they had won, and I think both sides were wrong. As simple as it can be. One of the more interesting movies that I saw, actually, was *Full Metal Jacket*. I don't say it about what happened in the last half of the movie, that was total fantasy right there. But the bootcamp training cracked me up. Because even though it was based in a Marine camp, I knew many people like Lee Ermey. I met them in basic training, I met them in flight school, and they had wonderful vocabularies that were delivered in your face. "Right now! You maggot get down and give me twenty!" I had to laugh at that even though the conclusion of the bootcamp side of it was rather grim. That part of the movie—the first part was humorous to me. A movie that I saw—it's always a background movie, it's never had a lot of play—that I thought was kind of interesting was *84 Charlie MoPic*. I don't know if you ever saw that one.

KC: I'm not familiar with that.

DH: If you get a chance look that one up. What it is, is the 84 CM, it's a combat photographer using a movie type thing. That was the representation of the presumption of the movie. It was an MOS. This was a Vietnam experience that is viewed through the

eyes—through the camera of a fella that's shooting film in the Vietnam combat zone. There's some interesting moments in there that I think resonate quite a bit. I'll tell you what I'll do, I got a copy of it. I'm probably not going to ever look at it again, but I'll happy to send it out to you and let you take a look at it.

(Editor's Note: Narrator discusses sending the film, but it is not relevant to the interview)

DH: It's an interesting perspective that's seldom utilized in that type of thing. There was a show on one of the—A&E or one of the TV—History Channel, maybe, about the British view of the war in the Pacific and hey had a lot of footage of that nature. You know, the combat footage, and so on and so forth. Perhaps not as graphic as what is seen in this particular movie. But it was kind of interesting. In the main, I don't recall any other movies that give me any particular sense of significance. I know there's a bunch of books out there that I have not read. I think—and I'm not trying to belittle anyone else's efforts or bestow sainthood on anyone one when I say this—I think for anyone that was there and had a larger sense of the landscape in South Vietnam, anybody that read *Street without Joy* pretty much is about as far as you wanna go with that. You see perspectives that are independent of the American philosophy or the Vietnamese philosophy. I don't think Bernard Fall was necessarily a big friend of the French philosophy. He just kinda called it the way it was. You're collecting information here in the oral history, people in some cases that would reinforce what I said, and in some cases offer wholly different perspective. Perhaps recon forces, long range patrol, somebody from the 4th Infantry Division that was on patrol, or somebody from the 11th Armored Cav Regiment that was out there in their APCs and tanks doing what they did. It ultimately can become one grand view of what went on over there. You take an awful lot of time to fare through all of it, and perhaps that's the job of historians down the road, I don't know. It is what it is.

KC: You mentioned the different perspective of different veterans, or groups of, you know, different units and what it would be like to be a lerp, or 11th Armored Cavalry, or whatever. That takes me to another question I wanted to ask you. With all of these various experiences—everyone over there had a different experience, that's the nature of the beast. That's the nature of life. But looking at American society and the role, or the

position of the American Vietnam veteran in American society, how do think that has been perceived over the years and why do you think it has been perceived that way?

DH: It was very popular in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War to cubbyhole Vietnam vets into the looney bin as a group. Deranged Vietnam vet, how many times have you heard that? I think that largely stemmed from print media, and perhaps Hollywood and some of the things that they did. All respect to Sly Stallone, *Rambo* was a fantasy. But there was that particular view. Early in Ronald Reagan's first term, he essentially thanked the vets for what we had done and welcomed them home, which, as I said earlier, was a very touching moment for me. It was something that was long overdue. At that point there was a huge shift in how people dealt with vets, and what they saw in the vets. What I saw amongst ourselves was no different, I think, than what my father and his generation would of—and how they would have viewed themselves. The Vietnam era vets are generally—they were then, and I think they are today—they effects of age notwithstanding—clear thinking, independent, strong of will, they're not afraid to call BS on a politician when it's appropriate. I think younger generations might view the Vietnam vets somewhat in the same vein as my generation may have viewed World War II vets and Korean War vets. Maybe you don't pay a lot of attention to 'em, and maybe you pay attention when what they're talking about is an experience that might be of interest. You get a little bit older and you realize the sacrifice that those people made. You start having a lot more respect for 'em. I will say this, there were times in Vietnam when I think if—and I used the term a while back—*Twelve O'Clock High*, and I'm doing that in the context of the aerial campaign. But albeit on the ground or in the air, there was times when Vietnam was just as violent as anything we cooked up in World War II or Korea. It just was not on the broad scale of—it wasn't an ongoing state of being. It was intermittent. The vets in World War II faced a campaign on multiple fronts that was extraordinarily violent on a continual basis. The D-Day invasion, the Pacific campaign, Okinawa, the Philippines, all of these things. It was never easy for those people. They didn't get to go to the club at the end of the day and have drinks and tell jokes like we did. Nor did their pilots of that era. They didn't have the luxuries we had. Yeah, we got mortared on occasion, and we had a few rockets thrown our way, but we largely ignored that, make jokes, you know, carry on. I think, in my own personal

perspective as far as capabilities, I don't think there's a speck of salt worth a difference between the vets in any generation. Nor what they were capable of doing or what they accomplished within the sphere of their influence and what they were able to do. Even though I am today, I have a hell of a lot high regard for those folks in the prior generations than what I did as a kid. One of my uncles was a B-17 waist gunner flying missions in Europe during World War II. He had a—the only time he ever complained about that was the fact that they were reliant on oxygen because the altitudes they flew at. He was not real fond of the system design because he had three or four missions where they had to drop out of formation and go to low altitude 'cause those cotton pickin' Jerrys had shot holes in their oxygen system and they couldn't stay up there. I'm thinking, "Good grief." You know, not just one time they tell me, it's three or four times. That was their version of normal back then. I hold them in the highest esteem for what they had to endure. It was a long, drawn out version of the recurrent moments that we had in Vietnam, I think. That's my opinion. Kudos to them for what they did. No less to the Vietnam vets for what they did. It was a long, long war. The nation grew weary of it, so did we. I notice that we did it with honor and not a small bit of sacrifice. I think probably that it shaped the success of my future quite a bit. I would not have wound up in the position I am today had I not gone through that. It opened doors for me. I mean, a lot of the people that hired Vietnam vets were Korean vets or World War II vets. There was some empathy there. There's also recognition in some of the skillsets that they carried with 'em. You can take one sense of—"Well okay, son, you were in the Army, what was your specialty?" "I was a dental technician." "Well, that's nice. I want you to go out there and be a line chief on repair for these Kenworth tractors for our transportation fleet." He says, "Well, I was a dental tech." He said, "Yeah, but you're disciplined. You've been through the drill; you know how to take orders. We're gonna teach you how to do it and we have faith in your skills—your skillsets that you brought with you." This is, I think, the way a lot of people that go through the military wind up finding success later on. It's not what they did, it's the context of how they did. The discipline that is so incredibly important in life, and it's something that's so often missing amongst a lot of people. They've got the basic tools, but they don't know how to apply 'em because they don't

have the discipline. They don't have the sense of how to be a team player. Kinda my perspective on that. Hope it answers your question.

KC: Yes, absolutely. It also answered another question that I typically ask, too, so that's two birds with one stone. I've got just one question left for you, Dan, and it's a broad question. It's a question that I ask all the interviewees. As a veteran, as a person who was there on more than one occasion, for you in your instance, you look back on the Vietnam War—we as a society look back on the Vietnam War and we say, "It means this." "No, this is what we should have learned." Or, "This is the legacy of the Vietnam War." "If we learned anything from the war, this is what it is." Well, we kick that around all over the place. It comes up in, you know, political parlance and discussions today at the highest levels. So, I'm gonna ask you as someone who was there. You know, a bright, observant individual—thoughtful individual. What do you think is the lasting historical legacy of the Vietnam War? What did the Vietnam War mean?

DH: Boy, oh, boy. It is a broad one. I think—what does it mean? It means that governments are capable of making mistakes in judgement and defining a path that is ill-advised. I think governments can rely on their people more than the people can rely on their governments. This is one of the reasons I encourage people to not be a party to any particular dogma when it comes to politics or much of anything else of that nature. I think there was a number of lessons in military and political strategies that came out of the war. Some of the people learned them, some people have already forgotten them. I will restate something I said early on. Colin Powell learned lessons from his experience in Vietnam and he applied them as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs during Operation Desert Storm, which led to one of the most profoundly quick military exercises our country has ever had. I mean, it was over in a thirty-day bombing campaign and a three-day ground war. It was done. He did this by learning that piecemeal actions on the part of the military do not bring about the desired response. He used overwhelming force against Saddam Hussein, and it worked. It worked really well. George W. Bush seemed to have forgotten that lesson just a few years later. I'm not gonna belabor that with any great length. But the strength—what I get out of Vietnam, the strength of the country comes from its people, not from its leaders. It's often the leaders that forget that and they shouldn't. They shouldn't because they might underestimate what the people are capable of doing. They

may overestimate what they're capable of doing. If you're sitting in the position as the commander in chief, you need to understand those thoughts, and you need to take stock of what your capabilities are before you just blithely jump into a military conflict. You know, are you capable of fighting in mountains and high altitude? Are you capable of walking seventy-five miles across a desert? Are you capable of delivering 4,000 long tons of supplies to an airport on the other side of the planet in 24 hours? I think you need to displace emotion in these decisions and base your actions on fact. You can't dial back the page on this book once you flip it—once you've taken action. There will be consequences that can be good or bad. I think that—not only in the spirit of the Vietnam conflict, but I think all of the battles that we've been involved with, and the wars. There's very, very valuable lessons to be learned therein. None of it has much of anything to do with the technology of that era. You have to look at the people and what their contribution was. You have to understand what they're capable of doing and what they will do in the face of overwhelming adverse odds. We've always—we've had a long history of doing magical tricks of that nature and we're not through with it. That would be the short version of how I would try and sum that up. It is a good question. I don't know if I gave it the best answer that I could give.

KC: No, that was terrific.

DH: Just right off the cuff, that's the best I could do.

KC: I dropped a bunch of it on you right there. That's quite a question to ask someone. Well, Dan, that exhausts the questions that I have for the interview. I'm really pleased and grateful that you were so generous with your time and with your thoughts, and with your memories. I do wanna ask you, if there anything else that you'd like to add? Anything that we haven't covered that you would like to get on the record?

DH: You know, Kelly, at this point, I don't know that there's anything of significance. I've hit the high points, what I thought were the significant points. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to have this dialogue with you for this project. I just really appreciate it and I'll let it go at that. I don't think there's anything of significance that I could add. When you get the recorder off, there's a couple of things I'll mention to you. But it's not appropriate at this point. With that said, I'll let it go. Thank you for the opportunity at catharsis and all those other good things with this kinda deal.