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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Francis McKeever
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Melissa Wark**

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

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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Francis McKeever. Today is 1 September 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus
3 of Texas Tech University. Mr. McKeever is kind enough to join me by telephone today
4 from his home in Charleston, South Carolina. Mr. McKeever, to begin the interview, I'd
5 like to get some background information from you, if I could, biographical information.
6 Could you tell me when and where you were born?

7 Francis McKeever: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at Mercy Hospital,
8 April 6th, 1944.

9 KC: And what were your parents' names?

10 FM: My father's name was John V. McKeever, and my mother was Rita M.
11 McKeever.

12 KC: What did they do for a living?

13 FM: They're deceased, but my father worked for Union Switch and Signal. He
14 was an analyst. My mother was a schoolteacher.

15 KC: What was this company again? Union Switch?

16 FM: And Signal (talking at same time).

17 KC: What was this business, this company?

18 FM: It was an railroad signal business.

1 KC: Okay.

2 FM: He was an analyst there in production management.

3 KC: What kind of school—what level of school and subjects did your mother

4 teach?

5 FM: My mother was an English teacher in middle school now, 6th grade.

6 KC: Did you have brothers and sisters?

7 FM: I have an older brother, John, an older sister, Rita, a younger brother, Kevin,

8 and a younger sister Nancy.

9 KC: So, you're right in the middle of the five of them.

10 FM: Yes, sir.

11 KC: All right.

12 FM: Good place to be.

13 KC: Yes, indeed. Sheltered a little bit. Protected on both sides.

14 FM: I guess.

15 KC: Where did you grow up? Did you grow up in the Pittsburgh area?

16 FM: I grew up in North Huntingdon Township, which is about twenty-five miles

17 east of Pittsburgh.

18 KC: Okay. Very pretty part of the world. Tell me about growing up there.

19 FM: We grew up in the country on a dirt road, as a matter of fact. We enjoyed

20 living that way. We had a very nice garden, which we tended. We learned to play

21 baseball and football on the sandlot. Had some real cold winters. A lot of snow. We went

22 to Catholic Elementary School through eighth grade then went to the public junior high

23 and high school. Great place to grow up.

24 KC: Yeah, yeah. It sure sounds like it. Now, was your father involved in the

25 Second World War at all?

26 FM: No, he had a deferment because it was government essential.

27 KC: Yeah, that's what I'd probably assume there. Okay, cool. So, you went to a

28 Catholic school, you said, up through eighth grade.

29 FM: I did.

30 KC: And what about high school? Where did you go to high school?

1 FM: I went to Norwin High School, which is in Erwin, Pennsylvania. It's a pretty
2 large high school. I think we had about three hundred and fifty or so in our senior class.

3 KC: Well, tell me about the high school experience for you. What sort of subjects
4 did you gravitate to?

5 FM: Well, I was not a mathematician. I did much better in the arts side of the
6 house than the sciences. I was editor of the yearbook. I did play junior varsity football
7 and baseball. I liked history, geography, those types of subjects. I enjoyed reading a lot.

8 KC: Growing up at this time in the 19—I guess a young fella in the 1940's and
9 '50s and the '60s, the dominant theme in politics, international politics especially, is the
10 Cold War. It affected a lot of folks in their everyday lives in a variety of different ways.
11 What do you remember about growing up during the Cold War?

12 FM: Well, that's interesting. I remember my mother had five siblings. One of
13 them was an Army Air Corps officer. I guess I was—this was in '54, maybe, so I was ten
14 years old. He came by our home on his way into Korea. He was an artillery spotter pilot,
15 and he got killed in Korea. I remember they brought his body home. We were going to
16 his funeral at Arlington. It was in the dead of winter. I believe it was in February. It was
17 snowing. We were on a turnpike headed that way, and the car hit a curb at one of the rest
18 stops, and it broke the axil, so we didn't get to go to his funeral, which was—I didn't
19 think too much about it then, but it was pretty hard on my mom. But in any case, I did get
20 to see his grave in Arlington. It's not too far from where John F. Kennedy's buried. So, I
21 remember that. I don't recall doing too much of this stuff of getting under the desk and all
22 that kind of stuff. I think we did that in school. I didn't pay much attention to the politics
23 up until maybe the '60s when the space race was going on. I think I was a senior or a
24 junior in school with Sputnik. I found out, and that was pretty, pretty interesting.

25 KC: Yeah. You know, you mentioned Kennedy and growing up Catholic in the
26 east. I wonder what your thoughts or your family's thoughts on Kennedy were.

27 FM: My father was a democrat in the early years of his lives, but he slowly
28 moved to the Republican side of the political scheme. I don't think he thought too much
29 of the Kennedy family frankly. He thought John F. Kennedy's father was a bootlegger
30 and so on and so forth. He wasn't enamored with them. The religious side of it didn't

1 come into play. It was his political views. He just didn't want to sign off on too much of
2 that liberalism. Kennedy's liberalism is nowhere near what we have today.

3 KC: That's for sure. Things have certainly changed. What about you? What were
4 your views on Kennedy?

5 FM: I didn't think too much about him being in office. The Cuban Crisis was sort
6 of an interesting event to come through. At the time, I thought, "This is going to be a bad
7 deal." It worked out eventually, but I think that was probably one of the best things he
8 was able to do in his term. Bay of Pigs was a whole different story. He was assassinated
9 when I was, I guess, a freshman in college. LBJ took over, and next thing we know, the
10 Vietnam thing was really starting to cook.

11 KC: You mention the Cuban Missile Crisis. You would've been an age where
12 these kinds of things would've been more likely than previous things being on your radar,
13 being on your scope a little bit. Do you remember the days of the events around that?

14 FM: Well, I do. We didn't have the television access we do today, but the news
15 was pretty up on it. I can remember the tension particularly in Florida with the military
16 movements that they had going on down there. I couldn't see in my mind how this thing
17 was going to evolve. We had troops on the beaches or whatever. We were going to
18 invade Cuba, and so on and so forth. I think I was more busy with school than I was with
19 the news at that time.

20 KC: Yeah, sure, sure. When did you graduate from high school? Was it '63?

21 FM: I graduated in '62.

22 KC: Okay. 1962. All right. So, what were your plans for moving forward? Did
23 you want to go to college? Were you looking for a vocation? What did you want to do?

24 FM: Well, I did want to go to college. My older brother, John, was at the Citadel
25 at that time. I was not really too studious. I made good grades. But I was not a Harvard
26 candidate. So, I didn't apply to any other schools than the Citadel for some reason and
27 ended up going there.

28 KC: Oh, is that right?

29 FM: Yeah.

30 KC: Tell me about this.

31 FM: My younger brother went there also.

1 KC: Tell me about this time there. It's a very prestigious school in a lot of
2 different ways. Tell me about your time at the Citadel.

3 FM: Well, in 1962, it was a real hard school.

4 KC: I'm sure.

5 FM: Being it was the year of, I guess, learning. At that time, they believed that—
6 well, they break you down, so you know what it's like to be on the bottom. That way, you
7 learn how to lead. I went through the police system. I became a non-commissioned
8 officer in the corps, but I had a whole different viewpoint of the type of plebe system that
9 they needed to develop these kids. So, I probably wasn't as hard on them as maybe some
10 of the other people. There's a point in some of it, and a lot of it there's no point in it. It's
11 just to where it doesn't produce any results.

12 KC: Well, can you go into some detail in that? I think that's very interesting.

13 FM: Well, it's a physical challenge, number one. So, you spend a lot of time
14 doing pushups. You pretty much are the low man on the totem pole. You have to walk on
15 the gutter. You couldn't walk on the sidewalk. Keep your chin in at all times. At the mess
16 halls, you had to serve the upperclassmen. You had to be prepared to give them current
17 events when they called on you at the dinner table. You had to know what they call was
18 plead knowledge and all kinds of inane facts about the school and the history of the
19 buildings and canons and monuments, things like that. You had to be on your toes. Of
20 course, you had to have your shoes polished to the nth degree. You had to have your
21 room in order. It helped me a lot in having discipline, which I probably needed to know
22 how to utilize your time. So, from that point, it was real helpful. Being a Yankee wasn't
23 necessarily too helpful. But we did have quite a few folks down there from Pittsburgh
24 that let us come on athletic teams. It was an interesting year. It went by on a real hurry.
25 My grades weren't really good, so I ended up going to summer school. I needed to figure
26 out how to study and not worrying so much about trying to choose.

27 KC: Right.

28 FM: So, that was good. Of course, the military side of it was really helpful. I was
29 proud to be a cadet. It gives you a sense of patriotism that you developed with the
30 campus. We had many, many graduates who had already been to Vietnam. At that time,

1 they were mostly MAC-V or special forces time. We had a couple of them who had
2 already been killed over there, and that was in '63.

3 KC: You mentioned that your idea of leadership, I guess, or how to deal with the
4 pleas was different than those who came before you. In what ways were your ideas about
5 this different than those? How did it manifest itself?

6 FM: I didn't think it was necessary to continually push them physically and
7 mentally. At some point in time, you've done all you can in that regard. I was more
8 interested in making sure that they got the grades they needed to stay in school because I
9 didn't want to see any of them leave school because they couldn't do the physical part of
10 it or the mental part. But there were some people who did anyway. But you can't—that
11 can't be helped. It just happens. But a lot of people—they just feel some sense of power
12 when there's someone in that position. I just didn't feel that was necessary. I just wanted
13 to make sure they got good grades, so I would be academic officer of the company
14 because of that.

15 KC: Right.

16 FM: I think you can earn someone's respect by treating them properly in that
17 sense.

18 KC: Sure. What was your major field of study? What sort of things did you like to
19 learn about when you're in the VMI?

20 FM: Well, at the Citadel, I studied political science. That was my major. I was
21 interested mostly in transportation.

22 KC: I'm sorry. I said VMI.

23 FM: That's all right. I let it slip. I won't hold it against you.

24 KC: Yeah, well you probably should. I'm sorry. Say that again.

25 FM: I majored in political science, which hid me from the dread of mathematics
26 and science.

27 KC: Right.

28 FM: It was—I had for some reason thought about being a lawyer at one point in
29 time. But I was really interested in transportation primarily because of the railroads and
30 things in Pittsburgh that I grew up with, and my dad was kind of in that business. So, I
31 actually wrote my senior paper on mass transportation when I was at the Citadel.

1 KC: So, being at this school and ROTC and this interest in transportation, is this
2 something that you wanted to pursue once you left school?

3 FM: Ironically, it was. At that time, most everybody who had an ROTC contract
4 ended up going right into the service. There was no sixty days and then you go home. So,
5 when you were a senior, you had—at least on the Army side—you had to make a
6 selection of what branch you wanted to go to in the Army. You had to pick two combat
7 arms and one combat arm. I knew I didn't want to be infantry, so I picked armor because
8 they had a whole bunch of tanks running around Vietnam. I think I picked air defense
9 artillery for some strange reason. Then for the non-combat arms, I picked transportation
10 corps, being so naïve as to think, "What do they do over there?" Well, that was a big
11 mistake. But in any case, I ended up with the transportation corps, which was good.

12 KC: Well, I wonder, what did you know about what was going on in Vietnam in
13 '62, '63, '64?

14 FM: In '65 and '66 that was all of our military sciences classes was Vietnam and
15 what was going over there in the tactics. At that time, they hadn't started the big build up,
16 but they were lining up for it. We would have people come in who had already been
17 there. They would tell us about their experiences, older Citadel guys. Of course, our
18 active Army professors had their spots in the perspectives also. So, we were pretty well
19 up on it.

20 KC: Do you remember any of the details or anything that you were telling you
21 about the way the War was being fought, what the background of it was, and how we
22 were approaching it there?

23 FM: Well, at that time, they were talking about—it was more of military
24 assistance than it was an out battle. They were talking mostly about trying to train up the
25 Montagnards, the Vietnamese Army to take care of the hamlets and the cities. But, of
26 course, at that time, I don't think we had anywhere enough advisors to meet that mission.
27 So, the further away you got from Saigon, the harder it became to influence the minds
28 and the will of the people. We couldn't maneuver that way. The special forces hadn't
29 evolved. They just didn't have the numbers from what they were telling us to do what we
30 had to do. So, it was a battle. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were trying to do
31 the same thing. I think they had the advantage because they knew the lay of the land.

1 KC: Right. It must've been really interesting, I would think, to be a student at the
2 Citadel, knowing that Vietnam could very well be in your future and talking with these
3 folks who had been over there at the early stages. That must've been very enlightening, I
4 would think.

5 FM: Well, it was. It was sort of scary. Honestly, not knowing—well, we did
6 know. I don't think there was any doubt that I was going to Vietnam. Because my brother
7 had gone over. My brother graduated in '63. He went over in '65 as a forward observer
8 for the Big Red One. He came back In September of '66 when I was just going on active
9 duty. Well, at that time, they wouldn't allow two brothers from the same family be in-
10 country at the same time. So, he came home, and next thing you know, I'm getting ready
11 to go. So, I knew it was inevitable. But I was ready to do it. That was part of the deal I
12 made when I took my commission. I didn't know what I wanted to be, so I wasn't too
13 sure about it. Whereas my brother was. So, I graduated in May of '66, was commissioned
14 the same day. I went on active duty in November.

15 KC: So, November of '66 active duty. Where do you go first once you finish at
16 the Citadel?

17 FM: Well, when I finish the Citadel, I spent the summer at home just waiting on
18 my orders. I had, I was selected for transportation corps. I said, "well, that's good."

19 KC: You knew that immediately then?

20 FM: Right. That's where they told me I was going. I just didn't know when. I
21 went to Pittsburgh and worked a summer job. In November, I reported to Fort Eustis,
22 Virginia, which is outside of Newport News. That was Transportation School, home of
23 the Transportation Corps, excuse me. So, I ended up there in November for the officer's
24 basic course. I think—I'm trying to remember. I think we had maybe forty-five other
25 second lieutenants in that class. So, that was a 90 day basic course that every branch has
26 for their officers. You know, you learn tactics and how to run convoys, what the
27 transportation corps does with the railroads, boats—they had their own boats all over the
28 place in Vietnam: LARC boats, river boats. They ran the ports over there, for instance.
29 They were mostly involved in running convoys, which I soon learned was a very
30 hazardous business.

31 KC: Yeah, of course.

1 FM: Again, they brought officers back who had been in Vietnam, who had been
2 around in convoys to teach them some of those classes. So, I said, “well, that’s
3 interesting, but I don’t think I want to be a truck company officer.” But I didn’t have any
4 choice, and I didn’t know what I would end up doing. In any case, you learn the basics of
5 military courtesy—how to dress, how to act, how to plan convoys around corps with
6 cargo, things like that.

7 KC: Yeah.

8 FM: I spent a couple of weeks doing field training where you’d go out and play
9 defenses and dig fox holes and things like that, weapons training, campus courses, pretty
10 much basic stuff, which was good. I think in December, they started coming down
11 with—they called them Levy’s at the time. They’d call them. At the time, they’d start
12 giving out assignments to lieutenants, so most all of them went to truck related activities.
13 I guess at least thirty of the class. A number of them went into forward operations. Cam
14 Ranh Bay was a gigantic port there, and transportation was always involved with that. A
15 number of them went into running the LARCs the watercraft that work across the shore
16 to load and unload the cargo.. Vehicles that floated in the water, amphibious-type
17 operations. The Army also had tugboats and LST, so some of them went into the
18 watercraft side of the house. I didn’t get my assignment until all of the other ones had
19 gone. The class ended in—I’m trying to think—in January of ’67. School was over, and
20 everybody had graduated and gone their own ways. There were two of us left—a fellow
21 named Tom Pfaff and me. We said, “I don’t know what we did to not get an assignment.
22 We’re either boneheads, or they’re going to toss us out.” So, sure enough, the first of
23 February, I got a call from Fort Bragg telling me that my orders would be coming
24 through. I would be going to the 608 Aviation Company, which was an aircraft direct
25 support maintenance outfit at Fort Bragg. Tom Path was assigned to the—gosh, I’m
26 trying to think what it was now—395th Transportation Company. I’m not sure, but he was
27 in the same type of assignment as technical supply officers and non-rated crew member
28 status. Well, I didn’t know anybody in aviation, much less technical supply. But I said,
29 “Well, this is really going to be an interesting trip.” The day after I got the call from Fort
30 Bragg, the commanding officer called me. His name was, at that time, Major Art
31 Bowden. He was a Texas A&M graduate. He said he didn’t know anything about me, but

1 he looked at the list of candidates coming out of that basic company, and he said there
2 was one guy from the Citadel. “That’s who I picked.” He was an A&M guy. He was a
3 great, great commander.

4 KC: Now, are you going to go through any sort of supply training before you go?

5 FM: Well, I did. I left Fort Eustis—I’m trying to think—maybe the second week
6 of February. I ended up at Fort Lee, Virginia, which was at that time a school, which did
7 supply functions. But they had a special school for aviation maintenance kids. Technical
8 supply and aviation had a big job because you had thousands of line items and airports
9 that you had to keep in stock and support your maintenance function. The Army had
10 started a program using an NCR 500 computer. It’s an early computer—not early. For
11 that time, it was early. To keep track of all these parts in a mechanized system. Whereas
12 in the past, they used to have to keep them on little three by five cards because it was
13 done on a computer. So, that took care of all your management. You received issues in
14 stocking and all that stuff. So, I went to school there for about forty-five days in total to
15 learn the supply system for aviation maintenance. When I was there, my platoon sergeant
16 and the rest of the platoon were going to the course to learn how to run a computer. So, I
17 got to meet those folks while I was there. That was pretty interesting too. Our platoon
18 sergeant was an E-6 named Will Copeland. He was a career soldier. (mumbling). I went
19 in to meet him for the first time. He was in class then. He shook my hand and looked at
20 me. I looked in his eyes, and he said, “Well, I got a second lieutenant to worry about.” He
21 told me early on. He said that, “If we work together, I’ll get you through Vietnam. I
22 respect you as an officer, but you have to learn to lead the men too,” which was really
23 good advice. We developed a really, really good friendship. He’s a good man.

24 KC: So, you have this contact who you’re going to be working with all the way
25 back in Fort Lee, then.

26 FM: Yes, sir.

27 KC: Yeah, that’s really handy that often times you hear you’re just kind of thrown
28 to the wolves out there once you get to Vietnam, but you had this contact already with
29 someone with whom you were working really close with.

30 FM: that’s right. Because the unit was at Fort Bragg. They had been scheduled to
31 deploy a year earlier, but they just couldn’t get everything together to do that. It was a big

1 unit. It was 239 people. The major was a company commander, which was pretty
2 unusual. So, it had two majors, a captain, two lieutenants, and six warrant officers. All of
3 them were rated except me. All of them were aviators except me. All the enlisted folks
4 went down. We had a maintenance platoon, a supply platoon, an avionics sections, which
5 was navigation radios, and a quality control section, and production control. So, it was a
6 direct support maintenance unit, so you did pretty heavy maintenance all the way to air
7 frame and engine replacements. Just fixing instruments. So, they were getting ready to
8 deploy at Fort Bragg for a year. So, I was the last officer to come aboard. I got there in
9 early April, I guess. They were just packing up. Everything was going into containers and
10 boxes and all that kind of stuff. So, there was not much training going on. It was all
11 deployment.

12 KC: Yeah. It sounds like they were ready to roll, just waiting on you, as it were.

13 FM: Yeah, I would say so. They were given the chance, so I had about a month
14 and a half to get acclimated and get my feet on the ground. We didn't do any kind of
15 supply functions. We were just too busy getting everything ready to go, making sure we
16 had all the equipment that we were supposed to have. A lot of them, we didn't have. It
17 wasn't available. It would have to come later on. But we spent a lot of time flying around
18 the country to different aviation related posts, trying to scrounge up stuff that we needed
19 for the operation. I was, oh, I guess—it took me maybe a month and a half to get to know
20 my guys. All of them were younger than me except Sergeant Copeland. They were from
21 all over the country. A couple of them had college degrees, but most all of them were
22 draftees. But they were pretty smart guys in computer stuff.

23 KC: I wonder if you might be able to describe this computer system. I think this
24 could definitely be of interest.

25 FM: The computer system was housed in two MILVANS [Military Vans], which
26 were on wheels, you know, trailers. They were thirty-five foot long trailers. They had the
27 computer in one, the printers and the card indexes on the other side, in the other trailer. It
28 came with a big 5 kW generator because it had to be air conditioned. So, I said, "well,
29 that's not too bad. I'm going to Vietnam. At least I'll have an air conditioner." That was
30 the heart and soul of the operation, but we also had all repair parts. They were being sent
31 to us from the Army aviation unit in Corpus Christi. They were coming in Conex

1 containers. Conex containers are an eight by eight cube made out of metal that had
2 shelves in it. It had all repair parts. You can imagine opening two doors of a container
3 and walking down a little aisle and on either side you had shelves built. They could be
4 five hundred different shelves in there from washers to nuts and bolts to wheels, you
5 name it. Any kind of part that you would see on any of the Army aircraft, we had it. To
6 fix a helicopter, we had a lot of aircraft to keep.

7 KC: Well, you would have to, yeah.

8 FM: We had rotor blades, engine boxes. It was a big, big operation. It was a
9 humongous amount of equipment that was going to be shipped to meet us there when we
10 got there. I didn't get much exposure to the computer as what happened at Fort Lee, and
11 that was very, very little. All my learning was on the job when we got to Vietnam. But in
12 any case, we got the unit prepared to go. We had a lot of vehicles. I guess we had maybe
13 seventy-five vehicles from some trailers and jeeps and whatever from all the unit, and
14 that had to go kind of to Charleston on a ship. So, it was my job, of course, as the second
15 lieutenant, to convoy that down to Charleston. There, again, my Fort Eustis training
16 failed me because I was a convoy commander, and we hadn't even made it off Fort
17 Bragg, and the convoy split into four different sections.

18 KC: Oh, no.

19 FM: It was pouring rain. It was probably a six-hour trip because they didn't have
20 the interstate. It was all two-lane roads once you got into Charleston. Luckily, I've been
21 to Charleston, so I knew where I was going. I was just praying that everybody else knew
22 where they were going. But, by the grace of God, we all made it to the Army place pretty
23 much at the same time. I don't know how that happened. Nobody was in any accidents.
24 Nobody was injured. That NCO was on Fort Bragg—he said, "I don't know how you did
25 it, but you made something out of nothing." So, I was lucky. But we got all the way into
26 Charleston, and we had four enlisted guys in our company who put cargo on this cargo
27 ship to go to Vietnam, leave out of Charleston. That was—I can't remember the day, but
28 it was in June. So, they got on board, and they left. We went back to Fort Bragg, and we
29 sat around for a week while the Transportation corps got us transportation out to Tacoma,
30 Washington, where we reported troops there. So, in late or mid-June, we flew out there in
31 three sections to Tacoma to get on board the troop ship *NS Geiger*. We went in three

1 sections. The first two sections—I think one of them left at nine in the morning. The
2 other left at twelve. This is out of Fort Bragg. Pope airfield. Our section left at 1630. Our
3 airplane was an old Lockheed Constellation. It had big old tail fins on it. Skinny looking
4 thing. It looked like a greyhound propeller airplane. I was on board that with three
5 warrant officers and a colonel and Major Bowdoin and the rest of the enlisted men. He
6 told me. He said, “You’re going to get in the back of this plane because if you get up near
7 the front, you’re not going to get any rest because those engines are awfully loud.” So, I
8 got a good seat in the back and slept on the way out there. The plane developed
9 mechanical problems, and we had to land in St. Louis to get the engine problem fixed.
10 We finally arrived down at Tacoma at the end of the night. Dark, of course. It was really
11 cool outside. But I found my room, which was a little stateroom. It was pretty dark. It had
12 lockers on one side, and bunks on the other side. I was the last guy to get it, so I managed
13 to make as much noise as I could just to wake those two other guys up. That began the
14 long, tedious voyage to Vietnam.

15 KC: Well, let me ask you here, Mr. McKeever, here if I may. You knew that you
16 were going to Vietnam. This is no secret for you. You had a brother who had gone and
17 come back. What were your thoughts on leaving? Here, we’re looking at the summer of
18 1967. The War has been in full swing for quite a while now. There are news reports
19 coming back. Your brother is back. You have other veterans you talked about coming
20 back and changing. What are your thoughts on leaving and going to the warzone now?

21 FM: Of course, I was apprehensive. I certainly didn’t want to leave my fiancée,
22 which was pretty difficult. But we had agreed earlier on that if I was going to Vietnam
23 that I didn’t want to be married and leave a widow behind. We came to that agreement. It
24 was tough, but we did. She was going to college. She would have that year to finish her
25 schooling, and I would be away. I was apprehensive from the point of view that I wasn’t
26 comfortable with the situation because I hadn’t been around the aviation side of the house
27 until now, and I had a lot to learn. It’s one thing to fly, but then you had to support at
28 least four hundred aircraft in the field of war, which was a big job. They were --pushing
29 aircraft in there early on. But by the same point of view, I was really happy that I was in
30 that unit because the warrant officers took me under their wing, and they were great
31 tutors from the maintenance side of the house and in developing and understanding

1 production control and how you needed to work all that into the requirements of the
2 squad. So, I was being schooled the whole time. These warrant officers were some of the
3 oldest aviation officers in the country because they had been in the Army aviation in the
4 helicopters primarily since the '50s. So, they were really, really knowledgeable people.

5 KC: Yeah, a lot of experience there.

6 FM: They were. From that point of view, I felt comfortable with the idea. Of
7 course, I had a lot of confidence in Sergeant Copeman. In fact, he had already been in the
8 military for fifteen years, so I knew he understood how to handle the event. So, I wasn't
9 concerned about dying or anything in that nature. It hadn't happened, but I felt a lot better
10 than being a trump command platoon leader for sure

11 KC: Yeah, yeah.

12 FM: One of the big unknowns was where we were going to be stationed whether
13 we were going to be in the bad place or the not so bad place. As it ended up, the unit was
14 going to be stationed in a place called Dong Bu Tin, which was maybe ten kilometers
15 north of Cam Ranh Bay and twenty-five kilometers south of Na Trang right on the China
16 Sea. It had a corrugated steel runway there maybe fifteen hundred, two thousand feet.
17 The 18th Engineer Brigade had their headquarters there. It was not an undeveloped area.
18 They were building it up pretty quick. So, when we got in there, they were already over
19 there completing our hangers. We were able to move into those and then get started.

20 KC: Let me ask about this trip over on the *Geiger* first. This is not two days later
21 you're at Cam Ranh Bay. This is going to be a long trip, and you're not a sailor.

22 FM: No.

23 KC: Take me on this trip.

24 FM: Well, it wasn't the Royal Caribbean, I can guarantee that. The *Geiger* was
25 late '49, '50 crew ship, which the last I knew of was the state of Maine maritime
26 academy training. But it was a crew ship. It was built for military troops. It had been
27 brought out of maritime, put in service to move folks on voyage. It could accommodate
28 about six hundred troops. Of course, the officers had their quarters, which were pretty
29 nice. They were up the side of the deck. Junior officers got three to a room, and the senior
30 officers had two to a room. The troops were bunked down on the hatch cover under the
31 holes. The cargo was stowed underneath the hatch covers, and then the hatch covers was

1 put down and then the troops put all the gear and bags on the hatch covers. They slept
2 underneath the wings of the hatches, so they were sleeping, I think, six high. They didn't
3 have a lot of room in there. It was not very comfortable. They had a little spring beds
4 with mattresses on them, but they could barely turn over. Our unit had two holes for all of
5 our guys. We also had on that ship a battalion of the Big Red One. We also had some
6 other ash and trash that were going on. So, there being a second lieutenant, I was proud to
7 be there. So, I had to maintain all the troops to ensure our unit. I had to go down there
8 and inspect it because you weren't allowed to put anything up on the bulk or on your
9 bunk to do an inspection to make sure that was just like it. That was kind of interesting to
10 do that. Make sure nobody was coming down with typhoid fever that the seasick guys
11 were getting the tension, which there was quite a few.

12 KC: What about you?

13 FM: It didn't bother me a bit. I was in a room with a port hole, so I was up on
14 deck. But when you're down in that hole, it's dark down there. Yeah (audio stops).

Interview with Francis McKeever

Session [2] of [3]

Date 1 September 2015

1 KC: All right, I just turned the recorder back on. Sorry about that technological
2 snap there.

3 FM: It's probably my fault. In any case, the troops had a rough voyage over there.
4 The officers had it pretty good, I thought. It was interesting in the morning, at least on the
5 officer side, they had a little cabin steward that came by who had this little three note
6 xylophone. It would go, "Dong, dong, dong, dong," to wake you up. It didn't have any
7 relevance. They played that little tune, and that meant you had to get ready to go eat. So,
8 the officers were really nice. We had tables, which sat six folks at a time and linen
9 napkins and silverware and menus. You ate well. Whereas the enlisted guys, that was a
10 little different story. Of course, they had a big kitchen on the ship, but the chow was
11 served on the mess kits, and then they had to go find a place to eat whether it was up on
12 deck or in the dining area. They didn't quite have a menu. Everybody ate the same thing,
13 and if you didn't like it, too bad.

14 KC: Right.

15 FM: But it was an interesting trip because we left Tacoma and sailed out on a
16 Puget Sound, and that was a long sail just to get out of that Sound. I didn't realize it was
17 such a long distance up there. Beautiful, beautiful views when I woke up the next
18 morning. So, it took almost a day to get out into the open ocean. We headed out, and we
19 hadn't gone three days when one of the soldiers developed appendicitis, and he had to be
20 evacuated from the ship. We headed toward Hawaii, and they sent a helicopter out to take
21 that guy off the boat. Then we went off across the ocean to Guam to refuel. Of course,
22 out in the ocean, it's—I've never been in the middle of the ocean. It was interesting
23 passing the days watching the dolphins that were around the boat a lot of the time in the
24 middle of the ocean. In the night, you would see the florescent water from the algae or
25 whatever it is that has fluorescents in it at night. The days were hot. So, you read a lot.
26 You write a lot of letters. Wish the time would go by faster. We crossed the international
27 date line, which was a fun thing because you get inducted into the Society of Neptune or
28 somebody like that. I'm not sure what they call it. But in any case, you have to go up on
29 the deck, and they have Neptune up there with his king and his court, and basically, they

1 have mustard and mayonnaise and throw food at you and get inducted into the society for
2 crossing the international dateline. That was kind of fun. We get a chance to mess up with
3 the officers. So, we ended up in Guam to refuel. It's kind of interesting going in there.
4 There were two or three Russian ships outside in the international waters watching all the
5 traffic going into Guam as well as the bombers flying out of there. These ships that
6 must've had thirty antennas on each one. They weren't fishing ships, that's for sure. So,
7 we tied up at Guam, and we got in there late at night. So, in the morning, they gave
8 everybody shortly just to get off and stretch your legs. There wasn't a lot to do on Guam.
9 It's just kind of a piece of dirt out in the middle of the ocean from what I could tell. A lot
10 of big lizards, not too many tourist attractions there. We were able to find the officers
11 club that the Navy used. We were able to get a couple of beers there, which was nice. The
12 troops—they had an enlisted club where they could get some beer too. They loaded us up
13 the next day, and off we went through the Philippines, which was pretty neat. We didn't
14 stop in the Philippines, but we went through the Highlands. I was amazed at how desolate
15 those islands were. They were just beautiful green jungles, very little civilization in the
16 ones I saw. Those water routes through there weren't very wide. They were probably at
17 the most a half mile wide. We sailed on right through there and came out on the other
18 side. There was an aircraft carrier out there waiting on us as well as a destroyer that came
19 up with us into Vietnam into Vung Tao.

20 KC: Okay, so you came into Vung Tao?

21 FM: Yeah. We arrived there early in the morning. I guess it was maybe six
22 o'clock. The sun hadn't even come up. But when it came up, there was a tugboat
23 alongside, an Army tugboat, by the way. It was transportation corps.

24 KC: Of course.

25 FM: On the back of it, on the deck, they had a big old shark laying there. They
26 pulled up alongside, hooked up, and brought us in to where we dropped anchor. The
27 Saigon River drains out at Vung Tao. One of the first things we saw were body remains
28 floating out at the time.

29 KC: Really?

30 FM: Pretty gross.

31 KC: Any idea where they came from? What the story was?

1 FM: I'm sorry.

2 KC: Do you have any idea where they could've come from or what the story was
3 behind them?

4 FM: No, we just figured they were casualties of war. It's a pretty big river, a
5 pretty big delta, so we didn't have any idea. It was not a pretty sight. So, there the Big
6 Red One guys got off onto lighter barges and off they went to Coo Chi, I think is where
7 they were headquartered for their build up. We pulled up anchor and headed up to Cam
8 Ranh Bay where we were discharged.

9 KC: Okay, so you're up at Cam Ranh Bay after what? Probably three weeks or a
10 month, it would seem.

11 FM: No, we dropped anchor in Cam Ranh Bay, got off the boat onto a barge,
12 which they took right over to the dock at Cam Ranh Bay. What was interesting was that
13 at Cam Ranh Bay, they had a container crane and a Seeland shipping. Seeland was a
14 container ship at that time. That was at the very, very start of the containerization era and
15 shipping. Seeland had a contract with DOD to move supplies into Vietnam, so here they
16 were at the dock loading supplies into containers. A pretty good-sized operation. But
17 again, the transportation corps was running. So, we got off at Cam Ranh Bay, and they
18 load us in the back of Deuce and a Halves and took us up to Dang Bu Tin, which was a
19 ten-kilometer ride across the bay and up Highway One into our new surroundings at
20 Dong Bu Tin.

21 KC: I wonder if you might describe these new surroundings for me. What was the
22 lay of the land? What did these surroundings look like?

23 FM: Well, it was flat as could be, flat as a pancake. Highway One, of course the
24 main highway on the south coast of Vietnam ran right through the middle of what was the
25 Army compound there. On our side, we had the engineers and the aviation companies,
26 which included a Chinook outfit. On the other side of the highway, we had two assault
27 helicopter companies, which we supported. The barracks were wood barracks with tin
28 rooves. Wood half the way up then screens the rest of the way up. They had fifty-five-
29 gallon drums of sand all around the walls for protection from any kind of mortar
30 fragments that would come through at that level. So, of course, your bunks were down
31 below the sides of the drum. It had a mess hall. All the latrines were outside, which were

1 three or four holers. They were pretty nasty. You had to do your business into a cut off
2 fifty-five gallon drum, and then every day, somebody had to put it out and put diesel fuel
3 in it in the area and burn it off, which we were able to tolerate for a while. It was pretty
4 bad.

5 KC: I would imagine.

6 FM: Officer quarters were about the same. We didn't have anything different
7 from the enlisted folks at that time. They were still putting in the road network and
8 building our hangars. The runways were okay, and they had an Air Traffic Control Tower
9 there that was run by a small unit. The roads were dusty as could be. There was no way to
10 keep the dust out. It was so dry over there. I remember the second night we got in. We
11 were waiting for our cargo ship to arrive. It hadn't arrived yet. It was about two days
12 behind us. The first night we were in, we were outside just talking, and there was some
13 mortar fire started from our side, from the engineer side, sending up flares from across
14 the highway. There was some Viet Cong out there trying to get through the perimeter,
15 which was—our security was provided by the Korean Army, so they maintain all that
16 security out there. But they were trying to get in, so they called in the gunship. It was
17 smokey. You could see him firing around, but you could hardly hear him. But every once
18 in a while, you'd see like a red laser light shoot down to the ground from up in the air,
19 and you just knew that somebody was getting their butt chewed up. That went on for
20 about an hour until it ended. Then it was like, "Okay, well, I guess we're here for sure
21 now."

22 KC: Yeah, that's a welcome to Vietnam kind of moment, I guess.

23 FM: That's right. Welcome home.

24 KC: So, there you are. You find yourself at your new base with the new unit. The
25 next day or maybe even that day, work begins. What's the point? What are you guys
26 doing there?

27 FM: Well, the first thing we had to do was unload that cargo ship and get
28 everything brought up to our location. We had a window where we had to be operational.
29 I think they gave us thirty days, but Major Bowden wanted this thing up and running
30 twenty days after we get everything in. Well, that was a 24/7 operation, get that cargo off

1 the docks and up to our location and to get the computers in and get them up and running
2 because we had to download all the data—you still there?

3 KC: Yes, sir.

4 FM: We had to download the data from all the materials that was shipped to us.
5 That's how we started our database. They sent us data on tape drives, as a matter of fact.
6 So, we were busy getting our tech supply inventory into the computer and making sure
7 we had everything broken up and ready to go. I left that up to Sergeant Copeman.
8 Meanwhile, I was traveling to two different aviation units that had already been in-
9 country to find out how they were operation. So, I had to go down to Coo Chi to see how
10 Tom Path's was set up and then come back and put some of that to work in our unit. So, I
11 was flying a bit around the country while they were getting organized with that. That was
12 pretty interesting.

13 KC: Yeah. Well, what are all the places that you went to?

14 FM: Well, I went down to Coo Chi for the first trip. We were flying in there, and
15 Major Bowden was flying. He said, "I'm not staying. I'll let you off, and I'll come back
16 and get you in the morning." Of course, we flew into Coo Chi. Before the aviation
17 maintenance was on the runway, we were picking up small arms fire going in there, and
18 he threw me out and says, "Go you. I'm getting out of here." And then he left. So, I found
19 a unit and got with Tom. We spent the night there, but it was not a lot of fun because they
20 were under mortar attack almost every night, so you'd have to get up and go find a
21 bunker outside the hooch and crawl in there and wait for that again and wake up and try
22 to get some sleep. I was really pleased to get out of there. Then we went to a unit up
23 toward Da Nang, which was pretty interesting because Da Nang was a gigantic operation.
24 That's where the Marines were working. I spent some time there, but it was pretty secure.

25 KC: You mention this mortar attack down here at Coo Chi. What is it like for you
26 to be so new in-country and to be facing one of these things for the first time?

27 FM: Well, I just kind of followed Tom's lead. I said, "Where are you going? I'm
28 going to be there right beside you." He said, "Don't stop because I'll kill you." No, that
29 was the first thing he said. If they start firing, wherever their impact, this is where we're
30 going. It was just sandbag bunker. It wasn't in the ground. It was above ground. A
31 corrugated steel roof with sandbags on top of it. I suspect if it got hit with a mortar shell,

1 you'd probably survive. But you'd sure have a headache. I was just thinking about
2 something you asked me earlier about heading to Vietnam before we left. One of my
3 roommates at the Citadel, a boy named Johnny Four was a Marine Corps officer who had
4 been commissioned the same day I was. He went to Quantico for his Marine basic course.
5 Then he was sent to Vietnam about the time I came on active duty. He was killed there in
6 November of '66. He was the first Citadel graduate to be awarded the Navy Cross for
7 heroism. I had to go to his funeral. I didn't have to go. I did go. I wanted to go. In Atlanta
8 in March of '67. His mother had died when he was a youngster, so he was raised by his
9 dad. Johnny was an automate Marine. He was really a leader at the Citadel. He was our
10 company executive officer and just an all-around great guy. But that was a pretty sad
11 affair to have to attend that. I said, to me, I said, "That's such a waste of a good person."
12 So, back to Dang Vung Tien. We got set up, and we got into operation in about fifteen
13 days or so. We were receiving aircraft that needed maintenance, and we were issuing spy
14 parts to units that needed spy parts. One of the really great lessons that I learned from
15 Major Bowden about leadership was he got officers together in the officer's hooch, and
16 he said, "I know that you all are missing your families and thinking about home. We got
17 to think about other things. We can't let that interfere with our missions here. We're
18 going to fix these officer quarters up. We're going to do it right." He told me, "The
19 reason we're going to do it is to keep your mind off all the other stuff. It's fine to think
20 about it, but you don't want to be thinking about it 24/7." So, he said, "The first thing
21 we're going to do is build us an officers club here that nobody could match." And we did.
22 We had the best officers club within three or four hundred miles.

23 KC: It must've been nice to have the engineers there with you.

24 FM: Well, they didn't do it. We did it ourselves. We had a warrant officer who
25 was probably the best scrounger I ever met in my life. Being in the aviation company, we
26 had access to things that other people didn't have. We had sheet metal. We had stainless
27 steel. We had all kinds of stuff that you could trade. He would go out, and he would come
28 to me and say, "I need some sheets of aluminum." He said eight, so I'd give him eight
29 sheets of aluminum, and he'd come back with a truck full of plywood or two toilets, three
30 toilets. I mean whatever. He traded for some furniture for Major Bowden's office that

1 only general officers are supposed to have. I don't know how he did it. Refrigerators, air
2 conditioners, this guy was fine. We ended up building our officer's bar.

3 KC: Tell me about this officers club. I want to hear about this.

4 FM: Well, when we came in there, of course, the building was just wood halfway
5 up and screen all the way up the rest of the way. So, we had it on this edition. It was
6 wood completely enclosed so that we could air conditioned it. So, we put plywood on the
7 walls, and believe it or not, I don't know who came up with the idea that we needed to do
8 something with this plywood. We didn't want to paint it. We wanted to make it look nice.
9 So, they said what we're going to do is get these gas torches that they used in the
10 maintenance building, and we're going to char the plywood. Well, have you ever tried to
11 char a 8x4 piece of plywood with a blow torch? It's hot. It's stinky, and it takes forever.
12 But we did it. Every wall was charred. It was interesting. It looked like something out of
13 the bayou, I guess. We did the walls, and then we built the bar. So, we had a full bar. We
14 had refrigerators in there to keep the beer in there. Of course, we got liquor. You could
15 buy liquor over there. We had a patio over there. It was a fifty-five-gallon drum made
16 into a charcoal grill where we could cook on. Of course, chief warrant officer Englat had
17 a connection with the Navy guys down in Cam Ranh Bay, and the Navy always eats well
18 if they don't do anything else. He would come back with boxes of frozen steaks, which
19 we would put in the freezer, and then we would have steak cookouts when we wanted to
20 have a party. All the donut callers, the Red Cross girls, loved to come there because they
21 loved to get a steak to eat.

22 KC: I'm sure.

23 FM: It was nice and air conditioned in our officer's rooms. Then we finished the
24 rest of the building off, so that each officer had his own enclosed room. We walled it all
25 the way up and put the air conditioning in there. We had air conditioners in the units that
26 were small enough that you could fit it. Then we put in our own restroom, so we had
27 probably one of the few flushing toilet arrangements in the area and a hot shower, which
28 we built. It was really comfortable. We got rid of all that outhouse business.

29 KC: Right.

30 FM: We didn't tell the engineers because they probably wouldn't have allowed us
31 to put a septic tank in, but we got it in the ground.

1 KC: Where did you find a septic tank?

2 FM: We built it.

3 KC: Oh, is that right?

4 FM: We dug a hole, put in the field lines, and ran stuff to the septic tank.

5 Everything was scrounged like the toilets and the showers. The hot water came from a
6 big old—it was actually a water tank. It was a fuel bladder off a jet airplane we got at
7 Cam Ranh and put it up on the tower, so during the day, it was heated by the sun. At
8 night, you had enough—it wasn't a terribly hot shower, but it was warm anyway. It beat
9 the heck out of cold showers. So, that was a great improvement. So, whenever you were
10 at home at Dang Vung Tien, we lived pretty good. We had an excellent mess hall, a really
11 great mess officer. We always had nice food because when Obi would scrounge, he
12 wouldn't only scrounge for us, but he would scrounge for the rest of them. We were able
13 to get our fresh vegetables from Da Lat, which was in the mountains directly west of us.
14 It was probably a half-hour or so up in the mountains.

15 KC: Kind of a resort time.

16 FM: It was. It's beautiful. When I was there three years ago visiting Vietnam, and
17 I told her to go to Da Lat, which is a tourist town. It's beautiful. Matter of fact, Vietnam
18 is beautiful. I'd go back in a heartbeat. So, we would fly up there every three days and get
19 fresh vegetables, so that the guys would have those to eat in addition to whatever rations
20 they would draw on a daily basis. So, they were well-fed. That was important to us to
21 help them around. There's not a whole lot we can do other than work and go to bed. But
22 listen to how their day went, and we had our officers club. They had that. There was a
23 group that brought books around from the libraries. They were Red Cross girls. They
24 were another girl, so they always had some movies. Engineers had a little outdoor movie
25 theater that they would run movies at night when they could. We were too far away from
26 Cam Ranh for us to go over there every day. You couldn't take your troops over there.
27 That's for sure. So, they were pretty much stuck at Dang Vung Tien. They had to pull
28 guard duty just like everybody else. On our side of the road, we had our own security. We
29 didn't have the Koreans. They were on the other side with the aviation and the special
30 forces company. So, we had our own guard post. We did guard duty along with the
31 engineers. We had a water point, which was about two clicks north of our compound

1 where they got water, and they ran it through a desanitization plant. That was run by the
2 engineers, so if you were a second lieutenant, of course, you had to do that officer a day
3 thing every so often. I was really reluctant to do that because you had to go check these
4 guard posts at night. I always rued the day when I'd find somebody sleeping and have to
5 write them up. It never happened, but I always thought about that. Somebody not hearing
6 me coming up. I tried to click them on the radio that I'm coming. You had to go check
7 the Koreans too, and you had to take a Korean sergeant with you. Of course, I didn't
8 speak Korean, and he didn't speak English, but we got through that. So, that was always
9 interesting. But I only did that a couple three times. So, I lucked out. Dang Vung Tien
10 was pretty nice, but I spent a lot of time out with the different units that we supported. I
11 was, in addition to being there, I had additional duties like paymaster, which was a
12 horrendous job once a month. I had to fly out of Saigon and pick up the pay for the unit.
13 They paid in military pay certificates. "Funny money," I call it. In any case, we had a
14 large unit with two hundred people, and you had to go down there and draw out the exact
15 dollar amount to pay everyone those pay checks. You couldn't turn any money back in,
16 so you better have the right amount when you left. So, I had to figure out how much
17 money I had to have and what denominations to pay everybody. It was a nightmare to do
18 that.

19 KC: I bet that'd be pretty tough.

20 FM: And then you sign for it. I signed for it, and it was usually thirty thousand
21 dollars of pay chips, funny money. Then I had to break it down for each soldier, wrap it
22 in a rubber band, and wrap his pay slip around it so when it got time to pay, they would
23 come in and sign for it, and I'd hand them the money. That was fine as long as Dang
24 Vung Tien, but we had guys all over the place, so I would have to pay the guys at Dang
25 Vung Tien and then get on a helicopter and go to Bam Bi Thut to find one guy or two
26 guys who were up there working on something. Then, I'd have to go to An Khe or Pham
27 Phiet or somewhere, wherever the fellas were working to pay them off. I had to do all of
28 that in ten days. So, I spent a lot of time tracking people down all over the place to give
29 them their money. Then I'd have to fly back down to Saigon and turn in all the signed
30 receipts. So, I dreaded pay day, believe me. I would've rather had a root canal than do
31 that.

1 KC: How many times did you have to do this?

2 FM: I had to do it.

3 KC: How many times were you pay officer?

4 FM: Six months.

5 KC: Oh, for six full months. Wow! Yeah, that'd be a mess.

6 FM: Well, yeah, and it was a pain in the neck for everybody because I wasn't
7 rated. So, I could fly the helicopter, but I had to have a warrant officer with me because
8 he was commander. So, the warrant officers were our test pilots. I'd have to take one of
9 them with me to escort me all around the country along with—I had to have an armed
10 guard, an armed guard with me whenever I had this money. So, it was cumbersome to say
11 the least. But they finally had another lieutenant come in, and I was relieved of that duty,
12 which was good.

13 KC: Yeah, I would think so.

14 FM: But I did get to see a lot of Vietnam that way.

15 KC: I would guess that you did. Tell me what you saw when you're traveling
16 around. You're going to An Khe, Bam Bi Thut, Saigon, all over the place.

17 FM: Well, the first trip to Saigon was when I went down to Coo Chi, and we flew
18 down into Saigon because our group headquarters 34th group was there in Saigon. At Tan
19 Son Nhut Air Base, you had the fixed wing runways. You had the rotary where the
20 roadway helicopters and all that came in. That was close to where the 34th group
21 headquarters was. So, when we went down there that first time, Major Bowden—we
22 wanted to go in there and shake hands, "How you doing," and so on and so forth. So, I
23 recall distinctly going in there and as we were walking out from the helicopter down the
24 walkways to the headquarters, I was walking between rows of aluminum caskets stacked
25 over my head. It must've been twelve feet tall. And that was really an eerie feeling,
26 empty caskets just stacked out there, hundreds of them. I said, "Man, oh, man, oh, man."
27 So, we went into the headquarters group there, and they had a television. I'm not sure. It
28 was one of the major news channels that was on, and they were broadcasting about the
29 watch riots. I said, "Holy cow. It's going on in America. I might be better off over here."
30 That was kind of spooky. Another time we flew down to Vung Tao, the Army aviation
31 had a maintenance ship in Corpus Christi Bay anchor there. That's where they did

1 maintenance on certain aircraft. It was a pretty high-tech ship. That's the first time we
2 ever flew on a helicopter pad on a ship. That was pretty interesting. We got to spend a
3 day on there and got to have lunch with the captain of the ship. There again, they eat
4 quite well. Napkins and China and all that. Vung Tao was an R&R spot for the GIs
5 believe it or not. It was a port city. They would go down there, and I guess they'd go to
6 the beach and have a little recreation for a day or two then back to the field again. So, we
7 would go down there occasionally with some of our guys and drop them off. We flew six
8 posts at a time, so we had no guns and plenty of room, so if somebody needed a ride
9 somewhere, we were headed, we could pick them up and take them out. Coming back
10 from Saigon, we would pretty much stay along the coast. We'd stay about twenty-five
11 hundred feet or so. The bomb craters were clearly, clearly visible from where the B-52s
12 had unloaded. It looked like just hog marks for miles and miles. You could see where
13 they had put all the before that out because all the vegetation was gone, dead as could be.
14 It was always interesting. You could go up the coast of Pham Phiet or Pham Rang or
15 whatever. We'd stop and get fuel. Most the places where you stopped to get fuel, there
16 wasn't much there but just the dirt and the fuel pad and the fuel truck. Almost all of them
17 had a track vehicle there with four .50 caliber machine guns mounted on it, so you would
18 get in and get out as soon as you could. Coast was beautiful, and the towns along there
19 were—you could tell the French influence because of the architecture. Beautiful,
20 beautiful scenery along there. On the other side, in the mountainside, you had Da Nang
21 and places like that which were just lovely. Saigon was pretty interesting. We spent some
22 time there. We—one of the hotels we stayed in was, of course, a French colonial hotel.
23 We didn't have any air conditioning and a musty old shower and sort of a rumped-up
24 bed to sleep in while you're in Saigon. But we did go to the Inter-Continental Hotel. That
25 was quite a trip. To go up to the top story. They had a big bar up there and a restaurant.
26 That's where all the work correspondents hung out, and of course, the big brass and all
27 that. So, we went up there one evening, and we had our flight clothes on, but it didn't
28 matter up there. I had a drink. You could look out, and you could see all over the place.
29 About everywhere you look within a 180-degree arc was flares going off or some kind of
30 impact on the ground to somewhere you could almost see the Choo Lai like a lot of stuff
31 going up in the jungle out there. But Saigon was a lively city. It was every bit what you

1 would see in Good Morning America. Very much like that. You go north of Cam Ranh
2 Bay, up the coast, and you have Na Trang and Pham Phiet, Da Nang, which were coast
3 cities in China Beaches up there a little further up. We would go up to Da Nang and do
4 maintenance up there. The 1st Cav was up in An Khe and Pleiku right up in the valley up
5 there. They were constantly having aircrafts shot at. I mean it was—they were the biggest
6 customer.

7 KC: I bet.

8 FM: But they were in contact every single day. Those guys, they flew their asses
9 off. Tell you what, I admire those guys. They were in the Ia Drang Valley hot and heavy
10 for four years easy just punching it out. We would go in there and do carry and repair
11 parts that they needed. One of our other missions was to evacuate aircraft, so if they had
12 an aircraft that was down somewhere and needed to be picked up, we would coordinate
13 that with a Chinook unit that was down at Dang Vung Tien. We would arrange them to
14 have them go in and pick it up. But they would just pick it up. They wouldn't go in and
15 rig it, so we had to take our guys in to rig the swings to pick them up. Sometimes, they
16 weren't the best places to go in to get them out. But that was always interesting. When
17 you would leave Da Nang, you would go up the road into An Khe. That's where all the
18 transportation guys were getting their butts shot off. That was just ambush city. The
19 engineers had pushed the jungle back maybe a hundred feet on either side of the road.
20 But a hundred feet is nada with a guy putting RPGs at you.

21 KC: Right.

22 FM: So, we would travel up that road. Whenever we went up there, we'd run up
23 that way and maybe have a helicopter that maybe kept a VC off those fellas. But that was
24 a busy, busy road going up into that valley. I had a lot of respect for those guys. Of
25 course, the Marines were operating out of Da Nang all of the time, north of Da Nang
26 mostly. Da Nang was a crazy place for you with a runway. We flew out of there one day,
27 and we'd just gotten—we went two or three hundred feet off the runway. Underneath us
28 came a Vietnam Air DC-3. I don't know if he didn't see us or he just decided to take off,
29 but I had to change my underwear after that. It was a scary thing, and it's the same thing
30 in Na Trang. Air America flew a lot of out Na Trang. They flew spook missions. They
31 had eagle couriers, and they had some DC3 too that they flew. Of course, they always

1 like to think they're running into Laos. Who knows where they're going? But they were
2 kind of strange to watch those fellas. So, you go up the coast from Na Trang, and off in
3 Na Trang, there were two maybe ships anchored out there, and they were power
4 generating ships to provide power to parts of Na Trang. That was kind of interesting.
5 When you're flying in Na Trang, they have a gigantic Buddhist statue up on the hill that
6 you fly into to get up there. Na Trang was a pretty city. It wasn't terribly beautiful, but it
7 had some nice areas in it. And again with the French influence on it. The Highway 1 was
8 quite a place too. It ran along the coast and went up the coast up through the—there are
9 some mountains above Dang Vung Tien in Na Trang, so it wound through those hills on
10 up to Da Nang. The fog would come in on those hills. It wasn't that high. Maybe two
11 thousand feet at the most. But the fog would come in because it was being so close to the
12 ocean. We actually have a helicopter crash up there and lost twelve people because pilot
13 and co-pilot had eight or nine maybe ten Vietnamese in there, and they weren't big
14 people. So, you could carry a whole bunch of them in there. That was pretty bad for that
15 to happen. So, it's a beautiful country.

16 KC: And it certainly sounds like you've seen a lot of it there.

17 FM: Yeah, I did. I was pretty lucky to have that tour. Bam Bi Thut because that
18 was right on the Laotian border, and they were usually having some kind of mortar round
19 or something dropped on them there sort of like Coo Chi, which was sort of like the
20 middle of the rubber plantations. I never did get down to the Delta, but mostly the Central
21 Highlands. Pretty country.

22 KC: Well, Mr. McKeever, that probably takes us to a good point to stop for today.

23 FM: All right.

Interview with Francis McKeever

Session [3] of [3]

Date 8 September 2015

1 KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr. Francis
2 McKeever. Today is 8 September 2015. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas
3 Tech University. And Mr. McKeever is joining me again by telephone from his home in
4 Charleston, South Carolina. Mr. McKeever, before we turned the recorder on, you
5 mentioned that there was something that you wanted to correct from last session. What
6 was that?

7 FM: I was talking about when we did our runs up to the 1st Cav in An Khe, and I
8 said that we went out of Da Nang. We actually went up from Quin Non, which was
9 where Highway 19 started and ran up through the valley up into An Khe and Pleiku. So,
10 it wasn't Da Nang. It was Quin Non.

11 KC: Sure. That would make sense. Yeah, yeah.

12 FM: It would be a much longer run if it were from Da Nang, I tell you.

13 KC: Yeah, I'm sure it would have. Well, today, I'd like for you to take me
14 through a typical day for you. What time do you get up? What is your routine? What sort
15 of things are you involved with? Take me through a typical day with you.

16 FM: In my particular case, we were in our platoon on a 24/7 operation, so we had
17 a day shift and a night shift. That was required because we had to update all our records
18 that night whereas during the day we were issuing and receiving parts and things of that
19 nature. So, the platoon was split up. I usually got out of bed about six o'clock, and I tried
20 to get over to the mess hall and get some chow pretty quick, so I could get over to the
21 platoon headquarters and see what was going on, see what kind of requisition volume we
22 had the day before because I had to report that down to the group and see what we had
23 coming in and make sure that everybody was allocated to the workloads. Once they did
24 that, I went about some of my additional duties, which were numerous as a second
25 lieutenant. I had the sanitation officer's job, which was pretty nasty because we had to,
26 you know, clean all the latrines and burn the waste, which was always a task to do.
27 Fortunately, we were able to hire local Vietnamese who could do that. They would come
28 on post about seven thirty. Of course they had to go through all the checkpoints, and then

1 they would go around to the different units they had to work for to do their jobs, and one
2 of their jobs was to take care of the sanitation issue.

3 KC: How would you screen the Vietnamese to figure out whether or not you
4 wanted to hire them?

5 FM: We worked through the 18th Engineer Brigade, which actually have control
6 of the post. They were the gate headquarters. So, they would have a, I guess you would
7 call it, a civilian personnel office. They would take our requirements and find people to
8 do that job. They also had the security at our gate and not on the perimeter. The Koreans
9 had the perimeter. So, they'd go over to the engineering perimeter and then they'd come
10 over to our unit. Highway 1 ran right down the center of Dang Vung Tien. So, on our
11 side, we had the 18th Engineering Brigade. We had our unit. We had the chinook
12 helicopter company there as well as the control tower for the runway. On the other side,
13 we had a b-team from the special forces, and we had two assault helicopter companies
14 and the Korean security base. So, it was a pretty good-sized facility. I guess we probably
15 had forty or fifty Vietnamese running around the compound at least in our area every day.
16 I always wondered in my mind what they saw and what they knew. But they would come
17 in and do that kind of thing. They would do laundry for soldiers. Initially to start out,
18 they'd have to take it outside in big pots and boiling water and clean it that way, but we
19 were able to secure some washing and drying machines that took a lot of that burden out
20 of the hand-washing deal. They were mostly all Mama-sans, which were mostly women.
21 We called them Mama-sans. Very few men doing any of that kind of labor. They would
22 come into the officer's quarter, and they would of course do our laundry and actually iron
23 any of the fatigues we won like usual flight suits. But when we had fatigues, they would
24 iron them for us. They would sweep and clean and things like that with little old straw
25 brooms. It was very interesting to see them cleaning the way they did. They were, for the
26 most part, good workers. Friendly even though there was a language barrier. We always
27 paid them a little extra money in tips because they did work for us. But they would never
28 take any of our food, which was kind of interesting. They didn't care for American food,
29 for some reason. So after that, I would take care of the sanitation duties, look at the guard
30 roster to see where we stood in terms of that, go back to the platoon headquarters and
31 work on that mission. If I had to go somewhere for pay, I would take care of that during

1 the day. Maybe two or three days it would've taken me out of the area. I also was on a
2 few court martial boards, which consumed quite a bit of time as the investigating officer.

3 KC: Can you tell me a little bit about that? That seems really interesting.

4 FM: Well, you know, we had a major as a company commander. He had a semi-
5 court martial authority as well as article fifteen, which was non-judicial punishment. If
6 we were having disciplinary problems or soldiers got into fights or did something crazy,
7 you know, they could face court martial. If it went to a higher authority, it would come
8 out of Na Trang where the 14th Transportation Battalion headquarters maintained a
9 general court martial board. They would select officers to sit on that board at random. So,
10 they had a general court martial, you would have to go to Na Trang and sit on that board
11 up there. We had one soldier who—this was probably, gosh, October timeframe—who
12 went a little crazy and got ahold of a .45 caliber pistol and went into the commander's
13 office and pointed the gun at him and said, "I'm going home." That was a pretty nervous
14 situation. Major Bowden finally got him to calm down. We got the pistol away from him
15 and got him arrested. He ended up going to Long Ben prison down in Saigon. He didn't
16 go home. He went somewhere else. He just—I don't know—he was an aircraft mechanic,
17 and he just couldn't handle the stress. So, that was an unfortunate situation. During the
18 day, if somebody was going to do a test flight and I had some time, I rode along because I
19 always liked to get in the air with some of these warrant officers because they could
20 almost fly one upside down. Not quite, but they had a lot of fun test flying different
21 aircraft. The afternoon went by quickly. I tried to get requisitions out. We always had
22 someone going out to the units that supported with parts or the units were coming in to
23 get parts. Sometimes during the day, we would have to go out and rig a helicopter for a
24 lift back to Dang Vung Tien if it was unflyable. We always had a crew that did that. They
25 were pretty good at it.

26 KC: Would you mind taking me through that process? If you had, say, a downed
27 Huey somewhere, what would be the protocol? How would this whole system work?

28 FM: Well, of course, we would know it was down, obviously. We would—if it
29 was in our area of responsibility, we would set up a time to go out and put the rig on it,
30 which would mean you put the rings on it, so the Chinooks could come in and get it. If
31 the Chinooks weren't available and we had to get it rigged, we would go ahead and get it

1 rigged then go on back the next day and wait on the Chinooks to come in and pick it up.
2 It wasn't always fun because sometimes it wasn't always a good place to get at them. All
3 we had were slicks. We didn't have organic weapons on our aircraft, so whatever we
4 went out with was what we could carry our own AKs or our own rifles or machine guns.
5 So, we tried to get in and get out. Depending on how bad the aircraft was dictated how
6 much time it would take to get it rigged. You tried to rig it on what they called the Jesus
7 nut, which was up on the rotor, so you could get a quick hook up on it and pick it out of
8 there. If they were really, really messed up, we would just destroy them with the thermite.
9 Get them down under them and get rid of it. We didn't have to try to repair something
10 when there was nothing on it worth recovering.

11 KC: Yeah, I assume you stripped the weapons and radios and things like that?

12 FM: Yeah, we'd take care of it. But usually it was totally destroyed. Most of the
13 time, they were in areas that weren't well traveled, let's put it that way. So, it was
14 interesting to do. I went on a few of them, and I got in and got out. I had no problems, but
15 I wouldn't want to make a career of doing that.

16 KC: Yeah, especially if it was an aircraft down by enemy fire, which would mean
17 that they could still very well be close to the area.

18 FM: Well, that's true. And you never knew when you were out there what you
19 would see.

20 KC: Did you ever have to call in gunships for support or anything?

21 FM: Well, there was usually some type of support in the air all the time. You
22 just—we had two helicopter companies across the street from us that would be available
23 if we needed him to come out with us depending on where he was. A lot of time,
24 someone else would be able to go in and get it before we could. We had interesting we
25 had sky crane helicopters, which were these big—it looked like a praying mantis almost.
26 It's a huge thing that could lift a much, much larger load. They would every once in a
27 while, bring in one that was banged up pretty bad rather than the Chinooks. It was quite
28 interesting to see them. You usually had somebody run down to Cam Ranh Bay with the
29 deuce and a half to pick up any spare parts that were flown in from either a Bell
30 helicopter or another by the Air Force. One of our missions was to receive new
31 helicopters into the country for distribution in the II-corps area. They would come out of

1 Corpus Christi, Texas, and unload it into C-141s with the tailbones taken off and turned
2 sideways against the aircraft. We would get four to six of them at a time off the 141s. So,
3 we would have to take a crew down to Cam Ranh. We'd climb down there, and they
4 would reassemble the helicopters and fly them back up to Dang Vung Tien, which was
5 just a ten minute flight, twenty at most. Then we would pre-fly and test fly them and then
6 issue them out to the units. That really kept us pretty busy in that regard. At one time
7 during the buildup, which was taking place in '67 and '68, we were receiving three or
8 four plane loads a week. We were really running out of space to put all these helicopters.
9 As a matter of fact, during Tet, I think we probably had twenty-five or thirty new
10 helicopters across the street on a pad over there that the assault helicopter companies used
11 because they had the space. On the night Tet began, the Viet Cong got in there and blew
12 up. I think maybe they got eight or nine helicopters with explosive devices that they had
13 made. What they did was they had big old rocks and stones. Big enough a man could
14 carry, but they hollowed the things out and put black powder in there and made those into
15 an explosive almost like a satchel charge with big stones. When it blew up, it flew stone
16 fragments all over the—are you there?

17 KC: Yes, sir. I'm here.

18 FM: I hope the battery's not going bad. So, we lost a few helicopters that way
19 during that particular event, which was really interesting. That pretty much took care of
20 the day for me. We'd get done with the day and go back to the officer's quarters, get a
21 little bite to eat, have a couple of beers, and write letters, try to read my mail.

22 KC: Was this a daily occurrence that you wrote letters home?

23 FM: I wrote a letter home almost every day. As a sideline, my wife kept all those
24 letters. I couldn't keep hers. We had to destroy mail from the States. She kept all those
25 letters. A year ago, I got all those letters out. I went through them. I wrote a book over
26 there based on my letters and related things that I wasn't able to tell her about in the
27 letters, didn't want to tell her about. So, it was an interesting thing.

28 KC: Yeah, I bet that must've been quite a process to go back through that again.

29 FM: It took almost a year to do it. I recently found some more letters, so I'm
30 going to do an addendum to the book.

31 KC: Well, that's great.

1 FM: But things that we enjoyed. We were not far from Cam Ranh, so whenever
2 the USO people came in, we tried to get our guys down there to see Bob Hope or
3 whoever was coming through. General Westmoreland would come there. We didn't get
4 too many VIPs where we were. We had the Donut Dolls Red Cross Girls. They were still
5 around.

6 KC: What'd you think about the Donut Dolly Red Cross girls?

7 FM: I thought they were real nice folks. They worked real hard. They were in an
8 all-male environment. It was probably a little unusual for them. They were real helpful.
9 They cared about soldiers. One of my roommates actually ended up marrying one after
10 his tour.

11 KC: I'll be darned.

12 FM: So, we enjoyed having them around. I had come down with hepatitis on
13 Thanksgiving Day of '67 and was evacuated to the 6th Convalescence Center in Cam
14 Ranh. They had all the malaria patients, the hepatitis folks, and people who had wounds
15 that weren't serious enough to have them medevacked to the States. That was sort of the
16 recuperation and rehabilitation center for quite a large part of Vietnam. That's where they
17 had all the course Army nurses and physicians. So, I spent from Thanksgiving Day
18 through January—well, through New Year's Eve there.

19 KC: Wow.

20 FM: It was a long time. I was really sick.

21 KC: Tell me about this. What was type of treatment, the quality of treatment you
22 had. This is a very long time to be holed up like this.

23 KC: Well, hepatitis A is caused by ingesting feces. I tried to figure out that I'd
24 gotten some fruit or something that could've been contaminated or something. You never
25 know. I'd been up in Bam Bi Thut for a while, and that was not a great place. I think I
26 probably got a virus there, and it incubated for quite a while. Then on Thanksgiving Day,
27 I got up that morning. We had a low work level that day. He looked in my eyes, and he
28 said, "Boy, your eyes are yellow. You got some problems here. I think you have
29 hepatitis." So, he said—I was sick, and I didn't want to go eat Thanksgiving meal, which
30 is a big, big thing. We went to there, and they said, "Yeah, we believe you got the bug."

1 Of course, they got you out of there as quick as they could because they didn't want you
2 to contaminate anybody else.

3 KC: Sure.

4 FM: So, over we went. They had a ward. They actually have two buildings that
5 had malaria and hepatitis patients together. They were air conditioned, thank goodness.
6 But they were just lined with sick people. Being an officer, it had two rooms per officers.
7 So, I shared a room with the lieutenant that had malaria from the Big Red One. I was just
8 sick as a dog for probably three weeks. No appetite, just really sick. What they did was
9 they gave you hemoglobin injections. Hepatitis is just bed rest and eventually you'll
10 overcome it.

11 KC: I've heard horror stories about these shots.

12 FM: They hurt. I can tell you that. It's a big old needle. Of course, they drew
13 blood from me almost every day to check the blood count and find out what your status
14 was. So, I was in there from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve. My roommate was from
15 the Red One. He was an infantry officer. He was an Italian kid. He had actually come
16 over to Vietnam on the *Geiger*, the same ship I came over on, and I didn't realize it. But
17 in any case, he was Italian from New York. It was coming onto Christmastime, and they
18 were bringing in care packages. Mali would run behind because they were over there, and
19 they would have to get your mail to you. One day, this banged, crushed up carton came in
20 the mail, and it was all stained and kind of smelly. He opened it up, and his grandmother
21 had mailed him a lasagna through the APO system, which was probably in the mail for
22 three weeks. It was not a really nice gift. We kind of laughed about it. We had no
23 appetites for that anyway.

24 KC: Right.

25 FM: But I received mail from school kids all over the country that you just mailed
26 it to a soldier that was in hospital. I enjoyed reading those letters. My roommate from the
27 Citadel was in divinity school, and he had all his Sunday school kids write letters to me.
28 So, it was helpful to kind of have treatment in the hospital. While I was in there, they had
29 a rolling library that they'd bring around on a little cart, and they had all different kinds
30 of books. I got a chance to get ahold of Bernard Falls.

31 KC: Is that right?

1 FM: In Vietnam.

2 KC: Yeah.

3 FM: I read that book, and I was really startled to see the very close comparison to
4 what was going on in our time. Street without joy was the fall of the French and what
5 tactics led to their defeat in Dien Bien Phu. The U.S. was doing a lot of thing just like
6 France. We would hold some money up and give it out, go back and get it, give it out.
7 But we were never able to truly overcome the hearts and minds of a lot of the people.

8 KC: Yeah.

9 FM: Christmas was kind of interesting. We had a little church there, so we had a
10 midnight mass. There was a ceasefire at midnight that was supposed to last an hour or so,
11 but it probably didn't last twenty minutes. Koreans had artillery battery up above the
12 hospital there. A quarter after midnight, they were firing away. So, there wasn't much of
13 a ceasefire. It was right on the China Sea there, a beautiful beach. So, I guess mid-
14 December I was feeling much better. I was able to walk around and get out and get some
15 muscle tone back from being laid up in that bed for such a long time.

16 KC: Yeah, I think that would be a difficult thing to do.

17 FM: Yeah, it was just boredom to tell you the truth. You can only read so much,
18 and they didn't have a workout room or anything in that nature for any of us to use. If
19 you wanted to get some exercise, you had to do it yourself. In any case, I got through
20 Christmas there and left on New Year's Eve back to the unit. Of course, they were having
21 a great New Year's Eve party, but I wasn't allowed to partake because I wasn't allowed
22 to have any alcohol for quite a while—at least until your liver got back to normal.

23 KC: Yeah, that's about the last thing in the world you needed.

24 FM: Yeah. So, I got back to the unit on new Year's Eve, and I was the designated
25 driver and bartender. But it was all in good fun.

26 KC: Yeah, of course.

27 FM: Next thing you know, we're cooking along. We were getting a lot of intel
28 about Tet and what the potentials were, so there was no surprise that there were attacks
29 on Tet, at least not to us.

30 KC: Could you tell me about the intel that you were receiving? A lot of units, a lot
31 of folks say, "Well, we had nothing. It was a complete total surprise." Others say, "No,

1 this was something that we had some intel on, and you're obviously—" (speaking at
2 same time).

3 FM: Yeah, the Koreans had some intelligence, and of course the group and others
4 had intel. But they're saying to be prepared that they were—it was the holiday, and there
5 was no telling what kind of attacks they would be or how large they were but to be
6 vigilant. We paid attention to that. We had scrounged some heavy corrugated PSP
7 material from the Air Force. We had been able to put that all around our computer van, so
8 that if any kind of mortar attack took place, it had to land right on top of us to do any
9 damage. We had hardened that the best we could. We had by February of '68, we had
10 the—the engineers had put a fire plant in so that our equipment could operate off a much,
11 much larger generator. We didn't have to run our 15 kW all day and all night. That was a
12 hard shudder. We made sure that our command bunker and our bunkers for the troops—
13 each barracks had a bunker—where they could go if there was an attack. They were
14 briefed since we were 24/7. Of course, we had people working all the time, and it's hard
15 to have light discipline when you're trying to run a maintenance hangar and a supply
16 function. That was probably not a good thing, but we just had to maintain our operations.
17 We felt pretty good that the Koreans on the perimeter would do their job. Unfortunately,
18 they still failed somehow to catch these guys coming in across Highway 1 to where our
19 helicopters were, and we lost those helicopters. We took some mortar fire around the
20 perimeter. But the Viet Cong came in and left, and we didn't catch any of them. Cam Ron
21 took some rocket fire into a few points over there and did some damage. But we didn't
22 have any massive invasion of the compound or anything like that. We lost our water
23 point, got hit with—they think it was a mortar. So, that was a bit of a problem. Biggest
24 problem we had as a unit was all our supporter units out in the II-corps area were under
25 attack too, so we had helicopters that were damaged in the field. In Saigon in our group
26 headquarters, their group load all a sudden went through the roof because they had to
27 support all the helicopters in Vietnam. So, they came and levied some of my guys to go
28 to Saigon to help take care of that work load. So, we flew them out the next day into that
29 mess down there. I think we sent about eight guys to work down there.

30 KC: What is the workload like for your group down there?

1 FM: We were really, really busy. We got behind, so we started issuing a lot of
2 stuff on paper because we couldn't keep up with the backlog because we lost some
3 people who had gone to Saigon. We had other people who had attentive supportive units
4 in the field, but we were real busy for, I guess, six weeks after Tet. During all this time
5 from—I guess from October, we had started integrating new soldiers into our unit and
6 sending some of our soldiers to other units, so that when the time came to rotate, the
7 whole unit didn't rotate at the same time. So, we were filtering people in and out through
8 the five, six-month period including officers. So, we had a number of officers who were
9 with either direct support helicopter Companies or maintenance companies all the way up
10 to Da Nang, who had been with us. They were all scrounging for parts wherever they
11 could get them. They would call me and ask me if I had a particular item. If I had them, I
12 would tell them. They would fly down and get it because they needed it so bad because
13 they had so many combat pieces going in up at I-corps and II-corps. They had to keep
14 their helicopters in the air.

15 KC: Right.

16 FM: So, we were pretty, pretty busy doing everything we can to make sure that
17 they can keep them up.

18 KC: Y'all are already a 24/7 outfit, like you mentioned before.

19 FM: Yeah, yeah. But it was a much heavier volume. Like I say, it was so heavy
20 that our computer people couldn't input the data into the system. That's how fast we were
21 issuing stuff. So, we would just issue it on paper and then back it up into the system as
22 we could. That lasted for about six weeks.

23 KC: You mentioned that where you were, it wasn't hit too hard.

24 FM: Oh, no.

25 KC: You had some come in.

26 FM: We had the zappers come in that night, and that was about it.

27 KC: Yeah.

28 FM: Some—Na Trang got hit pretty good. The headquarters, the 14th Trans
29 battalion was there, and they took a lot of mortar fire up on the air base up there. That
30 was a big air base. So, they took some pretty heavy damage too. They actually had some
31 injuries.

1 KC: Did you—

2 FM: But we got to Tet, and then we started to prepare for the return home. It was
3 a little early, but that's what everybody was thinking. I was able to get an R&R trip in
4 with one of the other officers to Bangkok.

5 KC: Tell me about that.

6 FM: Well, we had to bum a ride down to Saigon to catch the flight over there,
7 which was kind of strange. But nevertheless, we flew out of Saigon to Bangkok. We had
8 seven days, but two of them were tied up traveling. We flew into Bangkok. The state
9 appeared nice from the hotel from what we were anticipating. I got to see a lot of the city.
10 It was a crazy, hectic place. I thought that the people in Vietnam drove like madmen, but
11 Thailand had them beat, I think. A gigantic city with a river running through it was really
12 pretty nasty to tell you the truth. But some interesting sites they had. They had a zoo there
13 that had gigantic pythons that would eat whole hogs. They had a gigantic temple with a
14 gold Buddha in it, which I thought was really interesting to see. Of course, it was a
15 modern city, so they had skyscrapers and things of that nature. So, we did the tourist
16 thing and shopped for things for our fiancées and wives that they probably would never
17 use, but we had no idea. That was the case. We just kind of drank and ate for five days
18 and relaxed and got back on the plane and headed back. In retrospect, it's kind of crazy to
19 pull someone out of a war and send them back in. It didn't bother us too bad, but I can
20 just imagine a guy from an infantry unit going on R&R and knowing he's going to have
21 to go right back to the field and knowing he's going to have to be on a firebase
22 somewhere or whatever, how that would play tricks on your mind.

23 KC: I hear that quite a bit for a lot of vets.

24 FM: They suffer from that. I don't know if the benefits of R&R were worth it. I
25 don't know. It's hard to say. But in any case, we did that. It was worthwhile to see
26 Thailand. I'm not sure I'd go back there, but that got us through into March. Then we
27 started receiving more new folks into make sure that we were able to sustain the mission
28 once we left. I'm not too sure what the dynamics were of the assigned people but
29 somehow I ended up with a major being assigned. It came to the unit, but they didn't
30 have an assignment for him because the major was in his slot when he was ready to leave.
31 So lo and behold, they put him down in charge of my platoon for a temporary period of

1 time. I had just been promoted to first lieutenant, but I was not real happy to have this
2 aviator major come in and tell me how to run my computers.

3 KC: I imagine the major wasn't too happy to come in and take over a job from a
4 (talking at same time).

5 FM: His perspective and mine weren't on the same wavelength. He was only
6 there for, I don't know, not even forty-five days. He wasn't there long enough to do an
7 OAR on me.

8 KC: So, you guys really didn't see eye to eye it sounds like.

9 FM: No, we didn't. He just wanted to willy nilly get stuff away, and you can't do
10 that. He was a master aviator. He'd been in aviation for a long time, so he knew
11 everybody in transportation corps aviation. If somebody needed him, he's more than
12 happy to give it to him. Well, it doesn't work that way.

13 KC: (talking at the same time)

14 FM: They have to have a legitimate requirement for it, and they had to in theory
15 and practice put in a requisition. So, we butted heads quite a number of times in that
16 regard. But we got through it. Since I got promoted, I was relieved of some of my
17 additional duties, thank goodness, and was able to start writing resumes looking for a job
18 because I wasn't too sure I wanted to continue my career in the Army.

19 KC: Now, yours was the—

20 FM: Excuse me. We had technical representatives who were civilians from Bell
21 helicopter, from Africa, and from Collins radio. They were actually civilians with our
22 unit who did tech help for us. So, if we had technical problems, they were able to assist
23 us and resolve them. One of the fellas there was from Africa who built our engines. As it
24 turned out, Africa was building a helicopter engine rebuilt plant in Charleston. When I
25 heard about it, I talked to Hope Freeman, was his name, and asked him if he could help
26 me find a job there when I rotated back to the States. Of course, he was more than happy
27 to do that. So, as it turned out, I pretty much had a job lined up before I left Vietnam. I
28 did, in fact, go to work for Africa for a few years until the War closed down, and they
29 closed the plant.

30 KC: Your unit was one that came over basically as a whole. You came over on
31 the *Gieger*.

1 FM: That's correct. But—

2 KC: But that's not always the way you think of the Vietnam War. You think of
3 the single, individual, one-year rotation kind of thing. Tell me how it worked for the
4 entire unit. Is the entire unit getting ready to rotate back to the United States? And if so,
5 how do you arrange that? What were the dynamics of that?

6 FM: As I said, we had been receiving new people into the unit from December of
7 '67, so that we would bring a new person in, and they would fill a slot. And the person
8 who was in that slot would go to another unit. So, they would rotate out of another unit.
9 We would have a fresh body who had at least six months of a tour left. So, that we tried
10 to—I'm not quite sure the number was that we were aiming for. I think it was around
11 fifty percent of the unit would rotate out during that last month of the twelve-month tour.
12 The other fifty percent would've been brought in over the period of six months, so that
13 there was continuity in the command and control of the unit. It wasn't like all two
14 hundred and some of us left at the same time. That was handled by—I didn't have much
15 to do with that. When I did rotate, my replacement had not shown up. We had gotten the
16 staff sergeant to replace Sergeant Copeland. Mine hadn't shown up. He came a month
17 later. We had pretty much all the officers lined up, and we actually had a change of
18 command for about three weeks before Colonel Bowden had been promoted to
19 Lieutenant Colonel when I left. The unit was still able to function quite well, so I didn't
20 have any concerns about it.

21 KC: Right. Well, let me ask you a few questions before we bring you back home.
22 They're just kind of general questions that I typically ask folks. You mention that you
23 had Vietnamese working there on base with you. What were your views of the
24 Vietnamese in general, whether it was the civilian population, the enemy that you
25 encountered to a limited degree, I guess, or the Vietnamese allies in the States? What was
26 your opinion on these various (speaking at same time)?

27 FM: Well, a couple things are interesting there. We had the North Koreans who
28 did our perimeter. We also supported one of their aviation units up in the middle central
29 Highlands, so we got to know them. They actually gave the unit one of their Korean
30 military awards before we left. We also supported the Australians who were over with the
31 special forces b-team. But they had to own an aircraft, fix the aircraft. The Vietnamese

1 that I met in the area, in our AO were, to me, nice people. I didn't come out of any Viet
2 Cong. They may have been Viet Cong for all I know, but they were nice people. I always
3 felt that way about them that they weren't interested in this war. All they wanted to do
4 was harvest their little paddy of rice and to be left alone by us and by anybody else. I just
5 had that feeling. That was the case. Vietnam had been fought over for centuries, so
6 they're not unaccustomed to more misery, but I always thought there could be some
7 people of the ones that I knew. It was just a political nightmare that ended up being
8 resolved in '72, I guess. But now, Vietnam is a big prosperous country. Even though they
9 have a communist economic model, it's pretty much a free market society over there, and
10 they love Americans. My wife was there two years ago, as I said before. She told them
11 that I had been over there during the War, and most of the folks say that War's over a
12 long time ago. It's not our war now. We're moving on. So, they pretty much have the
13 right idea.

14 KC: Yeah. What about the Vietnamese military that you encountered? South
15 Vietnamese?

16 FM: I didn't run into too many of them. I don't know who supported their
17 aviation, but we sure didn't run into them too much. It's not that. Some of their pilots
18 were a little crazy. As I mentioned one time flying out of Quin Non, I think it was, where
19 that DC3 came up right under us, and they would just kind of sky jockeys. At least the
20 ones that I saw. I never had much to do with their ground elements. We would ferry some
21 of them around, but I never saw them in action.

22 KC: Well, let me ask you about the Koreans. You mentioned them on a number of
23 occasions. You tend to have very distinct memories of the Koreans. What are your
24 memories of them?

25 FM: They were pretty hard-nosed soldiers. From what I saw, the senior NCOs ran
26 the unit, not the officers. I saw a formation one day, and it wasn't long after Tet, so they
27 were really agitated and humbled by the fact that we lost some helicopters through their
28 perimeter. I saw the first sergeant just whack the devil out of one of the enlisted folks
29 with a stick over something. I'm not sure what they did, but they were not immune to
30 physically hitting a soldier for stepping out of line. It maintained some pretty strong
31 discipline. From what I heard I don't believe that the Viet Cong wanted to mess with

1 them too much. So, they were pretty hard-nosed soldiers from what I know. One thing
2 that happened not too long before I was getting ready to leave was that the special forces
3 b-team was always wanting to trade stuff with us. They wanted to trade AK-47s for
4 whatever we could give them. One of them had a solid chrome AK that they wanted to
5 trade with us for something. I said, “Well, I’d like to have that weapons, but I’ll have a
6 hard time getting it in-country.” But those guys were always out doing something crazy.
7 One morning—this is about a month before I leave—when we got to that month before
8 we rotated, they would not let us fly. They said, we could do whatever wanted, but they
9 said we couldn’t go flying. So, that was spent a lot of times reading and hanging around
10 the hooch pane. I was sleeping late one day, and all of a sudden, I felt this thing in my
11 bunk crawling all over me. I said, “What in the heck is this on me?” I heard all this
12 laughing and hooting and hollering out in the hallway, and one of the warrant officers had
13 gone over to the b-compound and gotten the—they had a little tiger cub over there four
14 months old. They brought that thing back and cleared my bed. I wake up, and here’s this
15 little tiger cub crawling all over me. Cutest little thing, swatting at me. I never knew what
16 happened to that cub. I guess they let him loose. A tiger cub and pink elephants. That’s
17 what I remember.

18 KC: Pink elephants?

19 FM: The elephants rolled in the clay and the dust, and it made them pink.

20 KC: Oh, okay. Yep.

21 FM: It’s kind of amazing to see them too. Big old things.

22 KC: Another question that kind of comes to mind. Given that you were an officer
23 a second lieutenant and then first lieutenant, what sort of challenges did you face in terms
24 of leadership? You get a very, very active platoon here. You’re 24/7 as you mentioned
25 before. What sort of things did you face as the biggest challenges, and how did you deal
26 with them?

27 FM: I tell you I was really fortunate to have Sergeant Copeland as my platoon
28 sergeant because he had an innate ability to get these guys from different walks of life,
29 different demographics, and different educations, and different religions, as a matter of
30 fact, to work together. We had sometimes where I was actually doing some of the
31 physical work, going out and pulling parts because we were so short-handed. I didn’t mind

1 doing that. I felt that that was—I wasn't trying to set an example. It was just I felt like I
2 could help out, and I did it. I was sure that they appreciated that. The warrant officers
3 taught me a lot, and Colonel Bowden taught me a lot about dealing with people. He
4 would bring me in his office and talk about things that were going on with the platoon,
5 what we needed, anything that he could do to help me out. He walked me through quite a
6 few of these court martial situations because I was all new to that. It's one thing to be an
7 investigating officer, and it's a whole other thing to be sitting on the board. So, it's two
8 separate functions there. I learned a lot from our first sergeant, who was a big old tall
9 skinny green bean from Kentucky, and you always think first sergeant is just going to
10 bust everybody's balls and make them work eighteen hours a day. But he was a good
11 leader. He delegated properly. He followed up, and he expected results, but he didn't go
12 around shouting and berating people. In our case, I think our unit was so much different
13 from a line infantry unit or any combat unit or even a transportation company by the way
14 we were set up. We didn't lead by committee or by head or task. They did it. If you fell
15 down, you heard about it real quick. We were sort of like a retail operation for aviation.
16 There was a guy's aircraft, and we couldn't get the parts. He didn't mind calling down to
17 group headquarters to say, "We didn't have this to help us out." Well, you get a few of
18 those calls down there, and then you're going to say, "Well why don't you have the
19 parts? Why don't you requisition or back field? What's going on?" It was an interesting
20 assignment in that respect. It's sort of like running a little business, almost. I was really
21 fortunate to pull that assignment.

22 KC: Were there any morale or discipline problems with the unit?

23 FM: Not very many. We had the one soldier who had the incident with the
24 commander. But for the most part, it was not a lot of competition amongst soldiers.
25 Everybody was—number one, they were technical people, so each one of them had a skill
26 other than just being a rifleman or something of that type. So, they had gone to school to
27 fix radios or repair engines or do airframe work. It was like running a company being in
28 production control, quality control, avionics test, and then the supply function. They all
29 sort of work as a business to maintain these aircraft. It was almost like a fixed base
30 operation today where you have private airplanes coming in, and they need service. We
31 didn't have a lot of griping. We always had great food, which was important. We had an

1 excellent mess hall. We were able to get things outside of the supply system like steaks,
2 for instance, and fresh vegetables. If you were in a combat unit, if you saw a steak, it fell
3 out of the sky. You didn't eat that way. So, we didn't have a lot of people moping around.
4 Of course, we weren't getting shot at every day.

5 KC: Sure.

6 FM: It makes a tremendous difference in this mindset.

7 KC: As you were preparing to leave here, leave Vietnam, do you have the
8 opportunity to stop and think about what you've seen through the year, the way the War
9 has been prosecuted? The Tet Offensive is obviously a big part of what you saw and had
10 a massive impact not just on the War but also on public opinion. What are the thoughts
11 on the way you saw the War being prosecuted for that matter?

12 FM: I thought we were winning the war. It's hard to define what winning meant,
13 but Tet was not necessarily a victory compared to the Viet Cong or the Vietnamese NVA.
14 They lost a lot of casualties. We were privy to a lot of the public opinion swings in the
15 States because we didn't have a lot of access to that news. I didn't know anything about
16 Kent State, for instance, until I got home. All we were hearing was good stuff from
17 General Westmoreland and LBJ flew into Cam Ranh Bay and gave a big speech about
18 how great things were going. So, from what we knew, we thought that we had the upper
19 hand. I guess we did it at one point, but I don't think—I certainly didn't realize that the
20 War was being prosecuted by politicians where the rules of engagement kept us out of
21 Laos. The Ho Chi Minh Trail are like a superhighway or an interstate. That kind of stuff,
22 you find out after the fact. You began to wonder what would've happened if we had other
23 ways of going about business over there. In retrospect, I think it was well-intentioned but
24 misguided in many senses to have that many casualties and that much treasure lost
25 without a goal. I saw it again in active duty on desert storm and again on active duty
26 during the Second Gulf War. So, history repeats itself.

27 KC: All right. So, you got everything squared away. You got your paperwork in
28 order. You know that you're going home. Take me through that day.

29 FM: Well, as I said, about a month before we were to leave, Colonel Bowden
30 said, "You guys who came over on the first boat, stand down. Be available if your
31 replacements need you, but I want you to go to the beach, do what you want, just stay out

1 of trouble.” So, we were in Cam Ranh Oceanside. There was a really nice sort of an R&R
2 area. It was like a white sandy beach with gigantic coral formations as big as buildings. It
3 was just huge. It had a little tiki bar there where you could get a beer or something. It was
4 just three or four of us to just get in the jeep, and three or four of us would just spend the
5 day over there getting all burned up in the sun and drinking beer and writing letters. They
6 had beautiful blue water over there. I’ll never forget how blue the water was. They had
7 these sea turtles that would come out of the ocean. They were four or five feet around in
8 diameter. You could actually stand on one. It would walk away with you standing on it.
9 So, I enjoyed doing that. We did a little snorkeling out there. So, we spent the last couple
10 weeks doing that. The remainder of the unit start going out, a couple every day. I was still
11 waiting on my orders. Colonel Bowden calls me and says, “Listen, you’re going to be the
12 last one to go with me. I just got to have you here until you go.” So, I said, “Well, that’s
13 fine.” I knew I was going to leave on the right day, so I didn’t care about it too much.
14 Sure enough, we got all packed up, and we had to pack all of our belongings in these big
15 old cardboard boxes because you just couldn’t carry all the stuff you accumulated. We
16 had done that about two weeks before, three weeks before, and they sent a big old truck
17 out. I think I was actually United Band lines that actually had the contract to do. They
18 picked all this stuff up, all our clothes and stuff that we accumulated in this big old box.
19 They took it down to Cam Ranh, put it on a ship and sent I home. So, all we had was
20 enough clothes to last us the time we were there. So, we packed up that day, and we
21 had—excuse me—put on our khakis to get on the airplane, if I recall. We went down to
22 Cam Ranh on the 707. I remember it distinctly because it was a much nicer airplane than
23 the one I went on Fort Bragg on. I got on there, and that thing was jammed pack. We
24 closed up the door, and he took off. He went off on the runway forty feet in the baby’s
25 chair hollering and hooting, screaming. The stewardess was coming by and giving beer,
26 and off we went. We stopped in Tokyo to refuel. It was dark, so we didn’t see much. We
27 didn’t get off the airplane. We left Tokyo and flew right into Oakland to Devar. We got
28 off at Oakland, and the transportation corps had an office there that was responsible for
29 getting everybody going in the right direction. Of course, these were all individuals going
30 back, so they were all going to different places. It took a while to go through that process.
31 Colonel Bowden and I ended up having to catch a C-130 flight down to Los Angeles in

1 order to get back east. So, that took a day. Then we got a late flight out of Los Angeles
2 into Chicago. In Los Angeles, it was kind of eerie because people kind of looked at you
3 like you had leprosy or something. I don't know. That was an eerie feeling because we
4 didn't expect a brass band, but we kind of sensed that you were just a soldier coming
5 back from a place you're not interested in. It had the same feeling in Chicago. Colonel
6 Bowden and I separated there. I went on to Pittsburgh where my folks lived, and he went
7 to Texas where he was living. It was—we didn't have anybody spitting on us, but we
8 didn't have anybody coming up and shaking our hands either.

9 KC: Anybody say anything to you?

10 FM: No. I don't think anybody struck up any conversations even on the airplane.
11 When we got into Chicago, we changed into civis because we decided that we were not
12 in the appropriate dress. I got into Pittsburg in civilian clothes. I had lost quite a bit of
13 weight, so I probably looked like a homeless person. I lost almost thirty pounds while I
14 was sick with hepatitis. So, that was kind of unusual to have that feeling. It was, I guess,
15 a homecoming of sorts. It's totally different than coming back from Desert Storm.

16 KC: Who met you there in Pittsburgh?

17 FM: My parents met me. My brother wasn't there because he was at Fort Sill
18 getting ready to redeploy back.

19 KC: Oh, he was going back to Vietnam?

20 FM: Yeah.

21 KC: Oh, wow. Yeah.

22 FM: So, it was just a flip flop. That's kind of when I really made up my mind that
23 this is what I wanted to do. I guess—my fiancée said I wasn't going back over there
24 either, and I had no guarantees that I would go back in the same capacity. I sure didn't
25 want to go back as a trunk company commander. So, I came off of active duty in
26 November.

27 KC: Of '68?

28 FM: That's correct. And I went to work for AmCo at Charleston. I went down and
29 had an interview, and they hired me as a material control analyst. So, I was actually doing
30 the same thing I was doing in Vietnam. They were rebuilding engines over there. We had
31 a supply function to make sure we had all the parts necessary to get all the parts of that

1 production back on line. I actually saw parts that had price tags on them that had come
2 back from Vietnam, or I had sent them back to the States because we didn't need them
3 anymore.

4 KC: Oh, isn't that something?

5 FM: Yeah.

6 KC: Now, you're back to civilian life in November of '68. There's still an awful
7 lot of war left. Do you continue to follow the War at all?

8 FM: Well, I had a six-year obligation from the day I was commissioned, which
9 was in '66. So, I joined the Saigon National Guard, which I thought would be a good
10 thing, but it turned out not to be a good thing because it was—they had some
11 transportation units in the reserves in Charleston, but they were all full. There was no
12 vacancies. The National Guard had a few vacancies, so naively, I said, "Well, I'll just go
13 in there." Maintain my affiliation with the military. Well, the National Guard is not like
14 the regular Army reserves, which I learned pretty early on. It was a mechanized infantry
15 unit. They were made up of mostly local folks who didn't want to go to Vietnam, who
16 were able to find slots in the National Guard, which would exempt them from going to
17 Vietnam.

18 KC: What did you think about that?

19 FM: Well, I thought it was kind of bad. I was with you, but I had signed on for a
20 year, which I did. Then I got out of the National Guard and finished my three years. So,
21 in 1972, I resigned my commission. In 1982, I was recommissioned. I had the
22 opportunity to go into a transportation unit.

23 KC: Why the change ten years later? Why the decision to go back?

24 FM: One of my Vietnam friends who was an 01 pilot was in the unit. My career—
25 at that time, I had gone from AmCo when they closed down into the shipping business in
26 Charleston. He knew my background was in shipping, and the transportation corps unit
27 was a terminal unit, so they ran ocean terminals for the military. So, he knew that I had
28 the background. He said, "Would you come into the unit?" I thought about it, and I said,
29 "Yeah, I'll do that," because I had kids in private school. I felt like it would be a good
30 assignment, and it would be extra income for their tuition. So, I went back in as a captain.
31 I served in that unit from 1982 all the way through the First Gulf War as a major. I then

1 came back. I spent a year on active duty in the First Gulf War. I came back into the unit
2 as reserves through '98 when I was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. I had to go into the
3 individual augmentee program because they didn't have a slot for me. So, I went into
4 that, and I worked for the group headquarters. In 2001, I got called back to active duty for
5 five years after 9/11. I finally retired in 2004. So, I had a nice career. I had a lot of
6 interesting people work for me, and I worked for a lot of interesting people. I worked for
7 the first female four-star general in the Army.

8 KC: Oh, sit that right?

9 FM: General Dunaway, Anna Dunaway when she was a one-star. Smart, smart
10 lady.

11 KC: I wonder if you might take me through your experiences. It doesn't have to
12 be as in depth as you did with Vietnam. But tell me a little bit about your experiences in
13 Desert Storm, how it came about, where you were stationed, what your activities were, as
14 well as the second goal. Throw a little comparison and contrast in there with Vietnam.

15 FM: As I said, I was with the reserve unit that operated internally. In the First
16 Gulf War when Sudan Hussein went into Kuwait City, President Bush reacted. Of course,
17 he started sending units over there. One of the ports that we supported was Wilmington,
18 North Carolina. Our responsibility was to deploy the 82nd Airborne Division to get them
19 out and get them over there as quick as we could. Two days after he went into Kuwait,
20 we were activated to go to Wilmington to deploy the division. We were up there for just
21 about sixty days. We got them out. We came off of active duty and then in January of
22 '91, the build-up was really big over there. The Port of Devar was gigantic, so the
23 transportation corps said we need units over there to be prepared to retrograde when this
24 war is over. Well, we didn't know how long that would be, but in any case, it wasn't very
25 long. In June of '91, our unit was put on active duty again to go to the Gulf and run part
26 of the Port of Devar. There are only three reserve units put on active duty to do that. So,
27 our unit went over there, and we did all the retrograde and cargo equipment and
28 ammunition from June through December. That was hard work over there. It was a very,
29 very hot climate, of course. All the oil wells were still burning. We had no way. The
30 Saudis don't do manual labor. They hire people from Bangladesh and from other third-
31 world countries to be their labor. So, we had to deal with that problem. The port was just

1 overrun with thousands and thousands of pieces of equipment going back to the States.
2 Our equipment as well as captured Iraqi equipment all over the place. It was
3 unbelievable. We begin work 24/7 because we got ships coming in every other day just to
4 be loaded up. We lived on these big barges that were like floating hotels that oil
5 industries use when they're drilling for oil. That's where they kept the oil well workers
6 on these buildings. They were four stories high. They had two-man rooms with little
7 bathrooms. So, we lived there, and we ate in a big contract mess hall. It was quite a bit
8 different from Vietnam in that sense. When I was there, my father passed away in July,
9 so I flew home. I had to fly back to Pittsburgh. When I came home, I flew on a space
10 available KC-10 tanker back to Andrews in Washington D.C. then went through the
11 SADO office to get a commercial back to Pittsburgh. So, I flew out of Reagan Airport,
12 and I had my Desert uniform on, and I had people shake my hands. People wanted to buy
13 me dinner. It was totally different feeling than Vietnam. It was kind of amazing. So, I
14 came home and then I went back. When I went back, the Chief of Naval Operations had
15 gotten some information that the Egyptian Army was taken the equipment out of the
16 country that didn't belong to them. He had information, but he didn't have any proof. So,
17 he called our headquarters, and General Pagonis was in charge of all the logistics then,
18 wanted to know if they knew anybody who knew about port operations that could go up
19 into Kuwait and find out what was actually going on with the Egyptians. So, I was given
20 that assignment to go into Kuwait with the military intelligence people to investigate the
21 Egyptian Logistics trail. The military intelligence guys lived in Kuwait City. They had
22 confiscated a big ten-story marble building that Kuwaitis kept their concubines in to live
23 in. That is where we worked out of. We went all over Kuwait looking for stuff that
24 Egyptians were taking. All oil fires were still going. It was really interesting.

25 KC: Must have been something to see.

26 FM: See the destruction, oh, yeah. It was amazing. See that. The highway of hell
27 was unbelievable. It was like a mile and a half long just a junkyard littered with thrown
28 out and destroyed equipment. Iraqi tanks all over the desert. You couldn't get out of your
29 vehicle because you'd step on some live ammunition laying out there. As a matter of fact,
30 some people did get hurt treasure hunting out there. In any case, I spent a week or two
31 with the Egyptian military. They were interesting to say the least.

1 KC: How so?

2 FM: Well, they're kind of a rag tag outfit. They were living out in tents out in the
3 middle of the desert. They didn't seem too interested in getting back to Egypt. We were
4 pushing them to get out, but they didn't have any real rush to go. In any case, I was never
5 able to find anything weird about what they were shipping out. I looked at all their
6 equipment and what they have stays to go back out. Kuwait City port hadn't opened up. I
7 brought the first shipment into the port after the war. But when I left, as a going away
8 present, they had found an armadillo, believe it or not, out in the desert. I guess they ate
9 it. They gave me the armadillo carcass, the shell, as a going away present. What am I
10 going to do with an armadillo? Unbelievable. That was kind of interesting. The military
11 intelligence guys were, I guess, unorthodox in the way they operated.

12 KC: Explain that to me.

13 FM: It was kind of neat to go into Kuwait City and see how badly it was damaged
14 from the Iraqi Army. It was pretty sad. Honestly, it was all ransacked and beat up.

15 KC: You said that the military intelligence guys were a little unorthodox. Could
16 you elaborate on that?

17 FM: Well, they kind of—they just sort of did what they wanted to do. If they had
18 some kind of actionable intelligence that was going to impact our military, they would
19 obviously try to route it out or know what was going on within the Kuwaiti infrastructure
20 that might impact the military because we still had a big presence up in Kuwait in the
21 base up there. They were always concerned about security threats, real or not. They
22 moved about freely. They went wherever they wanted and did whatever they wanted to
23 do their mission. Kind of, I guess call them spooks. I don't know. I just tagged along with
24 them. It told them what I needed to have done and who I needed to talk to, and they set it
25 up. I had to see all the vessel logs for the Port of Kuwait City, so I could see what activity
26 had gone on there right immediately before the war. When the Egyptians came in, they
27 came through there and dumped their stuff off and then their transports went home. What
28 got the Navy guys curious about it was that they came over on thirteen ships, but they
29 needed eighteen to go home. They couldn't figure out why they had to have an increase
30 in capacity to get out, and that's what sparked their interest. But I was never able to
31 determine if there was anything wrong or not.

1 KC: So, it wasn't that the U.S. or even the Kuwaitis were missing things. It was
2 just that, "Why this larger number of ships?"

3 FM: Correct. There was equipment all over Kuwait. Any road you took, you
4 could see stuff that either was allied equipment or Iraqi equipment. A lot of that stuff was
5 valuable stuff. When that build-up took place over there, there was a tremendous amount
6 of equipment going in there that was a commercial manufacturer that could be used in
7 Egypt, for instance. There were four-thousand stainless steel tanker trailers over there by
8 the hundreds that were shipped in there to carry bottled water, for instance. Nobody knew
9 who they belonged to, where they came from, or what. They were easy prey if somebody
10 wanted to rob one of them. You there?

11 KC: Yes, sir. I'm here.

12 FM: So, that was kind of the crux of that little mission. But our troops worked
13 hard. They did a really good job, and we got everybody home safely.

14 KC: How did you get involved in the Second Gulf War?

15 FM: Well, I was individual mobilization augmentee for military traffic
16 management command headquarters. So, two days after 9/11, I got a call to report to Fort
17 Eustis because they anticipated a requirement to move a whole lot of troops. That's what
18 happened. So, I went up there and worked on a general staff for five years as a G-3 and
19 G-7. It was a very good tour. It was an entirely different level from the company and
20 battalion and brigade level.

21 KC: Yeah, can you talk about that a little bit?

22 FM: Well, of course, it was Fort Eustis was the G-3 shot permitted that was
23 headquartered in Alexandria. They had all the transportation assets for ocean and air in
24 the military side of the house and some rail. But their responsibility was to do the
25 logistics, to move cargo and equipment. So, when I got there, one of the big issues was
26 ammunition security, which was within the United States was moving—ammunition
27 moves across highways every day and has its material. It goes all over the country, and it
28 had to be secured. There were fears that one of these trucks could be attacked or stolen or
29 whatever. That was going through our shop. I didn't have that responsibility, but one of
30 our other colonels had it, trying to track the shipments to make sure they were guarded
31 properly, things of that nature. My responsibility was finding the manpower to run the

1 ports here in the U.S. and in Kuwait where we were going to run all our logistics through.
2 As a reserve officer, I understood all the units that were involved, and I knew almost all
3 the leadership in those units, so I knew who I could depend on to work different ports
4 throughout the country. So, we ran ports from Oakland all the way around to Baltimore
5 deploying units when the build-up started. That was, from what I was told, the largest
6 logistic movement since World War II, deploying thirteen divisions into Duggal over a
7 year's period and then continuing to rotate supply. Those were long, hard days, I'm
8 telling you.

9 KC: I'm sure.

10 FM: I would get in about five o'clock because we had a briefing with the forces in
11 Kuwait, so we tried to at least get them a little bit of time where we would be available to
12 do that. I'd keep them upstairs in the middle of the night, so we would take care of that,
13 and then we would have a video conference with our headquarters in Alexandria, which
14 was where the two-star was. We had a one-star. Then we go about our business. In 1500,
15 we'd have another briefing for the one-star and then work until probably seven o'clock at
16 night and come back and do it again for the next day for about five years. Long tour, but
17 good tour. We deployed the bottom equipment. The bad part about it was we had to put
18 people on active duty for a year, and you messed up a lot of lives, a lot of families in
19 doing that. But when you're in the reserves, that's what you sign up for.

20 KC: Right.

21 FM: There's nothing that says you'll never be activated. So, that was tough. It got
22 even harder when you started running out of people. Then we had to go into the
23 individual mobilization assets. Those folks never thought they'd be on active duty. So,
24 digging them out was quite a chore too. It was quite an adventure.

25 KC: Well, let me take you back to Vietnam just a few last questions that I have
26 for you here. The United States and the communist settle, I guess in '73 with the Paris
27 Peace Accords. The American troops leave. What was your opinion on the way the
28 United States left the war?

29 FM: Well, you know, sometimes I think that the South Vietnamese hold a bag.
30 But by the same token, sooner or later, you had to get out of there because I don't think
31 the situation was going to change at all, ever. I don't believe that the South Vietnamese

1 had the willingness to face them. I think that the government was political corrupt,
2 personal opinion. That filtered down into the military. They did not have the same goals
3 and aims and desires that the North Vietnamese had. So, to me, it was unlikely that they
4 would've won. So, I guess it was good to get out of there before we lost more people.

5 KC: In April of 1975, Saigon falls, which is just the ultimate moment of what you
6 just said. What was your opinion on the fall of Saigon and the loss of Vietnam?

7 FM: I thought we were lucky to get out of there. Get our enlisted people out,
8 number one. I think that a lot of South Vietnamese were unable to escape, suffered
9 enormously whether because of their political beliefs or they were just in the wrong place
10 at the wrong time. I don't know. I'm sure that that was a terrible, terrible ten-year period
11 when they were purging the government over there. You know, it's kind of sad that it
12 came to that. Our expectations weren't met, nor were theirs. The biggest disappointment
13 was when I went to Washington and went to the Vietnam Memorial. That's a stark
14 reminder of the price we pay. But we continue to allow the politicians to influence the
15 war fighters. And we can't do that in this country and be successful. It's been proven.
16 You got disaster in Iraq. Afghanistan is no better. We just can't seem to get it right, sadly.

17 KC: Yeah.

18 FM: I'm not a war hawk by any means. I don't want my grandchildren to go have
19 to fight another war. But our military has not had a lot of success in the last decade. So, I
20 guess you got to figure out whether you want to have a strong military or just be a milk
21 test.

22 KC: What do you think you learned about yourself from your experiences in
23 Vietnam? How did the War most affect you?

24 FM: Well, I didn't—I didn't talk about it very much for many, many years. And
25 number two, I didn't want my kids joining the military. Although I wanted to stay and
26 serve. I didn't want them to have to fight any war that wasn't going to have a good
27 outcome. But I learned a lot about people in that period of active duty, which helped me
28 through the rest of my life. I think in the Citadel, they break you down and build you
29 back up. You learned how to take orders and give orders and all that kind of stuff. But
30 when you're in the military, it's a little different. These people aren't slaves. They're
31 human beings. You got to treat them like human beings. Treat them with respect and

1 dignity and get them to work for you. You do that with leadership, not with threats and
2 turmoil.

3 KC: Well, Mr. McKeever, I think I'm out of questions. Is there anything that you
4 would like to add to the interview before we bring it to a close?

5 FM: No. I hope it's been worthwhile for us to do this. I feel like I was very
6 fortunate to have the military career that I had to go to Vietnam and come back in one
7 piece. So, my experience is probably a lot different from the people who were really in
8 harm's way every day over there. They have my everlasting respect. Believe me. I
9 appreciate the opportunity to do this.

10 KC: Well, it's been my pleasure.