The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project
Interview with US Army SP6 James Steele
Conducted by Mike Law of the VHPA
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Mike: This is 23rd of September. I am Mike Law, and this is James Steele. He was a Tech Inspector (TI) with the 121st AHC. So, your first tour in Vietnam, you were with…?

James: The 117th Assault Helicopter Company out of Qui Nhon, and then we moved to Dong Ba Thin.

Mike: You had been trained as a 67N?

James: I was a 67N out of Fort Rucker, and became a crew chief on a gunship, which was the Hog. Had 24 rockets on each side.

Mike: And you did that for…?

James: I was with the 117th for a year. After completing that tour in Vietnam, I returned to Fort Rucker, Alabama. At Fort Rucker, I reenlisted for Japan. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was selected to go TDY en route to Vietnam with the 1st Cav. So I went to Fort Eustis, Virginia for TI school.

Mike: How long was that?

James: The TI school, I believe, I cannot remember, but it was six to eight weeks, or maybe 12 weeks. It was the 67W TI School, which meant that you covered all of the Army helicopters active at that particular time. After completing that, I think I came out number two in the class.

Mike: How big was your class?

James: Probably 20 to 30 people. I was promoted to SP6 upon graduation. By coming out at the top of the class, you got the next rank. Consolation was you were also en route to Vietnam. So, I was assigned to the 1st Cav in Vietnam, where we had Cobras.

Mike: When did you finish your TI training?

James: I would have finished the training in August of 1968, and then they would have sent me on 30-days leave or 20-days leave. And then I ended up in Vietnam in September of ‘68. So, from September of ‘68 I was with the 1st Cav to September of ’69. And then from September of ‘69, I transferred to the 121st Aviation in Soc Trang.

Mike: So you were a TI with the Cav?

James: Yes, with the Cav.

Mike: And you were in Delta Company?

James: Delta 227th Aviation Battalion.

Mike: That was a gun company?

James: Yes, it was a gun company.

Mike: Specifically, a TI is not designed to turn the wrench.

James: Correct.

Mike: You're a quality control sign-off guy, correct?

James: Correct. After any work on an aircraft is completed, especially if that aircraft has been Red Xed [Shows that a deficiency exists and the aircraft is unsafe for flight] for the work to be done, if it's dealing with flight controls or anything of that nature. And then when you repair that, you have to have someone come back and validate that it is done correctly. It is the TI that does that. He comes out, inspects, and signs it off. And as a part of that, you also do the intermediate inspections. Every 25 hours, back in those days, the helicopter had to go in for what's called an intermediate inspection. And then every 100 hours, it went in for what they call PE, Primary Inspection. And so the TI is the guy who signs off that work when it's completed, validates that the work has been completed. Let me tell you how we worked.

First, one of the Tis would do the initial inspection, write up all the things that they find wrong with it, and then another TI would be the person who signs off all that stuff after the maintenance crew has completed it. Also as a TI, you are part of the launch crew or 'launch team' in the mornings when the ships go out and you're part of the retrieval crew when they come back in, the retrieval, to make sure that if there's any problems, things can be taken care of so that the flights can go out the next morning. Naturally we had a list of ships that most likely needed a 25-hour intermediate inspection or a 100-hour PE, but mostly we wanted to talk to the air crews if they had anything to say about problems – especially Red X situations.

Second, TIs completed the paperwork for all inspections – scheduled 100-hours, new Red X situations, whatever. Briefly, the result was a list of items or tasks that needed to be done before the ship could return to the line.

Third, TIs verified that the work was done correctly and signed off that it was ready for a test flight or run-up or whatever was required. As a general rule, we tried to have a different TI do the sign offs from the one that did the inspection. You had to know the proper procedures of safety wiring, torque settings, etc. Also, as a general rule, we did not 'turn the wrenches' unless we were training someone on a task they didn't know how to do. We were BUSY and one had to be flexible especially when we had lots going on.

Fourth, the Maintenance Officer usually took a TI with him when there was a forced landing, serious battle damage, an accident, or a crash especially when the ship ended up in an unsecure area. Sometimes we could get a recovery CH-47, sometimes we determined we had to fly it to a secure area otherwise we'd lose it completely.

Finally, the test flight pilots would take a TI with them if a ship had a 'history' of problems.

Mike: So you had to know what was safety wired and what wasn't, and you'd asked the kids that did the work what was the torque setting or that kind of thing?

James: You had to validate the torque settings to make sure that torques were correctly, not over torqued or under torqued. You had to validate that safety wires were safetied properly and not improperly. Meaning, a lot of times when you safety, a lot of kids would safety them incorrectly, which means they're loosening the nut rather than tightening the nut. So you had to validate all of those kinds of things from there.

Also you may have issues where the pilot would write up a vibration of some type, and then the maintenance officer will come out and we will take a flight to validate what that vibration is. Also, after every maintenance, meaning PE, periodic maintenance, the maintenance officer would do a test flight. And on that test flight, the TI is usually the guy who signs off on the booklet as the maintenance officer. The maintenance officer is

going through all the types of maneuvers, et cetera, such as autorotation. Autorotation is one of the keys that when you make sure that there's a problem, then you can always autorotate by validating the speed of the rotor, et cetera.

Mike: So you didn't do a lot of flying, but you did quite a bit?

James: Quite a bit. The way you'd get quite a bit is when I was in the 1st Cav, we had Cobras. And when the Cobras would go out to work, we had an OH-6, which was called a LOH, that we would stand by in the event that we had problems with them or something went wrong. You would be sometimes at a fire base and the aircraft is going to be out working all day, and you want to be close to where they are. But at the 121st, though I was mostly in the hangar. In the event that one had a problem, they may call back for the maintenance officer to come out. We would look at it. And if you had to ground it, then the maintenance officer would fly it back along with the TI.

Mike: You told me that there were four of you in the 121st?

James: At Soc Trang I believe there was four of us. There was the maintenance sergeant, who was a TI, and then there was another gentleman by the name of Manning, myself, and I believe there was one more, but I can't remember his name.

Mike: And you guys had a regular schedule.

James: Yes.

Mike: And so you had to cover everything, otherwise nothing got signed off.

James: Correct.

Mike: They had other schedulers that would schedule the crew and you didn't…

James: Correct. All you did is whenever they needed somebody, they would set up at the hangar and a TI would go out and work the flight line. One guy would work the flight line when aircraft were taking off and coming in. Or when crew chiefs would do their dailies and they have an issue that's a Red X, then they would call up the TI and you'd go down and sign it off when they repaired it.

Mike: Obviously when you extended, you didn't mind the duty. You didn't mind being in Vietnam, otherwise you would have got out. But my point is, I guess you were done with Cobras or…

James: No. What happened is I thought that I was getting out of -- it seemed like when I was with the 1st Cav, the Cobra seemed to be a magnet. We got a lot of rocket attacks, a lot of mortar attacks, things of that nature. And since I only had one year to go, I felt I would go somewhere safe, and I elected to go to Soc Trang. However, again, you're still in Vietnam and Soc Trang was the Delta, which I had been up north in I Corps, and then I had been in the central part, and I wanted to see what the Delta was like. And so, Soc Trang was a good company that I had looked up, and I had a friend that had been there, and I elected to go there. It was a good duty.

Mike: No super regrets or anything like that?

James: None whatsoever. I must say my experience in dealing with the aircraft and the pilots and different people was well worth it. I wouldn't change a thing.

Mike: So you walk in the door and you're obviously not a new kid by any stretch of any imagination. You're a very experienced specialist. So somebody becomes your mentor to introduce you to the unit, or you just sit at the desk and the kids come up and talk to you?

James: I'm a specialist, SP6. And because I'm into aircraft and I like helicopters, I'm introduced to my platoon sergeant. And then from the platoon sergeant, I'm introduced to the junior NCO hooch. And with that, then you become a comrade with the TI's that are there and just go to work.

Mike: But at the same time, you don't know anyone and they don't know you, so you got to figure out whether you're going to trust the guy or not, or whatever.

James: The deal for me was that you had crew chiefs who flew those aircraft, and the pilots and the crew chiefs, they're a team, and I'm there for maintenance and understanding what that helicopter is supposed to be and what's supposed to be done. You have manuals of things that you have to deal with, and with that you just do your job. They assign you to do an initial inspection on an aircraft that's coming in for maintenance, then you go do it. And then when it's done, or if you're doing the final on another aircraft, you just take your sheets and go do the final, and make sure it's done right. Because you want to make sure everything gets right.

Mike: Almost every unit that I associated with always had bugs that never got resolved or had tragic results. Fred was just talking about them. They had, I guess a D model, and it couldn't pick up a load. It could start, did everything else I could think, but obviously the engine or whatever never developed enough horsepower to drive it. It was ultimately crashed on the 8th of February of '68 and a lot of people died. Those problems were rare, but they were not hard to find. Different crews would fly it, different crews would use it, and they'd write it up it has this problem or has that problem. Maintenance tries to check it out, can't find it, turns the aircraft back over to be used. That seems like a real ghost trying to chase a ghost, but they're real.

James: For me, it's a machine and a machine has certain criteria that it has to work to, based on what the book says it's supposed to do. And as long as it's doing that, then you have to go along with it. However, I think what you're alluding to is when they started talking about Vietnamization and turning over the aircraft to the Vietnamese, et cetera, as a TI or a maintenance person, you could see things that could go wrong or where potential crashes or things could happen.

Example, hot start. If you have a low battery, which you'll ask the pilot, the pilot will tell you they have a low battery, and you're putting in fuel into the intake, into the exhaust, when it finally takes off, you're going to get what's called a hot start, where a flame will shoot off the back of the tailpipe and you as a bystander can see, well, gee, that should have been a hot start. And if it is a hot start, that means you need to shut the engine down and turn it over to maintenance, and they have to do an engine overall where they redo the combustion chamber because it's burned up in there. If you see them do that, and then they restart it and fly off with it after changing the battery, then you know something was wrong.

Other examples are, you have a torque meter. If you pull too much torque, you're supposed to do certain things. As a pilot, you put it into maintenance to get that fixed. Blade strikes, those kinds of things where you have the tail rotor where they don't clear the bunker. Certain things you can tell was going wrong with an aircraft that should be reported that are not reported. Again, that's doing Vietnamization. American pilots, I never ever encountered any time when they didn't turn something in that maintenance had to take care of it. If it's a blade strike, they got rounds through the blade, you got to get them changed. Crew chiefs look at them, validate them. A round through the blade, simply just change it. You don't have to do anything to it. If it's a blade strike, then you may have to change the whole transmission.

Mike: No, I knew. I also knew that -- well, at least I highly suspected, that the Vietnamese, that Huey was way too complicated for them. It's funny because they could fly jets, they could do other things like that, but they didn't do the Huey well. I talked to several people that were pressed into that service and it was a politically incorrect joke. It really was. I was actually surprised they had anything flyable, even though they started with brand new airplanes, virtually brand new airplanes. So yeah, avoiding that one was probably a good surrender tactic.

James: But basically as a TI, though, I enjoyed my work, enjoyed working with aircraft and admired the pilots and crew chiefs that flew all the time.

Mike: At that point in time when you leave the 121st, you've been a TI for well over two years. Did you stay in the Army?

James: No. What I did then is I got out of the Army.

Mike: Right away or…?

James: Right away. I got an early out from Soc Trang, directly out. And I went to A&P school with the anticipation of going to work for TWA. After A&P school, I got hired by Lockheed Martin. That's how my aviation career ended, per se, but working for them for a contractor on the outside. I worked for Lockheed Martin for 37 years. But in 1974, I went back into the Reserves with the 336th Aviation Company, which was the sister company to the 121st in Soc Trang, and did 20 years.

Mike: So 20 years in the Reserves?

James: 20 years in Reserves and 6 active.

Mike: Where was that, here in Georgia?

James: No, in California. The 336th was located at Los Alamitos, California. Later on the 336th became the 214th. And then I was transferred by Lockheed from working at Burbank, California to Marietta, Georgia, the C130s and all of that. From there, I was transferred to Fort Worth, Texas when Lockheed acquired General Dynamics. So I went down there for 5 years and then came back to Marietta. So that's my 37 years.

Mike: What kind of work would you do for Lockheed? So you're an A&P guy, which says I can do lots of different things.

James: I hired in with Lockheed as -- I was a supervisor for what they call manufacturing operations on the L-1011s. Final assembly. Got promoted from that, then I went to the S-3 A program.

Mike: How many people were working on the L-1011?

James: On the L-1011, I had a crew of 18 people. And so from there, on the L-1011, when it stopped -- you had so many structural and so many electrical people. And so I went to the S-3A program when the L-1011 went down. And on the S-3A program, I think I had a crew of 18 again. And then from there, I got laid off for three months. They always had a big shutdown at around Christmas time. So then when I came back, I was already in college. After that, I went into contract procurement and became a subcontract administrator. And then from there, I became a hotshot corporate negotiator. And from there I became a compliance manager for contract compliance. So that's my 37 years.

Mike: All right. I was talking to a guy the other day that was in Vietnam. He was a crew chief on Chinook. He owns a company that does very specific maintenance. He says he was working on an L-1011. I liked the DC-10. I thought it was a fine airplane. It turns out, its economic profile got a little ragged at the end of its life and United wanted to get rid of

them so badly because they were really a financial dinosaur. But they hauled a lot of people to a lot of places. That's for darn sure. And I thought the L-1011 was a good successor to it, but it never took off very much. I don't know how many of them they built, but not many.

James: No.

Mike: But I was shocked this guy said he's working on them now, but I don't know how many of them still fly.

James: I'm not sure either. The one key element I did leave out of my talking to you, the reason I hired in with Lockheed is I was familiar with what was called the Cheyenne Helicopter. Lockheed had been contracted to build the Cheyenne, and this was before the Cobras. However, it became so expensive and overweight that they canceled the program, and the Cobras took off. That was the predecessor to that. But back to the L-1011…

James: Good aircraft, just got costly. I think that's the reason that it didn't survive.

Mike: I don't know if it was costly to operate or whatever.

James: They got the Roll Royce engines. They had three of those on it. Back in those days, the marketing was that it took three engines to go across the Pacific or the Atlantic, whereas now you can go with two engines. Back those days, they had to have three. The L-1011, one of the things unique about it was it was marketed as a class three landing aircraft, in other words, where it could take off and land by itself. In other words, you could take it off, program it to land, go to the next airport, wherever, land, and then you would only have to tax it in. So if it was fog then you could go on in and land. That was something that came up later.

Mike: Yeah. It was a giant airplane. There must still be some kind of special purpose cargo liner or something today.

James: I imagine. I know that Pat Roberts, he bought one, which was the 700 Club. I don't even remember them. I don't know much about them. But anyway, they had turned theirs into a hospital aircraft, where it had all of everything.

You got it all?

Mike: Yeah. Right.

THE END