

The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project
Interview with US Army Warrant Officer Robert 'Bob' J. Munhofen
who served as a helicopter pilot an Air Cavalry Troop in Vietnam
Conducted by Mike Law of the VHPA
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- Mike: Today is the 2nd of July. We're at the 2023 VHPA reunion in San Antonio. I am Mike Law and the man we're primarily interviewing is...
- Robert: Robert Munhofen.
- Mike: Robert J., right? M-U-N-H-O-F-E-N, correct?
- Robert: Yeah.
- Mike: How did you get in the army in the first place?
- Robert: I was at the University of South Dakota. I was not happy with my degree I was working on. The war was coming on, so I decided I wanted to get in the service. So, I went down to the Navy recruiter. They still had a two-year program, and by the time I got registered, they had changed it to a four-year. So, I marched on down to the Army recruiter. I said, "I want to fly." I said, "If you can get me in helicopters, that's what I want to fly." And they signed me up and away I went to basic training.
- Mike: Okay. What date was that, do you remember?
- Robert: Let's see. '60 probably three or four right in there.
- Mike: Okay. And so when did you graduate from high school and where?
- Robert: My memory sucks anyway. Let me think.
- Mike: All right. Fine. So how much college did you have when you dropped out?
- Robert: Two years.
- Mike: And you were working on a four-year degree?
- Robert: Yeah.
- Mike: Okay. So do you remember when you went on active duty?
- Robert: I was in Vietnam, March '68.
- Mike: Okay. I would assume you get inducted in South Dakota.
- Robert: Yeah.
- Mike: Now, where was the induction place? Did you go to Chicago or someplace like that?
- Robert: No, it was down south. Trying to think all the bases I went to down there because I went to different schools. I started out in Texas. I can't say the name of where I stated flying.
- Mike: Go ahead.
- Speaker 3: Weatherford?
- Robert: Yeah, it sounds right. I don't know.
- Mike: Well, that's where the flight school is. But you went to basic training, I would assume, in Fort Polk.
- Robert: Well, that was it ~ Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Mike: That's where they sent all warrant officer candidates to go to basic training. And then they would, once they finished basic training, they would send them then to Wolters or whatever.

Robert: Yeah, Fort Wolters.

Mike: Okay, fine. So in your mind's eye, how many people in your basic company were also like you that were going to fly? Two, five, 10, 100?

Robert: Oh, man.

Mike: Guess.

Robert: I'd say 30 or 40, right in there.

Mike: Really?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: That's a big number.

Robert: Yeah. I'm just guessing.

Mike: That's fine. Your guess is infinitely better than mine. Okay, fine.

Robert: Well, I had an interesting thing happen to me at Wolters. They asked for some people to stay behind because the next school where we would be training in the Hueys, they asked for volunteers to stay back. Well, I said, "I'll stay back for one month." So, they made a super senior out of me. So, I kind of helped the sergeants and stuff with the guys, you know. And I was walking to the PX one day and two Cobras flew in. And I didn't even know we had Cobras. I didn't even know what they were. So, I went running down there as fast as I could go to. Two Majors jumped out and I said, "Sir, sir. What are you flying, sir?" He said, "That's the new Cobra." And I said, "Oh, how do I get into that?" And so he wrote down a piece of paper. I ran back to the first sergeant. I said, "I want a 1049 for Cobra school." And he said, "You can't do that." And I said, "You can't refuse me a 1049." So he threw it at me and I filled it out and handed it to him. When we graduated, there was like 400 of us. They picked three guys to go to Cobra school, me and one guy on each side of me. And we went off to Savannah, Georgia to Cobra school.

Mike: Okay. Yeah, that's good. And by the way, I interviewed the guy that flew that Cobra into Wolters. He used to go to the PX there all the time and fly it out of Bell Helicopter down at Fort Worth. Anyway, so your memory is good.

Robert: Yeah, in some ways.

Mike: All right. Could you name your best friends in flight school, either in Wolters or Rucker or even in Savannah?

Robert: Mostly in Vietnam, I can remember their names, but flight school, no. I'd have to look them up.

Mike: So you had half a year at Wolters. One month pre-flight, four months of flight training, and then your super-senior month?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: All right, fine. And so then you go to Rucker and you finish that class. You didn't get delayed?

Robert: No. And then I went to Cobra school after that.

Mike: Yeah, right. And that was three weeks long.

Robert: Yeah, that sounds about right. It wasn't very long. It was just enough to get us oriented in the Cobra.

Mike: Yeah, right. Well, it had a very high touch control compared to the Huey.

Robert: Yeah, especially at a hover!

Mike: Yeah, until they moved the tail rotor to the other side. So, you get into Vietnam in March of '68. [Later reviewed his DD-214 USARPAC (United States Army Pacific) date is 2 April 1968]

Robert: Yeah, March, or it might have been a little earlier than that.

Mike: All right, fine. You just took leave after flight school?

Robert: Yes. Not very long, and then I got shipped over

Mike: And so in your mind's eye, how many people were in your Cobra class?

Robert: Three, I remember. I can see their faces. Yeah, there were three of us that stayed in a beach house. I got that picture. I can't remember their names. I think Newkirk [David J. Newkirk] might have been one of them. I can't remember the other one right now.

Mike: Okay, fine. They were just your friends, but the school was bigger than that. The whole class was more than three.

Robert: Oh, yeah. I have no idea how big the class was.

Mike: All right, fine. So where do you land in Vietnam, do you know? There's two logical places.

Robert: Saigon. Of course, that's where the main airport was to bring everybody in on an airliner. And then I was shipped down to Dong Tam, far south as you can go around the Mekong. That was D Troop, 3rd of the 5th Cav.

Mike: So, you waited a couple of days at the 90th Replacement Battalion until you got sent back?

Robert: No. The minute I landed, they shipped me right off. seemed to me like they just put me in a helicopter and took off with me. They want to get some killers going, I guess.

Mike: All right. You get down there, and how does that go?

Robert: In beginning I didn't like it because it was the old gunships. What do they call that? The B model or whatever it was. I didn't like the way it flew and everything. The first day we went in to pick up a wounded guy, threw him behind my seat. I wasn't flying. I was sitting in the other seat. And he took off from this, right over some water, and there's a VC laying in the water. And I looked down, and he's aiming right at me, pulled full automatic on me. I peeled up in the seat, turned sideways and got as flat as I could. The bullets ran it across the bottom of my seat and hit the guy we just picked up again in the back! So, I got lucky that time. But that was awful. I can still see that guy looking at me and I'm going holy s****s!

Mike: Yeah, that's pretty traumatic. So that was one of your first days in Vietnam?

Robert: That was my big first moment.

Mike: How long did you stay in that unit not flying Cobras?

Robert: Seems to me like it was two months before we got the Cobras. It might have been three months. I was flying the C models. I mean, these guys were really different. The guys that flew the old gunships collected ears off guys they killed and stuff like that. I wasn't too fond of that. One guy had a wire in his room, with just enough ears

hanging on it. I thought this guy had gone off the deep end. But when the Cobra got there and we all got switched over, we were a little bit more...

Mike: Humane, huh?

Robert: Yeah, a little more humane. It may not have looked like that when we were shooting them up with miniguns, but we had to learn some new tactics when we were working with the LOHs and stuff like that. We were trying to keep them from getting killed because we were covering them.

I don't know if I mentioned I worked with Ace Cozzalio [Ace Alan Cozzalio] quite a bit. He was the wildest LOH pilot I've ever met in my life! He was not afraid of anything. He would use the rotor blades to push the reeds out of the way to see if the bad guys were hiding in there. And I'd say about 50% of the time they were laying there waiting for him. They just would nail him and his door gunner. I don't know how many door gunners he got wounded. They were hanging out of the end and trying to shoot underneath when they made contact. Then, I had to go in and try to help him. It was really interesting.

Mike: Yeah. How many hours, in your mind, did you fly Charlie model or the B model?

Robert: Oh, man? It just seemed like a real short period of time to me, but I think it was two or three months. It was every day going out, kind of like it was when we got the Cobras. But I think we were a lot more active when the Cobras got there. I can't remember if the LOHs were there when the Charlie models were running around. It seems to me like they both came together, but I don't know.

Mike: So, do you remember being checked out and signed off as an aircraft commander in the Cobra?

Robert: In the Cobra, I flew front seat for Captain Roger Herrmann [Roger C. Herrmann]. He was kind of the highest ranking guy that was out there shooting every day. I was one of the few guys that could cover from the front because I was an old farm boy. I had some muscle in my arms to work the weapons systems. Most of the guys couldn't cover him from the front seat. So, Roger, because of his rank, he kept me in the front seat to make sure I got him home in case something happened. I flew with him until he went left Vietnam. I've always assumed that I was his guardian.

Mike: So, after he left, you moved to the back seat?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: So how long did you fly with Roger?

Robert: Oh, it seemed to me like four to five months.

Mike: At that point in time when you finally moved to the back seat, you'd been in Vietnam well over half a year.

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: All right. Did you have any emergency situations flying in Vietnam. Let's talk about Charlie models first.

Robert: I got my engine shot out six times and had to put it down. In the Charlie model, my only serious incident was the one we talked about earlier. Yeah, but they didn't shoot it down. That's my memory of that machine gun looking right at me about five feet away when we flew over the top of it. It's imprinted in my head pretty well. I still kind of squeeze back on a chair when I think about it.

Mike: And you should!!

Robert: Especially when it hit the armored seat. I could feel it! It was a strange feeling.

Mike: Yeah, of course.

Robert: I mean, we got shot at a lot. That was just a daily thing. We got wounded quite a bit. I didn't. That was the closest I got to being wounded, for my whole tour. I had another serious incident. One day we were going to Saigon to pick up one of our aircraft that had been rebuilt. And usually they'd take them to Vung Tau, but this one was near Saigon for some reason. So we went up to ferry it back home. I was flying front seat. I can't remember who the guy in the back was. We were going right out south of Saigon over the Plain of Reeds. And he said, "Look, somebody's cutting a buffalo up down there." I said, "Well, I wonder who that would be?" So, the pilot started to roll over like this. As I pulled it the front weapons systems sight around to start using them, I saw tracers coming up at us. So I switched to the 40-millimeter grenade launcher system. All of a sudden KABOOM! One of their bullets hit a 40-mm round as it was coming out of the tube, blew the whole canopy right off the aircraft.

Mike: Really?

Robert: Yeah. All we had was the frame of where the plexiglass used to be, and I'm hanging on to it so I don't go up in the rotor blades.

Mike: Well, you had your seat harness on.

Robert: Yeah, but I was hanging on to it and I said, "Let's get it to Vung Tau out on the ocean." That was the closest place we could go. We made it there. We got on the ground, shut down; then we looked at the aircraft. The line of hits went right across the side of the Cobra, the same height as my 40. One of the bullets hit that 40 when it came out of the tube and just imploded the whole side of the aircraft. We were just lucky it got back to the base.

Mike: It probably destroyed the turret?

Robert: No, it didn't do much damage to the turret, but I'm sure they had to do work on it. But it really pushed the aircraft in. The pressure in my eyeballs felt like they came right out of my head from the impact. I could hardly see. I had my visor down, thank God, but I just had little pieces of plexiglass on my face. I never got a Purple Heart out of it though.

Mike: That's too bad. You should have gotten one.

Robert: You've got to show a scar to get a Purple Heart, I think.

Mike: No, you don't! Wounds like breaking the skin or even a blood blister in the skin is enough proof.

Robert: You don't? Okay.

Mike: No. You just have to have a set of orders awarding the Purple Heart. Normally an aviation unit could not issue those orders. The unit's medical dispensary could complete the paperwork and send it through channels to a higher command with the authority to issue those orders. Normally, in Vietnam Purple Heart orders were issued by the hospitals or the Combat Aviation Groups. Rarely were they issued at the aviation battalion level.

Robert: I had some scars from the plexiglass.

Mike: You could have received a Purple Heart for that incident.

Robert: Now I just have freckles!

Mike: Good for you!

Robert: But I also have scars from skin cancer.

Mike: That was an interesting ordeal for sure!

Robert: We weren't even on a mission. We were just cruising back to our base. I mean, talk about weird coincidence.

Mike: Well, war is weird. That's for sure.

Robert: Yeah, it is.

Mike: So, did you extend during that tour or just wait till it was over with?

Robert: I just waited until my year was over with. I stayed with Delta Troop the whole time.

Mike: So most every day was the same old story?

Robert: Yeah. We just went out hunting.

Mike: How did you fly? What was the number of LOHs and the number of Cobras on a team?

Robert: Usually, two Cobras and two LOHs went out together. I mean, we stayed down pretty close to the LOHs so we could cover them in case they got hit. But they would be down sweeping through the reeds or trees or whatever was there, trying to flush them out. Or if they had a machine gun nest, Ace was always - he loved those machine gun nests. He would just line up on them, open up his minigun, and fly right at them as they were shooting at him! Usually, he got lucky and won that fight. I saw him do that three or four times!

Mike: Now you said you flew low. Would both Cobras be low or one up higher?

Robert: Usually, one Cobra covered the other. If I went down low, the other one would kind of stay back and make sure he could cover anything shooting off to the side that I couldn't see right away.

Mike: Okay. So, did you fly a loop or an orbit around the LOHs?

Robert: Yeah, kind of like that.

Mike: And how many feet off the rice paddies would you fly?

Robert: Oh, a couple hundred feet when we were protecting the LOHs.

Mike: All right.

Robert: Unless we were on a rocket run, because you got to get up a little higher so you can aim a little bit. That was a little trickier. But if we were just shooting the minigun and/or the 40, then we got down low with those weapons.

Mike: Did you have good reliability with the weapon systems?

Robert: Yeah. I didn't have too many problems. Once in a while the minigun would freeze up, but not very often.

Mike: And the chunker, that was fine?

Robert: Yes, the 40 was really good. I really liked the 40. One night mission in particular, I was on... They always had somebody on duty in case somebody started mortaring so they could go up and stop them. Well, I was on that duty that night and I happened to be with another group down the runway, which I didn't know any of the people, but they assigned one of their Hueys to me. So, we were up just looking around and they get a call that a LRRP team is in trouble. There were six of them in a village trapped and one of them was wounded. And they said, "Can you go get them?" I said, "Sure."

Mike: The Huey was not part of D Troop?

Robert: No. I didn't even know the guys in the Huey.

Mike: Okay. And did you have two guns with you that day?

Robert: No.

Mike: Just that night...

Robert: Just me and the Huey guy that I didn't know.

Mike: Okay. So one Huey and one Cobra?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: All right, fine.

Robert: I went down, did a circle around them just to make sure I knew where they were at. You couldn't see much. It was really dark. I said, "You tell me when I pass over you so I know exactly where you're at." So I made two crosses and I could see a little street between the hooches there. And I said, "Well, that'll be the best path in," you know. So, I called up to the Huey and I said, "Let's go down and get them." He says, "I ain't going down there." I said, "The hell you're not." And he said, "No way." He said, "Those assholes are just waiting for us." I said, "Yeah. You want to leave those guys there in that situation, right?" I said, "I'm through talking. You want a court martial? Are you going down with me?" I said, "Because I'm gonna court martial your a****s." He said, "Well, I'll go down as long as you go with me." I said, "Yeah, I'll follow you right down." It's getting to me a little bit. So, he starts down. I stayed right alongside him. And he got down, got all the guys loaded, he took off. And I just told my co-pilot upfront. I said, just pull the 40 and don't let go, that way to circle them with 40 and he'll fly about it. As he flew out, I just put him right underneath this house and everything, burned the whole village to the ground.

Mike: Well, that'll work.

Robert: That was an exciting night.

Mike: You don't remember the name of the LRRP team or the numbers or anything?

Robert: No, I don't.

Mike: Were they 9th Division people or somebody else?

Robert: They were some unit that was out of our base, but there were so many of them. That was kind of the headquarters for the south. But we got them out of there.

Mike: Oh, that was a good deal. Did you receive an award for that?

Robert: No.

Mike: No?

Robert: No.

Mike: So, guess how many hours you had in gunships in that tour in Vietnam. [Comment from Mike ~ Bob's DD-214 states he was awarded 43 Air Medals. Usually one was awarded for every 25 combat hours flown; therefore Bob logged over 1,000 combat hours in that year. Many people logged that much time as well; but many did NOT!]

Robert: I really don't know.

Mike: Okay, fine. But you flew a lot?

Robert: Oh, yeah. Mike, I'd say three days on, one day off, three days on, one day off, kind of like that. Not always.

Mike: All right, fine. Did anybody in your platoon get seriously hurt?

Robert: Yeah. Not a lot of them. We were pretty lucky. I mean, they got hurt, but not killed. A lot of them. Closest I came was I had a bullet come from, when I was shooting the minigun, a bullet slipped in there and glanced off my helmet and hit Roger in the

breastplate. So, neither one of us got hurt. But that's as close I came to getting it right in the smacker. But I mean, they came across all the time. I took pictures of the canopy. It's just full of patches. I'd go, "How in the hell they miss me?"

Mike: All right. Did you go on R&R?

Robert: Yeah. Trying to think of where I went. It was kind of a weird place.

Mike: What else do you know about Roger?

Robert: I thought he lived out east after I got back I learned that, but he could have moved there. I haven't talked to him for a long time.

Mike: Anybody else that you can remember in your platoon besides... Well, Ace wasn't in your platoon, per se.

Robert: Well, Roger kind of hoarded me because he didn't want anybody else flying front seat, and he had the authority to keep that going. So I flew with him the most time I was over there. But then I can't remember the one kid that flew my front seat after I got up there. I can't think of his name anymore.

Mike: But that was a kind of a normal stick. They would put two pilots together in perpetuity?

Robert: Yeah, it was mostly up to the guy in the back who he wanted. You know, if you were a new guy or something coming in, they kind of like to keep the same guy if they knew he was pretty good at flying up front.

Mike: Okay. What were your living conditions like on that tour?

Robert: It was pretty comfortable, I thought.

Mike: You had wooden hooches?

Robert: We were in tents first, and then when they built barracks, they were nice.

Mike: Two story or one story?

Robert: Two story. Then they had a bunker right outside. I got a funny story about that.

Mike: Go ahead.

Robert: A mortar round came in the middle of the night, landed right between the two buildings. And my roommate, big guy, he was up above me, and he jumps off, pulls the mattress with him on the floor, but knocked me over as I was coming out of the bed. And then another few came in. They were getting awful close and he said, "Let's go. Let's get to the bunker." So, we took off, didn't put our hats on or nothing. Just in our underwear. Ran down the stairway, headed for the bunker. And we had a brand new captain. I didn't even know him. He says, "Get your a****s back up there and get your gas mask and your helmet on." I said, "F**** you. Are you gonna court martial my a****s for doing that?" So, my major, he kind of liked the way we did stuff for him and he says, "Leave them guys alone." That was the end of it. I did. I just told him to F off. Just went right in the bunker.

Mike: So in your mind's eye, how often did you visit the bunker? Once a month? Once every couple of weeks?

Robert: We got mortared probably every three days, not directly on our spot, but the base was pretty big. One time they did a run on the ammo dump and they got in there. It was during the day and we were standing. We heard all this noise going on down there, and they threw a satchel in and it hit one of the big things and it damn near blew us over on the other side of the base, the implosion.

Mike: The shockwave.

Robert: We're standing there looking at it and all sudden...

Mike: Right. Shockwaves are...

Robert: I said, "Man, are they coming in or not?" We didn't know whether to go grab our guns or what. But they never got very far. They shot them all. That was a big explosion though.

Mike: The whole time was at Dong Tam?

Robert: Yes.

Mike: All right, fine. Okay. So, did you wear the flower power patch on your shoulder?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: Okay, fine. So the regular 9th Infantry patch?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: Okay. So you had two tours in Vietnam?

Robert: No, just one.

Mike: Oh, I thought you were...

Robert: I didn't go back, no.

Mike: Okay, fine.

Robert: I went to Germany.

Mike: All right. So you leave Vietnam. And do you still have your DD214?

Robert: I think I might, but it's probably in a pile of papers that I haven't seen for a long time.

Mike: All right.

Robert: I don't think I threw any of that away, but that's...

Mike: All right. Would you make an effort to try to find...

Robert: You want copies of them?

Mike: Well, I would like copies of all your Vietnam Era papers.

Robert: I can do that document.

Mike: -documents.

Robert: Sure.

Mike: All right. I will give you a business card and we can go from there.

Robert: I know I got tons of stuff. I just haven't looked at it for a long time.

Mike: Well, it's no rush, but it's priceless.

Robert: Oh, sure.

Mike: And as good as he is (referring to Bob's brother, Brent), he won't be able to help you much.

Robert: He'll make sure I get it done. My wife's a big help!

Brent: I will.

Robert: My wife's my top boss and he's my second boss.

Mike: Oh yeah?

Brent: It's my job.

Robert: He's got to keep me up straight.

Mike: How much age difference between you and your brother?

Robert: 16 years.

Mike: Oh yeah?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: So he was alive when you were in Vietnam but he was very young.

Robert: Yeah. My sister -- let's see -- four years, something like that.

Mike: Oh yeah?

Brent: Three or four.

Robert: She's been gone quite a while though.

Mike: Okay. How many Air Medals do you remember you got?

Robert: 43.

Mike: Oh, that's a lot for one tour. Congratulations. You flew a lot.

Robert: That number really sticks.

Mike: Well, good. It should. Did you get a Bronze Star?

Robert: Got a Bronze Star. I got two Distinguished Flying Crosses. Oh, man, I can't remember the rest of them.

Mike: All right. That's good enough. So can you describe to me the events for the Distinguished Flying Crosses?

Robert: Not really. I thought every day was like they were giving me one.

Mike: Sometimes that happened!

Robert: I think more or less the guy that wrote you up was so glad you were there, that kind of thing, you know. There's a lot of days I did the same thing that I got the medal for, but I didn't get a medal for that day. You know what I mean?

Mike: Sure. I do know exactly what you mean. But a lot of people expect...

Robert: When you hang your a****s out and you bring it home, you go, "Wow."

Mike: That's true.

Robert: I didn't get it. They didn't give me, I should say.

Mike: That's right. So other than that, looking down at the guy that stitched the bottom of the helicopter, that was one of your more poignant experiences in Vietnam?

Robert: Well, it was such a surprise. It happened so fast. The minute I turned the turret, everything happened. Boom, there's no canopy, you know. It's called survival after that.

Mike: Sure.

Robert: About 1,000 feet up and you got to figure out how you're going to get on the ground without dying, you know.

Mike: Yeah, sure. I didn't know you could actually lose the canopy, but I bet you could.

Robert: There was no plexiglass left. I don't know how it did that. I mean, I felt it because my eyes have been watering ever since. It just about blew my eyeballs out and lost my hearing in this ear because of it. Not completely, but might as well because it's hard for me to understand. They're talking on that side and this guy's gonna get all... All

the noise comes in from there. I haven't got my hearing aids because I forgot them at home.

Mike: You got problems, boy.

Robert: Yeah, I do. I can't remember s****s.

Mike: You got problems.

Brent: Can I jog his memory a little bit?

Mike: Sure!

Robert: Yeah, I have to have my wife and him to keep me going. They know what I want to say sometimes so I can get it out.

Brent: What about your mission with Ace when, was it [David J. Newkirk] Newkirk's LOH got shot down?

Robert: Oh yeah, that's in the book [Rex Gooch's book on Ace]. That was a bad day. That's one day I should have brought up.

Mike: Go ahead.

Robert: The very first time Ace flew in the front seat with me. He'd just got back from Cobra school [the AH-1G NETT (New Equipment Training Team) was the in-country Cobra pilot training school], which I didn't know. That's when he just disappeared for a while. And he chose my ship because, you know, I was his co-pilot for a long time. He hopped in. Well, he says, "I'm your front seater today." I said, "Okay." So off we go. Well, he's micromanaging the LOHs because that's what he did all the time, you know. So that's all he's doing, giving instruction. "Get out there and do that, do that," you know. And so they're showing off for him, right? And it was kind of a, it was really a lot of trees, and then there was a big patch of reeds. And Newkirk goes out there and he says, "I think I saw somebody run through here." So, he started pushing the grass away with the rotor blades. Well, they were waiting for him. WHAP! They hit him. I'm trying to think of where they hit him. They hit him in the groin almost. Came up and I think they got him up here. So, he pulls in full power, goes straight backwards, almost 100 yards, hits a palm tree and slides down the palm tree. And so, I fly down to cover him. But, I was out of ammo. I told Ace, I said, "We got to go home," and that's when all this started. I couldn't even shoot a round. So, I turned the helicopter backwards because we didn't have that much armor forward the front. All our armor is in the seats but the engine and everything back there will protect us some. I turned my butt to the enemy and they were just nailing the helicopter. I said, "Get them out of that LOH and let's get going."

Mike: All right. So you landed?

Robert: No, I didn't land. I just hovered so they could do their job to get the guys out of the helicopter.

Mike: So you're blocking the fire.

Robert: Well, I'm trying to block the fire. They're just filling the helicopter full of holes. I'm sitting there waiting for the engine to quit. So, they got over there and they pulled two guys out of the helicopter and threw them in and we took off, and I took off and I'm just smoking like crazy, and they're just waiting for that engine to quit, but I made it all the way to the base. I couldn't believe it. And both the guys in the LOH made it. They were wounded. We never saw them again. They shipped them home.

Mike: What was the one guy's name?

Robert: Ace, you mean?

Mike: No.

Robert: Newkirk, I think was his name. I don't remember what his... He wasn't a pilot in the scouts. The gunner was the crew chief. I didn't know the crew chiefs that well because I didn't work with the LOHs. So I don't know what his crew chief's name was. It's in the book. That was one hairy day!

Mike: How long did you hover?

Robert: It felt like forever, but it probably was at least 10 minutes. All I could hear, ping ping ping. I'm waiting for that engine to go boom. Luckily, it didn't, but it was smoking when we got it back.

Brent: Did you get another helicopter then and go back?

Robert: Yeah, I got another helicopter, went back, got shot up again, but didn't go down. There must have been a real big nest of them in there. That was quite a day.

Mike: So how did you get to work on that project?

Robert: What do you mean by project?

Mike: Well, Rex's book about Ace.

Robert: Rex just called me up.

Mike: Did you know Rex from Vietnam?

Robert: Did I know what?

Mike: Rex from Vietnam?

Robert: No, no. He just called me. Evidently, the other guys told him that I was part of that group that was in there with Ace and stuff. He just gave me a call and said, "Would you like to help me write the book?" I said, "Sure." So we corresponded for, oh God, three or four months back and forth, and I'd had to put it in writing and send it to him, and I kept copies and all that. But I had to sign a deal that I wouldn't get the money out of the book because he was doing all the work and I said, "That's fine."

Brent: And when you guys ran out of ammo, Ace stuck his revolver out the window.

Robert: Oh, yeah, I forgot that part. Ace is turning the nose little bit to the right so I can shoot at them. He pulls a 357 out, holding the canopy and laying over the nose shooting at them with a pistol. Oh God, that guy was something else!

Brent: They probably knew you were out of ammo.

Robert: Oh, yeah, that was pretty obvious. I forgot that one. That's the best part. I said, "Ace, I don't think that's going to slow them down but go ahead."

Mike: Lucky, he didn't make you charge them with the Cobra!

Robert: Oh God. I didn't think we were gonna make it out of there. I thought that was my last day on earth right there!

Mike: All right. What other experiences do you remember? Did you have good enough maintenance, did you think?

Robert: Yeah, I thought they were pretty good.

Mike: In other words, you didn't...

Robert: Didn't have a lot of trouble, you know. The only trouble we had is when we got shot up. You know it usually screwed up the engine or something. But I went back smoking quite a bit when they hit something on the engine. I know I had to do a forced landing six times total, not right in the firing zone where we were at like the

one today with Ace. It was out in the open, but still scary just to be out in the middle of a place you don't know where those little... What do you call them?

Mike: Bad guys were.

Robert: Yeah, where the bad guys were. So got a little nervous when I'm sitting on the ground. Say, "Hey, we're over here. Come and get us."

Mike: Right. Now, did you guys fly with two LOHs, two Cobras, plus a Huey?

Robert: No, we didn't have Hueys. Two Cobras and two LOHs.

Mike: Okay, that's the way you flew.

Robert: That's how we always went out.

Mike: So the lead Cobra was also the Charlie Charlie (command and control)?

Robert: Not always. The LOH guy, whoever's running the LOHs was in charge of that, but we cooperated. I think it was more or less who was the highest ranking in the group of the helicopters. But it seemed to me like the Cobras were kind of in charge, but the LOHs kind of went on their own too. So I don't remember saying, "Hey, you can't tell me to do that because I'm going to do this." You know, there was none of that. They just did their job and we just followed them around and protected them. Even if I told them let's go, they still would finish what they wanted to do. They didn't listen to me.

Mike: So did you routinely do spot reports to whoever you were working for?

Robert: You mean reports on what we did?

Mike: Yeah.

Robert: I think we did if we got in trouble, but I don't remember doing that. I'm sure we had to write up reports.

Mike: Well, I was talking about radio calls more than anything else.

Robert: Well, yeah. If we're in deep shit, we started calling for more help.

Mike: Oh, well, yeah, what I was talking about, you know. So you would bring out two full teams. One would be in the AO, one would be sitting at the refuel point, and switch?

Robert: You mean as far as the team of LOHs and Cobras?

Mike: Yeah.

Robert: No. We always went out as a team. We had nothing to do with the other teams. They were out doing their thing.

Mike: Okay. That Air Cavalry troop could have more than one team hunting at the same time?

Robert: Oh, yeah, we had several of them going out.

Mike: At the same time?

Robert: Oh, yeah.

Mike: All right, fine.

Robert: Different places. I think we covered the whole area south of Saigon. We'd go out to different missions. Depending on what General wanted us to go where, they would say, "We want you over there today. They need protection." Or, "They're already in trouble. Go help them." That type of thing.

Mike: Okay.

Robert: We mostly went to where the s****t was happening just because we had to get the ground troops out of trouble because they get shot up pretty bad and they start hollering and say, "We need help." And then we had to go out there and get the medevacs in and stuff and make sure they could get in without getting shot down, stuff like that. I'd just fly covers around them when they were on the ground, this big circle, so they knew what they were going to get if they opened fire. The VC didn't like us.

Mike: No, no. I understand that. And the LOHs would be as close as they could without getting in the way?

Robert: Yeah. I mean, we went out without the LOHs. The only time we went with the LOHs is when we were like a hunting team trying to find the enemy. They called it a hunter-killer team. We went out as just Cobras sometimes just like to protect, I say, the medevac or something like that.

Mike: Okay. So you were more of an escort person.

Robert: Yeah, we were. It varied quite a bit, but most of the time we were out hunting for the enemy. But it changed according to whatever our Major wanted to do.

Mike: I was kind of surprised to hear that you would fly multiple teams in reconnaissance mode at the same time, but you did.

Robert: Well, it was never anything special. Just the same way. It all depended on what was going on and how bad it was. And if it was real bad, we even sent out more Cobras. We'd have two of them circling here and two of them circling over here if it was a big area, and we'd be taking care of a larger area just so they couldn't move in on the troops. It was different tactics all the time.

Mike: Okay, no worries.

Robert: It was this kind of whatever... You know, once we got used to how Charlie did things, then we kind of... Not that we could read their mind, but we kind of knew what they were trying to do. So, we'd try to cover the ground troops. That was our main goal. Is keep the ground troops from getting killed.

Mike: Did you put your own infantry in very often?

Robert: My own what?

Mike: Each Air Cav Troop had their own infantry. Did you put your own infantry in?

Robert: Yeah. We had 18 Doughboys, we called them.

Mike: You called them Doughboys?

Robert: Yeah.

Mike: All right, fine.

Robert: We'd put them in and then we'd sit there and protect them.

Mike: All right, fine.

Robert: Didn't do that a lot. I didn't like doing that because I knew all the guys we were putting down there.

Mike: Quickly now, did you quit flying a few weeks before you DEROSed or? Before you left Vietnam, did you stop flying or?

Robert: No, no. I flew right up to the last day. I was on a mission right up to the last day.

Mike: And then?

Robert: Then I went to Germany.

Mike: Okay. And flew Cobras in Germany?

Robert: No. They didn't have them except on the border. I was guarding the Russians there. And I called down there, one of my buddies that I flew with over there, I said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Where are the Cobras?" And he said, "Come on down." I said, "You get any time off?" And he said, "No." And I said, "Don't mention my name." So, all I did was I flew a Bell 13 to keep my hours up. And then they let me out six months early unless I reuped. They offered me captain in one year and all kinds of stuff to keep me in and I said, "Not if I don't have to." He said, "No, the war is winding down. We don't need you, but we would like to keep you because you're trained." And I said, "No, I'm done."

Mike: So when did you leave the army?

Robert: Let's see. '70-something. Don't know the exact date. I was about a year and a half into Germany.

Mike: Oh, all right. And so then what did you do?

Robert: Went back. My dad started a sheet metal company. He was a sheet metal worker. I did that before I went in the service. And we started our own company out on his farm and built the company up. Did that for several years until he retired, and then I went to work for Tessiers in Sioux Falls and worked for them until I retired.

Mike: Good for you. So you didn't go in the guard or anything like that?

Robert: No, no. I was done with all that.

Mike: All right. Any other words of wisdom for this conversation?

Robert: I would say it was all worth it, the thrill, because I made it.

Mike: Didn't get hurt.

Robert: No. Well, maybe up here, but he's always known that.

Mike: Good enough.

Robert: I've always been a little goofy.

Mike: All right, fine. So your homework assignment is we'd certainly like a copy of all your Vietnam papers ...

Robert: He'll make sure I do it.

Mike: All right.

Robert: My mind - I go from day to day anymore.

Mike: Well, thank you very much for the chat.

Robert: Well, I hope I did some good for you.

Mike: Well, it's your history. Anything else you would like recorded?

Robert: No. I can't think of anything right now.

Mike: Well, when we get the transcript, then we'll go from there.

Robert: Okay, sounds good.

Mike: All right. Thanks for your time.

Robert: You bet.

Mike: So you do go by, Bob?

Robert: Robert. My wife says Robert because she wants to be more proper, but you can call me Bob. That's fine.

Mike: It's fine with me.
Robert: Just don't do it in front of her.
Mike: No.
Brent: He's also known as Rambo by his friends.