Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Marius Burke
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

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.

Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Marius Burke on the 9th of June, year 2000, at 11:45 p.m. in Wilksberry, Pennsylvania at the Woodlands Inn. Alright, Mr. Burke, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Marius Burke: Okay, well with going to flight training and went into Navy flight training and was asked to, I was given the option to go either Navy or Marine so I decided to go Marine and went into helicopters. Most of my time on active duty was aboard ship based out of Jacksonville, North Carolina and a lot of time in the Caribbean. My last tour was in Guantanamo Bay with a detachment down there and then some special mission work with an H-37 running up and down the coast with electronics equipment and so forth. Then we went down to an island about 100 miles south of Cuba called Labasa Island. It actually belongs to the U.S. It used to have a colony there back in the 1890s but since been abandoned. The only thing they had on there were goats left over. We did some work down there and lost our 14th engine in 2 weeks on the way back and ended up having to dump our electronics equipment to keep from going into the ocean and that was pretty much the end of the project anyway. So, that took care of it. Shortly thereafter I went back to the States and was getting out and that's when the missile crisis came to a head. Of course, the day after we finished our project is when they shot down the U-2 so I ended up being told that I was involuntarily extended and I'd

already checked out so I checked back in again and a couple of days later they clarified it and said, 'Well anybody who was due to get out before the 31st of October, would get out,' and I think I was scheduled to get out on the 30th of October. So, I started checking out. The NCO ended up talking me into extending and I foolishly said, 'Well I'll extend if I can go down on the first wave,' those kind of stupid things that you do when you're young and foolish, and of course, 'Yeah, of course, that's no problem.' So, we went down there and cruised around for about 3 months and nothing came of it; it was a waste of a [retrieved old?] helicopter. Then I got out and fly with a reserve squadron. I got an offer to fly A-4s and went to school in East Carolina and then North Carolina State. As I was running out of money and looking for a job, I got called by Air America and it seemed like it would be a good summer job. That's how I ended up over there.

SM: Alright, now you were in the Marine Corps from 1958 to 1963?

MB: Right.

SM: How would you rate the flight training you received? Did you think it was pretty good?

MB: In the Marine Corps? That flight training?

SM: Uh-huh.

MB: The best, yeah, absolutely. I mean, it was an 18 month program. The first 4 months are all academics and physical training and by the time I was done with that I don't know if I was any smarter but I was certainly in the best shape of my life and I thought I was in pretty good shape before I ever went in. The flight training, of course back at that time they've since changed it but we had to go through everything. We started flying the T-34, went to the T-28, then we went into twin beeches and the last 6 weeks I went into helicopters. That was my choice, so out of 18 months I had 6 weeks worth of helicopter training before I went into the fleet.

SM: Now how was that transition from fixed wing to helicopter? What was the hardest thing about transitioning?

MB: Oh, it really wasn't all that bad. Helicopter's a lot more complex compared to the airplanes, and I went straight from essentially our flight training was in a little Bell 47, a little bubble Bell right into an H-37 squadron which was, at that point in time, the largest helicopter in the world. It's a big twin engine machine, you carry trucks and cars

and everything else inside. So that was a challenge but it was sort of an elite squadron and it was very top heavy with majors and colonels but it was kind of *the* squadron on the helicopter side of things in the Marine Corps and most of these folks were fighter pilots and they didn't have a lot of helicopter experience so its kind of the blind leading the blind and within a year I probably had more time and experience with the machine than anyone else in the unit and I was suddenly the instructor and I was supposedly the expert and realistically I didn't know what I was doing. We were just kind of learning by feel more than anything else. There was no challenge. Actually, I learned more about flying when I got out and got into the reserves and was flying jets because folks there had thousands of hours and they knew what they were doing. It taught me a few things.

SM: Now the time you spent in the Caribbean in the late 50s, early 60s; where were you when the Bay of Pigs invasion occurred?

MB: Well let's see, what time frame would that be?

SM: That would have been just after Kennedy came into office, early '61.

MB: I'm trying to recall. Most of our time was spent around [Diegas?] off of Puerto Rico was where we did our maneuvers and so forth and then we cruised around during that time and they never let us do anything.

SM: Okay, so your unit hadn't received any kind of a mission to support that invasion that you were aware of?

MB: Not specifically, but in general. Yeah, where we're here and if we get the call, we're going in. That really was not very well organized, almost like the evacuation of Saigon. It was sort of that type of thing.

SM: What did you think or what did the members of your unit think when you heard about the invasion and the fact that it failed?

MB: I was pretty disappointed. Yeah, we really hoped that we would get in there and do something, and yeah, pretty frustrated and it just seemed like it was one more political snafu.

SM: Did you wonder why you weren't a more active part of that invasion?

MB: Well quite frankly we were so far removed from the decision makers and stuff like that that we were just there and you followed orders and whatever they wanted

you to do you were going to go do it and that was about it. So, it really wasn't the type of thing where we were on top of how the decisions were being made or anything like that.

SM: And what about the Cuban Missile Crisis, '62? At that point, you were, like you said, you were just about to get out and you decided to stay in because you wanted to be in the first wave. Did you guys realize or did you talk about at the time the potential for actual nuclear war and potential that the ground invasion might actually trigger…

MB: You know, I don't think anybody seriously thought that there was going to be a nuclear war. That seemed to be so far out. That was just my thinking anyway and we were looking at it as being a simple invasion going in there and just doing our thing and mopping up and taking care of business and of course that was the most frustrating part and it became pretty boring just cruising around the waters there for a couple of months with nothing happening, particularly for me since that was the only reason I hung around. By then I was fed up. I was really ready to get out.

SM: Did your unit have anything to do with the turning of the Russian ships back, the confrontations between U.S. and Russian forces in the Caribbean?

MB: Not that I recall. I think they probably kept us maybe a little further away and they just used the smaller ships to handle that part. I don't recall sighting any of them.

SM: Now have you heard recently that some of the documentation and some of the information that's come out more recently about the Cuban Missile Crisis is that there were, in fact, 9 short range ballistic missiles already launchable ready to go in Cuba, and Khrushchev had given the crews on the ground orders, 'If the Americans attack, launch!' Have you heard that?

MB: No, no, actually I haven't.

SM: Oh, okay.

MB: That's interesting.

SM: I was wondering if you had heard that, or now that you have, what do you think about that and the proposed assault?

MB: Well its probably not real surprising and certainly the powers that be, they supposedly had that information at the time or…

SM: They did not have that information.

MB: They did not have that information?

SM: No, Kennedy did not know.

MB: Really?

SM: He was moments away from ordering the launch of the assault. That's when [Kruschev] backed down was at that point.

MB: That's interesting.

SM: It was [? Brinksmanship?] Kennedy didn't really realize…

MB: He didn't realize…

SM: …how close…

MB: ….how lucky he was.

SM: But alright, anyway, I was just curious. Okay, so Air America approached you in 1963 to apply for them. How did they approach you?

MB: I just got a call.

SM: You just got a call?

MB: They tracked me down somehow or another through Red Dawson there in the Washington office.

SM: Do you think it had anything to do with those last flights you were making in the Cuba area, the [Elant and Sigan?] flights you were making?

MB: Oh, I'm sure it did because I'm sure those were agency folks who were working with us at the time and I don't know what other reason they would just single me out because they really hadn't hired any helicopter pilots for about a year or so because at that point in time there wasn't much activity up in Laos. The guys were lucky to fly ten hours in a month. They really didn't hire anybody else for almost a year after I got there, so there was about maybe 8 or 10 pilots at Udorn and when I showed up on the scene they weren't particularly happy to see me because that meant cutting their hours. They were only getting 10 hours and here I show up and that was probably going to be 10% of their flying that was going to be cut down for what that was worth and they didn't really understand why I was there and so that made them suspicious, too. They probably thought there were some other ulterior motives; I was there to spy on them or something. But yeah, nothing much happened. They ended up I was there for a month or two and then they sent me to Tai Pei to get a Chinese license which was kind of a joke but we had

a Bell 47 that was used for some special stuff and it was Chinese registered. The company had a number of airplanes that were Chinese registered and you had to have a Chinese license, but the irony of it was that when Chenault was there in Taiwan, part of the reward for flying tigers was civil air transport was made flag carrier of Taiwan and that was still the case when we were there and of course Taiwan had its own national airline, China Airlines, and there was a lot of resentment over that. So they were trying to figure out a way of ending that and one way was not to get Chinese licenses out to folks so they had great difficulty getting anybody to be able to pass the tests and for some reason I did, but it was a 2 day ordeal and they did everything to make it difficult for you. I was out CCA building which was outside of town in the middle of February, it was cold, it was rainy, no heat, and they let me use the corner, one of the secretary's desks, and the typewriter would be running across and all that. The exam was sort of translated from FAA exams and translated into Chinese and back into English and they lost something in the translation and some of the questions would even be completely covered over, but then the next question would be referring to the question that had been covered over and of course you didn't know what that question was so you couldn't answer this one and when I went over to the proctor to ask him, 'I don't know how to answer this because this.' And he says, ' That's one.' I said, 'One?' He said, 'Yes. You do that one more time and you already fail. No cheating allowed.' Okay…so I ended up getting a license anyway. But eventually I think we got rid of most of the Chinese registry aircraft anyway.

SM: Now when you first went to work for air America, and more than likely par of this was intelligence work that you did the last year that you worked in the Marine Corps throughout Guantanamo Bay, did you have to go through any other specialized training or background investigation? I imagine you already had quite a clearance for that kind of work.

MB: Yeah, oh I think they did their background checks and all of that which we're certainly not privy to exactly what that existed of. There really wasn't much beyond that other than our in house flight training to get prepared and of course everybody's sitting there saying, 'Well, I bet you these guys are the CIA,' so everyone pretty well figured that one out but nobody really talked about it. We weren't supposed

to talk about it. We weren't supposed to talk about anything that you were doing so it was kind of a sort of an Alice in Wonderland type scenario and there were different levels of information. As chief pilot, you were privy to a lot more things that were going on. It was just like the T-28 program; nobody talked about it, supposedly nobody knew who was flying those aircraft. Well, probably most folks did know. I mean, you're up there on the radio talking, you can recognize voices and things like that, too, so a lot of this stuff, best kept secrets, were pretty tough to keep those.

SM: Can you explain a little bit more about that program, what it encompassed?

MB: Well, one of the biggest problems we had, and it had to do I think with the degree of secrecy and all that was people didn't know what we were doing, didn't understand what we were doing, particularly the military so there was a lot of resentment, and in the early days we were the only search and rescue capability in Laos because there were no U.S. military folks on the ground or anything like that, and we had great success because one, we knew the area, and typically if we were within 30 minutes, if you were within the first 30 minutes of somebody going down, had a real good chance of getting them out. If it went beyond then, it was tough because then the enemy, they would kind of circle around and wait and ambush and so forth. That became tough. But, a lot of times when we'd go out on special missions and things like that where we really needed to have air support because we were doing some very sensitive, hot areas and we needed close air support, you couldn't get it. The military wouldn't provide it or if they did, it wasn't real good. I remember one specific instance where it was really frustrating. We got the call that an Air Force pilot had been shot down some months earlier up near Sam Nor and had been captured, and then they got word that he'd escaped and made contact with some friendly elements and so we got a call one afternoon and there was two of us working up in that area, Bobby Nunez was in one helicopter and I was in the other, an H-34 and we had to cross the trail up by Sam Nor and that was not a good place to be because they had 37 millimeter radar controlled guns on trucks running up and down there along with all other casualty aircraft and it was not a healthy thing to be crossing that road. So they said, 'Well we have cover coming in to support you coming off the ship,' so we're orbiting to the west of the road and sure enough, these jets come in and they said, 'We don't know what we were supposed to be doing but we were told to call in

this frequency,' and I said, 'Well here's what we'd like you to do,' I said, 'If you'll go ahead and make runs on the road, we'll cut across.' The guy came back and he says, 'Who the hell are you?' and I said, 'Well that's not really important, what's important is what you're trying to do,' and all I heard was, 'To hell with you,' and they off and left us. So, I was…I couldn't even see straight anymore. I was furious at them. So, we're orbiting and Bobby, he was way up there about 10,000 feet and figuring out what we were going to do and pretty soon I look down and I'd probably gone over the road about 20 times going like this and we were on the other side of the road and I said, 'Well, we're here, let's go.' So we went out, we made contact with one group of friendlies and they didn't have the pilot with them. They said, 'Well he's with another group. You'll have to come back tomorrow before we can get him to a place where you can get him out,' so I was relieved that night and went back home and came back up the next day. We used our own T-28s to escort our folks and that was really…we didn't have a lot of choice because if we needed support that we could depend on, we figured we'd have to do it ourselves. So, the group of us that were flying the 28s got trained by the air commandos there in Udorn and they had removable insignias on the sides depending on who was flying them and so forth. But, it was nice. We were able to at least talk back to them. Most of the time we didn't have that option.

SM: So when you say removable insignia, you mean like the U.S. insignia, Thai insignia…

MB: Lao insignia.

SM: Lao insignia, that kind of stuff?

MB: No insignia.

SM: No insignia?

MB: Yeah, that's what we used.

SM: So you could even fly false squad operations where you could…just because the insignia's on there doesn't mean that's the actual pilot?

MB: Right, right.

SM: Now when you said you made contact in Laos with friendlies, are you talking about the CIA operated mobile teams or mobile forces there?

MB: Yeah, well, you know whether it be the Hmoung the mayos, we always called them the mayos. It wasn't until we came back to the States we started calling them Hmoung. Mostly we worked with them.

SM: And they were, in essence, also part of the teams that were certified CIA?

MB: Right, yeah, and we'd drop teams all over the country, up in Vietnam and so forth. They'd do listening and road watch and all kinds of different things.

SM: Now when you arrived in 19…you arrived back, you arrived in Udorn in '64?

MB: '63.

SM: And you were there by '63? Wow, that was a quick turn around. What were your primary responsibilities once you got there in Thailand?

MB: Oh, just as a line pilot for about the first year.

SM: And what kind of missions did you run that first year or so?

MB: Pretty much a little bit of everything. We didn't do a whole lot of flying during that first year. Probably in '64 it started picking up.

SM: Were you running teams into Laos at that point?

MB: Oh yeah, our flying was in Laos and but we'd support USAID, refugee relief, food, supplies, ammo, and things like that to the outposts. But, it was pretty low key. Most of what we were doing was just USAID work, helping refugees, things like that.

SM: Do you know if the teams you were putting in place, especially the [CRA], the civilian led mobile teams, if they were engaging in operations like road watch at that point in '63 or '64?

MB: I don't know if we were doing any of that in '63. There may have been a little bit. It picked up as time went by and as activity picked up obviously.

SM: And what about electronics or signaled intelligence? Would you fly birds outfitted with equipment similar to what you had in Cuba?

MB: Well we had primarily airplanes that were doing things like that, the Do-Do Birds.

SM: U-2s?

MB: Well, U-2s but we had Volpars. Mostly this is lower altitude [?], maybe a lot of camera work, the primary missions would be the camera work and locating, you know, potential drop zones and things like that.

SM: Do you know if the film and the intelligence that was gathered in terms of photo intelligence, was that sent back to the United States or was that processed in country?

MB: Oh, I think they processed it over there and I think the information they got obviously was sent back to the States but they had the capability to do everything right there, both in house and in conjunction with the Air Force.

SM: So when did things really start to pick up for you at Udorn? Was it '64-'65 time frame?

MB: Yeah, I'd say '64-65 when things started picking up.

SM: What did you think about the Gulf of Tonkin incident when that occurred? How much did you hear about it?

MB: Not a whole lot. Information over there was pretty slim. Communications we didn't get, a lot of up-to-date stuff and again, Gulf of Tonkin, that was far away as far as we were concerned.

SM: Now from your perspective, it seems like the emphasis on U.S. foreign policy from '63 to '64-'65, the emphasis is on Laos, or did you see it as part of the bigger picture of Southeast Asia and the cold war fight against communism? How did you see where you fit into the big picture and what you were doing out of Thailand?

MB: Well Laos is looked at as sort of the in between period, as a funnel for South Vietnam and all of that and since the military was not supposed to be in there, the feeling was that we were doing an operation up there that was, in terms of dollars and cents, very cost effective; a fraction of what they were spending over in Vietnam, and for the most part we were probably accomplishing a whole lot more. If we were only just able to hold things as they were, they felt that that was a big investment. But, it would go back and forth depending on the season; the rainy season, things just kind of slowed down and in the dry season things would pick up and the north would take over land and then we'd take it back and it was kind of a see-saw type thing, but towards the end, I mean, we just inexorably they would just take more and more…it was pretty frustrating.

SM: That's an interesting statement. In the 1971 time frame to the 1972 time frame, what would your operation…what would you do operationally during the wet season in Laos? Would you start transporting people more frequently, especially in terms of the agency people that were on the ground with the mobile teams and stuff like that?

MB: Well we would stay pretty busy. We had obvious limitations with the weather, but the wet season would slow down the other side because going on the ground it was tougher for them so that's where we had a greater advantage with the air support with that respect. But really it was based on seasons as to who was doing more activity. They would kind of prepare for their offensives and they were generally pretty well organized and they arrived at our doorstep many times. Its just totally amazing where we…our main base there [?] in Long Chin, in the later days was under siege. We woke up one morning and nobody even knew there were any tanks in the country period and here were two tanks sitting up on the ridgeline point blank shooting down at us. It was like, 'Where did they come from? How did they get here?' and they were probably on the back side of the mountain for maybe a month or so and when we finally pushed them out before they found their caves had been carved out and they had hospitals and everything else set up; it was amazing what their capabilities were given what they had to work with.

SM: What time period was this?

MB: This was in '73-'74.

SM: And in what area?

MB: Up near the Plain de Jars. We were just south of the Plain de Jars, Long Chin was right there. Oh yeah. We were under attack; it was on a daily basis. We'd have 130s coming in, rockets. There was…probably Long Chin was one of the busiest airports in the world at that time and we had something taking off and landing every 20 seconds or so. It was interesting.

SM: Were there many collisions, accidents, as a result of that heavy traffic?

MB: No, amazingly really there wasn't. There was one way in, and one way out. You couldn't take off this way and you had to come back out the same way. There was these limestone carse right at the end of the runway. A couple of T-28s that didn't quite get stopped in time and went into the carse, but yeah, for all the traffic and you had

Hmoung pilots and Thai pilots, U.S. and wherever, it really worked pretty good. We had somewhat of a control tower towards the end, but before that people just knew when you get here, you call and somebody would acknowledge and you'd turn around. It was the same thing flying in route. There was very little in the way of navigation and folks would, particularly in the airplane, they would just climb up to an altitude and say, 'Well, we're headed north and we're roughly over [Ritaville?] bridge,' or something like that, 'At 8,000 feet,' and somebody else would say, 'Well I'm at 7 and I'm over here,' and, 'Okay.' People would just kind of communicate. I can't think of any mid-airs or anything that we had through all that time with all that traffic. That's pretty remarkable when you consider all the controls you have here in the States and towers and approach and all the rest of it, and all the mid-airs that we have as a result.

SM: Now what about losses due to triple A?

MB: We had a few real significant ones. A lot of our losses, particularly in the helicopters, were from small arms fire and I'm pretty sure that the other side had teams of snipers; guys that they would position on mountain tops, passes, and so forth and they had long rifles with scopes and all that and I think their only mission was to pick off the light planes sneaking through under the weather and I don't know how many folks we lost helicopter wise; in fact, we ended up having to go to two pilots because we lost some where the only rounds that they could find were right between the eyes of the pilot and we had a couple of STOHL craft, they'd get knocked down that way. Then we had a couple of pilots who were killed in the helicopters and I think in all cases we ended up we had 2 pilots up front in the helicopters and actually, that saved the aircraft. But, that was generally our biggest concern was small arms.

SM: So it wasn't the quad 50s?

MB: Well those would certainly get your attention.

SM: Yeah, but you were flying lower altitudes and…

MB: Depending on where we were. Actually, most of the time we'd try to fly high to stay out of small arms fire, but actually the thing that saved us for the most part was we had very good intelligence and every time we'd come back from up country we'd debrief with our flight information folks and say, 'Well, yeah, there's bad guys over here now and something over here. We picked up fire over here,' and it was pretty much up to

date, and as a result…and it was the same thing over in Vietnam. The military would really get angry because they'd go in a great big gaggle, low level, and they'd get all shot up going into some place and 10 minutes later here comes an Air America helicopter just no problem at all and I heard comments where they say, 'Well you guys must have a deal with the other side,' you know. They couldn't understand why we weren't getting shot up. Well, the reason we weren't getting shot up was because we knew that over here there was enemy here so we didn't fly over here. We'd go around where the military just went right on through. So, there's a lot of misunderstandings about that, just like the rumors that we were getting 15,000 dollars for every pilot that we picked up and that's not the case. But, that generated hard feelings because they felt like, well, the only reason we do it is because we were being paid big bucks to do it when in fact, in actuality, it cost us money because in the early days, typically we would be flying single pilot, single aircraft. We might be hundreds of miles away from any other aircraft, particularly if we were operating north. Now if the military was given some bombing missions or whatever, we get called and they say, 'Go ahead and shut down, and stand by the radio station.' We had a few radio stations positioned around the country and you might sit on the ground for a couple of days doing nothing, just waiting, and at that point in time we didn't get paid for sitting on the ground. The only thing that we got, back then, was…I think we were getting five dollars an hour for flight in denied area, instead of the enemy controlled area. So if you're sitting on the ground for a couple of days when you might ordinarily be flying 10 hours, you were losing money and then if somebody actually got shot down, they never shot them down in friendly areas, so all you had to look forward to was going into pretty unfriendly situations and we got out five dollars an hour for flight in denied areas. I think, right to a man, none of us enjoyed doing that but knowing that that was one of us out there we'd sure want somebody to come and get us, and you know, we'd get what we could and we had great success, and even after the Air Force came in with their jolly greens and their mini guns and all kinds of support, we still picked up probably a great majority of the pilots because we generally would be right in the area, and we knew the area and the situation where the poor military guys, they'd come over there for a tour and just about the time they were figuring out what's what, they get transferred out. So, half the time our guys are going in and pick up

pilots and on their way out, well, here comes jolly greens and they'd say, 'Well, land at the nearest friendly strip and we'll take over from here,' and they'd take him home and get their air medals and whatever, just go from there.

SM: They would actually get credit for picking up the pilot?

MB: Oh I'm sure they did, because they're the ones that came back with them, you know, and we didn't keep score or any of that stuff.

SM: Well you kept track in your briefings and in your debriefings on pilots that you picked up, didn't you?

MB: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, there's information but there was just that and a lot of it had to do with the secrecy part where we couldn't come out and say, 'Well, here, we're publishing this paper for everybody to understand that here's what it is that we do and how we do it and what's going on,' which probably would have been helpful, but there was, I think, basically sentiment that these guys figured, 'Boy, we're over here. Poor us and those Air America guys are making all these big bucks and a bunch of smart asses and don't talk to us and think they're hot stuff.' I sat in on a briefing one time where an Air Force briefer was saying, 'Well, if you go down and you see one of those unmarked helicopters, don't get on board. Its one of those damn Air America mercenaries trying to make money off of you.' Nobody ever turned us down.

SM: They called you mercs?

MB: Yeah, there was the attitude that we were just there as mercenaries. And sure, I think everybody liked to make money, but you could have made a heck of a lot more money if you stayed in the States and flew for the airlines with nobody shooting at us. I think most of the guys were there because they believed in what they were doing and enjoyed the challenge and the intrigue and all the rest of it.

SM: Wasn't that part of the pitch for the job? When you were approached by Air America you knew that this was going to be work, probably. How much did you know?

MB: Not a whole lot, quite frankly.

SM: Where you were going to go?

MB: I, at that point in time, was just in the midst of getting over a divorce that was pretty ugly and I probably wasn't in the best state of mind and actually, I'd been approached sometime early when I was still in the Marine Corps and, 'I wouldn't go over

there and do that stuff. That's too dangerous. I've got a family and I don't feel that's appropriate,' but when they contacted me the second time I was in the state of mind where I didn't really care. I figured, 'Hey, I can go over there and make a few dollars and go back to school and if I get bumped off over there, that's probably not a big deal either,' and I anticipated it being probably a lot worse than it turned out to be for the most part. When I got out there it was…I got to where I just really enjoyed it. I liked the challenge, I liked the people that we were working with, and it was hard to explain. It was like a runner's high or something like that. When things are going well, we were making progress, it was really a great feeling. There were times when I felt if they'd just feed and clothe me, I'd do this for nothing because you just had that good feeling about it, that you were actually accomplishing something. Conversely it was pretty depressing when things were going the other way. You couldn't do much about it.

SM: Did that ebb and flow, was that part of the give and take of the fighting between PAVN and the forces on the ground, the dry season versus the wet season? I mean, one of the things that, Codename Mule, the author of that book, his name is escaping me right now, that wrote the book.

MB: Oh, Parker?

SM: Parker, yeah, Jim Parker.

MB: Yeah.

SM: One of the things he talks about in his book is there seemed to be this constant give and take when he was there in the war where you have PAVN would take ground during the dry season because that gave them more mobility, as you pointed out, and then during the wet season would be air superiority, the use of helicopter mobility and things like that, they would then retake that ground. It perceived to me this constant ebb and flow in Laos and did that sense of elation and depression kind of mirror that?

MB: Yeah, yeah it did, it did, it really did. You know, there was always the hidden hope that we'd take the whole country and that would be it, and considering what the comparatively meager assets that we had to work with compared to what they had over in Vietnam, we probably accomplished a heck of a lot more with far less. Of course, the only thing that counts is the end results and it was all for not unfortunately.

SM: Well the use of air power in Laos and its support of the Laos policy, it seems like it was primarily in the support capacity, intelligence gathering, troop transport? Not a whole lot of use of air power in the context of that it was used in Vietnam; the B-52s, the gunships and stuff like that.

MB: Yeah, no, no, there wasn't any of that; no helicopter gunships per say. They did run some B-52 strikes on occasions which I don't think did a whole lot but they had primarily T-28s and then you had the Sandies, the A-1 that air commandos were flying them and they provided some support, but most of that, again, was for primarily missions where we were either infiltrating or exfiltrating teams as opposed to the offensive where you're going in and they were doing all this. They'd get a little bit of it when they had some Thais that were flying up there and then the Hmougn were flying the T-28s and they were pretty good, they did a pretty good job. Those poor guys, I mean, they were there for the duration and if they were good, it was just like the folks on the ground. There was a couple of commanders up there that were just really outstanding and they really would go out with the troops. But, it was a question of time before they'd get nailed.

SM: These are Lao commanders?

MB: Yeah, Lao or Hmoung or what have you and eventually just attrition would catch up with them. You expose yourself just so many times, and so towards the end we were carrying around 12 year olds, the rifles were bigger than they were, because they didn't have anymore people. They were pretty well decimated, and that was sad.

SM: Well, when you were infiltrating and exfiltrating…[MB speaks to a third person]. When you were in those types of operations, how much of a departmentalization of information was there? Were you completely aware of the type of information that they were going on, and when they came back were you allowed to talk with each other or did they try to keep that stuff departmentalized?

MB: It was on a mission by mission basis. The guys, a lot of times the guys didn't know exactly what the mission was. They knew what the mission was to bring these folks and drop them off. What they were doing there they didn't know for the most part. In other words, they didn't need to know.

SM: So it was a need to know type of scenario?

MB: Pretty much, yeah. The folks at our level in management and so forth, we would sit down to briefings with the agency folks and have a little bigger picture of what was going on, but nobody really gave out more information than anybody needed. If there was a need to know, in most cases, all the pilots would needed to know was, 'You're going to go from here to here, you're going to drop people off, you're going to pick them up, this is what the situation is around here,' and that's it. Let me make a quick stop here, I'll be right back.

SM: Let me ask you a quick question about the Lao, Hmoung and Thai pilots. Who trained them?

MB: Primarily the air commandos.

SM: Who were they?

MB: Air Force.

SM: U.S Air Force pilots.

MB: Yeah, yeah, and they were very close with us. They worked very closely with us. They were on our side of the base, Air America's side, and so they were kind of like all part of the same group. A good bunch of guys, and we had a very nice little club that we all kind of built there and that was a big plumb for anybody to have access to the club. The air commandos was no question; they had full access, but there was only a select few folks from the regular Air Force people on the other side that had access because we just simply didn't have the capabilities to handle any more which got some people's noses out of joint, obviously. But the air commandos were good guys. They gave us our training in the T-28s, and the Air Force maintained the aircraft and everything else and it was kind of a fun deal because we had kind of a free reign. Anytime we wanted to go out and fly, just for proficiency purposes, we wouldn't…I'd go in something dressed like this, you know, and just show them a card and they'd say, 'Alright, that aircraft over there's available,' and you just go out and fly. It was kind of neat.

SM: And they were fairly proficient pilots?

MB: Oh yeah, I mean they were good.

SM: Okay.

MB: Yeah, they were excellent.

SM: What were the language barriers? How was that overcome? Were they taught English or the commandos, were they fluent in Laotian or Thai?

MB: No, most of the pilots that they trained in Thai or Laos, they had to speak English.

SM: And the Hmoung as well?

MB: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Of course, that didn't mean that they spoke great English, and obviously there were communications problems and things like that, too, but the Hmoung probably were the best to work with. The Lao pilots, you never knew what to expect. Most of the time they didn't understand what you were doing and they probably wouldn't or couldn't do what you needed them to do so you never really had a great level of comfort that they were really going to help you out if you needed it.

SM: In terms of providing things like close air support?

MB: Right.

SM: It wasn't just in the training that the communication problems would exist or occur but more importantly when…

MB: When you're running missions and so on.

SM: …you're running a mission and you need to be able to communicate with the pilot as to what you need or want.

MB: Right, right, I mean they knew how to fly the aircraft, they could do that, but to get them to do what you wanted or to get them to understand sometimes…and of course you didn't know whether they didn't understand or they didn't want to understand, too, but it didn't really make any difference. The end result was the same.

SM: You didn't get the support you needed.

MB: Yeah.

SM: Any particular incidents that stand out where that happened?

MB: Oh, I can't think of anything specifically offhand, but in general it was just…it was sort of an ongoing irritation at times. You were never really comfortable if you were depending on them. The Hmoung pilots were good, and of course the greatest comfort level was when you had the other Air America guys who were up there; they knew exactly what needed to be done and you could expect to be taken care of.

SM: Now to get back to the flags, exchanging the flags on the aircraft to suit the pilot, we talked earlier about the rules of engagement in Laos which were similar to the rules of engagement in Vietnam where they were very restrictive on what American pilots could do. Was there a way of overcoming some of those restrictions by having Thai or Lao, or Hmoung pilots fly missions instead, or were they controlled by the same set of rules?

MB: Oh, its hard to say exactly but for sure, I mean, they were less restrictive of what they could do. I mean, it was their country, they could do whatever they wanted to do. It's a whole different scenario as opposed to we, as Americans, I mean that was so sensitive; particularly the T-28 program. I mean, that was so super-sensitive, and of course the biggest fear was that one of us will going to get shot down and there'd be an international incident that here we are bombing, and there was some news stories talking about that. The word got out, obviously, and I don't know exactly how they ever came to the conclusion to do that other than the fact that we just absolutely had to have a little better capability to support ourselves. We actually, we ran some missions strictly on our own that were bombing and interdiction and so forth as opposed to just simply escorting aircraft in and out. But, that was pretty restrictive, and again because of the sensitivity. It would be one thing to say, 'Well, all we were doing was supporting and protecting our people,' as opposed to going out of our way to bomb or to attack someplace, and I'm sure the powers that be lost a lot of sleep at night just thinking, 'What the hell am I going to say if that happens and one of these guys get shot down and then captured?' Fortunately it didn't happen.

SM: Now the…when that kind of activity occurred, was this principally in the area around the Plain of Jars and military region II of Laos?

MB: Probably more so there than anyplace, but we'd go down south in that area, but the biggest amount of activity generally was up Plain of Jars and that whole area through there.

SM: And those missions where you did fly T-28s and engage in interdiction and bombing, were those American pilots or a combination?

MB: Well, we did some of that; very limited, but most of that type of stuff was done with the Lao and the Hmoung pilots. They did that just on a daily basis.

SM: Okay, so they did, they did, they were able to skirt the restrictive rules of engagement that prevented Americans from flying?

MB: Yeah, yeah, but I would say yeah, they weren't tied to the same restrictions that we were, obviously. But again, I mean, it was a very small…I don't know how many pilots they had, maybe half a dozen or something like that so I mean there was just a limit to what they had the capability of doing, too.

SM: And you're…and of course, the organization itself wasn't equipped to handle multiple missions or a lot of missions? Your primary support would not come in the form of conventional munitions you could load up on a TAC aircraft? It was primarily for other types of missions, wasn't it? Or did you ever have any problems with getting munitions for your operations?

MB: I'm not sure I understand the question; again?

SM: Well, I'm just curious as to the overall mission of Air America in Laos was not to fly interdiction or bombing runs?

MB: Oh, no. In fact, the requirements put on us was we were supposedly strictly non-combatants. We were technically not allowed to carry weapons, and for years we had…obviously there were guys who had weapons stashed or got something while they were up there, but we could get in trouble if we were caught with one. Nobody's going to give us any problem up there, but if you carried one back down with you or something like that, that was pretty much a no-no. Over in Vietnam, there was a similar situation and I forget; it was probably in the early '70s we had a C-47 was going into a strip and was shot down on final and they rallied it in in a rice paddy, and nobody was really I think badly hurt, but the VC came and killed them all, killed the crew, and they took their uniforms off and put them on and so when the helicopters came in they could see folks with Air America uniforms and they just opened up on the helicopters and did a couple more folks before they were able to get out of there. So, there was a real uproar about, 'Hey, these poor guys didn't have a chance. They had nothing to protect themselves with. If they'd have had some weapons, they'd have had a fighting chance!' So, they finally relented and if you went out on a mission you could check out I think typically it was an oozy that you would check out when you'd go out to fly. When you came back, you had to check it back in.

SM: So in helicopters there were no door gunners or anything like that?

MB: Nope, nope.

SM: Okay, so I guess my question was or my point was that you didn't have the logistics support for heavy bombing activity. It wasn't part of your mission?

MB: No, that was not our mission. Again, it was one of those things, fighting with one arm tied behind your back. We were expected to do dangerous things and go into enemy areas and everything else but we were not given the wherewithal to operate like the military would, like I say, with door gunners and machine guns and all that sort of stuff. There were some very specialized, special project missions where they did have something like that, but that was not the norm, and so yeah, we…you know, we were masquerading under the umbrella that we were civilians and non-combatants, so our best chance for survival was information and knowledge and just avoiding where the bad guys were as best we could and for the most part it worked pretty well; not always because it was a fluid situation and things sometimes moved faster than the word could get around, too.

SM: Was there a high rotation of pilots through while you were there?

MB: I wouldn't say a high rotation. We had a pretty small group for the first couple of years and then things started heating up and we started bringing in a lot of pilots and one of the problems we had, when I got there, flying 34s, we pretty much flew overgrossed all the time and going into very marginal helipads and things like that up in the mountains. It was very demanding work; there wasn't any margin for error. We had a very small group, very highly skilled, and we were pretty successful getting away with it. As we grew, got more and more pilots, some less skilled than others, and that would generally manifest itself in losses; their guys would crash and so forth so it was almost kind of a weeding out process; the weak either had to be very lucky or they wouldn't survive very long. And, I think folks would get to the point where it just got to them. 'This is not my cup of tea anymore, I don't want to go up there anymore,' and they'd leave, and some of them, they'd be gone for 6 months or a year and decide they wanted to come back because we were…we had…it was a two edge sword; we were there for the duration, as long as we wanted to be, and we could leave anytime we wanted to, also, but I know there was some pilots that I think they had families that liked the lifestyle. They

liked having maids and that type of thing. They'd just go out to the club and sit by the pool all day and have a great time and the thought of coming back to the States and having to do all that work themselves, they were not real interested in doing that and I think there were pressures put on the husbands that, 'We don't want to leave here. We like this,' and so some of the folks hung on when probably they shouldn't have.

SM: Was there structured R&R for pilots?

MB: Yeah, then again it depended on the work load, obviously, but everybody as I'm trying to recall I think had like 7 days a month of what we called STO or scheduled time off where they could just take off, go to Hong Kong or Bangkok or wherever and pretty much try and get everybody back, and they would have days off otherwise but again, it depended on the flying requirements. Then if you stayed for 3 years which was considered like the fulfillment of your contract, then you got home leave which was 3 months and you got first class tickets back to your home of record and back and if you decided to leave all your household effects would be shipped back and all of that. So, that was kind of a cut off point; if you filled up 3 years, that was sort of like, 'Okay, you completed your contract,' and from there on out it was just still open ended.

SM: What were the toughest missions to fly?

MB: Oh, I would say probably, well, the extractions. The search and rescue ones were probably the nastiest, and of course a lot of the infil/exfil missions, because you know you're going into unknown territory that was known enemy territory and you never knew what you might run into and obviously when you're going on the SAR missions you knew that was in an area of high enemy activity and you're a sitting duck out there and you're going in, and we were extremely fortunate on those. I don't think we lost anybody on a SAR mission as such.

SM: Wow. What about the special missions?

MB: Well again, these were insertions of teams; you know, maybe your road watch or your electronic surveillance or what have you where teams would go in and their mission was to maybe blow something up or whatever.

SM: Sometimes those aircraft would go unarmed. They would make special dispensation for certain special missions.

MB: What do you mean?

SM: I thought you mentioned that sometimes with the special missions that aircraft would actually be armed?

MB: There was a very select few special operations type missions where yeah, they had some.

SM: Can you talk about those at all?

MB: Oh, in general. Not a whole lot different from like the infils and exfils were, but a lot of it had to do with, you know, one of the missions was planting listening devices right in close proximity to enemy concentrations, you know, and maybe you dropped this thing in the top of a tree and this area would be picked out by our Volpars and do-dos and they'd say, 'This is where we want this to be dropped,' and so we'd go in at night and insert these things and quite successful, again, there. They were pretty well planned missions and highly qualified crews and they worked out fairly well.

SM: Now how about motion sensing devices to try to track troop movements and stuff like that?

MB: Yeah, a lot of things like that and a lot of stuff that, you know, we didn't even know what they were doing with them.

SM: So again, a departmentalization…

MB: To some extent.

SM: Some extent?

MB: Some extent, yeah. A lot of times you didn't even want to know. But yeah, nobody talked more than they wanted to; that was pretty much the sense, and in some respects that was good and in some respects it was bad because sometimes its better for people to know a little bit more about what's going on and have an understanding and appreciation that was just something that we probably really need to do and they had a little better feeling of that as opposed to, 'I don't really know what I'm doing, but I'm doing it.'

SM: How was morale?

MB: I say morale was excellent. It's curious, there was a lot of people that were there that I probably would not have necessarily socialized with on a regular basis, and in the same deal with the group here but we all have one thing in common; we're all over there doing the same thing and these are folks that maybe I may not feel real warm about.

I have a lot of respect for them because I know what they did and what they would do when things got tough and so there's an appreciation and a bond you might say between folks that you would never have given different sets of circumstances, and pretty much the sense that most everybody would rise to the occasion. When things got tough, somebody was in a bind, with few exceptions, you could pretty well depend, if I'm down there, these guys would have made that effort to get me out and vice versa. So, there was that and I think the fact that we were so grossly misunderstood by the public and the military that that brought us even closer together and some of the folks that we worked with, like Tony Poe was just a jewel.

SM: He was the CIA station chief in Laos?

MB: Well, he was sort of the original man up there; pretty legendary. As you go through, you'll hear more and more about him. Tony was a hard drinking, hard living type of guy, but he was a straight shooter and he expected a lot, but he was always straight and he would tell you, 'There's not a problem, you can go in here, this is what you need to do,' or he would say, 'There shouldn't be a problem but I'm not 100% certain. I'm going to go with you,' or else he'd say, 'You're not going to go over there. It didn't make any sense.' So, whatever Tony would say, 'I'd like you to go here,' you didn't question it and it was always the possibility of an unknown happening but it was never to his knowledge whereas a lot of the folks who came in the later years, one of the young guys, I don't know whether they trying to make a name for themselves or what have you, but their attitude was more adversarial and, 'Hey, if you guys are getting paid to do this, what the hell's the matter with you,' you know? 'You just go over there and do it.' You never had the same confidence that, you know, in their mind you got the feeling that you were expendable and you went over on this mission and didn't come back? Well, that's the name of the game. Realistically, we weren't there on suicide missions. We were there for the duration and unless the odds were stacked in your favor, sure, there's always a risk but you've got to take a calculated risk and if you can, in your own mind, imagine that you're not going to be able to go in there and come back out again, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to go in. I mean, that's not heroism, that's stupidity. Some of these folks, in later years, towards the end I can remember going up almost on a daily basis because they called down and said, 'Hey, you've got to come up

here because the pilots are refusing to go on this mission,' and so I go up, I listen to the brief, and usually it had to do with cover and it was hard to get cover support, but we had a policy that if there was no enemy activity when we were going in, we didn't go in there unless we had some cover. It didn't make any sense, and so what they would try to do if they couldn't get cover, they'd say, 'Not a problem,' you know, its okay, but for a lot of guys they knew better and they'd say, 'Wait a minute! We've got activity reports here, here, here, and here. This is not the place to be going in,' and I would say, you know, 90-95% of the time, I'd say, 'They're right. We're not going to do this unless you get coverage.' Sometimes they would get cover, and other times, 'We're not going to do it,' so there was a lot of head-butting here and there was a lot of animosity where the customers felt like, 'Boy, you Air America guys don't want to do anything,' and that wasn't the case.

SM: Now these were the successors that Tony Poe?

MB: Yeah, some, you know, selected ones, yeah. I mean, there were a lot of other good guys that, well, Dick Rodell and folks like that that were straight shooters, professional, and really we worked well with. But, there are others where you didn't have that same level of confidence. You run into that anyplace.

SM: Now when you needed cover and when you were supplied cover, this was Air Force and Navy cover, primarily?

MB: Yeah, primarily Air Force. Sometimes it would be Navy ships off the carriers.

SM: Any other instance like the one doing that SAR mission, you know, where you had, again, conflict, with the Navy or Air Force pilots?

MB: That's the only one that really sticks in my mind. The biggest problem we had, for the most part, was just simply getting the cover and when the Air Force came in with the jolly greens in Udorn, what they ended up doing was they would frag the missions using the Air Force machines knowing that a great majority of the times they wouldn't make it for whatever reason; pilots were sick or maintenance problems or weather or what have you. So then we'd be the backups and we would go. Well, the fact that it had been fragged in conjunction with the Air Force, they could get the cover so we would then have cover. So I think pretty much all those missions were being made in

that direction because if we were the primary ones, chances were that we wouldn't get the cover.

SM: And when you did receive cover, it was good or adquate for the job?

MB: Oh yeah, well, you know, if we had it, yeah. Those guys were good, and it was mostly the best cover, obviously, is with the A-1s and yeah, those guys were pretty good, yeah.

SM: Now you mentioned illness. What were the biggest problems in terms of illness facing you and other pilots?

MB: Dysentery.

SM: Dysentery?

MB: Yeah. Some guys had dysentery the whole time they were over there.

SM: What was the most, for lack of a better adjective, the most brave thing you saw while serving in Laos, flying over Laos; what was the bravest action you witnessed?

MB: Oh, there were so many. There is one, I think I've got the right one. I've got some after action reports that you might find interesting that I've written from some other folks, but one I know was up in the plains and French Smith who is no longer with us was flying with one of the customers, and that was the real sensitive thing about the American customers going on any kind of hazardous mission because that was really bad news if they were to ever get caught, and so they weren't supposed to go. But anyways, they were flying somewhere around the Plain of Jars and they got shot down and right in the middle of it was I think a North Vietnamese battalion or something like that, right there, and they leaped out of the helicopter and fortunately the customer had some weapons and they kind of kept folks at bay for a short period and one of our other pilots, [Nick Thruvier] was in the 34 and he was in the area and he heard them call in their may-day and I don't know how to put it; Nick was not known to be a particularly aggressive type person, but he rose to the occasion and he swooped in right in the middle of this whole thing and managed to pull them all out, get them all out of there. That was…and that was probably a very good example of from one end of the spectrum to the other pretty much you can pretty well count on the guys to look after each other and do it and Nick just really did just a super, super, super job. I think I may have a copy of that little report the French wrote up, which will probably be interesting to read.

SM: How many Air America pilots were lost while you were there? Do you know?

MB: You know, I don't know. They should have the exact number. They have them on our little wall. [Yeah, in just a couple of minutes. Yeah, okay. Yeah, give me a couple of minutes.] I know I think in the last 2 years we lost…in the last year or so I think we lost something like 17 pilots in one year, but they've got an exact count down there at University of Texas there in Dallas. They've got a plaque that's got…

SM: All the names?

MB: There's a lot of names on there unfortunately.

SM: When you finished and you…

MB: I actually just went over there just strictly as a line pilot with the intent of shipping my family back to the States and I was just going to go over there for sort of the duration. Really the plan was that Air America had become somewhat notorious and that they were going to pull out. I think the plan was for Evergreen helicopters to take over the operation like supposedly June of '75 and I figured that's probably a good time for me to leave; of course, we never quite got to that point. So I flew out of Saigon for some months and then I went up to Da Nang to take over as base manager there in the absence of Frank Sturgaurd was on home leave and in the process Da Nang fell so I got involved in the middle of that.

SM: When was that?

MB: Well, that would have been probably in late March, early April of '75.

SM: Of '75?

MB: Yeah. What may be helpful, I've got a couple of after action reports that I wrote up on Da Nang and Nha Trang and Saigon that probably goes into pretty good detail of what transpired and it might be more enlightening than anything. So they sent me…I went back to Saigon and a few days later they wanted me to go up to Nha Trang to look after operations there. I got there about 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning and by 9 o'clock that night I was back in Saigon; things went that fast. From there I was kind of given the job to work on civilian plan and because of the difficulties we had in getting people out of the crowds and so forth, that's when we came up with the plan on the

rooftop helipad and worked on getting those…and I'd say they actually did work pretty well.

SM: That was because of the mobs you encountered going into..

MB: We needed to be able to get our people segmented into areas where we knew where they were at because everybody lived all over the place. There was no way in the world you could get to them and access to the base was always a question. You never knew if you were going to be able to get to the front gate depending on what the Vietnamese decided. So, that wasn't a very good option so really the only good option was the overfly but you had to be able to find and get to the people.

SM: When was your last flight out of Vietnam?

MB: The 29th of April, probably…I don't know, 11 o'clock that night. I started flying I think at 4:30 in the morning and then I got caught aboard ship the night before because Saigon had been attacked and they were shooting anything in the sky and it was dark and they said, 'Don't come up here because they'll probably shoot you down,' so I ended up almost running out of fuel. We finally found a ship out there in the dark and spent the night and came back in first thing the next morning. It was a long day.

SM: Do you think you were the last civilian mission out of Vietnam?

MB: Yeah, I would think so because when I went in on the last flight, it was really eerie because all the previous flights, I mean, there was so much air traffic and on the radio everybody talking and aircraft coming and going and I went on this one and I said, 'Jeez, something's strange,' and I realized there wasn't anybody in the air; I was about the only one there. I know the Marine Corps came in subsequent to that and made some flights afterwards, but at that point they'd shut everybody else down on the ships and it was kind of eerie. In fact, I stopped by the Air America ramp, I had a full load of people, to see if there was anybody or anything there and there was our Volpar twin turbine beech sitting there and I looked at that for a couple of minutes thinking, 'Boy, it would be nice if we could just jump in that thing and I could fly to Bangkok or Hong Kong or something like that and just avoid shipward life,' and finally decided that, 'Nah, sure as shooting I do that then there's going to be something wrong with it, and then something's going to happen to the helicopter and we're going to be stuck here,' and I said, 'A bird in the hand is better than the alternative,' so as it turned out, there apparently

wasn't anything wrong with it. It was full of fuel and there was a pilot who was supposed to be flying it. He'd bugged out with his new-found family and he was on his way to Guam.

SM: There's a capstone to this; twin questions. What was the most important thing you took away personally from your experience in southeast Asia, flying in Laos and supporting the missions, and then secondly; what do you think was the most important lesson that we should take away from the experience in southeast Asia as a nation, historically?

MB: Well I say I developed a love for the people in that part of the world. That was the biggest thing I came out with. Unquestionably, you know, we've got to get the politicians out of the decision making process in the future. I mean, if we're going to fight a war then we need to fight it like it is a war and fight it to win because it was so depressing to look back and see that we lost it. They didn't necessarily win it, and all friends that I had that were killed over there, it was all for nothing. That was probably the biggest disappointment for me and most depressing part of it all, and its like you were just being pawns and that we were not important in the grand scheme of things. It was just somebody pulling strings, playing games. It was just not commitment. We had the commitment, I mean, I think the Air America folks are probably the most dedicated people over there simply because we didn't have to be there. We could leave anytime we wanted and we were there because we, I think for the most part, we loved the people and in particularly the [Mayo]. The Hmong, these folks, they didn't have any particular allegiance to the government or anything like that. All they cared about was raising their family and growing their crops and being left alone. They were willing to fight for that and we were supporting them, but not well enough.

SM: Anything else you'd like to add?

MB: That's probably more than enough for now.

SM: Thank you very much. This ends the first interview with Mr. Burke.

Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Marius Burke
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
April 12, 2001
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

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.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Marius Burke on April 12, 2001 at 8:30 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Burke is in Melbourne, Florida. Sir, I wanted to begin today's session by discussing your time as a chief pilot in Udorn and although we had discussed this in the previous interview I just wanted to flush that out, go into a little more detail. Would you state again exactly the primary responsibilities for you as the chief pilot?

Marius Burke: Well, primarily I started out as an assistant chief pilot to Wayne Knight and that was oh, I think probably in '64 or '65 probably. I don't remember the exact dates, and then eventually moved into the chief pilot's spot. But, we essentially were responsible for coordinating with the customers, scheduling, flight training, maintenance flying, and pretty much ran the basic operation.

SM: And in addition to checking out pilots and doing other things, did you also go on support missions for personnel in Laos?

MB: Oh, sure. See, a lot of our training and check rides, other than proficiency check rides that we would do right there at Udorn, the rest of it, what we called route checks and initial checkouts for pilots were done up country, and we would go up anywhere from one day to a week and fly with the individual on the line for whatever missions were going on. If we got short on pilots or things like that, we'd go up there just to fly missions ourselves.

SM: What aircraft did this include in terms of work that you did?

MB: Well, let's see, I flew the H-34, the H-58T, the CH-47, Chinook, got involved with a Bell 47 training program, we were training Thai pilots. I helped out with some training of Lao pilots, and we had to use 500s, UH-1Hs, the 204-Bs and the 205s, the little Bells. I think that pretty much covered all the helicopters.

SM: I was just going to say that sounds like the inventory of helicopters.

MB: Yeah, pretty much. The neat part about it to me was that I got a chance to check out on all of them and typical company policy was no more than two types of aircraft for checkouts for pilots. So, that was a fun part of the job that I got to fly in all of these things.

SM: Now in terms…not just the restriction in terms of the number of aircraft within a specific type, that is, fixed wing versus rotary wing, so typically company policy was only two say rotary wing aircraft? Was there much crossing over from fixed wing to rotary wing for pilots?

MB: No. It was the same thing on the fixed wing side. I don't think there were very many people that flew more than one or two types of airplanes or helicopters at any point in time. Now I also, I think I mentioned, had flown the T-28s, too, so that was an unusual type thing. We didn't have anybody that…I'm the only one that I'm aware of that flew both airplanes and helicopters at the same time. Now we had a number of helicopter people – well, not a large number, but a small number – that transferred to fixed wing. Primarily, they would go maybe take a co-pilot's position or something like that and hopefully, eventually, upgrade to captain depending on what their background and experience was and that was primarily for folks who did have some airplane background before. There was one or two folks that transferred over from airplanes into helicopters, but again, these are people who had a lot of helicopter experience previously.

SM: And when they transferred over they wouldn't just jump back and forth between aircraft? They'd be assigned?

MB: No. If you were in the airplane side of it, you just flew airplanes, and if you were on the helicopter side, you just flew helicopters.

SM: Now you mentioned just a moment ago a Lao pilot training program. Would you go ahead and describe that and what it entailed and what the purpose for that program was?

MB: Well this was a program that was started…oh, I guess in the late to mid '60s and it was handled by initially two Marine pilots came over and they had, I don't know, three or four Lao students and it was like a year program. They used H-34s which Air America provided. We did all the maintenance and everything else for it and they conducted their training, and the Lao pilots would be flying for the Lao Air Force in the H-34s. It started out in the first year as two Marines and then the second year it was one Marine, a fellow by the name of Paul Walton who at that time was…well, he was active duty with the Marine Corps and he and I had gone through flight training together so we worked very closely together and I helped him at times in the training aspect and he had three pilots, all of whom had had some previous flight experience primarily with either the French or the Russians over the years and he ran them through a one year program, and then I believe when Paul left they sent an Army pilot over to take over that program.

SM: And would Lao pilots fly in a joint operation capacity with Air America, or was this just for Lao Royal Air activity?

MB: Yeah, this was just primarily for Royal Air Lao operations?

SM: I was also curious about the role that either you played personally or Air America pilots played generally in both Medevac and SAR missions while you were in Udorn.

MB: In what respect?

SM: I was curious if this was common place for both types of operations. There is of course some interest in the part of the association but also historically I think it is important to understand what role Air America played given the number of aircraft they had flying throughout especially Laos, and I would imagine that many of them were stationed out of Udorn, flying missions into Laos, but of course with American over-flights in North Vietnam a lot of pilots ditching into Laos. I was just curious from your perspective what you witnessed in terms of either Medevac missions for those or SAR missions for those types of pilots or for other individuals.

MB: Well, for the most part, in the early years, Air America was the only search and rescue capability over there. The military didn't have any aircraft based obviously in Laos or Thailand for that matter, and so we essentially ran all the missions that encountered military pilots being shot down and what have you and of course we did all the Medevacs of the Laos and the Thais and so forth who were fighting up there. That was unfortunately a big part of our mission was to evacuate those folks, and for many years we were not officially allowed to have weapons or anything else like that and for many years we had no armor plating or anything like that on the aircraft and we flew single pilot. It was a pretty challenging scenario. Later on, the Air Force finally came in with some Jolly Greens primarily based out of Udorn and they were there ostensibly to do search and rescue for military pilots. They would go down in Laos and possibly up there in Vietnam also, and of course we had been doing both for quite some time and even while the Air Force was there we probably still picked up I would say probably the majority of folks that went down, and the main reason being we were flying up there, and typically if you could get in within the first 30 minutes of somebody going down you had a good chance of getting them out. After that, it became rather problematic. So, in many cases, somebody would get shot down and next thing you know an Air America helicopter is in there, pulls the pilot out or pilots, and as they're coming out here would be coming the Jolly Greens saying, 'We're on our way,' and they say, 'Well, we've already got the guys,' so they'd rendezvous with them at some safe area and exchange and the Air Force would bring them back to Thailand. Towards the end they started basing up country I think just during the day, particularly if there were missions that were going on and so forth so they were a little bit closer, but again a big problem was they didn't know the country very well and once their tour of duty was up they'd rotate out and a new group would be there where with Air America, we were pretty much there for the duration. We just had a far better feel for the situation and the intelligence and just the ability to be in close proximity when something happened was obviously a big advantage.

SM: Well regarding intelligence, so much…I would imagine so much of a successful SAR mission rides on being able to arrive not just to the correct point, but to the correct point while evading enemy forces that might be in your path. Air America, of

course, had an infinite knowledge of enemy forces typically in a particular area, and so as pilots you could avoid contact. Would there be cross briefings to Air Force SAR pilots so that they could share that information, or was that just…that didn't happen, do you know?

MB: Well there wasn't much, unfortunately. That was a big disappointment to me because I felt that we, in our group, had the best information because we were spread out all over the country and every time our pilots would come back they'd debrief flight information center folks and say, 'Oh yeah, well, this hilltop over here they've got a machine gun now and so forth,' and was all up to date information. The Air Force didn't have as much hands on information like that, and they were invited to come over and meet with our FIC folks and there were some that did, but for the most part there was just…I don't know, there was a strange attitude that a lot of folks didn't know what we were doing, they didn't necessarily trust us, and they would kind of say, 'Jeez, if we got the best intelligence information going, why do we need to talk to those folks?'

SM: The mistrust that existed between Air America and the Air Force, and really Air America of course has been shrouded in secrecy and myth during the war and since the war. One of those myths involves the idea that Air America pilots were compensated in special ways for certain activities to include SAR rescues. Did that ever happen to your knowledge?

MB: We did not get special pay for SAR missions. Essentially the only pay we got was we got hazardous duty pay for flying in what was considered denied areas, in other words, enemy areas, and I'm trying to remember, I think it was like $5 an hour or something like that. Particularly in the early days when we were essentially the only SAR capability, the only way we really made any extra money was by flying. So if you flew in denied areas and things like that you got your flight pay and your hazardous duty pay, and initially if they had scheduled reconnaissance flights or what have you coming over, we'd get a call. I remember a number of occasions when I was working away up in northern Laos and I'd be single pilot, single aircraft, probably not another aircraft within 100 miles, and they'd say, 'You need to go ahead and shut down by the radio station and stand by. They're going to be running missions for the next day or so and if somebody gets shot down it's up to you to go in and get them.' Well, if we sat on the ground, we

didn't fly, and we didn't make any money, and if somebody did get shot down it was interesting that they never got shot down in friendly areas, so it was not a pleasant thing to look forward to. Then we would get our standard hazardous duty pay for it. That was probably one of the biggest difficulties we had I guess relationship wise with the military because their sense was we were getting big bucks for every pilot we picked up over there and I think that created some animosity that the only reason we were picking them up was because we were making big bucks for doing it. That would have been nice, but I think almost, to a man, every one of us realized that that could be one of us down there and that's one of our people and boy, if we can get them out of there we need to do that. It wasn't a question of how much money am I going to be paid, because they couldn't have paid us enough money to do that just for that basis.

SM: Certainly the nature of the mission is you go in as quickly as possible, grab whoever is down, and get out as quickly as possible. So in terms of hazardous duty pay, you're not looking at a whole lot of time in a hostile area because you're trying to get out of there.

MB: Sure. Maybe you made $5.

SM: You're not going to make a whole lot at $5 an hour. Also, I'm curious, did you encounter this personally while you were in country, this notion based on other military pilots you talked with, that Air America pilots were getting compensated, bonuses or whatever, in special ways, for picking up pilots?

MB: Oh yeah, we hear these stories all the time, 15-20 thousand dollars a pickup. One curious…one good friend of mine, Bob Nunez, had been in the Air Force and he'd flown with the Jolly Greens and he knew I think it was really the first crew of Jolly Greens that came over to Udorn and I guess they talked to him about all this money that we were making for picking people up and Bob, he says, 'Look, that's not the case,' and he spent a long time convincing them that's not what the story was, and he pretty convinced them that that was what it was. Unfortunately…oh, what is the fellow's name, it escapes me now, but he was a new pilot, been around helicopters for many years, but turns out I guess he was an alcoholic. Anyway, he had been maybe in Udorn just for a week or two and he was still undergoing local training and this one day he was around the traffic pattern and they needed to send an aircraft down to Savannakhet to drop off

some parts, so we sent him down with the pilot. So they flew down to Savannakhet and dropped the parts off and came back to Udorn. It was strictly a milk run. That evening he happened to be staying at the same hotel downtown as the Air Force Jolly Green guys and I guess he was pretty well out of it. He was standing in the hallway and these folks came by and they saw it, I think he had his Air America uniform on and they struck up a conversation. They said, 'How are things going?' and he said, 'Oh, I really had a good day today. We had to go out on a mission and pick up some pilots that got shot down and boy, we got the shit shot out of us,' and so forth and they said, 'Really? Wow!' and he said, 'Yeah! But not bad, you know, 15 grand!' These guys were just outraged and one got a hold of Bobby and said, 'Boy, what a lying sack you are!' and Bobby said, 'Wow!' He came and passed the word on the base and talked to ol' Clarence Haverty and this fellow was on the next train out of town. I mean, that probably set us back quite a ways. Whatever possessed him to come up with that story was hard to understand.

SM: Another interesting component to this is to your understanding, if you were to give an approximate percentage, how many Air America pilots were former military pilots?

MB: Oh, probably 98%, particularly from the helicopter side. I'm not sure if we had any helicopter pilots who were not formerly into military flying, and primarily on the helicopter side it's pretty tough for anybody to get a helicopter license and the training and the experience without having been in the military. We had a few more folks on the fixed wing side that probably had not been in the military, but very few.

SM: So I guess in addition to the issue you discussed previously is that as most Air America pilots thought, when you heard of a downed pilot, the thought, the immediate thought, was, 'That could be me,' and certainly there is a military bond there as well.

MB: Sure, exactly.

SM: I was curious about the spontaneity of these operations. I was under the impression that most of the Air America SAR operations would basically occur on the cuff. You know, you'd be flying a mission, you'd hear of a downed pilot, you'd drop what you're doing and you'd go get him?

MB: That's pretty much the way it worked. I mean, there were some times, as I mentioned, where they had scheduled missions and particularly in the early years and you know they were real paranoid, real concerned about when these guys got shot down how they were going to get them out and so in those cases, when they knew they had one or two days worth of heavy reconnaissance flights or what have you, that's when they would just stand us down so that we would be immediately available to go. It wouldn't be all the aircraft; it would be whatever aircraft happened to be in the area that they were running these missions. They didn't want us to be 50-60 miles away in the middle of another mission when something like that happened.

SM: So you would be on stand-by in the event that a pilot was shot down?

MB: Right.

SM: Now do you recall was there a consistent schedule where there would be Air America pilots on stand-by in case there were?

MB: No.

SM: No?

MB: No, it was just you'd be up country and you'd get a call and say, 'Go over to the radio station and shut down and we'll give you instructions.'

SM: Was Bobby Nunez an Air America pilot as well? You mentioned he flew Jolly Greens.

MB: He'd been in the Air Force before he came with Air America.

SM: Okay. Again, you mentioned that a lot of the Medevac missions and of course a consistent component of your operations included going into Laos and pulling out Thai and Lao forces. Was that something you personally engaged in a significant amount of time?

MB: Oh sure, essentially everybody did.

SM: Did you work in a particular area of Laos in that respect, or all over the country?

MB: No, pretty much all over the country, from one end to the other, and we tried to schedule people in different areas for a couple of reasons; one, that they became familiar with all the areas, and that some areas are probably maybe a little more or less

desirable to fly in than others, whether it be the flying or the living conditions or what have you, so you didn't want to stick one person or a few people in just one specific area.

SM: I was wondering if you were cognizant of and if you participated in knowing the South Vietnamese offensive Lam Son 719, and if you know if Air America had provided any kind of support for that particular operation?

MB: I can't say specifically if we were or what manner of support we would have provided. Well…yeah, I really can't say for sure. The folks there flying out of Saigon may possibly have had some involvement and we may have had some helicopters somewhat involved but it probably would have been peripherally, not in direct support.

SM: Do you know if any Lao forces under American leadership were involved, that is of course run by the customers on the ground?

MB: Oh, I would suspect so, but again I don't really have any direct knowledge.

SM: Alright, so this will end the interview with Marius Burke on April 12th. Thank you very much, sir.

Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Marius Burke
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
April 17, 2001
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

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.

This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Marius Burke on the 17th of April 2001 at approximately 8:15 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Burke is in Melbourne, Florida. Sir, why don't you go ahead and discuss some of the hazards you face as a pilot flying over Laos, in particular enemy hazards and also natural hazards.

MB: You had the combination of enemy activity and weather, the weather being the rainy season and you had low lying clouds and heavy rain and then smoky season, you had very thick smoke that was literally like flying high [?]. You could see maybe an eighth of a mile in front of you and maybe you could see straight down and that would be about it. That was challenging enough to go along with the very rugged terrain that you went flying over with many mountains and so forth, but then you had to contend with the enemy situation and Laos was, to my understanding, had more anti-aircraft weapons than they had in Germany in World War II. It was pretty exciting to be flying along with no capabilities to do much. You'd see these orange basketballs come flying by in the sky and you knew they were gunning for you, and naturally in helicopters, particularly, you were generally at lower altitudes so small arms fire was obviously always a threat.

SM: What kind of armor did you guys have for personal protection in the helicopters you flew?

MB: In the early days we didn't have anything but then eventually they ended up installing some armor plating in the bottom of the seat in the back and then they had at least in the H-34s and S58-T's sliding panels on the side windows in the cockpit and that was really the extent of the armor plating and we would bring, the new guys, would bring maybe flak vests with them or something like that mostly to sit on. It obviously I'm sure saved a lot of people, but there was…we lost a number of people through sniper fire. As near as we could determine the other side would position these folks with long rifles and scopes, mountain tops or cuts where aircraft would be trying to sneak through and so forth and their only mission was to I guess get the pilot. We had a number of pilots who were killed with just one single round in the head, and that's when we pretty much went to two pilots in the cockpit. Prior to that time, it was primarily fine with just one pilot. Probably the most exciting scenario for me was, ironically, it was the last day flying up in Laos. Essentially they had the cease fire accords in effect and it was just a question of moving people around and removing equipment and supplies and all that sort of stuff and I had to fly in an S58-T and we were just flying single pilot at that point and we'd taken out the armor plating as a weight saving device so we could carry a greater load since there was supposedly no concern about us being fired upon, and I had made this shuttle probably 30 or 40 times that day back and forth over the same ridge line going out of 20 alternate and carrying supplies and people back. It was…actually, it was going to be my last trip and I was coming back and I'd flown over the same ridge line, like I say, probably 30 or 40 times, and it was just getting…you know, it was late in the afternoon, it wasn't dark yet, but it was getting that way, and this was sort of a typical scenario for the other side, too. They liked to do things late in the afternoon, because that made it real difficult to launch search and rescue efforts and things like that, pretty tough to do at night. So anyway, I'm coming over this ridgeline and suddenly the left window, co-pilot's window, just shattered and I just instinctively made a very steep turn in the opposite direction and it was quiet for like four or five seconds until I righted the aircraft and apparently they realized that I was still in a flying mode and then the entire whole side, there must have been 1500 of them down there, opened up. Fortunately, I managed to get by them. But, they'd just been sitting there biding their time and thinking, 'Okay, this is probably the last trip, let's see if we can handle this guy,' and as it turned out, in

fact I still have it, I've got it framed in my office here, the bullet that came through that window, when we took out the armor plating there was about a one inch rail that kind of held the armored plating in place that was attached to the base of the window, and that was still there, and the bullet hit probably just below the top edge of that rail and it was lined up right for my head. It hit that rail and just sort of tumbled and actually landed in my lap. I'm sure they were real disappointed, but they obviously had me foresighted. Those were the types of things you kind of expected to happen but it was always a surprise when it did.

SM: Especially that close and miss! Did you know other pilots who had similar near misses like that?

MB: I'm sure every pilot had near misses. There were plenty of them where everybody got shot up at one point in time. But, that one was probably as close as you could get without getting injured.

SM: What do you think was the largest anti-aircraft weapon used against you when you were flying in Laos?

MB: Probably the .37 millimeter, although I think the Volpar that Jim Ryan was in that got hit in…I believe they said it was an 85.

SM: And that's when Jim Ryan lost his leg?

MB: Right, right.

SM: Now where were you when that happened? Were you in the vicinity?

MB: I don't remember exactly where I was, whether I was up country or even out of the country because I don't believe I was in Udorn when they came back, otherwise I would have probably been there to meet him when he got there.

SM: You mentioned before we started recording this morning an incident that occurred near the PDJ where you had to gain significant altitude and kind of fly over that. I was wondering if you'd go ahead and talk about that.

MB: One of the problems we had obviously was battling the weather and at the same time staying clear of enemy areas, and I'll have to say that Air America and our flight information folks probably had some of the best intelligence going up there, and for a couple of reasons; one being our folks were there sort of for the duration. You became very familiar with the area, and word got passed very quickly if something changed. Of

course, whenever the pilots would come home they'd have to go into FIC and they'd debrief and they'd say, 'Well, this hillside over here, they've got enemy activity and they've got weapons over here,' and so forth. That was never a guarantee in a fluid situation obviously but pretty much you kind of knew where you could go, and as long as you knew where you were and you didn't have the weather restricting you, you could probably safely make your way around. Obviously there were a lot of places that we went that were either no man's land or there were known enemy in the area and you just simply had to fly over them. For the most part we would go as high as we could practically fly over those areas and unfortunately the weather didn't always cooperate. The Plain De Jars for probably 90% of the time we were over there was typically under the control of the communists and ironically it always seemed like the Plain De Jars would be relatively clear weather wise. The weather seemed to wring around the plains, so that was always a challenge. If we were working our way up north of the Plain De Jars, I mean we would have to go all the way around the horn, take the long way up and the long way back and fuel was always a consideration, obviously. One day I was coming back after flying all day and there was just a long line of thunder storms all around the plains and there was no way I was going to get around them and couldn't really get through them and they'd kind of moved in behind me also so I couldn't go back to where I'd been which wasn't a particularly secure area anyway, so I just climbed up to 20,000 feet and moved directly over to the plains and fortunately there was a high cloud cover and I made it across. I didn't think too much of it at the time but thinking back on it having a little more experience I was probably up there 15 to 20 minutes at that altitude with no oxygen which isn't always the greatest scenario, but it worked.

SM: Do you remember becoming light headed at all?

MB: No, I didn't. It was just I had my flight mechanic and myself on board. It was a Bell 204B I believe. You get up at that altitude and the helicopter is not real responsive. It tends to…like you're flying on the head of a needle type thing.

SM: Interesting. Is it because the more altitude you gain, the less lift that you have?

MB: Well, that, but yeah, the air is so thin that you don't have as much stability, and I don't doubt that probably the lack of oxygen didn't help that matter either.

SM: The enemy that was occupying the PDJ at that point, they didn't have anything that could reach you that high?

MB: Oh they did, but I suspect they either didn't recognize I was up there…and I think the cloud cover was certainly a help. It didn't help Jim Ryan because they were above a solid overcast when they got hit. But they had radar controlled .37 millimeters but hard to say how well they were equipped and how accurate…whether they would even turn them on unless they were looking for something.

SM: Now I was curious, when you mentioned earlier the sniper activity that the enemy would engage in to actually try to take out the pilots of these helicopters, your helicopters, when that first started happening was there any change in your procedures or your operating procedures in terms of not flying straight line, zigzag, and stuff like that?

MB: No, not really because that really wouldn't make any difference. I mean, we're going slow enough that that wouldn't be a problem. The biggest change we made was we ended up going to two crews on board the aircraft because we lost a couple where there was just one pilot. We lost some…I don't know if we lost any folks in Helios but I'm thinking a couple of the Pilatuses, they would fly a lot of times at low altitudes, sneaking over ridge lines and things like that.

SM: So slow moving single aircraft were susceptible to the same types of resistance that you were?

MB: Sure, and whether it would necessarily be a sniper or just lucky shots from folks on the ground, when you're down at low altitude you're certainly a much easier target.

SM: Was there anything else that you wanted to discuss with regard to your time flying in Laos?

MB: That's a…

SM: I know, it's a big question.

MB: That's an awful open ended one there.

SM: I know. Is there anything you could think of, though?

MB: No, other than the fact that it was just very challenging, flying, and it took a particular type of individual to survive over there, too, and then there was a lot of luck involved, too.

SM: Now as the chief pilot, you were responsible for checking out pilots, correct?

MB: Right.

SM: Did you have difficulties at all? As you mentioned, flying in this type of environment is very dependent on personality and skill and luck. Were there any difficulties you encountered in that context?

MB: Oh not so much. We had a good training program. We had a good staff of instructor pilots. Typically on the helicopter side the pilots would undergo local flight training, just learning the systems and the aircraft and the way we operated it and so forth, and then they would go up country with another pilot for maybe one to three months and at such point in time as it was felt that they were ready for upgrade to captain then either myself, White Knight, Bill Hutchinson, and our other staff of pilots, our instructor pilots, would go up and give them their final checkout. That typically would be from maybe four days to a week of just essentially flying the line to insure that they were able to do all the different things that they needed to be able to do and knew the area. Familiarity with the area was the biggest challenge, quite frankly, because when the weather was bad, all those mountains looked the same.

SM: In terms of your job, was it made easier by the fact that Air America hired a significant number of former military pilots, and so they had basically experienced a lot of the hazards of flying over a country during war?

MB: Well, yes, particularly as time went by. Essentially all of the pilots who came to work for us had flown in the military and the vast majority, particularly in later years, I think had all been over there in Vietnam so they had that experience. So they were generally pretty well qualified and typically they were qualified in the aircraft that they'd be flying with us.

SM: Now you left Udorn in 1974. Before that of course some significant diplomatic political events had taken place regarding the United States' efforts in Southeast Asia, in particular the basically the complete withdraw of U.S. ground forces after the Paris Peace Accords of 1973. I was wondering, what were the biggest changes you witnessed in Laos, flying over Laos, after the peace accords were signed?

MB: There wasn't really any great changes other than right at the end it was pretty much everybody was supposed to be staying in place wherever they happened to be and they weren't supposed to be shooting at you and so forth. We didn't really trust that obviously and we didn't go flying over enemy territory to test it out. But, there just wasn't the type of activity that was going on before in terms of moving troops around or attacks and things like that.

SM: So your off tempo did decrease?

MB: Yes, oh yeah, and there was just a gradual crank down. We started cutting back on our pilots. We were trying to encourage people to take their home leave or transfer down to Saigon or what have you, wherever we could place them, because there simply wasn't enough flying to justify all the people that we had.

SM: While you were flying over Laos, from the time you got there to the time you left, did you, in terms of the briefings you received and things like that, was there a noticeable increase over time in terms of North Vietnamese activity? Did it start at a smaller tempo and then increase over time? Did it stay static or pretty much the same? What was your experience that you recall?

MB: Oh sure. It built to a crescendo actually towards the end. In the early days it was hard to tell because there wasn't a lot of activity, we didn't have a lot of aircraft and a lot of people and we weren't doing very much when I first got there in '63. I think the average pilot flew maybe 10 hours a month and that was it. Four or five years later I went through a period where I averaged close to 200 hours a month. So, a vast difference in that respect, and then you would see the activity on the road, Ho Chi Minh Trail and all of that. So, there was I would suspect not a lot of North Vietnamese there in the early days but as time went by I think they pretty much were running the show.

SM: You said that was about four years into your experience that your operational tempo increased to a peak, about '67 or so?

MB: Well I wouldn't say a peak. It built up significantly. Probably the nastiest time was around the '70-'71-'72 time frame because I took some leave and went back to the college in California for about a year and while I was getting ready to work on my thesis the company was anxious for me to come back because things had really picked up. So, I went back for I think a quarter, for three months or something like that while I

was working on my thesis and flew and then went back to school for another semester and I noticed a remarkable difference in the level of activity and the hazardous nature and so forth. There was a lot of new case officers that operated differently than the old folks like Tony Poe and I think were probably a lot more reckless. It tended to be, towards the end, some real hard feelings on a lot of people's parts, both from the customer standpoint and from the pilot standpoint. The customers wanted the pilots to do some things and the pilots were not necessarily wanting to do these things because they felt it was just too hazardous and there wasn't enough support being provided. So, there got to be some pretty hard feelings and that was really unfortunate. I remember the Thais had an artillery group there on Site 15 which was only like five or ten minutes from 20 Alternate and it was an air strip and it was in a bowl surrounded by mountains and they were essentially surrounded. They would have us go in sometimes two, three, four times a day with anywhere from two to six to eight helicopters, bring in supplies, bringing people out, carrying out wounded, carrying out bodies, and so forth. It was running the gauntlet because wherever you would come in, almost immediately after that there would be mortars coming into that same spot. You would see enemy soldiers probably within a couple hundred feet just standing out and shooting at you. We got to the point where we literally couldn't land. We were pulling bodies out in cargo nets and dropping things off in cargo nets. We had air cover and everything else which was the only thing that probably even allowed us to do that. It was…I remember saying to myself, 'Wow, this is really nuts!' And a lot of the trips in there were really kind of unnecessary, where the case officer would decide, 'Well, I've got to go in there and talk to these folks on the ground.' I said, 'Can't you just do it on the radio or what have you?' He could have but he was gung-ho I guess, but he was putting a lot of people at risk in the process unnecessarily. Pilots were getting a little tired of this, and the amazing thing actually was we didn't lose anybody, and this went on for probably at least a month and finally one night I think there was like 1200 Thai, they just left in the middle of the night. They walked out pretty much unmolested. I think they probably made a deal with the other side and they walked out and of course the word was out that, 'Well, if Air America had provided adequate support, that wouldn't have happened.' That was really kind of a slap in the face because I think the guys flying up there and going into that place were doing

everything they could humanly possibly do and then some and should have been amply recognized in a positive way for what they did rather than be put down by at least some people. I'm not saying everybody did that. So there tended to be…things got real dicey. There were a lot of places where they would have missions or they'd have outposts that were under attack and needed to be evacuated or what have you, and heavy enemy concentrations and anti-aircraft weapons and so forth to contend with and we had to come up with a policy that, well, if we're going to go into situations like this we've got to have cover. If we don't have cover, we're just not going to send the helicopters in there under those conditions because it doesn't make any sense. Unfortunately, they were never always able to get cover so there were a lot of times when they'd try to downplay the gravity of the situation and say, 'Oh, yeah, it's not a problem over there, you can go in,' to get the pilots to go without cover, and sometimes they would go but a lot of times they'd say, 'Wait a minute, we know what the situation is over there and that's just suicide to try to go in there without any kind of backup and cover!' Customers would get upset and I remember there were times when I'd get a call and, 'You've got to come up here. Your pilots aren't doing the job they're supposed to be doing,' and I think without fail I'd listen to the brief and then I'd come to the same conclusion that we're not going to do this. So, there tended to be a little bit of animosity that came out of that with some of the customers and some of the pilots which was really unfortunate, and I could see it from the customer's standpoint. They had their people out there that were in trouble and they wanted to get them out, but sometimes folks lost sight of reality. It's one thing to have some people in trouble and you send more people out there to get into more trouble and lose more people, it just doesn't compute.

SM: Well certainly that story brings into stark relief the various conflicting issues that you all had to cope with and had to work with in that you're civilian pilots, you're not armed, you don't have direct immediate internal fire support because since you're a civilian, but at the same time you're trying to accommodate and work within a war and make a profit, so you can't lose pilots and aircraft because that's going to cut into your margin there. The mere fact that you did succeed as much as you did is amazing, in light of those circumstances.

MB: Well I know Bill Lair I think made the comment many times that we accomplished more with a fraction of the cost doing what we did in Laos than the military ever did over there in Vietnam. Of course unfortunately in the grand scheme of things, in the end, it still came [?].

SM: But still, it's quite an accomplishment. What time period was the Thai artillery unit that you were providing that support, what time period was that? Was that during that high tempo period when you went back?

MB: Yes, this was…well, it was probably just before I left and after I came back and really pretty much until the end the Thais were over there in fairly good numbers, mostly artillery groups and things like that.

SM: That particular point where the Thais left and walked out, was that before or after you finished your schooling, your university training?

MB: That was in the middle. That's when I went over there for the three-month hitch, and that was just walking out of that particular post.

SM: Was that…do you know if that was during the Easter Offensive in Vietnam, when the North Vietnamese tried to…well, they did attack into South Vietnam during Easter of '72?

MB: No, that would have been in '70 I think was the time frame. I look back on a lot of these dates and it's hard to place them exactly, and the only reason I can place that one fairly well is the fact that it was in between my school when I was there at school between '69 and '71.

SM: Do you remember the Easter Offensive of '72 and did you guys hear about that activity in support of actions against the North Vietnamese coming in from Laos?

MB: Oh, I think peripherally all that stuff seemed to be the same, actually. There was always something going on. Other than what we got through our intelligence information on activity and so forth, our news information over there was relatively limited. Mostly what you'd get would be Time or Newsweek magazine which was usually so far off the mark that you knew that 90% of what you were reading was bologna anyway. It was probably made up by some journalist who sat there in the Continental Hotel lounge in Vientienne and would glean information from pilots that had had too much to drink or something and took that as gospel as to what was going on.

SM: Were there any inaccuracies or errors in reporting that stand out in your mind still today, or is it in general bad reporting?

MB: Just general. You'd read stuff in the magazines and look at that and say, 'Jeez, I don't remember that. Where did that come from? That's a bunch of bologna!' Yeah, it was essentially that, and of course a big part of it was the fact that they weren't allowing these folks to go up country so their only source of information was people that they could probably buttonhole or overhear people talking or what have you. I think it's mostly based on rumors.

SM: And was there any newspaper or magazine or perhaps radio program that got it right, maybe not all the time, but was pretty close to reporting accurately what was occurring in Laos?

MB: Not that I can recall.

SM: Very interesting; did that change at all when you went to Vietnam?

MB: No, I don't think so.

SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Marius Burke on April 17th.

Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Marius Burke
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
April 19, 2001
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

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.

This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Marius Burke on the 19th of April, 2001 at approximately 8:10 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Burke is in Melbourne, Florida. Sir, why don't we go ahead and continue with our discussion of the transition from Thailand and flying over Laos to Saigon. What time period did that occur, and what was your primary…or not Saigon, but Vietnam because you worked in Da Nang as well, but what was the purpose of that transition and what did you do there?

MB: Oh essentially I was just going to go down there and fly and I had already made plans to probably finish up my career there in June of '75 since I had interests in States that were calling me to come back urgently, and since we were leaving Thailand I moved my family back to the States at that point in time, that and in view of the fact that things were kind of up in the air in Vietnam anyway. I felt sort of an obligation to hang around a little longer, so I packed my family up and shipped them to Utah and went down to Saigon and started flying there, essentially all over the country.

SM: Now what was…at that point in time, this is 1974 so the peace accords have already been passed and the U.S. ground forces have been completely removed by this point. When you were flying around in Vietnam at this point, you're still flying around customers? What was your primary responsibility in terms of flying?

MB: Oh, yeah, certainly we were flying customers around, doing work for the various agencies, USAID and so forth, and then of course they had the ICCS contract which was kind of a bizarre scenario because here you had…initially it was the Canadians and the Indonesians and then the Hungarians and the Poles, and they were supposed to be monitoring the cease fires and all of that sort of stuff over there. Shortly after I got there, the Canadians just gave up in disgust and they left and they were subsequently replaced by the Iranians and we had specially marked airplanes and helicopters with distinctive markings and so forth that we used strictly for the purpose of carrying these people around and we even had I think different epaulets and maybe different hats and insignias when we were flying them. Essentially the trips, though I didn't fly very many of them myself, the ones we took were scheduled as to time frames, altitudes, routes, and all of that and very often they would be back behind enemy lines. It was a rather bizarre scenario to say the least, and my impression was that it was more of an intelligence passing on procedure for the Poles and the Hungarians than anything else. They always had these big, black suitcases that they carried with them and I really didn't see where they were accomplishing anything constructive for our side at all.

SM: You mentioned the Hungarians and the Poles carrying these suitcases, when they'd get back on would they still have them or were they left behind?

MB: Yeah, typically they'd carry them in and carry them out. Obviously they had stuff inside that they were doing something with.

SM: And you said the Canadians left in disgust. Did you get a chance to talk to any of them and get their perspective on what they were witnessing and why they were so disgusted?

MB: I really didn't. This was very shortly after I arrived on the scene and I didn't really know any of them. It was almost within probably weeks of my arrival and next thing I knew, they were gone.

SM: Did you find out from anybody else or did you talk with anybody else about this issue and find out other particulars about it?

MB: I really didn't get any specific info on it other than I think just their general feeling that it was a farce and it was a waste of their time to be participating in it.

SM: And the purpose for the meetings between the Canadians, Poles, Hungarians, and I assume the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, was to try to establish some kind of a peaceful negotiation, or what?

MB: Yeah, I assume that's what it was but the whole thing seemed to be such a farce to me it was hard to imagine just exactly what if anything they were accomplishing. I really couldn't see where our side was getting anything out of it.

SM: Did you ever fly Americans to these meetings?

MB: No, it was strictly those four groups.

SM: I'm curious, when you were going into these areas which were apparently enemy controlled, that is by either the PAVN or what's left of the remnants of the Viet Cong, how were you greeted or treated when you would land and drop off these passengers?

MB: Well, my only experience was one trip where we went back in the jungle and we landed and these fellows in their pith helmets came out, and they stood guard around our aircraft and we just sat there and waited until the group came back and then took off and left, so it was, oh, rather innocuous though it was kind of a funny feeling. I probably have less of a feel for that than any line of the other pilots that were there prior to my getting over there, because I flew a lot more of those flights.

SM: When you were flying customers around at this point, when you were flying in support of customers and CIA personnel, what were your principal missions in terms of were you just flying supplies out or running people, shuttling people, to specific locations? Was there any fighting that you witnessed or anything like that?

MB: No, it was mostly pretty basic stuff. For the most part, you might haul some supplies or things like that but a lot of it was just hauling various customers around to the various sights that they wanted to visit and holding meetings and so forth and we carried a lot of Vietnamese folks in the same manner.

SM: Did you get shot at when you were flying over Vietnam in '74 and early '75?

MB: Yeah, but it wasn't to the extent that we ran into things say in Laos. It seemed to be a lot mellower for the most part anyway, and a lot of the places we would go were not particularly all that hazardous.

SM: What did you think was going to happen, or did you have any thoughts in terms of between North and South Vietnam?

MB: Oh, I really didn't have a good feel for it one way or the other. By the way, I've started going through that other information that you sent me and I wrote up a copy of my notes on the evacuation which would probably maybe clarify things a little bit more in terms of perhaps observations and feelings. It wasn't until things started going downhill up there in Hue and Da Nang that I got the definite feeling that things were going in the wrong direction. Just the panic and the fear shown by the South Vietnamese, to me, was pretty devastating in terms of their morale and leadership and so forth and it didn't seem to be much of a will to, 'Hey, we're going to stand and fight and protect our property.' It was, 'I'm going to get out of here!'

SM: This was in late '74 or what time period?

MB: This would have been…

SM: The Hue-Da Nang…

MB: Probably in…I'd have to look at the dates, but say around March '75.

SM: Oh, okay, so much…a little bit later then? Okay.

MB: Yeah.

SM: And when you say that, again, the tenor or the feeling that you were getting from the Vietnamese and that is primarily a fear and, 'How can I leave,' did you have many conversations with Vietnamese about what was happening? I assume at that point there were quite a few English speaking Vietnamese that you might be shuttling around.

MB: Yeah, but there really wasn't much opportunity to sit down and talk with them. You'd have a mission and they'd get on board and you'd carry them where they wanted to go and you'd drop them off and you'd come back and pick them up and what have you. So, there really wasn't a lot of discussions at that point in time, and for the most part I was somewhat turned off by the Vietnamese generals that I had occasion to carry around, or have any conversation with. They seemed to be very aloof. They really weren't too interested with carrying on a conversation with just an American type thing. Whether it was the status, these guys just really thought they were God's gift to the military over there. It was really disappointing. I remember one comment I made, I forget his name now, but he was sort of the head general up there in Da Nang and that

little region and when we were pulling people out on the last day the counsel general, I was taking him around doing things he needed to be done and he says, 'Oh, I just got word that general so-and-so is supposedly going to kill himself,' and he said, 'I've got to go save him.' I just went, 'Why?' He's really screwed up, and he was a real pompous sort of guy, and that's fine if he's sort of like a George Patton type, very tough and thinks well of himself and so forth, if he does the job and accomplishes it, good for him. That's what they're supposed to be doing. But, this guy apparently when things went bad he just crumbled and I said, 'Hey, let him!'

SM: Did he go up and save him, though?

MB: Well I dropped him off and I don't know quite frankly if he accomplished anything or if he actually got to see him or not.

SM: But you didn't save and bring them both out?

MB: No, in fact we had to leave that evening and counsel general said, 'Well,' his name was Francis, Al Francis, he says, 'I'm not going out. I have to stay here,' but he says, 'Come back and get me tomorrow,' and I strongly advised him not to stay there overnight but he was adamant. So, that was the primary reason I went back the next day. Of course we were also trying to track down some more of our local employees up there, one of them which was my secretary, Sally, and we were able to get them out. We hunted all over for Francis the next day and it wasn't until late that afternoon when we were just about out of fuel and had to leave that we got word that he was onboard a ship and wanted us to pick him up and fly him back and of course we were unable to do that. We had a whole load of evacuees and so forth. As far as I was concerned he was in safe hands and we didn't need to extend ourselves beyond that.

SM: Now what were you getting in terms of any kind of feedback or just feelings, if you will, from the CIA personnel that you were shuttling around? You mentioned the feeling you were getting from some of the Vietnamese was that there was fear, concern, things like that. I was curious if the CIA case officers that were going into some of these areas probably trying to hold things together at the last moment, if they were giving you any kind of feedback, either overtly or subliminally?

MB: No, and that was actually a big disappointment. I was surprised that their lack of concern or awareness of what was really going on. I think I outlined that in my

report. They'd have reports of tanks around north of Hue and it was getting kind of tense up there and we got a call to go up there and bring some people out. As a result I recommended to the customer that their people probably shouldn't be staying up there at night. If they wanted to go up there during the day we could head back in the evening and they said, 'Oh no, no, we don't need to do that,' and I think it was that very night we got a panic call to go up there and pull them out. So, it was not a lot of information and admittedly I went up there to take over the operation as sort of like the base manager or the fill in for Frank Sturgar who had been the base manager up there and he was on home leave, and I'd only been up to Da Nang one previous time I believe, maybe twice for four or five days and I didn't know really any of the people up there very well as a result. I'd met them once or twice perhaps, some of them maybe I hadn't met at all, so I was kind of feeling my way around. But, it was really a big disappointment in the manner in which…well, to give you an example, the…oh, I think the night that we brought the customers back from Hue…no, it was one afternoon we were then…after that we brought them up in the morning and we brought them back in the evening, and one afternoon one of them had left one of their special radios in the aircraft. I thought to myself, 'Maybe I ought to just hang onto this,' and it was somewhat fortuitous I think because it was some days later and I had started staying at the base and in fact I'd encouraged all of our people to stay there at night rather than going downtown because my concern was if anything happened we wouldn't be able to get back to base to the aircraft. It was, I don't know, maybe two o'clock in the morning and suddenly this radio came alive and I heard voices and one of them was saying, 'How many people do you have out there at the airport?' or how many Americans I think it was, and this was sort of like the…oh, I guess he was the main base officer for the company and Roy Lewis was the air ops representative out there in the field and they were directly joining our compound at the field. It was probably about a 12 foot bobbed wire fence between us but the buildings were probably within ten feet of each other. Roy gave them a number and I started counting in my mind and I realized that that didn't include us, and he says, 'Well, get everybody and get on down to the docks right away,' and that got my attention. That didn't sound good. So, I sat there for a few minutes expecting Roy to call me and when he didn't I called him and I says, 'Hey, is something going on?' like, 'What's happening?' and Roy says, 'I don't know,

but we've been told to get our folks and go out to the docks.' I said, 'Well, that's interesting, what about us?' and all I got was, 'Do the best you can,' and that was it.

SM: That's kind of ambiguous. Do you know what he meant?

MB: Well sure, I knew exactly what he meant; we were on our own. They were bugging out and every man for himself.

SM: Do you remember about what date this was?

MB: I'd have to look through the paper but I'll send that to you.

SM: Okay. This must have been sometime in April I would imagine. Well, we can just wait until we get the paper. I was just curious.

MB: It was either…I lose track of these dates. Let's see, maybe I can find it here.

SM: Did they get all their people out at that time?

MB: Well, actually we ended up having to go in and pull them out because it turned out they couldn't get off the base. The Vietnamese wouldn't let them out. This was probably the end of March, and it looks like maybe it was the 27th of March or something like that.

SM: So this is almost within a month of Saigon falling?

MB: Yes, roughly.

SM: Well what was it like that last month? What was your life like and what did you and the other Air America pilots do for that last month?

MB: Well, I was pretty busy. When I left Da Nang I went back to Saigon and I don't think I was in Saigon more than a day or so and due to my experience I guess with the evacuation up in Da Nang the company asked me to go up to Nha Trang and sort of oversee that operation. I think I got up there about noon and the evacuation was already underway when I got there and I was back in Saigon I guess by nine o'clock that night. The rest was almost kind of like a blur. By then I was convinced that the end was coming and I got involved with plans for potential evacuation in Saigon as well as doing some flying missions around the area. I spent a lot of time working with our flight information folks, folks at the embassy, and so forth. That's when we came up with the plan to have these rooftop helipads because with my experiences there in Hue and Da Nang and Nha Trang the biggest problem was being able to get the right people out without being

mobbed. I remember vividly going back to our ramp there in Da Nang trying to locate some of our workers and there was one of our handymen that was running around on the ramp and there was literally thousands of people there. So here you are, you're trying to hover over him and convince this guy to reach up and pull him and snatch him out of the crowd; well, everyone else wants to get up, too, and he kept whenever he got close to him he'd move away because I guess the rotor wires and everything scared him. It was just a total unsatisfactory arrangement. It was felt that if we could find the relatively secure buildings, high rises, that we could somehow cut off access at least for some period of time. That would give us enough jump that we could get a lot of people out. They could block the entrance to the building and everybody funnels up to the top and gets to the helicopters and pull them off and by the time folks had realized what was going on and started breaking through and then climb up to the top, you'd have a lot better chance of getting people out. We essentially set up I believe it was 32 structures, and that included obviously the embassy, the Pitman building which was sort of the agency headquarters, and we kind of made some preparations. We took aerial photos and all of that and had these buildings designated and tried to encourage all of our people to congregate in those specific buildings; in other words, move out of private residences and things like that. For the most part, that worked fairly well. We had difficulty getting access to some of these buildings, and I got into one that was probably no more than a mile away from the airport and there was still some USAID folks and people like that around, but the evacuation was going in earnest on the airplane side. The Air Force was hauling people out. I was able to get an apartment and that was it. I think the only reason I was able to get this apartment was they figured if I was there, they'd have a ride out, is what it amounts to. I eventually managed to get some more rooms for other folks but it was like pulling teeth despite the fact that there were plenty of open apartments. The sense was that Air America was different. This was a USAID building and therefore it was for USAID people, not for those Air America people. So, the next thing that I wanted to do was sort of make routine helicopter landings on these rooftops, and the embassy was dead set against that. They absolutely refused to let us do it. I went ahead regardless and I started commuting from the base to the apartment. I remember the first night I landed up on the rooftop and boy, I probably drew a crowd of a couple thousand people in the

neighborhood. The streets were just full of people looking to see what the heck was going on, there was this helicopter landing on the roof! But, after about the second or third time they didn't really pay any more attention. It was just a routine thing so they ignored it, which is exactly what I was hoping to accomplish. But, that was the only place we were able to do that.

SM: Did they say why they didn't want you to do that, because that is a very…I mean, it's a very logical thing to do.

MB: I think…you know, and it's hard to say, I think they were in denial. I don't think they liked the idea of somebody like myself, 'Oh, just one of those Air America pilots that thinks he knows something. He doesn't know anything. We've got all this intelligence and we know what's going on,' because I remember I think my last conversation with the ambassador, and they were essentially saying that I was upsetting people unnecessarily, and that he had good information that Saigon was off limits to the North Vietnamese. It would never be taken over and therefore the things that I was doing was just stirring the pot and upsetting people unnecessarily.

SM: This was the ambassador saying this? Who was providing him with this supposed information? Do you know?

MB: Well, as I can determine it was through the agency and his advisors. I tend to suspect that he was maybe a little senile at that time and maybe didn't fully realize what was going on. I think they had a lot of misinformation, and again, this is just supposition on my part. The agency chief down there, a fellow by the name of Tom Holgar, I believe was Hungarian, and the impression I had was that he had become close friends with the head of the Hungarian delegation and that this was a source of a lot of his intelligence. It kind of makes sense that they would have such strong feelings, but that's just my supposition. I don't know.

SM: When you mentioned earlier that again, as you were developing this plan to evacuate from rooftops instead of from base areas and the ground based on the Da Nang experience and you said this would allow them to control access to the building, to prevent mobs from coming in, and allow for a more hopefully a smoother evacuation and a safer evacuation, who were the people that would prevent access to the building and control and engage in crowd control on the ground while you evacuated?

MB: Well, good question, and I'm not sure that we really fully determined that. Obviously in some of these buildings they had military guards and security people and things like that that would hopefully be able to do that. The thing is, though, it was felt that with the relatively small numbers of people that we'd be able to get them off those roofs pretty quickly and obviously it would take time before people would realize what was going on, and then they'd have to break through the doors, and they should have been barricaded if you're going to block access in stages all the way up to the top to buy time. But, there wasn't any specific arrangements made other than what was made at the individual buildings, because obviously they were all different, too.

SM: Were there Americans? When you say the military guards protecting some of these buildings, were some of them Marines? I know there were Marines at the embassy, but what about at the other buildings?

MB: I don't know if the Marines were at any of the other buildings.

SM: Okay, and I take it that the plan that you helped devise in terms of evacuating Saigon, that that included…I don't know, maybe putting some materials, as you mentioned, some of the doors were supposed to be barricaded and things like that. Did that include pre-positioning stuff so that it would be easy for the people as they came up into the building to go ahead and barricade as they went so that it would slow down a mob if it did happen?

MB: Quite frankly, I really didn't get involved in that part of it.

SM: Oh, okay. Do you know who did?

MB: Not specifically. My side really was the air side and this is what we need and I kind of left that up to other folks. I was busy enough as it was without trying to get involved and all the nitty gritty of it, and I felt that certainly there were people that were far better qualified in those areas to handle that.

SM: How did the plan work when it came time to evacuate? There's that expression, 'No plan survives first contact.' Did this one?

MB: It actually worked very well, quite frankly, despite all the problems that we had. Had the other items that I had really wanted, the biggest one being fuel…because what the plan was, and we had made two or three trips out to the ships to brief folks out there on what was going on, and essentially the basic plan was that six hours before any

evacuation the Marines would come in and secure the facility and all of that. Then, Air America was supposed to be shuttling the people from these rooftop pads out to the airport and from there the military with their Jolly Greens and H-46s and so forth would take the people from there out to the ships. You were talking, oh I don't know, the ships were probably 100 miles away, and unfortunately one of my big concerns was alternate sources of fuel. We found an old abandoned USAID building that I thought would be ideal to store fuel and we spent, in fact, Nikki Fillipi, I believe spent a day up there working on it with a crew to cut off access to the roof. It was sort of like a [?] and so the plan was to cut off stairways, ladders, and so forth and we put 55 gallon drums of fuel on the rooftop and that was done and I went in there with one load of fuel and was informed that if I was caught near that building that they'd probably shoot me down. This was primarily from the Vietnamese but I got no support from the embassy folks in accomplishing any more. As a result, when the field was hit, they hit the fuel dump and so we didn't have any other fuel. So, what we had to do was we could run a couple of shuttles downtown to the airport and then we'd have to just load up with people and fly out to the ships to get fuel and then fly all the way back, and you had enough fuel to do a couple more shuttles and then you'd have to go back out to the ships again which really constrained our ability to do what we needed to do. Amazingly enough, for the most part I think with just a few exceptions essentially only Americans did get out.

SM: Now when you said that they told you if you went near that building you'd probably get shot down, this is the South Vietnamese saying this?

MB: Yeah, yeah.

SM: Did they say why?

MB: No, there wasn't any explanations given. It was just very typical of what was going on over there. There wasn't any good explanation for a lot of things, but it was just, 'You can't do this, we don't want you to do it, and if you do, this is what's going to happen,' kind of thing. We just didn't get the support.

SM: Did you ever get an explanation from the embassy staff on why they didn't support this? I mean, forward positioning fuel would be just a basic precaution.

MB: No, never got an explanation for anything from any of those people, quite frankly, and I wasn't particularly interested in hearing about it anyway. It was a real

frustrating thing. I was just so busy running around with different things, and one of the things came up; we had a lot of Filipino personnel, mostly mechanics, and a lot of them had been there for years and years and years and they had families and a lot of them had Vietnamese families. Well, Air America and their folks, other than Americans, were on the bottom of the list for being evacuated. A lot of the Filipino's families, they had no passports, paperwork, or anything else like that, so that made it even tougher to do anything. So, the Philippines sent an LST over to Vung Tau to take these people out and so they brought all their families down to Vung Tau and the Vietnamese wouldn't let them go. They'd go down to the dock and they'd say, 'Uh-uh, you're not leaving!' So now we had like 1200 people down there on the beach camped out and obviously the part Filipino mechanics particularly, they says, 'Well we're not leaving our families. We're going to stay here until we know they're safe,' and obviously that was going to adversely impact our operation, because if they weren't working we were going to be out of business pretty quick. They were a necessary part of our operation. So I went down there and met with them and I believe the Filipino ambassador was out there and I met with he and his staff and said, 'What can we do about this?' and I said, 'Well, if they won't let you go out to the dock and go by boat out to the ship, why don't we just load them up on helicopters and we'll over fly them. Then his staff was agasp, 'No, no, we can't do that! That'll be big trouble!' The ambassador, his credit, he says, 'Really? Would you do that?' and I said, 'Sure!' so he said, 'Let's do it!' The next day I got a couple more helicopters and we got all those folks out there, and they were obviously very happy and said, 'What can we do to repay you for all this?' and I said, 'Do you have any more room on your ship?' and they said, 'Oh, we could probably handle two or three hundred more,' and I said, 'Well, we've got a lot of Vietnamese employees and I don't know how they're going to get out. Would you mind taking them?' and he says, 'Well sure,' but he says, 'We would need to have…if we can get a letter from the embassy, the U.S. embassy, stating that they will accept responsibility for them when we get to the Philippines, we'll do it.' So I called over to the embassy and got a hold of a fellow by the name of Jacobson who's sort of like the ambassador's secretary and explained to him what we needed and his response was, 'I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole.' I couldn't even see straight. I finally asked him, I says, 'Well could you do me another

favor,' and he said, 'Well what's that?' and I said, 'Would it be possible to get a photo of yourself?' and he said, 'I guess so, what do you need that for?' and I said, 'Well I want to make about 100 copies or so and pass it around to all the rest of the crews so when it comes time to go, we'll know who not to pick up.' I was furious. So, we didn't get the folks out. That was just the type of thing that seemed to go on constantly. Air America had the lowest priority. We couldn't get our people out of Da Nang on Air America airplanes that were sent up there to haul other people out. We could haul them out but we couldn't haul our people out.

SM: Why?

MB: Priorities. I mean, we did it anyway.

SM: But you were told not to?

MB: Well essentially we were told, 'This aircraft is for these people here to go out.' We got into a big harangue with [?] base manager at Saigon and they're talking about the seat belt and that you cannot put any more people on an aircraft that you have seatbelts for, and I'm saying, 'Wait a minute, we've got an evacuation going on here. This is serious business,' and, 'Well don't you put any more people on that plane unless you have enough seatbelts!' Of course we ignored it, but it was that foolishness that constantly went on, and what it really amounted to was that I don't believe anybody recognized what was going on. They just couldn't see the forest for the trees.

SM: I'm curious, were there any other significant air presence, was there any other significant air presence in South Vietnam at this time?

MB: Of what nature?

SM: Helicopters. You mentioned that the Air Force did have some Jolly Greens, but who was doing…in terms of the overall air mission for the evacuation, who was doing the most flying, or was it evenly split up?

MB: Oh that's hard to say. I think Air America did the most flying probably hour wise because the big plan of the Marines coming in six hours before any evacuation failed and the evacuation already started, and I flew out to the ship and got a hold of Marine General Carey who was in charge of the Marines and I says, 'Where are you guys? We need you! Help! We're being overrun!' and he says, 'My hands are tied. I have to get approval from the ambassador before we can come in and he hasn't give it to

us yet.' That was the type of thing we were battling with. I think it was three o'clock in the afternoon before they even got there. We had been flying for quite some time hauling people out before the military showed up, and then I think my last flight was…I don't know, maybe 11 o'clock at night and I started at four in the morning. They said, 'That's it. Shut down,' and I think Marines…and I believe the Air Force had some helicopters over there, too, off the ships, and they flew for maybe a few hours after that. They primarily pulled people off of the embassy and out of the airport.

SM: About how many Air America pilots were a part of that evacuation? Do you know?

MB: I can't think of the exact number, probably somewhere around 20, probably around that. Well, there's probably more than that if you're counting the airplanes and of course the airplanes all pretty much…they left fairly early in the day and then the helicopters just…the airplanes went…it was a one way trip for them.

SM: About how many planes left? Do you recall?

MB: Probably a dozen or so.

SM: What kind of aircraft were they, the one way planes?

MB: Well mostly C-46s, C-47s, Volpars, maybe a Caribou. They went in different directions. There was word that Thailand wouldn't allow them to land, but some of them went to Thailand. Others went down to Malaysia.

SM: Did you ever hear why the Thai government didn't want aircraft to land there, if for no other reason just to refuel and move on?

MB: Oh, I think it was just political concerns, and it was interesting; somebody wrote an article in the Air America Log here a couple issues ago, Adams had something to say about it. A couple of them landed in Takhli which is up north of Bangkok and some others landed in Bangkok itself, and some of them got held up for quite a while and others just parked and went downtown. So, it was kind of willy-nilly but I think for the most part it was strictly political considerations.

SM: If you were to guesstimate, again, about how many military aircraft eventually became involved in the evacuation, from what you saw?

MB: Hard to say, maybe 30 or 40. I really don't know because we were just so busy doing our thing. I remember having been out to the ship for a couple of visits and

meeting some of the people I thought I had a little better handle and they had a little better handle on things, but they didn't. As I was coming in on my last trip they're telling me, 'Oh what a great job you guys have done,' and this, that, and everything else, and I landed and shut down and security guards came over and, 'Put your hands up,' and I had weapons and things like that that I'd stashed. I figured if I got trapped there in Saigon that was probably going to be my last resort. I think I had a sawed off shot gun and a carb 15 and a grenade launcher. Actually, they'd given out weapons that morning by the…I think the airport compound, and I'd picked up two .9 millimeter Berettas. These are all brand new and they said, 'Here, take whatever you want.' So, I stuffed them all and got out to the ship and, 'Put your hands up,' and they took the big weapons and they threw them over the side which I thought was really bizarre, didn't make any sense. The pistols, they says, 'Well, we'll put these in the armory and keep them there for you.' Well I really didn't care to see another weapon as long as I lived, quite frankly, at that point in time. It didn't make any difference to me. They ushered me down into the hull of the ship and I was fortunately rescued by a Navy Lieutenant Commander who offered to share his room with me, so that was a little more pleasant. He had an interest in weapons, and I said, 'Well I'll tell you what, I don't care if I see another weapon again, but I've got two Beretta .9 millimeter pistols down in the armory and if you want them, they're yours.' I said, 'You know, I'll make you out a bill of sale or whatever you need,' and so we did that and he went down there and he was told that, 'Oh, we threw those over the side.' It was rather disappointing. We were essentially, the pilots I think, for the most part, treated just like refugees once we got aboard the ships and we were pretty much cut off from all information and intelligence and anything else like that until we got to the Philippines.

SM: Now when you were approached when you shut down your aircraft and were told to put your hands up, was this at gunpoint?

MB: Oh I don't know if they pointed their guns at me or not, but essentially they just wanted to frisk me and make sure that I didn't have any hidden weapons or anything like that. I don't know what they thought we were going to do, that we were going to commandeer the ship. It was all pretty bizarre.

SM: And the aircraft you were flying, was this a clearly marked Air America aircraft?

MB: Oh yeah, yeah.

SM: Now did other pilots land on the same ship with you?

MB: Oh yeah, yeah. I landed on the command ship, the Blueridge, because that's where I'd done my briefing and so forth previously and I knew a few people there.

SM: And were they treated the same way when they arrived pretty much?

MB: I think so, yeah, and the unfortunate part was they didn't have a lot of room, just had a little small deck in the back, and so they kept throwing the ships overboard. I wasn't going to let them throw mine over since I was sort of the last one coming there wasn't really any need for them to do so. But, that was just so bizarre because obviously they had space in the carriers and what have you that they could have salvaged these aircraft and that was just an outrageous waste.

SM: Do you know what the rationale was behind pitching those aircraft overboard?

MB: Probably a lack of information and understanding. I don't know, it escapes me. I would really like to get into the heads of some of those folks and find out just what their thinking was at that time.

SM: And do you know if that came down literally from the captain of the ships when that happened?

MB: I would have to think so. The captain's in charge. On the ship, he's the guy; he's the one that says, 'Do this,' or, 'Do that.'

SM: Were some of these aircraft that were getting tossed overboard, were these Air America as well?

MB: Oh yeah, oh yeah. In fact, I got this commander that I stayed with, he had a movie camera, so he took pictures of three or four or five ditchings and I got a copy of that and it was great teaching element for how not to and how to ditch helicopters. What they did initially the pilot would land and of course there was both Vietnamese and our guys and of course Vietnamese stole a couple of our helicopters right off the bat before our folks could even get out to the field. They weren't real adept and one of them sort of crashed into the side of the ship. The though was, 'Oh, that's one of those inept Air

America pilots,' but what they would do, they'd land on the ship and they'd give them a May West and they'd take the doors off and they'd say, 'Ditch it.' It was pretty interesting. There was three or four Vietnamese. I think they got one guy that he ditched probably half a dozen for him, and every which way you could think of. Then, one of our guys, Dave Kendall, he landed and of course the radios didn't work and they said, 'Well you can't fly that thing around without radios; ditch it!' So, Dave was out there trying to figure out how he was going to do it and he decided he'd go real low and slow and get it moving forward slowly and then jump out and it would fly off. Unfortunately, that upset the center of gravity, and as soon as he jumped out the helicopter started backing up and hit tail first and probably within a couple of feet of his head. He fortunately wasn't hurt, but that makes a pretty exciting picture.

SM: Was anybody injured during the ditching?

MB: I think one guy broke an arm and that was about it. It was pretty amazing.

SM: That's lucky.

MB: It's so bizarre because they had a boat running around to pick the guys up and of course those guys were at great risk from flying debris and everything else. When a helicopter hits the water, it just starts tearing itself apart, and pieces are flying all over. It was not a well thought out operation at all.

SM: And as you pointed out, there was an aircraft carrier in the vicinity with plenty of space for these aircraft?

MB: Should have been.

SM: When you finally settled down after all of this on board this ship on your way to the Philippines, what was going through your mind? Do you remember?

MB: It was just a very frustrating scenario and of course we were pretty much kept incommunicado. I didn't…other than we flew the aircraft off the ship when we got in the Philippines, I didn't fly for probably five or six years after that. Looking back on it, it was pretty much psychological. I was really kind of depressed about this terrible loss of lives and equipment and money and everything else over there that happened, I was unable to fly. It wasn't until I got involved in air ambulance operations that I had any interest at all in doing any more flying.

SM: Did you find that new work to be rewarding?

MB: Oh, very much so, and that's probably the only kind of flying that would have gotten me back in.

SM: Did you get a chance to talk to many other Air America pilots on the trip over, when you were again on board ship to the Philippines? Eventually did you guys get together and sit down and kind of hash things out?

MB: There wasn't a whole lot of opportunities. We were kind of spread about and we were pretty well restricted, you know, access on the ship. We were restricted to certain areas and we weren't all in the same area. I was up here with the commander and most of the guys were down in the hold someplace, so there wasn't a whole lot of interaction.

SM: Later on when you were able to meet up with some of your fellow Air America pilots, did you talk about this experience or did you just kind of avoid the subject?

MB: Oh, yeah, we talked about it. You know, pretty much everybody was frustrated by the whole thing was really the bottom line.

SM: Did everybody get out?

MB: Essentially, all of our people did. I mean, there were some obviously local Vietnamese, there was a few Americans left there. There was one agency guy that didn't get out, but amazingly probably 99% did, which I thought was truly remarkable.

SM: That agency person who did not make it up, is his name public knowledge?

MB: I think so. Yeah, I think so, and I can't remember. I think he eventually got out, but that's probably a story in itself.

SM: Yes, sir. What do you think was the most important thing you took away from that experience in Southeast Asia that was maybe important to you later in life?

MB: Don't depend on other people to do things for you. That was the toughest lesson. I hate to say it, but don't depend on the U.S. Government to look out for your interests. I hate to say that, too. I think we were looked upon as necessary evils, we were expendable, and I didn't really feel like there was an adequate appreciation for what they did over there. Some of these guys did some really remarkable things, great danger for themselves, and never were given recognition. Even today you'll see clips of a helicopter on a rooftop and it invariably will be referred to as a Marine Corps helicopter or a

helicopter. It's very rare that you'll even see, 'Oh, well this was an Air America helicopter.' There's never been that recognition.

SM: Do you think that things are changing in terms of the recognition that Air America deserves to receive?

MB: Oh I see some very small steps in that direction, even, I think with this upcoming reunion where the agency is sort of going to formally recognize Air America. Over the years, it's probably less of a bad word. I meet more and more people now that maybe have a little better appreciation whereas in the past the only thing that conjured up in people's minds of Air America was a bunch of bloodletting mercenaries.

SM: Of course that perception was not helped very much by that movie 'Air America.'

MB: No, not at all. Yeah, that was pretty sad.

SM: If you had it all to do over again, would you do anything different?

MB: Oh probably not. I don't have any regrets about what I did or how we did it. I might have done a few things a little different in manner but given the situation, timing, the lack of information and experience and all the rest of that, probably did as well as we could have done.

SM: Is there anything that we as a nation should take away from this experience, something that maybe we haven't yet learned from the experience in Southeast Asia?

MB: Don't underestimate the enemy, and don't politicize it. That, I think, was the biggest problem was that it was a political war run by the politicians, not by the military, and what ended up happening didn't need to happen.

SM: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

MB: Oh, I'm probably talked out right now. I need to get off here anyway.

SM: We'll end it here, then. This will end the interview with Marius Burke. Thank you very much, sir.