The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with John Hammett
Conducted by Jason Stuart
Transcribed by Emilie Meadors

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Jason Stuart: This is Jason Stuart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University conducting an Oral History Interview with Mr. John Hammett. Today is October 2, 2009; I am in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections library on the campus of Texas Tech and Mr. Hammett is joining me by phone from San Antonio, Texas. Is that correct, sir?

John Hammett: That's correct.

JS: Alright, if we can begin, if you could tell me a little bit of biographical information about yourself. First of all, when and where were you born?

JH: Well, I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: In 1921.

JS: Alright.

JH: I attended school there in Shreveport, and when I graduated from high school, I tried to get into the Air Force [US Army Air Corps at the time], but at that time you had to have two years of college. So having just graduated from high school I decided that I would take a couple of my friends and go to Canada and join the Royal Canadian Air Force.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, three of us got on a train and went up there, and we spent about, I guess two weeks every morning going down to the place and getting part of our physical. What happened was when we got up there, they put us into a home that was taking guys coming up there and joining the Air Force; they put them for a place to stay. So, every morning we'd go down and take part of our physical, and after about almost a little more than two weeks, we got up one morning and they handed each one of us an envelope. So, we opened them up; and I was the only one of the three that had passed my physical. So, I stayed, (Laughing) and the other two guys went back to Shreveport.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: So, then I went up into Montreal and went to Manning Depot Number One up there and started taking my training.

JS: Okay.

JH: And after about two or three weeks I was set up to the Gaspe [Gaspésie] Peninsula, and I asked the people on the train, I said, "Where is this Mount Jolly?" and they said, "You mean Mont-Joli."

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: I got off the train up there almost into the Atlantic Ocean; and that's where I started my training.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: That was, I guess I spent somewhere near two months up there, and it was kind of surprising because I had only seen snow once in my life and I got up there and people had their two-story houses, and the steps were coming out of the second story. I said, "What's that for?" and they said, "Well, when the snow really gets in, that's where you'll have to enter the house."

JS: Oh wow.

JH: So that kind of surprised me a little bit. I joined up with a bunch of guys up there, and I guess we spent the winter. Then went all the way out to the west coast and I started getting our flight training up there.

JS: Okay.

JH: Then I went back to the east coast and I finished up my flight training; and then they started letting me fly to England.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Well, what we were doing, we were just ferrying twin engine aircraft over to England, and then after we'd get over there then they'd fly us back. And then we'd get in another airplane and fly back to England. This was quite a deal because we didn't take any weapons; we didn't have anything but a radio. And they told us not to use the radio unless we had to; because if you start using the radio the Germans would pick it up and then they'd send fighters out there to greet you on the way back to England.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, we didn't think that was very good.

JS: Sure, right.

JH: So, I flew in England for several—I guess for almost a year and a half, and the only problem I had was during Dunkirk, while I was real involved in getting on the tail of a German aircraft, somebody way off in the way was shooting at somebody over there and missed them and hit me.

JS: Oh no.

JH: And so, I had to bail out over the English Channel, and then they came by and picked me up. And at that time, everybody that had a boat of any kind was going over to Dunkirk [France] to pick up the soldiers and get them out of the way because the Germans were pushing them back into the ocean.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I got picked up there, and I got back, and they said, "Well, here's a number." And I said, "What's the number for?" and they said, "Well, when the aircraft come back in, and they refuel and rearm, then you take one and go back again." So, I was lucky that I didn't have to go back that night, because they had pretty bad weather, so I just stayed where I was.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I was going back out to the west coast and I was doing some flying out there, and then they transferred me back to Mont-Joli again, which was the number nine bombing and gunnery school, and I was sent up there to teach.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, all of a sudden— one day I had leave to come back to Shreveport for the first time in a couple of years, — and they said, “Well, your leave’s been cancelled because America is now in the war, in December. So, this is the thirty-first of December when they started having problems over in Europe.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: They decided that they were going to send all the boys back that had gone up to Canada.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, a whole bunch of us decided we would transfer back, and this was in December when the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I got on a train with a whole bunch of guys, and we went back to the west coast. Got on another train there, after we had gone through the American physical, and we got through with that and we turned over to another train and got onto the one from Canada, where they would give us a pass to get back to Canada. So, we all got back on the train and went all the way down into California to start Air Force training there. Well, the problem there was the fact that when we got down in California, they said, “Well, you guys are going to have to learn to drill, and then you’re going to have to take Morse code.” We went into a classroom and we were sitting there, and they were giving us Morse code at six words a minute. Well, we had already passed our test in Canada for twenty words a minute.

JS: (Laughing) Right, yes sir.

JH: So, a bunch of us were sitting there playing tic-tac-toe while everybody else was practicing Morse code.

JS: Right.

JH: And then they sent us to another place down in California, and we started drilling and all this, and then one night they said, “Well, you’re going to have to learn to take your course.” And I said, “Well, what is it?” and they said, “You’re going to have to do guard duty.” And I said, “What’s that for?” and he said, “Well, everybody has to go take their guard duty.”

JS: Okay.

JH: So after about a week of that then one morning they said, “Well, as an Air Force cadet you’re going to have to learn to do mess training. And I said, “what’s that?” and they said, “Well, you got to go down and go in for a couple of weeks and learn to set tables and wash dishes and this sort of thing.” So, we had to do that for about a couple of weeks and then they sent us into—I see, I guess it was flight training again.

JS: Okay.

JH: Well, we got there— and of course most of us there had a couple of thousand hours of flight training— and we got there, and they said, “Well, you’re going to have to start all over again.” So, I had an instructor that only had about three hundred hours of flying time, and I had two thousand, so he was trying to teach me how to fly.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: Most of the guys— we were doing all kinds of things. We were doing things that the instructors had never done before; and they got mad. And then one day we all had to take a flight from Phoenix all the way out to the west coast. Well, we were supposed to go five minutes apart. Well, we went five minutes apart, but then we all joined up out on the desert together and flew to California. We flew a little bit low in places and they decided that maybe— they got the numbers off our airplanes. When we got back, they said, “Well, you’re going to have to learn to go take a new instructor, every day, and he’s going to use the same sheet. Anytime he can mark an “X” on one of the maneuvers that he gives you, once you get three of those, then you’re going to be eliminated.” So, we said, “Well how long will this take?” and they said, “Well, this is probably going to take you enough to get three Xs.” So, we all decided we’d see just how far we could go.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: Some of us went two and three weeks, every morning, until they got enough Xs to eliminate us. Well, that happened. And so, one morning I looked on the bulletin board and they said, “Anybody that has enough flight training to be at this point, we would like for you to volunteer for the liaison flight training.” And I said, “Well where is that?” and they said, “Well, you’re going to have to go back down to Texas and take a flight test.” So, I went back down to Texas and took a flight test; and they said, “Okay, you passed, so you go on up to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and learn to fly liaison flights.”

JS: Okay.

JH: So, we went up there, and this was learning how to fly low level, in between trees, and all this kind of stuff; how to land on roads and how to land and take off on roads. So, after we spent about two months of liaison flight training, we passed; and then we were made the staff sergeants, with an "L" wing.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, I went through that and then ended up going up on the east coast, got on board a ship and went to North Africa.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Well, I flew liaison there all through North Africa, and then we would send the units to go to Italy.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, we went to Italy and joined up with a unit in Naples, and we spent two and a half years flying liaison with different divisions, all the way up to the end of World War II.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: So, then I came back to Shreveport, Louisiana, and I finally got permission that I could get out of the military. Well, the problem is I had joined up with a general I had flown with in Italy, and he wanted me to fly with him. So, every morning we would fly some place; like we'd go up into Oklahoma. And we'd spend the night, and he'd join up with a friend of his, a girlfriend. And then when he got through with that then he'd meet me out at the airport, and I'd fly him back to Dallas. I flew him to New Orleans, and I flew him to Baton Rouge. Finally, I told him I was getting tired of this and I wanted to get out. So, then he gave me permission to leave, and I went back to Shreveport, Louisiana. And when I got there, I decided that I'd do what my father tried to get me to do when I went to Canada; was to go to college.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, I went out to college in Shreveport, and while I was there, I met a young lady, and after a couple of years of being engaged and what not, we were married.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, Betty and I have been married sixty-three years.

JS: Oh wow, yes sir.

JH: I went to law school at Tulane.

JS: Okay.

JH: And I started having some back problems, so I got eliminated there; and I went back to Shreveport and that's when Betty and I got married.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And then I started going to different flight schools all over the place because I stayed in the Reserve. And they sent me to Little Rock when I was flying up there, flying all these general officers all over the place, and they were in the National Guard.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And I was supposed to be training the National Guard.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, what happened there after a couple of years, I got orders to go to Korea. So, I ended up going to Korea, where I spent eighteen months during the fighting there, until it finally ended there in Korea.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And then I came home. And after a while I was back down in New Orleans again, and had joined at a reserve unit, and the first thing you know I got orders to go to Vietnam.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I joined up with the 44th Medical Brigade, which was the first medical brigade to go into combat.

JS: Okay.

JH: And we went to Vietnam, and I spent a year between 1966 and '67.

JS: Okay.

JH: When I got through in Vietnam I came home, and then I got out of the military.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Well, this lasted awhile, and the next thing you know I got orders to North Africa. So, I went to North Africa and I finished flying there, and I went to Italy and finished three years of flying up until the war was over with World War II.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Well, when I came back to Shreveport, I had to do something to earn a living, so I became a flight instructor.

JS: Okay.

JH: And I flew airplanes and talked to students in Shreveport until, I guess for about three years. Then after I finished all that, I got signed up again; and ended up going to Vietnam.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And I was the operations officer for the medical brigade that went to Vietnam.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And then I finally got out after that. I decided that I'd had enough military; so I had thirty-three years in the military and I retired from the military.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So that's where I am today.

JS: Alright, what did you do after retiring?

JH: Well, I became a flight instructor, and did that for I guess two or three years. Then I went back to college again, and I guess I had four or five different things I did. Finally, I decided that I would join the outfit in Atlanta and worked with the National Guard training them. Then that's when I got orders to go to Korea.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, then I went to Korea with the 25th Division, and I was with them for a year, and then I got orders to go down to Seoul and I took over a helicopter unit to do medical evac for the doctors.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I did that for eighteen months, and finally they said, "Well now you can go home." Because Korea was ending.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, then I went back to Shreveport.

JS: Okay.

JH: I worked there running the EMS for the state of Georgia, getting all the people that wanted to do medical work.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I got into the state of Georgia, and I got all these people that wanted to do Medevac. I had to give them a special type of ambulances and equipment, and then I started teaching paramedics.

JS: Okay.

JH: And I did that for twenty years.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And then it was this time that Betty and I decided that we were going to come back to San Antonio. All three of our children lived in Texas.

JS: Okay. Yes, sir.

JH: So, we sold our house in Atlanta and moved to San Antonio, and this is where I've been ever since.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: I retired from the military, and that's what I've been doing now.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And right now, about once a month, a bunch of us that were helicopter pilots in Vietnam go to lunch, cuss and discuss.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: Vietnam.

JS: Sure, yes sir.

JH: And so that's what we do.

JS: Alright, yes sir. Well, you mind if I ask you some more questions?

JH: Sure, go ahead.

JS: Well, backing up a little bit to when you initially joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, I wonder if you could talk just a little bit as far as what made you decide to join when you did, and why the Air Force?

JH: Well, the reason that I went up there was: I wanted to fly. So, when I finished high school, I tried to get in the Air Force, and they had at that time you had to have two years of college. And I only had high school.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I found out with high school I could go to Canada, so I got some of my buddies and we got on the train and went to Canada.

JS: Okay.

JH: And that's where I through all my training up there and flew in England.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And then we came back, and I decided I'd get out. And that's when I went to college.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And that's where I met my wife, and we were married.

JS: Alright, yes sir.

JH: So, then I did all this twenty year of teaching paramedics, and getting ambulances equipped, and licensed, in the state of Georgia.

JS: Okay.

JH: And so, we've been right here in San Antonio because I've gotten three children still here in Texas. My daughter just retired in Austin, and she ran the EMS in Austin, for thirty years and then she retired.

JS: Oh wow, yes sir.

JH: And then my son is a contractor in Austin, and then my young son who's forty-five, he's out in West Texas, and his job out there is farrier. In fact, he's still doing it. He's fixing horseshoes out there.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: My daughter has retired, and she just built a home down in the coast.

JS: Okay.

JH: My oldest son is rebuilding things up in Austin.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: So, I'm retired and just sitting here and enjoying it.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: I've had a couple heart attacks so I had to give up flying.

JS: I'm sorry to hear that.

JH: So, what questions do you have?

JS: I wanted to ask you a few more questions about World War II if you don't mind.

JH: Okay.

JS: Well first of all, what type of planes were you flying?

JH: Well, I was flying light aircraft.

JS: Okay.

JH: Because I was a liaison pilot.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: And light aircraft directing artillery fire on the Germans.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, I was in division artillery outfit.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: I flew all the way up Italy, directing artillery fire on the Germans as they quit and decided to go back to Europe.

JS: Yes sir, alright.

JH: Can you speak a little bit louder.

JS: Sure, sure yes sir.

JH: Okay.

JS: I wanted to ask you, just if you could talk a little bit about your impressions of the Germans, and their, I guess, their performance as an enemy. If you could talk a little about your impressions of the Germans?

JH: Well, I'll tell you what, when I was flying in England, I flew against the German Luftwaffe.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: And they were excellent pilots. They took the young men when they were about fourteen or fifteen, and they taught them how to fly. And then when they got about eighteen, then they put them in the Luftwaffe, and they started flying against the British and they were excellent pilots. They made it kind of tough on us a lot of times because when we first got to flying against them, we were right out of flight school.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And they had been flying for a number of years, so they were excellent pilots and they made it pretty tough on us. Now, a lot of times when I got back to England— I had a flight of five aircraft, and four of them were pilots from Poland, most of them were from Poland. These guys— when the Germans took over Poland, these guys were pilots and they made it back to England. So, when they got back then they joined the RAF (Royal Air Force) and then we flew against the Germans. The only problem with the Polish people: they hated the Germans with a purple passion. When we'd go out on a flight of four or five aircraft— and we were told not to engage, but to strafe trains, convoys and that sort of thing. Well, when we were flying along and all of a sudden, we see a German over here by himself flying around, and I'd tell the Polish guys, "We're not to engage."

JS: Right.

JH: Well, the first thing you know you'd look around and one of them had taken off and headed for this German. What they didn't realize was that the Germans would send out one man to get you to go and join them, and then, when you'd look around, you'd find fifteen or twenty of them coming out of the sun, or out of the clouds, and they'd try to get you.

JS: Right.

JH: So, I tried to tell these guys, "Leave them alone until we're told to engage." Well, they wouldn't, but they'd do what they wanted to do.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Most of the time they'd usually get shot down; but luckily would parachute out and make it back. And the first thing you know, a month later, you'd run into them and they had made it through France and had gotten back to England; so, we had to do it all over again.

JS: Right.

JH: Okay, so I went off flying liaison with light aircraft like Cubs and Taylorcraft, and that sort of thing. And I flew that all the way through Italy until World War II, and then I came home. And that's when I became a flight instructor. I had to have something to do to earn a living.

JS: Sure, yes sir. Well, I wanted to ask you, I know you mentioned Dunkirk, and being shot down. You said that that was by friendly fire there?

JH: No, that was the Germans.

JS: Oh, okay. Yes sir.

JH: This guy was shooting at somebody. My wingman said, "Why is everybody shooting at us if there's somebody way the heck over there and he missed and hit you?" Well, what happened was that he hit my oil line and I had to bail out. So, then they came by in speedboats and picked us up, one of the pilots— one at a time. I had to laugh about that because they came by about forty knots and threw a loop over your arm, that you'd hold up, and when they get that loop around your arm, they'd fireball this boat and turn, and when it did it would sink, and you'd slide right off the deck onto the back of the boat. And then they'd take you down in between two diesels running wide open and here's a doctor down there putting the stethoscope up to your wet flight suit, and giving you the "okay sign," "You're alright." And he couldn't hear it with that diesel running; he couldn't hear his stethoscope at all.

JS: Right.

JH: Because then they'd take us back over to the white sand, and the cliffs, and that's when you'd get your ticket; and get in the next aircraft that's fueled and armed and you'd go back. The first night I went back I didn't go back because it was getting stormy anyway, so I got a good night's sleep for a change.

JS: Right. So, after being shot down, then the very next day you were right back up there again?

JH: Yeah.

JS: Yes, sir. Alright, wow.

JH: Well, they just gave me a number; so, when your number came up, you'd go back.

JS: Right, yes sir. Another thing I wanted to ask you, were there any other memorable moments like that, that you remember that you could possibly talk about?

JH: Well, I guess when we got to Rome.

JS: Okay.

JH: A friend of mine that was a pilot with me, we went out one day to find out what was happening to the Germans. Were they moving north out of Rome? So, we were flying around over Rome, and on top of one of the tall buildings we decided to fly a little low and take a look; and they were having a party. They were waving at us as we went by, so we found us a nice big boulevard to land on.

JS: Okay.

JH: And then we went over and joined up with this party for about two or three hours, and then we had to get in our planes and get home before it was dark because they were beginning to wonder where in the heck we were. So, we had quite a time there, but then I flew a general up to—what the heck was it? Up on the coast in a light aircraft that had floats, so we could land, and get up on the beach, and get the general where he wanted to go. When he'd come back, he'd get in and I'd fly him back down to Rome.

JS: Okay.

JH: But I didn't mind that too much because when I had the general in the airplane going up on the coast, I always had three or four fighters aircraft up above me to protect me.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: That was always very nice.

JS: Sure.

JH: One night and one day in North Africa, I woke up one morning and I kept hearing this noise. So, I can't get out of this house that we're living in, and I looked down on the little airfield that we had, and they had the tail of the aircraft sitting up on a fifty-five-gallon drum and they had tied bazookas on the wings of this Cub. I said, "What are you doing?" and they said, "Well, we fixed it so you can go and hunt German tanks. When you find them, you can pull these strings with your observer sitting in the back and you can fire these bazookas at your tanks." Well, still young, and like an idiot, I let them do this, and then my observer and I went out and started flying up and down these big gullies until we found us a couple of tanks in a little orchard, and we lined up and went zinging in, and he pulled the strings, and when he did these bazookas went everywhere but where they were supposed to go.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: And so, the next thing we had to do was duck back into a gully to keep from getting hit while the Germans are shooting at tanks.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: So that was another thing that I should never have done, but I did.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: I flew a lot of places, went to a lot of different little airfields, and one thing I did up in the Po Valley—

JS: Okay.

JH: One day I was told to fly up to the Brenner Pass, and keep going until I was got into Austria, and I was to find this prisoner of war camp and land. And the colonel that was running the place had decided that the Americans were coming, and he decided he would give up. So, I flew up into Brenner Pass and before I got into Austria I was out of fuel. Well, I had carried two-five-gallon cans to fill up my tank.

JS: Right.

JH: So, I landed on the road in the middle of Germany, filled up the tank, cranked up the airplane again, and flew on north until I found this prisoner of war camp. We landed, and the colonel surrendered. The guys in the camp thought we were spies because we went into the camp and I told them that they had surrendered to the Americans and in a few weeks the Americans are going to be there, and they could go home. They thought it was a trick, but of course it wasn't. After a couple of days there then the colonel got us some fuel from a German tank that used aviation fuel, and it filled up my tank, filled up my tank, filled up my five-gallon cans and I flew back to Italy flying back through the Brenner Pass. En-route I had to land again and refuel the tanks and get back into my units in Italy, but that was the only thing that really—I really shouldn't have done that either.

JS: (Laughing) Yes sir.

JH: Well, I got back alright, and that was okay. What else have you got?

JS: Let's see, flying in Italy, did you ever have to face the Italians, too or just the Germans?

JH: The only time I faced the Italians was after I had flown up and gotten that surrender on the people that had been captured. I was told, when I was back in Italy, to fly back to Rome. I was supposed to get a pair of Italian Wings presented. So, I flew back

to Rome and I had a big dinner and had a bunch of drinks down there like they usually did, and they presented me a pair of German wings— or Italian wings, for getting these people surrendered in the prisoner of war camp.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, about two days later after I finally got enough to where I could get back in the airplane, I flew to northern Italy, and was there until they surrendered.

JS: Yes, sir. I was also wondering if you could talk a little bit about the tactics you used for, I guess for directing artillery and if you could talk a little bit about how that worked.

JH: Well, I had an observer.

JS: Okay.

JH: And he used his binoculars, and radio. We would fly until we would find an artillery piece firing, or some spot that we could locate. We'd get that location, call artillery back and get it and direct artillery fire onto the Germans. Of course, we would even direct onto things like machine guns that were shooting on the Americans, or whatever. We flew low where we could take binoculars and find out things that were going on the ground, so we could get the location, and direct artillery fire on the Germans.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And that's what we did. We did that day, after day, after day, after day. We would go up early in the morning, and then come back at noon, eat again, refuel, and go back and continue to look for things to drop artillery on. We would find some of the American tanks that were being shot at by Germans, and we'd locate the anti-tank guns that were shooting at the American tanks, and we'd direct artillery fire on them so that the American tanks could move on forward.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: That happened every day that you would find somebody. Either a machine gun, or artillery fire, or even when they would drop mortars on Americans. So, we'd find where Germans were dropping their mortars and we would fire on them to stop them. So, we worked on mortars, we worked on machine guns, we worked on artillery fire. So,

anything that we saw, where they were using something against us, then we'd direct our artillery fire on it.

JS: Would you ever have any downtime or any off days or were you pretty much flying every single day?

JH: Well, the only time that we'd fly that we weren't over the front—after we would get out and the lines settled— we would fly back behind our lines, and we'd find a farmer that had a corn field, or house that had a bunch of things around it. We'd land on the road and try to bargain with them, with some coffee, to get—we got one place that had a whole bunch of hutches.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, we landed there, and we bargained with him, and I guess we bought them and got about ten or twelve real nice fat little bunnies; so, we could go back and have some food for a change.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, we would barter with them with food, or we'd go back and go back into Florence and land in the racetrack there that we established in an airfield. And then we'd go in, and we were always taking a lot of coffee, and we'd go in and find out how many bottles of Cognac you could get for it. And then we'd fly it back up to our unit. I had a dog that I had captured, after they had stolen a bunch of my uniforms out of our tent one morning and I found this German villa, and this guy spoke great English, so we talked to him all day and stayed at his villa that day and he gave me a little dog and I called him "Snafu," which is a situation all screwed up. I took that little dog back and raised him on triple-sec and vermouth.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: If he couldn't go with me every time I took off, when I'd get back, I had to go back to my tent and find everything pulled out of the tent because he got mad, he wouldn't go with me.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: I had to give him coffee every morning because he needed it real bad.

JS: (laughing)

JH: One day I guess he saved my neck. We were sitting there having breakfast, sitting in the ditch on a bank, and all of a sudden, the dog started barking and ran into the ditch. About that time, we heard this whistle, and that was when the 88's (German anti-tank guns) was shooting at us. You could hear them coming in and we'd all dive down in the ditch with the dog for a place to stay without getting hit.

JS: Sure.

JH: One day the dog was in the airplane and he was sitting in the back on top of the radio, and he started barking and raising cane; and I looked around and we found two German fighters that were coming towards us. So, we headed for the deck real fast, and he got killed in the airplane. A 40 mm went through the radio and right through him and out the top and it killed him. I hated losing him because I had him for about two years.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: It was kind of bad not to have Snafu around.

JS: Sure.

JH: Like he did with everyday.

JS: Right sure, yes sir. Well, you mentioned landing near where the Italian civilians were, and bargaining with them, and things like that.

JH: Yeah.

JS: I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the relationship with them. Were they fairly friendly, or?

JH: Oh yeah.

JS: Okay.

JH: Anytime that the troops had gone through, and they were back in their farms, and guns were north of them, when you'd land—and particularly if you had things that you could swap with them; like we would take a bunch of little cans of C-rations and we'd trade that, or if we didn't have any coffee. Of course, they all wanted coffee.

JS: Right.

JH: And they would trade mostly anything including their wives if you had enough coffee.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: But they were very friendly, and in fact, I sent a bunch of pictures home where I had found some young ladies that let me have some pictures that I could send to my mother. When I got back after World War II I found out my mother had taken all these pictures and had this album, “Bill’s girl in Rome”, “Bill’s girl in Venice.”

JS: (laughing)

JH: And I still got those (both laughing).

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: The Italians were very friendly, even when we would take four days to go back to Rome and stay in one of the hotels down there. We found them to be very friendly. Like my friend said, “Even the young girls.”

JS: Another question I wanted to ask you, I know you talked earlier about Dunkirk and being shot down there, but were there ever any other times whenever your plane was damaged, or anything like that?

JH: Well, I had an observation plane that I had a wheel blown off of, so I had to come back and make a one-wheel landing and when airplane that got to where I couldn’t keep the wings leveled, it ground looped and I had to stand up on my nose and flipped it over on the back. These are things that happened on the line. I had a lot of flack that hit my plane. It made it pretty difficult sometimes when they took a wheel off of it.

JS: Sure.

JH: You had to make a one-wheel landing and keep that wing up as long as you could before it hit; and then you’d have to flip. Like I say, this happened a lot of times. I don’t know how many times we had an aircraft punch holes all in the airplane, and the ones we were flying were fabric. So, when the aircraft would burst out when they were shooting at you, there wasn’t a place to duck because all you had was fabric.

JS: Well, where were you when the war in Europe came to an end?

JH: I was almost up in the Alps; I was in the Po Valley. From there, we went all the way back down to Rome to get on the ships to come home.

JS: Okay, how long after the cease fire, and when the war came to an end, did you get to go home? How long was it before you got to go home?

JH: Oh, we were probably six months.

JS: Six months, okay.

JH: Yeah, I did a lot of flying because the Air Force was short on some pilots so every now and then when we were at an airfield, they would want some co-pilots, and these were on DC3's where they were having to ferry people back to Rome.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, we would act as copilots on the twin engines.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Some of us had twin engine training, and some of us didn't.

JS: Had you had any twin engine training at that point?

JH: No, the only training that I had was when we flown twin engines, Lockheed Hudsons, over to England. The funny thing was that America had these airplanes, but they had to get them to Canada to fly over to England. So, we would land these Lockheed Hudson's on the freeway and taxi right up to the Canadian line. And then they would throw a rope over and we'd tie on and tow it over into Canada. That way, America was not sending aircraft to England.

JS: (laughing) Right.

JH: So, we had that going on. But the funny thing was when we were flying over, we had a lot of civilian pilots that were flying these aircraft to England.

JS: Okay.

JH: Including a lot of women pilots. The only trouble was that we were still in the Air Force, in the RCAF (Royal Canadian Air Force). I was getting a real top salary. I guess I was getting something like seventy dollars a month; and these women that were flying these aircraft, the same as we, were getting five hundred dollars a trip.

JS: Oh wow (both laughing).

JH: That made it kind of tough for awhile.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And I still have—when I left home, my uncle gave me a silver dollar, 1921.

JS: Okay.

JH: He said, "I want you to save this as your good luck piece." I still have it.

JS: Oh wow, yes sir. Now, had you had any relatives that had served in the military prior to you?

JH: Well, I had some at the same time as I did. My brother flew in Dallas until he finished his training, and then he was flown into South America. And then he flew an aircraft all the way over to, lets see, I guess he flew over to— what he wanted to do was to get into Africa so he could fly and get over into China, and he was flying the "hump." When Bob came back, and I came back, Bob was in the construction business, but he also flew student aircraft like I did.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: So, we flew the same route out of the same airfield. I almost joined up with him in Africa. My mother had written me and said he was flying over. So, I called airfields all over the place to find where he was coming in, but when I finally got down there and went into operations and asked about it, the said, "Well you just missed him two hours ago." So, he went into China, and he flew the hump, and he got shot down in Burma, and the natives saved him and got him back to the Americans because they knew they would be getting bags of salt, bags of sugar, coffee, and these things for bringing him in.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: So, he was telling me that when they were taking him back, that he was having trouble eating, because they were shooting monkeys out of the trees, and once they cut the tail off of them, when they cook them, they'd look like a little baby. He said (laughing) it was kind of hard to eat.

JS: I imagine so, yes sir. Well, one more question about when you were in the Royal Canadian Air Force and flying those planes over to England. I know you mentioned that you could not use the radios because they were afraid that it would attract the Germans. Was there ever any contact with the Germans? Did you ever come into contact with them during these trips?

JH: Yeah, we did, but we were very lucky, and a lot of times there were a lot of clouds around. If you spot these people then you could hop in the clouds some place and get lost.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: The thing was kind of tough because as we would get into England a lot of times we would come into very bad weather. And if you would know about fogs in England.

JS: I've heard.

JH: It's tough to find airfields when you're looking for one.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: There was one field that we landed on where they had—we called them blow torches. What they had were pipes that lined the runway. When it was so bad that you couldn't see the airfield to land on, they would fire up these pipes with these blow torches sending this flame way up in the air and burn the fog off. You could fly around, and you could see that as we called them, "the torches" glowing in the fog and you could spot the airfield that way. But then it was kind of tough because everybody was short on fuel and you couldn't have these things burning on long periods of time because you use up so much fuel.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: A lot of things came into anytime anything happened.

JS: Sure, yes sir.

JH: This field I was telling you about, they had one that was an auxiliary field and they had painted on the runways and all the runways to make it look like an orchard. So, if you were flying directly over, you'd look down and you'd swear that you were flying over an orchard.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And that became really noticed and we'd always tell the new pilots that if you're looking for a place to land, try Big Orchard.

JS: Was the blitz going on at the time that you were doing this?

JH: Oh yes, yes. I made one trip into London with the young lady that I had met that had helped me get back to France— or from France, because she was in a radio station and she had directed me, so I finally located her after we got back on the ground and we went into London one night, and we ended up in the subway spending the night leaning up against a brick wall down in the subway, where we'd have a safe spot while the blitz was going on.

JS: Alright, getting back to the end of the war and talking about that again, I'm sorry, I know I'm jumping around here a little bit, but getting back to the end of the war, in that time when you were in Europe, those last six months, I guess at the end of the war was there a big celebration at the end of the war once the Germans surrendered?

JH: Well, yeah, and that was usually done at one airfield or one artillery unit or the other, wherever we happened to be when it happened. We made sure that when we flew back from our little airfield from up in the valley, that we went back to Florence or some place where we could load up our little airplanes and get back with the goodies. But everybody, if they didn't have airplanes, they'd go back to the nearest city and they'd take jeeps, and two and a half ton trucks, or whatever, and take all the stuff they could and trade and load up the ships and equipment and take it back with all the stuff on there that they needed. One thing in England, we had a bartender. He would give you fifty dollars and he would match it up with another fifty. So, if your buddy got shot down and didn't come back, then you could get one hundred dollars in cash to buy drinks for the rest of the people. I had that happen a couple of times, but the funny thing was a lot of them—usually if you landed in France, particularly if you had a USA on your shoulder, which we all did, the French would try to get us back to England. So, they would hide you and take care of you. If you were hurt, they'd take care of you that way, too. It made it kind of tough sometimes. I remember one day we were with a couple of guys, and one of them had gotten hurt pretty bad, and so the French had put him in a bedroom, and they had a girl that dressed up like a nurse to take care of him; so if the Germans came up, she would say she was from the hospital and she was there to take care of this patient who had been in an automobile wreck. They would take care of you just in everyway possible. In fact, I don't think we found one French family that didn't try to help us. Sometimes if you happened to be on a farm, they'd put you in their clothes and put you to work out there with a rake or a hoe or whatever. You continued to do that even when the Germans would come by looking for them. So, you had to do a lot of things. I guess one of the things that happened after our captain got back, I was taking my son's bicycle to the shop to get it fixed and I still had my US uniforms on, and this man that is at the shop told me, he said, "Usually I'd let you go back into the back and pick up your bike." But he said, "My father's back there and the British shot the train up that he was an engineer on, and

he's still pretty bitter." So, he said, "The best thing to do is let me go get your bike and I'll bring it up front." (Both laughing) so that thing had a little (unintelligible) even after the war. But a lot of the things we did in England was shoot up trains off the tracks. And if you had like a Spitfire or a Hurricane— a Hurricane had twenty millimeters on it, and not 30 calibers like the Spitfire— but with a twenty millimeter, if you had enough of them, you could take a train right off the track, if it was moving fast. You'd just go up there and shoot it and take it right off the track. So, I kind of liked the Hurricane because it had big guns.

JS: Sure, right. Did you fly a Hurricane any?

JH: Yeah.

JS: Okay.

JH: Well, we flew both Hurricanes and Spits.

JS: Okay.

JH: In fact, I was in college going to class one night and after it was over I was talking to the instructor and he was telling me that he had flown in the RAF, and that what the aircraft he had flown, and he asked me, he said, "Which one of the Spits did you fly?" and I said, "Well, I flew Mark I through Mark V." And he said, "Oh, you were over there quite a while."

JS: Right.

JH: I said, "Yeah, I'm afraid so."

JS: Did you spend any time in France or just flying over France?

JH: I just flew over France.

JS: Okay, yes sir.

JH: One day I flew over Paris and I didn't take any guns, I had cameras that they put in the nose of the plane. They wanted me to take pictures all the way down to the (unintelligible) because they wanted me to get pictures of the German troops that were in Paris. The thing was that when you came back and you took all the pictures you could tell what German troops were in Paris by the uniforms they'd wear, and the patches on their sleeves. So that way the Americans would say, "Well, the Germans have such and such or troops in this area and know that they were bringing them forward."

JS: Well, are there any other memories from World War II that stick out before I should move on?

JS: Well, like I was telling you, I used to fly a Cub with floats up to Anzio.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: And that's when I applied fly the general up, and land and taxi up on the beach with a float. And then back in Italy, the general was staying at a big villa, and they had what we called a "swimming pool." It was a little water fall that went into this pond, and it was long enough that I could get the float plane in and out of it, so I could pick up the general and bring him back, and land him on the water with floats.

JS: Well, what do you remember? I know this wasn't in your theater of the war, it was in the Pacific, but what do you remember about the bombing of Hiroshima and the use of the atomic bomb? What do you remember about that and what did you think of that?

JH: Well, the only thing I remember was in the *Stars and Stripes*. They had an article in there about it, and that was the only time—well, we did get some stuff on radios, but a lot of times we'd be up flying when they would be putting it on the civilian radios, so we didn't get that much news. We were real excited about that, and we were wondering if this was going to happen in Europe as well as in Japan.

JS: Well, anything else concerning World War II?

JH: Oh boy.

JS: I know that's a broad question.

JH: Yes, it is. (Laughing) You remember that I'm eighty-eight, and when I tried to remember back that far, it gets a long way.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Yeah, in fact when I was at lunch the other day with my buddies, when I walked in one of them says, "Well, here comes the old man." Since I'm the oldest one they call me the old man.

JS: Now, those other helicopter pilots that you know, had any of them served in World War II or Korea as well?

JH: Very few of them.

JS: Okay.

JH: In fact, when I left Italy— I don't mean Italy. When I left to go home from Korea, a lot of these guys had just finished helicopter training, and when I came home at the ending, they came home to start flying. So, most of them—well, there was one. Joe was in the Navy during World War II, and he got into flying helicopters after the war was over. So, he's the only one that I know of that flew during World War II.

JS: Right, yes sir. Well, at what point in your military career did you make the switch to helicopters and get that training?

JH: I was flying fixed wing in Little Rock, and helped with the National Guard, and I was sent up there as an advisor. I was sent to helicopter school from Little Rock just before they sent me to go to helicopter school at (unintelligible). When I went over to the 25th Division— I had a couple helicopters in the 25th and I was flying them, so they sent me back to MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital), and there was nothing there but helicopters. I had a real bad thing that happened right after I got to the MASH. I was sent up to pick up two patients; and on this little H-13 you had them stuck on the outside litters. When I got back, I helped carry them into the MASH, and the doctor came out and started chewing me out. He said, "You brought me two dead patients."

JS: Oh no.

JH: And I said, "Well, they put them on there at the aid station, and I just brought them back here." He said, "Yeah, but you didn't look at them." He said, "They all died en-route and you should have been able to have done a trache on them." And I said, "A what?" and he said, "You could have done a trache." And I said, "What the hell is that?" and he said, "That was a tracheotomy." He said, "You could put a tube in their throat until they could breathe, and they'd still be alive when they got here." So that was a real shocker because I didn't know what the heck—I was doing medical evacuation and I didn't know what to do with them. So, then I learned to do a trache on those two patients, and then the doctor gave me some tracheotomies to put in the helicopter. He said, "Now, when they start turning blue, you go over there and give them a trache." (Laughing) So, I guess you learn as you go.

JS: Did you receive any type of medical training then?

JH: After Korea I went back to Fort Sam [Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, TX] and I went through the advanced course at Fort Sam. And then as soon as I finished that I

started getting all these new pilots just coming out of flight school. And so, I would form up a unit, and after about a month or two of training them, then I would send them, or get them sent, overseas some place, and I'd get new pilots from Fort Rucker and then form them up into a unit, teach them how to do these missions, send them. For awhile every three months I was in a different unit, and I looked like all I could do was just transfer from one unit to another, but the funny thing is that the group that I'm in now for lunch, they're about six of them in there that came to me, right out of flight school, there at Fort Sam for training, and then shipped them out. Now, they've all been back to Vietnam and they all remember me as their CO (Commanding Officer) (both laughing).

JS: Well, before we get any further into that, I wanted to ask you, after World War II, do you remember the beginnings of the Cold War, and if so, could you tell me a little bit about your thoughts on that?

JH: Oh, you mean the Cold War when they had the wall in Germany?

JS: Right, yes, the beginnings of the problems with the Russians and the Communists.

JH: Well, I had a medical battalion, and I was in Germany.

JS: Okay.

JH: While the Cold War was going on I had to take my battalion up to the Americans that were on the wall, and make sure they were getting the proper treatment. I worked right against the wall, and the fact that we were sitting in observations right at the wall and looking across the wall at the Germans that were watching us. So, I was pretty much involved in the Cold War.

JS: Okay, yes sir. Well, we're coming up on an hour and a half here. Would you like to go ahead and take a break for now or would you like to continue?

JH: No, that's fine.

JS: Okay, well one thing that we haven't talked too much about that I'd like to talk about. I guess I'm sort of jumping around here a little bit, but if you could talk about your experiences in Korea. You had your helicopter pilot training. Was this just before Korea?

JH: When I left the 25th Division I went back to MASH Hospital and I took over the four helicopter units that were stationed there, and we did medical evac to the front

lines and this included both the Turks, the Americans, and anybody else that was on the American side. Anybody that needed a patient sent back to the MASH, we'd fly up, pick them up, and bring them back to the MASH.

JS: Okay.

JH: Now, the MASH that I was in we had the only neurosurgeon in the country. And I got to know him real well because I used to sit up on a step ladder, with his cameras, and take pictures while he was doing is surgery. And when I came back here and I went to the advanced course, he was teaching part of the advanced course, so I got to know him real well. One night I had slipped a disk using a vacuum cleaner, and I had to go up to the hospital and I ran into him. A couple nights before I had gotten up at two o'clock in the morning and picked up a couple patients on the coast and brought them up to the neurosurgeon, and I had to get him out of bed to come get these patients. And so, when I had to hobble up and down the hall to go to see him that morning, he saw me coming; and he says, "Oh, I've been waiting to get you. Now I'm going to get you good." And his son is now a neurosurgeon here in San Antonio.

JS: So, before you began flying helicopters for the MASH unit, before that you were with the 25th Infantry Division in Korea?

JH: Yeah.

JS: Okay, well let me ask you a little bit about that if you don't mind then.

JH: Sure.

JS: First of all, when did you first receive your orders to go to Korea?

JH: Oh, now you have to ask me. The only thing I could remember I was in Little Rock, and I got orders to go to Korea, and I had to take my wife and my young son to Shreveport and get them a place before I was sent to San Marcos to go to helicopter school.

JS: Well, so after receiving your initial orders then you were sent to San Marcos at that point?

JH: I went to San Marcos, and I went to helicopter flight school, but it was Air Force.

JS: Okay.

JH: And they only gave me enough training for me to get the thing off the ground and get it back on. And once I finished there, then I got orders to go to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

JS: Okay.

JH: And I spent two months there getting helicopter school, and learning to fly a helicopter, and landed any place you wanted to land. I had to fly, and land, up on the mountains at Fort Sill with the instructor, and I'd go and put one skid on a rock sticking out of the mountain; and he would get off and stand on the rock a minute, and then he'd get back on and say, "Alright, let's go find another one." So, this was teaching us how to get to where—like I had to get on that rock so that we could get a patient loaded.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: And then take him back to the MASH. So, all the work that we did on landings and takeoffs— and when I was at the MASH, they used to call me "Captain Midnight."

JS: Okay.

JH: Because I did most of the night flying because the other pilots that I had were not really long-time pilots. So, I did most of the bad work, on bad weather, whether it was snowing, or whether it was pouring down rain, or fog, or what.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: And so, I did most of the night flying so that's why they call me Captain Midnight.

JS: Okay.

JH: Oh, and by the way; when I got back here to Fort Sam, I'd been here about oh, two or three weeks and I went into headquarters one day and they said, "Major, you've got a letter." So, I went over to the desk and he handed me a letter and it was addressed to Captain Midnight, Fort Sam Houston. So, I got mail in. And it was from a guy that I had picked up one night in bad weather and had brought him back to the MASH, and they had to amputate one hand. Oh, and he was trying to get me and the nurse to write a letter to his fiancé that he no longer loved her because he had lost his hand, and that he didn't want to marry her. So, we talked him into writing a letter left-handed.

JS: Right.

JH: Which he did, and this time he was typing it up, and sent me the letter at Fort Sam because he had married this girl when he got back. So, a lot of things went on at the MASH that didn't go on at other places. We had the Royal Red lancers; this is an organization that all the doctors and the (unintelligible) and the pilots. We always had drinks after night after we had dinner, and these two doctors we had were nuts. They were like the one that was at the MASH hospital on TV.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: One night the nurses were in this tent; and they nailed the doors shut on both ends of the tent, right after they threw red smoke grenades in the tent. Of course, everybody knew who did it, but nobody saw him do it. Another thing, the same doctors, they took a whole bunch of eggs and put them out in the field out by the hollow, out by the heliport, where it was about one hundred and ten degrees, and they left them out there for about two weeks. And then one night they brought them in, and then they hit the siren for the air raid; so, everybody would run out and jump in their fox holes. Well, before that, they had put a bunch of rotten eggs in all the nurses' fox holes. So, they all jumped in there into those rotten eggs. So, we had a bunch of nuts going at the MASH.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: Yeah, you had to know these two doctors to get to know what really went on at the MASH. I got five days leave to go to Tokyo, and when I went down to get on the airplane, who did I get on there with but those two doctors (both laughing). So, we had a ball when we got down to Tokyo.

JS: Well, any other memorable moments from this time from the MASH unit that sticks out in your mind?

JH: Well, one day while I was there, I found this real pretty little waterfall, and a nice little pond and it was back in the mountains.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: And I didn't see any people close by. So, I was telling this to a couple of the nurses one night; and this chief nurse goes, "Why don't you take a couple of my girls and drop them off out there in the morning, and then pick them up in the afternoon so they can bathe and sunbathe and not be disturbed?" So, I started doing that, and I had a group

(unintelligible) and then the next afternoon I'd take two more and the next day two more. I had a real service going there back and forth. The nurses really needed it. They were hard working people, and they did long hours.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, we all tried to help them the best we could.

JS: Well, what was a typical day like for you in this unit? What kind of things would you be doing on a typical day?

JH: Well, a typical day I made as many as eight or ten flights to different aid stations to pick people up. One day I went up to pick up a couple of patients and the doctor came out of the aid station and he said, "You got to go out here and pick up a pilot." And I said, "Where?" and he said, "Right out there in no man's land. He bailed out, and he landed halfway between the Chinese and us. He's afraid to move because he's in a mine field." I said, "What am I supposed to do?" he said, "You take the helicopter out there and pick him up." So, I got a hold of the artillery and I had them drop a bunch of smoke on the Chinese, so that I could get out there without getting shot. So, I went out and picked him up and then brought him back. Things like that happened all the time.

JS: The entire time in Korea were you flying helicopters the whole time, or did you fly—?

JH: I had a couple of fixed wing L-19s and I used to put a litter in the back of one of them. I took the back seat out and put a litter in because I had a distance to go, and I couldn't do it without refueling the helicopter. So, I put a patient in there and fly the L-19 back and take a patient to a specialized hospital, but I did that quite a bit. I had a little landing strip right across from the MASH hospital where I kept my fixed wing.

JS: Okay, alright.

JH: Well, is that about it?

JS: Yeah, I guess for Korea. I'd still like to talk to you about Vietnam, but before we get to Vietnam if you'd like, we can go ahead and take a break for today and then we can do Vietnam another time?

JH: Yeah, why don't we do that?

JS: Okay, I'll go ahead and stop the recording now.

John Hammett: I was the assistant operations officer for Fort Sam Houston.

Jason Stuart: Ummhmm.

JH: And then all of a sudden, I got moved over to the 44th Medical Brigade and I had to form it up here at Fort Sam and take it to Vietnam; and this was the first medical brigade to ever go into combat. In '66 I took it to Vietnam, and I was the operations officer there, and I was the only one in the brigade that got awards. I was also flying medical evacuation helicopters; and I flew over seventy-five of those while I was there as the operations officer. And we had a brigadier general that took over the brigade when it got to Vietnam, and I flew him every place he went. Cause I had to be with him anyway, so I just took a good helicopter, and we went everywhere in Vietnam. One day I almost jumped out of my seat. The crew chief was in the back and he was getting ready to light a cigarette and he dropped his lighter; and when it hit the floor it sounded like somebody had shot us. So, I told him, "No more cigarettes until we get on the ground." (laughing) In fact, as the operations officer, I had all the medical evacs in-country—when you take all the personnel from all the hospitals, and the medical brigade, the battalions and the units in the field, they had fifty thousand troops, medical troops, in the country.

JS: Oh wow!

JH: And this included— about halfway up the peninsula we had one thousand bed hospital to take care of all kinds of things that we didn't normally have in the MASH or a regular hospital. I had to do all the evacuations from Vietnam to Tokyo, and then get them ready from there back to the states.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, I had a lot of evacuations as far as Air Force evacuating to Japan.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: I had two medical evacuation companies. Each one of them had twenty-five helicopters. And then I had a bunch of individuals, even if it was four or six that they needed, scattered all over Vietnam. And then I had to go and visit these places almost weekly. And so, I flew from one end of Vietnam to the other end, and funny things had happened, like down in the southern part of Vietnam we had a lot of problems with the

enemy shooting mortars at MASH hospitals. So, we went down there, and we put up big telephone poles, and then put them on from pole to pole and planked it over, and then put about six feet of dirt on top of it, so the hospital was protected. When we say we had a MASH hospital, there's no telling what we had to do to protect it. And then we had the ones that came over that had the compressors, and they blew up, so they were like a big balloon [inflatable hospital]. They were air conditioned and everything. But we had real problems with those, with dropping mortars and artillery on them. Then we had one that came, a brand new one that came from the states, and the colonel that had been selected to run this thing— (background static) and it was over on the western part of the country and as soon as he got it set up, the next day he was going from one section to another that were separated to keep them from being mortared all the time. They hit him en-route and killed him. So, we had a real problem with keeping the people we needed in these different hospitals. Lord, we had hospitals all over the country, and of course when we would get one in you might need fifty nurses in that hospital, and then we had to get in all these people and have them put in different locations for protection. So, if we had a village in that area then we'd use those, a lot better than having them in a tent.

JS: Sure, yes sir.

JH: (Editor's Note: The audio quality is poor during this time on Hammett's end) I had to visit all of my units, from one end of Vietnam to the other. So about once a month I had to make the rounds of all the units and check them out and see that everything was being functioned properly. Of course, I was in Saigon, and we had buildings, but we had a problem then with people coming in with a Jeep and throwing a grenade in the tent— I mean, into the gate, or something like that. We had a lot of the people get new people in there because we got them killed. When you were in Saigon, if I was driving a jeep, I'd take my watch off my left hand and put it in my pocket, because if I was driving the jeep and I stuck my hand out for a left-hand turn, somebody's coming along on a motorcycle and could jerk the watch off my arm. So, we had that sort of thing running all the time. In fact, (unintelligible) and this young girl came riding this bicycle down the street, and just before she got to our gate, her hat blew off, so she leaned the bicycle up against the gate and started walking back to get her hat; and that was when we

all hit the deck, because as soon as she got out away from the gate, the bicycle blew up and blew the gate away.

JS: Wow.

JH: Another thing was on Sunday after church, about eight of us would get in the van and go downtown to a building that was about five stories tall, and at the top was a nice restaurant and we'd go up there and get lunch. (Unintelligible) just about twenty pounds of dynamite on top of the elevator.

JS: Oh wow, wow.

JH: (laughing) So you got to watch where you're going and what you did.

JS: Sure, yes sir.

JH: These were things that happened everyday while you were in a country like Vietnam. Like we had to train our people that had just come in from the states that we were training. If a group were walking down the trail, and a real pretty little Vietnamese girl would come walking down the trail toward them. The first thing you know, she would set off an explosion right there in front of the group. So, you had to teach them that's a woman, but you don't treat them just like you would here in the states. That's the sort of thing that happened daily almost. Do you have some things you wanted to ask about or what?

JS: Sure, yes sir. Well, I've got some questions here, first of all, when did you first arrive in-country in Vietnam?

JH: Let's see, it was 1966, but it was probably in the fall of '66. Like I said, this was the first medical brigade in combat.

JS: Yes sir.

JH: So, we had a lot of things—when we got there I had— before we left Fort Sam. I had gone out to the Air Force, and they had all kinds of vehicles, and fans and air conditioners, and you could go out there and buy them, at so many pennies a pound. So, when we went over there, I had two cargo ships loaded with equipment to take with us. Like air conditioners, and fans, and that sort of thing. They also took the general a sedan and I got a lot of—I must have put aside about six different tires in the car, so you'd have something incase he had flats while he was over there.

JS: Right, yes sir. What was your rank at the time when you were sent to Vietnam?

JH: I was a lieutenant colonel.

JS: Lieutenant colonel, yes sir. And prior to being sent to Vietnam, had you been keeping up with what was going on over there? Did you have a pretty good grasp?

JH: Oh yeah, I had a week of briefing.

JS: How did you get over there to Vietnam?

JH: Well, I carried about—we must have had twenty-five people selected to go over there with us. Our sergeants, and personnel, and I, had all those on a cargo ship.

JS: Alright, unfortunately the line is really starting to break up here. It's making it difficult to hear. I don't know if that's a technical problem on my end or what, but could I call you back in just a moment?

JH: Sure, go ahead.

JS: Okay, thank you sir. (Phone dialing)

JH: Hello?

JS: Okay, that seems to be a little bit better now. Well, sorry about that, but that last thing—well actually, the next thing I wanted to ask you about was: once you arrived in-country in Vietnam, what was your first impression of Vietnam?

JH: When I got there, we had a two-star general that controlled the engineers and the medics, and everything else. The day I got there when it was about, I guess it was two o'clock in the morning when we flew in; and within twenty minutes after we got on the ground I was escorted into the general's headquarters. And as soon as I walked in; the first thing he said was—and I hadn't been on the ground, but twenty minutes— and he said, "Why on earth are we having trouble keeping my helicopters flying?" I said, "I don't know, but I'll find out and give a briefing at six o'clock in the morning and let you know." But these were the sort of things he said, "Why do we have trouble with the medical helicopter that get shot up?" (Lengthy unintelligible) An hour after that I had generators and everything else to operate where I needed them.

JS: Unfortunately, the phone line is breaking up again here. I wasn't able to catch all of what you said. I'm sorry; I'm not sure what's going on here.

JH: Well, I was just saying that as soon as I got on the ground within twenty minutes, I was at the general's headquarters trying to answer questions about what was happening in the country as far as the medics were concerned. Of course, I didn't know what the heck was going on as far as getting equipment and operating medical helicopter units, because if they got holes punched in them (unintelligible) anyway he thought as soon as I got on the ground that I would know exactly what I needed.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: I had to tell him exactly what I needed, and what size, and where. So, I got all that done within the day.

JS: Alright, well after that initial meeting with the general, were you able to come back with a good report to kind of explain to him what was going on?

JH: Oh yes. By the next morning I already knew how many aircraft were down, what they needed to fix them, and where they were located.

JS: Okay, so you didn't have much time at all before you had to get straight to work then, huh?

JH: No, by the next morning after I got there, I had to have all this stuff fixed up in my mind as to what I was going to tell the general and how we were going to get it done.

JS: And you said you were based primarily out of Saigon, but were traveling all over the country?

JH: I was based in Saigon. I had aircraft that would come in and pick me up and I'd go to different areas in the country.

JS: Of all the areas that you traveled to, and all the places that you visited, which area did you find that was, I guess was the worst as far as having troubles?

JH: The northern part of the country is where we had the most problems.

JS: Was that the area where more helicopters were being damaged, and shot down, and things like that?

JH: Well, no, not shot down, but we had a lot of work to do to keep them flying.

JS: Okay. I know you mentioned earlier that you said that you were in charge of dealing with the evacs from Vietnam to Tokyo.

JH: Yeah.

JS: Could you talk a little bit more about that, and what that entailed?

JH: We had Air Force that would come in and pick up our patients that we needed to go to Tokyo. And basically, to some of the larger hospitals that we had in Tokyo. So, when we had patients that required specialized equipment, and treatment, a lot of that had to go to Tokyo. So, I had aircraft going over there, I'd say as many as two or three a day, going to Tokyo, taking specific personnel that needed to go there to get equipment.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Because they had specialized hospitals there that we could not have in-country.

JS: Alright, what types of aircraft were being used for this mission?

JH: Well, the Air Force used four engine aircraft that would carry sometimes as twenty or twenty-five patients in litters.

JS: And these were the guys that were so badly wounded that they couldn't be treated in-country or?

JH: If you had to get a kid there that had to have a leg amputated, or an arm amputated, they usually took them to Japan to get it done.

JS: Those with the less wounds or more minor wounds, I guess you'd say, would stay in-country at a field hospital?

JH: Yeah.

JS: Okay. Would there be guys that also would be evacuated to hospital ships and things, as well or was it primarily—?

JH: We had a couple hospital ships that we would fly out and land on the ship and deposit the patient there. The hospital ships were well equipped to handle the problems that we would have with different patients.

JS: Could you I guess take me through your daily routine in Vietnam?

JH: My daily routine?

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Well as soon as I got up in the morning, I had phone calls from all over the country. If anybody was having any problems, and they needed me to help them with it, then I'd have to stay on the phone for maybe a couple hours in the morning trying to get these things worked out. Things that I could handle that they didn't have at their

particular locations. Like if I had an outfit that needed a particular type of equipment, they couldn't handle, they would contact me, and I would get to my commanding general, and he would get the engineers to put the equipment up that would help him out.

JS: Would you ever fly any medevac type missions yourself?

JH: I flew almost one hundred medical evacs the first year I was there.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: A lot of times when I would fly the general out to a MASH, or a location, while he was being briefed or whatever there, I might get a radio call to go pick up a patient from an area that they didn't have the equipment to pick up. So, I would make several missions while I was waiting for the general and get those picked up and taken to the local hospitals and come back and pick the general up when he's ready to go.

JS: Are there any memorable medevac missions that kind of stick out in your mind that you could possibly talk about?

JH: Well, I went to several locations where we had an area where we had maybe two or three hundred people there to protect it, and they would be out in the middle of nowhere, and we'd go out there to visit them. And one day I got in my helicopter and took off from just outside of this compound and as I was starting to take off, right down the runway, about five of the Viet Cong came out of the jungle and they all took them (unintelligible) and then, as I progressed towards them, then they started aiming a few yards ahead of me. What was happening was that (unintelligible) they were learning not to shoot directly at the helicopter, but to shoot in front of it so that we'd fly into the projectiles. (Unintelligible). I did a turn around and backed out of there and went out the other direction. It was just something you did on the spur of the moment; you didn't think about it while you were doing it until it was over.

JS: Sure, yes sir.

JH: (unintelligible)

JS: Yes, sir. Did you fly helicopters the entire time, or were you flying other aircraft as well?

JH: I had some fixed wing aircraft that I flew to the southern end of the country if I had a patient to take to a specialized hospital that was right down on the end of the

country. And then I had a little aircraft, and an air strip, right across from the MASH hospital.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: So, if I had a patient to move, and that I couldn't do it with a helicopter because it would be too far to go, then I would take a fixed wing.

JS: Well, speaking of that one incident where you were coming under fire from the Viet Cong there, were there other incidences where you came under fire from the Viet Cong that you could possible talk about?

JH: The only time that you knew it was when you were taking off, and you'd hear it. That could be anytime when you're taking off in Vietnam.

JS: Well, I know you talked a little bit earlier about how, I guess, basically anyone could be an enemy, or could be a threat. Could you talk a little bit then about your impressions of the Vietnamese people and give an assessment of the enemy, of the Viet Cong and your thoughts on them.

JH: Well, it was pretty hard to determine who was going to be the enemy because there, anybody could be your enemy. No telling whether it was a child or what, they took care of the Viet Cong.

JS: Alright. Did you ever do any work with the South Vietnamese?

JH: With the who?

JS: With the South Vietnamese Army with the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam)?

JH: Oh yeah, we evacuated the Vietnamese soldiers. I guess every week I'd be getting several of them to pick up to bring to one of our MASH hospitals.

JS: What was your impression of the South Vietnamese soldiers?

JH: The impression of what?

JS: Of the South Vietnamese soldiers?

JH: The ones that I was associated with, they did a good job. Of course, the ones that I was associated with, they were probably the better trained people anyway.

JS: Did you ever evacuate wounded enemy?

JH: Oh yeah. (Unintelligible) [When I was sent to any of the MASH hospitals] to pick up a couple patients. I never knew whether it was the enemy, or whether it was our

people. They'd have them all covered up with a blanket, on a litter, and they'd just put it on that helicopter, and I'd bring him back. It was just depending on what the soldier needed done as to where we took them.

JS: Right.

JH: So even if they were enemy, we still handled them the same as our own people, you know, as far as treatment was concerned.

JS: Well, when you were not on duty and not flying missions, how would you spend your down time?

JH: I didn't hear that.

JS: When you were not on duty, when you weren't flying missions, how would you spend your downtime, if you had any?

JH: Well, I was always on duty. If I was going out to a unit that was just helicopter units sitting out, or around the medical battalion, or whatever, I'd just fly out to this unit and land, and discuss whether they had any problems and if not, try to help them out. So, I went to a lot of places where I really didn't have a particular reason to get there. Other than the fact that when I got there, I would find problems they were having and help them out.

JS: What were some typical problems that the units could have?

JH: Well, most of the problems that I had were maintenance problems.

JS: Okay.

JH: We needed generators to power some of the equipment that we needed to repair helicopters then I'd have to try to get a generator shipped up there, which would also provide them light to work at night.

JS: Right.

JH: In tents or wherever they happen to be.

JS: So, the problems then were almost always equipment issues?

JH: Usually it was equipment that was needed, yeah.

JS: Now, what would be the process, I guess, for getting them the things they needed? What would you have to do at that point once you determined what the problem was?

JH: Well, I'd usually have to go back to my headquarters, and then go to the general that controlled all the service units and tell him what we needed, and he would see that the engineers would ship it to us.

JS: Yes, sir. It sounds like you were a pretty busy man over there. When you weren't getting equipment and things, you were flying these medevac missions all the time.

JH: Well, I flew medevac, and I also had the staff fly around to different units that were needed. So, I was pretty busy flying around from one place to another all the way up to the end of the country or back.

JS: How large was your staff?

JH: I had about a, let me think now. (Unintelligible) I had about four majors and about three captains that were on the staff.

JS: And their jobs were to—I guess were they similar to yours, except for the fact that you were in the command position.

JH: Right.

JS: Okay.

JH: Yeah, I had to make sure that the people that I contacted were given the equipment they needed through one of our staff.

JS: Well, are there any other memorable moments or funny moments or anything?

JH: Well, things I wasn't really involved in, but we lost several pilots that crashed, or were shot down, but that was in the year's time and then, just before I got there one of my people went in to pick up somebody, and it was evidently a very hot area, and he turned around to come back in and pick up the patient and they shot him down; and he was killed. He also got a Congressional Medal [of Honor], for bravery.

JS: Do you know how many—I guess what the casualty rate was for your unit?

JH: Well as far as people that were killed, I'm trying to remember, but I would say maybe three or four the year that I was there.

JS: Yes, sir. Well, how long— was the unit deployed in-country for the entire time in Vietnam?

JH: Yeah.

JS: Okay.

JH: I took the unit over there, and then it was still there when I came home.

JS: When did your tour come to an end?

JH: I didn't hear you?

JS: When did your tour come to an end?

JH: Mine ended one year after I got there; so, it was in '67 that I came home.

JS: Yes, sir. During the time that you were there, how did you feel about the way the war was going?

JH: Well, I had a lot of problems talking to the Air Force. In fact, I had some pilots that wanted to fly with the medical helicopters because they were told that they would only have so much Air Force time, and they had actually a little time on their hands, so they would come and want to know if they could fly with us.

JS: Well, given your prospective on the war from your time there, did you feel that the US was winning the war, or could you really tell? Or how did you feel about that?

JH: Well, I heard a lot of talk from the Air Force pilots. They were told not to bomb certain areas but thought that it would be a good idea to get those areas under bombs but were told they couldn't do it. So that was added to us saying things could be a lot better if we could destroy those areas, but were told not to; and why, I don't know.

JS: Well, I know this is kind of a broad question here, but given the fact that you participated in World War II, and Korea, prior to going to Vietnam, how did Vietnam compare to those other wars as far as your experience there?

JH: Well, if you're talking about World War II, it was a lot different because we were moving— like in Italy, we moved up the Italian Peninsula just based on our equipment and personnel. So, we were continually moving, which we didn't do in Vietnam. We had more people in World War II, of course, than we had in Vietnam so we had a lot more areas of which we could work.

JS: What did you think of the strategy of Vietnam, and the way the war was handled?

JH: Oh, it was not the way it was handled, it was the fact that the areas that we were working in were so different, and that there were a lot more Viet Cong than we realized at times. So, a lot of times you couldn't go to an area because you didn't have the

personnel to get there like you would in World War II. Before World War II, when I got out of high school, I couldn't get in the Air Force because I didn't have two years of college.

JS: Right, yes sir.

JH: I went to Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, and I flew with them for a long time.

JS: Well, speaking on Vietnam, when your tour finally came to an end of that year; at what point in your tour did you stop flying before you went home? Did you fly all the way up to the end of your tour?

JH: I flew the day before I left.

JS: Wow.

JH: I went to the northern part of Vietnam and visited maybe half a dozen units that I hadn't seen in a few days. So, I actually flew up into Vietnam the day before I left.

JS: Was there any sort of out processing, or was it just you, in effect, completed your last mission and then went home?

JH: What happened was that I was told one morning that I had orders to leave the next day, and that I would get on a medevac going to Tokyo and then from there get on another medevac unit and go back to the states.

JS: Okay, yes sir. Well, before talking about leaving Vietnam and your career after Vietnam, is there anything else about Vietnam that we should cover that we haven't?

JH: Well, I don't know because once I left Vietnam, I wasn't very privy to get (unintelligible) to find out what was happening over there. All I got was what was in the news. I got home and we found out that a lot of the stuff that we got in the news really wasn't what was going on there.

JS: Well after leaving Vietnam, how much longer did you stay in the military?

JH: Oh, quite a while. I was (unintelligible) aircraft that was going to replace the Huey, and I spent almost a year working with that, and about twenty generals who decided that this new aircraft needed certain things that they wanted for their particular area. One of them said we ought to have a 105-howitzer mounted in the aircraft. Well, you fire one 105 in an aircraft and it would shake all the rivets out of it, and this sort of

thing. Another one was the infantry wanted two squads to stand up inside the new aircraft so when the pilot came to a hover, he could press a button and all twelve men would drop out and become one unit on the ground. And as we'd find that we weren't dropping them out over an area that was nothing but mud after they (unintelligible). You didn't drop a unit down in the rice fields, and the rice patties, because you had trouble getting out of there to get to where they wanted to go.

JS: Was this to design the Black Hawk?

JH: Yeah.

JS: Okay, how long did you work on that project?

JH: For a year.

JS: For a year, okay. What did you do after that?

JH: Well, after that I took over a medical battalion.

JS: Okay.

JH: At Fort Benning, and I was there until I guess for about a year and a half and then I finally decided to get out.

JS: So, what year was that that you retired?

JH: Oh, about seventy—I guess I got out around '77 or '78. And once I got out of Fort Benning, I was working with the Department of Human Resources, and I worked the whole state getting helicopters and medical units prepared to take care of patients, and the whole country.

JS: For medical evacuations?

JH: Yeah, a lot of times I flew a Huey and picked up a patient that was maybe one hundred miles below us, where I was located, to pick up a patient and take to a specific hospital where they had area it to take that patient. So, we did medevac over all of the state. You know, just depending on the patient, and what was needed, and where we'd have to take it to get it done.

JS: How long did you do that?

JH: Well, after I got out of Fort Benning I went to work for the state, and I worked for them for twenty years. I was seventy years old when I retired from the state, and out of the military.

JS: What was your rank when you retired from the military?

JH: Lieutenant colonel.

JS: So, during those entire twenty years were you primarily flying these medevac missions?

JH: Well, those twenty years were working for the state. I was out of the military. so, I was running all—I had a bunch of people all over the state that I sent out to check on these different types of units that had ambulances.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: These were not military; these were civilians that were running ambulances. I had to make sure they had the proper equipment, and proper personnel, for those vehicles. What I did was that I trained for twenty, for twenty years I trained medical evac personnel and paramedics.

JS: So, it sounds like it was very similar to your job in Vietnam?

JH: Yeah, well they got me out of the military, and they got me into the state of Georgia Department of Human Resources based on the things that I had done in the military. So, when I went to work for the state, the first thing I did was I made up a set of regulations for ambulances. What equipment they needed, and the personnel they needed, and to make sure that they got them, and operated the way they should. When I first started, there were a lot of ambulances being run by people that had hearses, and not having any personnel or equipment to operate the vehicle. So, it was my job, and the people that I had with me. We made them get the equipment, and the personnel, and operate them. And that was my job.

JS: Okay.

JH: So, see that all of this was done.

JS: Right, yes sir. And you retired from that about 1998 or so? Something like that?

JH: I retired in ‘92.

JS: Okay, ‘92, I’m sorry. Well, the last thing I guess we should do before wrapping up the interview, I’d like to ask you just some general questions to get your opinion on Vietnam; just general questions about the war, and the media, and things like that. For those you can say as much or as little as you’d like.

JH: Well, in Vietnam we were always short of equipment.

JS: Yes, sir.

JH: Things that we thought we needed or thought we should have we didn't get. So, we were never really given the equipment that we needed, and the amount of it that we needed. Well, that's always everything you do in war. You always need more than you get. It was pretty bad in Vietnam.

JS: Right. How did that—did that have a major affect of performance of the unit?

JH: Performance of what?

JS: Performance of the unit, and the ability to do their job.

JH: Oh, in Vietnam we were always short of equipment.

JS: Yes sir, right.

JH: But working for the state I would try to get everything we needed. Maybe not quite enough, but enough to make sure it was done correctly.

JS: Well, just a few more questions before wrapping things up. Looking back on your experience in Vietnam, how do you feel about your own participation in Vietnam and also, how do you feel about American involvement in Vietnam? Do you think that we should have been there?

JH: Well, the whole time that I was there, we had equipment; but we never did get enough—a lot of times we had a particular thing that we needed for a particular aircraft, but we couldn't get the stuff shipped into Tokyo. In fact, we were short on fan belts and a particular H-13 that we were flying, this was in Korea. The way I got it was that I got some sheets and pillow slips and took them over to the Marines and swapped them with what we had for what we needed. Some things were going on that you didn't have any real control over. (unintelligible) Or at least not the way you should've had it.

JS: Well, is there anything else you'd like to say before we bring the interview to a close?

JH: No, I can just tell you that the thirty-three years that I was in the military, I thoroughly enjoyed it, and did the best I could get it done with.

JS: alright, well let me go ahead and stop the interview or stop the recording.