Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Neil Whitehurst. Today is August 6th, 2003. It’s approximately 9:45AM Central Standard Time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, in the interview room of the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Whitehurst is in Wilmington, North Carolina. Sir, let’s start with some biographical information on yourself and your childhood. Can you tell me where you were born, when you were born and a little bit about growing up?

Cornelius Whitehurst: Certainly. First of all, I was born February 1st, 1946 in a very small town of Bethel, North Carolina. The population at that time was a little under two thousand people. The school system that we went to was very small. There were thirty people in my graduating class to give you some idea of the size. It was a rural community surrounded primarily by tobacco farms in which we were also small tobacco farmers. My youth was spent primarily in the odd jobs, going to school, and trying to play baseball and basketball whenever I could. I enjoyed quite a bit of hunting and fishing when I was a youngster because that was something that I’ve always had a tendency to gravitate to.

RV: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

CW: I have three sisters, three sisters, no brothers.

RV: What age were they in relation to you?

CW: Two of my sisters were ten years older than I. Then I came along and we had one more sister that was born four years after me that kind of made an interesting family there. But since we lived in a small two bedroom house, I guess that was a pretty good way to do it because we just about moved two out when the other two came in.
RV: Yes, sir. What did your parents do for a living?

CW: My father was a combination of—we farmed and he ran a small country store for a while. He also was a butcher. He also worked for one of the little local stores that was a combination dry goods, meat market, this type of situation.

RV: Did he farm tobacco?

CW: We farmed tobacco. We had a little farm. The farm was only 160 acres, but it was owned jointly with my aunt. So you figure, we were only half owners on a small farm. At that time and for many years afterwards, we only had about eighty acres of tobacco. But that eighty acres of tobacco was eighty-five percent of the income off of the farm. It became one of those things were everybody worked in the tobacco field and everybody participated in the harvest and burning tobacco, et cetera. So it was a way of life that has since gone another route.

RV: What are your biggest memories of childhood? What do you see when you look back?

CW: Well, it’s kind of interesting. I, first of all, think I had a very blessed childhood. I had two parents who worked so hard. Even my mother, she would work at odd jobs and do things such as cook for the fire department or the rotary club to make a little extra money. My memory was always either working in the garden, working on the farm or when I got a little older, I held every possible odd job there was to hold in town.

RV: Tell me about those.

CW: Well, I can remember shining shoes. I can remember working in the grocery store. Actually, we delivered groceries on a bicycle. I had the paper route for our local paper which I was paid $4 a week for getting up every morning and delivering my papers before I even went to school. One of my memories was that the local supermarket, there was a gentleman there who owned that. He had fought in World War I. I used to finish delivering my papers, go to the supermarket, still the rest of the community had not awakened, and have almost a quart of chocolate milk that morning with him. He would tell me about fighting in World War I. Then I’d go to school. After school I would probably have other jobs, maybe cutting someone’s grass, maybe cleaning yards. I worked in the gas stations. The most coveted position in town was a short order cook at the only hamburger place that we had. I finally got that job. So, that was probably an area
where making $.50, $.60¢ an hour even when we had minimum wage hiring, that was my most lucrative source of income outside of working in the tobacco fields.

RV: Tell me about working in tobacco.

CW: Well, now, working in tobacco was really an evolution of hierarchy. You started out as a small child. You would hand the tobacco. We got paid $4 a day for handing tobacco. When the tobacco truck pulled into the shed where we processed the tobacco to put it in the barn, the handers would hand it to the tiers. The tiers would put it on sticks and later on we would put it in the barn. Then next progression up was a trucker. We used mules. We didn’t have tractors. The trucker was the guy that drove the tobacco truck with the mule and he got paid $6 an hour. But when you really made the big time, you became a breaker or a primer or someone who picked tobacco. That was $10 a day. I didn’t mean hour, I mean a day. That was $10 a day, $6 a day for a trucker, $4 a day for the hander. You really felt like you made big time when you became a primer. When I made $10 a day and I’d work five days a week and I made $50 in a week, I didn’t really see any big reason to go to school or college. I mean, I had it made. That was more money than I ever saw.

RV: Now, when did you do this work? You started as the child and as a hander?

CW: I was probably about thirteen years old before I was able to go in as a primer. I was much earlier than that, eight, nine, ten years old, you started as a hander and maybe at eleven or twelve years old, I could drive a tobacco truck.

RV: Did you work this mainly in the summer time?

CW: Mainly the summer harvest. We tried to finish the harvest before school started and that was the whole thing.

RV: So, I’ve heard many, many stories about how hard it is to work in tobacco fields and priming being one of the hardest things to do.

CW: Well, it was. Of course, it went through an evolution procedure. After that, people started having trucks, tractors that pulled the sleds. Then you started having the tobacco harvesters where you actually could sit down on the harvester and it went through and you broke the tobacco off and put it on a conveyor belt. But even during this period of time, we were still processing tobacco the old way. We were putting it on sticks. We were curing it in the barns. We were taking it out and we were working it into
what we referred to as dry tobacco. It was these beautiful leaves. You didn’t dare break a leaf, and it was all put in these beautiful bundles. As it progressed into the bulk cured systems came in and it just started breaking it off the stalks and cramming in the barn and shooting the gas to it and the whole world changed. Now, the other day, right here in North Carolina another tradition came to an end. The old tobacco auctions that we normally see are on the way out because of the contract procedures that a lot of the tobacco companies are contracting directly with tobacco producers now. Those few that are still going to the tobacco auction as of this year, the auctioneer is no longer the auctioneer. They’re using handheld computers to go along and do the tobacco auction. So that’s another part of it gone. But that was a big part of growing up in rural North Carolina. It really was.

RV: Yes, sir. Was the farm your father co-loaned with your aunt, was it successful financially?

CW: We were successful. It certainly could not provide an income for both families. So you had to supplement it. Of course, today, I own half of that farm and we rent it out, but we still grow tobacco to a certain extent but our allotment has been cut fifty percent in the last few years. So it’s no longer a viable source of income. In fact, it really doesn’t even pay its way. I keep the farm to grow some trees and go hunting once in a while.

RV: Tell me about military influences in your life. You spoke with the gentleman you would have your chocolate milk with in the morning. What about in your family? Did anybody in your family serve in the military?

CW: Actually, no. We had several people and I hate to go back this far, we had several people that were involved in the Civil War, but who didn’t? Actually, my father was not in the service because he was thirty-six, seven, eight years old when the second World War came by and he was a farmer and was deferred to continue farming. I really didn’t have anyone in my family per se. But I must admit, just like many southern boys, I was enamored with the Second World War and Korea and probably not for the right reasons but in any event, I just thought it was something that I should do if something came along and provided me the opportunity. I think also, it was a way that I thought was a great equalizer. I always thought it was a wonderful situation where people from
different walks of life and different cultures and different races and different religions
could all come together, go through basic training, sleep in the same bunks, eat the same
food, wear the same clothes, get paid the same pay and have a chance to really break out
of a shell and see what was beyond Pitt County, North Carolina. So, that was a big
motivator.

RV: What about the Korean War? What kind of memories do you have of that?
You were quite young when that broke out.

CW: Well, I was quite young and when people refer to the Korean War as the
forgotten war, they were really correct because we had people in our town that were
killed in the Korean War. There were some of my older sisters’ friends whose brothers or
fathers were killed in the Korean War. But we just didn’t hear about it. You just didn’t
hear about it. In fact, if it wasn’t for me reading G.I. Joe comic books, I probably would
not even have known that it was going on at the time. I really feel so sorry for the Korean
War veterans because it’s almost as if it was out of sight, out of mind. Of course, I
studied it in depth later on and marveled at some of the things that MacArthur did and
some of the things that had happened and have seen a lot of exposes and things on behind
the scenes with the Soviet and the Chinese hierarchy and how things played out. But it
was amazing. I later had the opportunity to meet several Korean War veterans when I
went into the military. Some of the senior officers and staff NCOs (noncommissioned
officers) had been veterans of the Korean War and that’s when I learned a lot about it.

RV: What other military influences did you have? This older gentleman who
talked to you about World War I, do you look back as that an influence upon you getting
into the military?

CW: I really don’t. That was more of a historical curiosity and sense of just
feeding on his information. I think the first person that really I consider a military
influence that I knew was a gentleman who was not a relative. He lived in town. I really
didn’t know him. He was much older. He had joined the Marine Corps and was
successful enough that he was promoted to a warrant officer. When he came to town one
time, right after he was promoted to warrant officer, I had a chance to meet him while I
was over for the day/night lunch cooking my hamburgers in my ultimate job. We struck
up a conversation and I was enamored and also realized there was no way from listening
and talking to him that I’d ever be able to make it in the Marine Corps. In any event, I just felt like with the advent of the war coming on—the Vietnam War started to make headlines—that I wanted to do something. But, I also, and I must admit, always from the time I read my first book, I wanted to fly. I felt like the only avenue that I really had a chance to fly in would probably be to go into the military. So, that enamored me quite a bit. I wanted to get in as soon as I could for reasons of building longevity, reasons of trying to get ahead or reasons for trying to maybe put myself in a better position. So when I was in my last year of high school, I joined a Naval Reserve unit over in a little small town of Washington, North Carolina. From there I was transferred to a Naval Reserve unit in Norfolk, Virginia. I joined on a program called a four by two program, which means that you have to do four years in the reserve and two years active duty. Normally you do your two years active duty first and your four years in the reserve second. But when I was fortunate enough to be selected for college, they allowed me to do my four years in the reserve while I was going to college, under the guidance that after graduation I would have to do two years active duty. It was during the time that I was going through East Carolina that I joined the Air Force ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps). That program looked like it was promising, but some things just didn’t work out with that. So I decided to stay in the Navy and try for something called the Aviation Reserve Officer Program, AvROP program. That program was designed for people just like me who were in college who wanted to go into the Navy who wanted to fly. The procedure was that if you qualified between your sophomore and junior year, they would send you to Newport, Rhode Island, I believe for about eight weeks. Between your junior and senior year, they would send you back for another eight weeks. Upon graduation, you would be commissioned an ensign and then you could go to flight school. I was really just keyed in on that. But that’s when reality and the world catches up with you because when it came time for me to go between my sophomore and my junior year, they told me that they had too many people in the pipeline and that I was going to be shifted back to between my junior and senior year and then I would do eight weeks after graduation and then I would be commissioned and then I would go. The next year, I was told that there were too many people in the pipeline, that I would have to wait until graduation and just got to regular OCS (Officer Candidate School) and then I would get a chance to go. It was somewhere...
in that junior/senior year area that I was going across the student union and I was in my Air Force ROTC uniform.

RV: This is at East Carolina University?

CW: At East Carolina. This Marine Corps recruiter had his booth set up and he was in his dress blues. He saw me in my little Air Force uniform and he pointed at me and told me to come over there. Of course he scared me half to death, this captain in the Marine Corps. He started talking to me and he found out I was in the Naval Reserve. He found out that I had already taken all my ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) tests which are aviation related tests. He found out that I had a flight physical that I had passed that. He turned around and he says, “Son, I tell you what.” He says, “We’ll take your scores. We’ll take your physical. We’ll transfer you to the Marine Corps and we will guarantee you flight school, but you have to go to Quantico, Virginia, and go through OCS.” I said, “You know, this is the first guarantee I’ve ever had in my life.” I said, “Let me think about it,” because I really did not know whether or not I would be able to handle Marine Corps OCS. I’d heard a lot of things about that.

RV: What did you hear?

CW: I heard it was very difficult. I heard that you had to be some type of, I don’t know, superior athlete or something of this nature to go through it. But I got to thinking, you know, “My gosh, I may not be all of those things, but some people like me have to get through it some time sooner or later so I think I maybe have as good a shot as anybody else.” I was enamored and I was enamored with their esprit de corps and a lot of other things that I had read and heard. Of course, I liked all the services. So I did. I transferred to the Marine Corps Reserve, became a PFC (private first class). The next year I graduated and I had to wait until the fall to go to OCS. So I said, “What’s the best thing that I could to get myself ready for OCS?” I had married during my senior year and had a little baby on the way. So I went to the local department of transportation and found out that they had road work crews that worked digging ditches, picked, burying dead animals, putting in culverts, this type of thing. I said, “That’s what I want to do,” because I knew that that would one, provide me a little income during the summer, and two, it would get me in shape without me having to actually go through some type of rigorous physical exercise program. It was the smartest thing I ever did. My bride had graduated a
little earlier than I and she was starting to teach school in a small school. I went out and I
did that. I worked on a road crew. They could not understand why in the world why
someone with a degree would want to work on a road crew. I told them I had my reasons.

RV: Did you work there in Greenville?

CW: I worked out of little Washington in Beaufort County. I buried a lot of dead
skunks that year and put in a lot of culverts.

RV: So you got used to the heat, being outside.

CW: The heat, just putting me outside. It was perfect. I could not have come up
with a better regiment to prepare myself for what was to come in OCS.

RV: Good. Before we get to Quantico, let me go back and ask a couple of
questions. What kind of student were you? How were you in school?

CW: I tell you, school was tough for me and I almost hate to tell you, but the
main reason that I went to college was because I was told that to fly an aircraft I had to
have a commission and to have a commission, I needed a degree. I said, “Well, doggone
it, I guess I better go get one.”

RV: Right. Was there an expectation for you to go to college from your parents
or this was really left up to you?

CW: There was a hope. My oldest sister had gone to college and become a
teacher and my next oldest sister had gone to business school. There was always a hope
that another member of our family would go. But from an academic standpoint, I guess, I
was the poorest of the four people in my family. I had a very difficult time. I don’t think
that our small high school was really geared to preparing people for college although we
had several people that were successful and went on to school. Some were in the medical
profession and others. But it was difficult for me. It really was. I didn’t know how to
study. I tried. For me, when I did learn something, I knew it. Other people, they made an
A on a test and went on to the next thing. Me, I made an eighty, but I remembered it for
four years. But that was the thing. I had to go to summer school often. I had to take a few
courses over again. My wife was a big influence on me. She was an honor student and an
English major and a French minor. Thank goodness she edited my papers and helped me
type and do things like that.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in school?
CW: Actually, history, which is what I majored in. I was always interested in history. Second was, believe it or not, anthropology and sociology. In fact, we did not have an archaeology department at East Carolina College, which was university and I graduated from the first class that was university. We did not have an archaeology department, but I was very interested in the Algonquin and Athabascan Indian histories and populations of the Southeastern United States and did a lot of research in that area and ended up actually helping a couple of professors establish an archaeology program at East Carolina University, but we kept running into loggerheads with the University of North Carolina which had total control over all of that. Anything that we did, we had to go back and kind of get their blessing.

RV: What year did you graduate high school?

CW: I graduated high school in 1964.

RV: What year did you graduate from East Carolina?

CW: 1968.

RV: Let me ask you a couple of other questions. Where did your interest in flying come from?

CW: I’m not real sure. I just always enjoyed aircraft as a child. We had something called the Civil Air Patrol or the Civil Air Concentration. Well, I can't even remember the name. It was back after the nuclear threat where individuals would join an organization similar to the Civil Air Patrol where we would volunteer and watch for aircraft that were flying over. We would report it to the central command and all the states had volunteers that did this. I was one of the people involved in that. I can remember the code name, now. We would sit in these little houses and we would track aircraft flying over. We would dial our local operator and ours was November Foxtrot 34 Black. Then we would say, “We have a multiengine aircraft heading north/northwest at high altitude to so and so.” That’s before the global radar system. That’s the way we track all the aircraft coming into the United States. I did that and then I decided that I wanted to learn to fly. I had a friend of mine whose father was a retired Army major who had come back from World War II. He had gotten his private pilot’s license and had a small plane. Actually, it was a multiengine plane. But my friend who was a basketball teammate, he didn’t care at all about going with his father. His father asked me one day, and you have
to understand, we were from two different socio-economic classes, but I didn’t really understand it a lot at that time. He asked me if I wanted to go and of course, I said, “Certainly.” So I had the chance to fly three or four times with Mr. Everett and he let me have the controls. When I went off to East Carolina, one of the things I decided to do is, I said, “If I’m going to be a candidate to go to aviation flight school, I want to know if I can fly before I get there. I don’t want to get there and bomb out.” So I spent every spare dollar that I could taking student pilot’s lessons. I never got my private, but I did get to solo as a student pilot. So I knew in my heart and my mind that I could fly an airplane by myself before I ever went to flight school. It was just a matter of getting there. Also, when I was in the Navy, I was at the Naval Air Station in Norfolk, Virginia and Oceana. So actually, as a young eighteen, nineteen, twenty year old boy as I was going through college, I worked as an air crewman and also as a mechanic on the A-4 Sky hawks and the S-2F tracker and a submarine plane. So I was around airplanes. I emerged myself into them. I’d build them. I flew models. I had pictures of them. I read books about them. If I didn’t fly, I guess I would probably had to shoot myself because it just felt like that was my destiny.

RV: So you had a lot of experience before you actually got into the military to actually fly, go to flight school. What kind of athlete were you?

CW: I think I was the greatest athlete that I ever knew. (Both laugh) My penchant was for baseball, but to give you an idea and our little high school was really geared toward basketball. We did not have enough for a football team. But we only had nine people on our baseball team when we were seniors in high school. I drove a school bus. That was one of my odd jobs. At that time, when you were sixteen years old, you could drive a school bus. So I was the school bus driver from the day I got my driver’s license. Sometimes when we had a ball game, we had a little small class A conference with eight little small towns in our county were in this conference. Now, we went to the conference and got permission for Bethel High School to play a baseball game with eight ball players instead of nine, knowing that I was the ninth player and that if I didn’t show up in time, I was automatically out at the plate until I got there. There were several times when I would bring my school bus back to the school after taking everybody home and actually change in the bus into my uniform and run out in the third inning or something
like that and I’d already been out. I’d actually gone up to the plate with two strikes on
me. But that was my thing. I played basketball and so that was that.

RV: Why did you join the Naval Reserve in high school?

CW: I just really felt like every single young man in America should join the
military or do something whether that’s go to Appalachia and help poor folks or dig
ditches or build schools or something.

RV: You felt that then?

CW: I felt it then. I’ve always felt it. I was enamored with the draft. I said, “This
is the greatest thing.” I think one of the reasons is simply because I grew up in a very
segregated south, but my heart and mind was not there. I had all kinds of controversy. In
fact, I actually was fired from my job three times because we had one door that the black
people could come in and one door that you could come in if you were white. I would tell
Mr. Hardy, I said, “This is bull.” That time we also had all the civil rights marchers were
coming down into our area to march. They were coming down from up north and I could
not in my heart see any—that was stupid to have people go around one door.

RV: Was it in the back?

CW: Well, it was a little small place built on the side of a car dealership in the
back door and the front door. You came in, you came to the same place. It was just one of
these things. Mr. Hardy would sit across the street and he’d come in and he’d say, “Well,
you did good, but you did wrong so you’re fired.” He’d hire me back the next day. I
always saw this situation. I saw several of my black friends in the area go off into the
Army. I said, “This is the greatest thing going. This draft is the greatest thing going in
America,” as far as I could see for young people to give them the opportunity once to get
out, to break those roots, to see what the world was all about. I just couldn’t understand.
Of course, my knowledge was so limited. I didn’t know what it was like in Midwest or
out in the West or the Southwest. I only knew little rural North Carolina. I knew that it
was a good thing for a lot of people. I knew that I felt like if there was a war I needed to
be there doing my part for the country. I wanted to fly. I wanted to participate. I guess it
was a sense of patriotism that might have been misfounded but it was there.

RV: It sounds like it was there very strongly inside you.

CW: Probably so.
RV: Tell me what you knew about the United States involvement in Southeast Asia in ’64 when you graduated and going in to college and through your college years. What did you know about it? What did you know of the bigger picture of why the United States was actually involved?

CW: Well, I didn’t really obviously know the big picture. I knew from reading that we had something called SEATO. That was the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. I knew what we had as far as our alliances in Europe. I just felt like it was another type of thing that we had that we had committed to to help stop the spread of communism because everybody was very much aware from the Bay of Pigs, which is another little story I guess I need to tell you about.

RV: Okay, go ahead.

CW: But everybody was aware of communism and the threat. So it was on my mind. I said, “Well, gosh. Here’s another place where communist aggression is trying to take over some poor people who want help.” I really thought they wanted help. Then the French had been in and trying to help and I saw this and I said, “You know, this sounds like something that was tailor made for the United States.” Now, I did not know at that time about the Gulf of Tonkin incident and some of the controversy of whether it actually occurred or not or some of the other type of thing. I just knew that there was a war, the United States was involved in it. Communism was one of the factors and I needed to be there. I must tell you, I guess it was 1961, ’62. I was fourteen years old or so. In keeping with the tobacco market, one of my cousins was a tobacco buyer for Southeastern Tobacco Company. They worked down in Claxton, Georgia, each year. He asked me one time if I’d like to come down to Claxton, Georgia, just to work on the floor and see how these larger warehouses worked. He was kind of my idol. I didn’t have a brother. He was several years older, but he had been in the Army, had been drafted, gone to Europe and served with Mr. Elvis Presley and come back. He taught me a little bit about hunting and fishing and I hung around him all his life even to the extent where he got tired of me, but I followed him around. So I went there. I got wind of—of course we all knew what was going on in Cuba with Castro at that time or at least I did. I guess most other people didn’t, but I cared about it. I got wind that there was something going on in the Florida Everglades, people trying to get ready to possibly go over there and take out Castro. I
said, “Gosh, this is an opportunity.” I was really young. I was really naïve and I made some contacts with some people down in Tampa, Florida. So I decided, I’m going to go down to Tampa, Florida. So I got on a bus and spent my last few dollars going to Tampa, Florida. I had an address. I went down to the waterfront of Tampa, Florida. My intention was to join the resistance, to go with them to free Cuba.

RV: Wow. What did your family think about this?
CW: I told no one. I told no one, not even my cousin because I knew he would call my mother. I’d already been brought home a couple of times when I tried to run away to go see my aunt and uncle in Alaska. So, after that, I’m going to do this. So I went down to Tampa and I really got an education real quick. The very people that I thought I was—and I never met Cuban refugees or any people from Latin America. I just had this vision in my mind. I was down on that waterfront and I was trying to make a few contacts. All of the sudden I realized I was someplace that I didn’t need to be, that people didn’t appreciate me being there or asking questions. To make a long story short, I had to make a run for it. I barely got out of that with the skin on my body. I made it to a bus stop, jumped on a bus, a local bus they had in Tampa with people behind me.

RV: Really? What had happened?
CW: Well, I had asked some questions, told them what I wanted to do and evidently I’d run into the wrong group of people. These people didn’t care any more about Cuba or Cuba being freed. They decided that I was just persona non grata and they wanted to—I think they wanted to do me severe bodily harm and nothing against anybody. I just met the wrong group of people at the wrong place on the waterfront and I was probably the only non-Cuban or non-Latino around. All of the sudden I just got myself in a real bad situation.

RV: Now, you were what, fourteen years old?
CW: Fourteen years old.
RV: And your parents didn’t know where you were?
CW: They had no idea I was even in Florida. They thought I was in Claxton, Georgia.
RV: My gosh. Did you tell them later what had happened?
CW: Later, many years later. I ran for it. I jumped on this bus. This gentleman says, “What stop do you want?” I handed him $2.10 and I said, “As far as this will take me.” He took me basically to the end of the line. I got off the bus and I started hitchhiking back to Georgia. I made it back just in time to catch the boys going back to North Carolina. They thought I was gone. So that was a little thing in life that was a nice experience. I learned a lot.

RV: That sounds very interesting, very dangerous but very interesting.

CW: I was very naïve and not very well thought out. It was all emotion based and that’s probably been a problem that I’ve had for a long time.

RV: How did Kennedy’s assassination affect you?

CW: It affected me quite a bit because believe it or not, I was home sick laying on the couch watching my black and white television when it all occurred. I can remember Walter Cronkite and other people coming in and breaking in and this news and the whole nine yards. I mean, I was right there. It just—and of course, once again, I saw this as a big communist conspiracy. But it affected me terribly because one, having tried to be involved in the Bay of Pigs type of thing even on that little innuendo that I was just referring to, it felt personal. I had no idea until later on studying what had happened, why it went down the way it did. I had no idea that the president actually withheld the support because of an agreement with Russia and Turkey and that involvement. I had known later on in years, military people in the Marine Corps and the Navy that were actually on the carriers off the coast ready to go and they couldn’t understand why they couldn’t go. But you never know the big picture until twenty years later. But it affected me greatly. It really did. I felt like we as a country had basically suffered a secret attack. It motivated me to continue to do what I could to help stem the tide of aggression and communism and any threat to the United States. I know that sounds a little bit cavalier, but that’s the way I felt about it.

RV: It sounds as if you lived that, that those weren't just words to you then.

CW: Well, it meant a lot to me.

RV: Was your father very patriotic?

CW: Yes, he was. He was very patriotic. Of course, he had no military background and the only one I would really tell him, but the only problem that we had
was from a political standpoint every now and then. He was what you might call a yellow
dog Democrat. Although I’m a Democrat, I was a conservative Democrat. We would
knock heads once in a while, but he was a great man. He really was a great man.

RV: Why don’t we talk about Quantico? You had taken us up through East
Carolina and getting over, transferring to the Marine Corps and working that summer on
the road crew outside. Then in the fall you went up to Virginia.

CW: Sure did. Went up to Quantico, Virginia. Boy, was that an eye-opening
experience. I had been through a Navy boot camp which was a Navy Reserve boot camp
and it was in Norfolk, Virginia. It was an abbreviated modified boot camp. It certainly
wasn’t like Great Lakes or anything of this nature. But it had given me some procedures,
military structure. I knew more than a lot of the young men that were in my OCS class.
That was really a Godsend to me. Plus I was in the right kind of shape. We had football
players and weight lifters that didn’t make it because that wasn’t the right kind of shape
to be in for this particular situation. I also learned how to keep my mouth shut. I learned
how to observe things primarily from my boot camp experience. There was a lot of
nomenclature and procedure that I was a little bit ahead of the game on. I also had the
chance to observe some of the members of our class. We had a program in the Marine
Corps at that time called ECP, Enlisted Commissioning Program. These were super sharp
staff NCOs who had the opportunity to move up and go to OCS and become officers. I
figured out real quick who those two or three people were and I kept my mouth shut and
said, I’m going to watch them. Whatever they do or don’t do is what I’m going to do. So,
that was really an eye-opening event. We had sixty people started our class. We had
thirty people finish. It was really difficult because all of the DIs (drill instructor) or
Sergeant Instructors were Vietnam veterans. They knew what they were training us for.
They knew that one hundred percent of these young lieutenants would go to Vietnam.
They knew a bunch of us would die and they were doing everything they could to make
sure that we got the type training and the chance to survive.

RV: Now, did they talk to you about their Vietnam experience?
CW: They did. That was very humbling and very motivating. They would talk to
us in the context of training. For example, we may be doing some type of route march or
recon or Mike bivouac or scouting or listening post OP (operation post). They would sit
there and talk to you in such a way as you could actually visualize and understand the threat that this wasn’t just training for training’s sake. This was training to save people’s lives, to make sure that people you were responsible for had a chance to come home. It was very, very realistic.

RV: Tell me about your typical day there. What was it like?

CW: Of course, the first day was amazing because you had this atmosphere in which I think they did a real good job. You had a lot of wives and you had a lot of mothers and fathers that brought their children up to turn them over to the Marine Corps for this camp they were going to go to. They served coffee and cookies and Kool-aid and they all talked really nice. Then all the people had to leave and we had been treated just like a college freshman orientation class. Then they said, “All of you just go outside now and kind of get in line.” Of course, I knew what getting in line meant. There were several people who had been in the military before or ECPs, but most of them, this was their first introduction at all to the military. So we started this loose four-column march, but there was a railroad track separated part of the base. That railroad track was the railroad track from hell. Because once you crossed that railroad track, you were out of sight of all the parents and the wives and anybody else. The whole world ended as I knew it right at that moment. I just really can't do justice to you other than just to try to give you some idea. We were marched to our barracks. We were on the third floor. We had a basement which meant four floors in the building. It was getting equipment issue and running and falling and there were some limbs broken on the first day and some serious injuries.

RV: How did those occur?

CW: Primarily from falling over the stairs trying to carry duffel bags and footlockers and weapons and everybody, hurry, hurry, hurry. There was three platoons that lived on three different levels and we were the top ones. It was really—I guess it was intended to do that. It was really bad. You’d have people running into you with M-14s and everything else. It was amazing. It really was. We survived the first day. The first night, people were standing around. We were still in civilian clothes, hadn’t been issued new uniforms. The fear was so great that with people getting sick and things of this nature, but you just knew that you had to last one day at a time. That’s all I focused on was one day at time.
RV: How long was the program?
CW: We had twelve weeks. It was a very long OCS and quite intense.
RV: Can you describe some of the training that you went through?
CW: Tremendous amount of physical training, but psychological was extremely difficult. We did everything from obviously basic military skills to a lot of tactical indoctrination as far as studying our enemy and primarily how to become platoon officers which they later had an advanced school that you went to called basic school for those people that were going to be regular infantry officers which was another five months. But we got our basic instruction. We did a lot of rifle instruction, a lot of night work, a lot of marching. We went through the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) Academy’s physical observation and confidence course, which was right there, which was in itself unbelievable work because it’s not just physical. You have to put together a team and come up with some skills and ideas how to accomplish a task within a short period of time. All the time you’re theoretically being fired at or under attack. That in itself was an amazing thing. I wish all the services had to do that. But that was a lot of education, a lot of indoctrination into what the Marine Corps was, who you were if you became a Marine. You were not a Marine until graduation day.
RV: What did they tell you about that?
CW: Well, you were just a candidate. A candidate is a little bit lower than most creatures that crawl on the ground. Later on in life, I was fortunate enough in the Reserves to be the assistant depot inspector at Paris Island. So I’ve seen both sides from the time that the young men and women get off and stand in the yellow footprints all the way through it. Of course, they are recruits. They are not Marines until they finish their training. So, it’s very similar in some respects, the OCS and recruit training at Paris Island. But they have a mindset and I think it really hasn’t changed a whole lot in many, many years as far as it was a scenario. The way it’s done and the professionalism obviously, it’s changed a great deal. The quality of instructors and DIs of the Paris Island is amazing.
RV: What kind of weapons training did you have?
CW: Well, in OCS, primarily weapon’s training was, we fired the M-14 rifle for our qualification and the .45.
RV: How were you?
CW: Well, I was expert with both weapons.
RV: I assume you probably drew upon your experience as a kid?
CW: Yeah. I was fortunate enough. I must say that when young people go into
the military, I think the coaches and the instructors really like someone who’s never seen
a weapon before because they can really train them from the get go. But I had hunted and
fished and fired shot guns and rifles before. So I had to unlearn some things, but I learned
the others very well.
RV: Did you have any injuries or major problems in your unit during the
training?
CW: Well, I had a leg problem. I had injured my leg somewhere around week
two to the extent that when I got up in the morning, I could barely get
out of the rack. After I exercised a little while, it was all right. But I didn’t dare tell
anybody because they would put you back. I had a couple of bunk mates who actually
helped me out of the rack sometimes in the morning until I could get loosened up. So I
would get up maybe an hour before reveille. It was just to try to get the soreness out. We
had one guy name Cobay that broke his arm in the eleventh, or tenth or eleventh week.
of course, he would normally be recycled until his arm got well. But that guy was so
tough that they allowed him to continue with a cast on his arm. He went through the last
two weeks with a cast on his arm. They said, “If you ever fall behind, we’re going to
recycle you.” But the rest of us made sure he never fell behind.
RV: How did you survive there as a unit? I’ve heard descriptions of this where it
was really a team effort. You didn’t want to be out in front. You wanted to blend in.
CW: It was. That was me. I wanted to fall in the middle because I knew I wasn’t
the toughest physical specimen, but I knew I wasn’t also the least desirable member of
the organization. But, you had to work together. That’s the thing. You would never, ever
make it on your own. It was not an individual effort, it was a team effort. So many things
were geared to that. The confidence course, the FBI course, the physical readiness test
where you had to carry your buddy and someone else carried your rifle and run with
someone over your—carrying a stretcher. You were all graded, you either all made it or
you didn’t. There were times when we felt, in the latter part of OCS that we pretty much
got this. There’s nothing else they can throw at us. It was just a matter of doing our time. We would have inspections or something and everything would be perfect except one person with one little thing. We felt like we were senior cadets, senior candidates. In that one little thing, the wrath of God would come down on the whole unit. We would all have to get up at two o’clock in the morning, get right back out, take off another twenty mile hike or something like that because one person had one little piece of brass that wasn’t shined right. But that was done psychologically. The whole thing was just to let us know that you’ve never made it and you never will because no one—they were always going to find something wrong.

RV: How did you do psychologically? How did you adapt to the military or the Marine Corps lifestyle?

CW: I was fortunate once again because I had an idea of what was coming down. I had a preview because I would watch these two or three enlisted commissioned cadets and I would overhear what they were saying. Then I finally struck up a conversation with one of my sergeant instructors who was a platoon sergeant. I more or less was able to glean some things from him that he didn’t really didn’t meant to give me any information, but I was kind of like a detective trying to figure out what was coming down next, just how serious this was. So I kind of kept myself not too far out in front but certainly not too far in the back. I was fortunate enough. I got a few “atta boy’s.” A time or two I found myself maybe in the top one or two and I didn’t feel comfortable being there because I knew more would be at stake. So I would slide back over.

RV: When did you finish?

CW: I finished in November of 1968.

RV: From there, where did you go?

CW: From there I went straight to Pensacola, Florida.

RV: This is flight school?

CW: Flight school.

RV: Why don’t we take a break sir?

CW: All right.

RV: Okay, continuing the interview now. You were then going to naval flight school in Pensacola, Florida.
CW: Exactly.
RV: Walk me through that. How did you get out of Quantico? Tell me about graduation a little bit.
CW: Well, a couple of little caveats I guess I think was kind of interesting. Upon graduation from Quantico, my wife and my father came up for graduation, which highlighted my life to become a second lieutenant. I’d been told by several people that I knew in my little hometown that I’d never make it through. I think I was the only second person to ever go through Marine Corps OCS from my local community. The other is a good friend of mine who is a PhD now. So I felt like I was in good company. But my father brought me a letter and my wife brought me a letter when they came up for graduation. The letter from my father was from the draft board in Greenville, North Carolina, saying, “Congratulations, I had been drafted into the United States Army.” The letter from my wife was from the Department of Navy saying that I had been ordered two years active duty for missing drills. So on the way home, I had to stop off at NARTU, Naval Air Reserve Training Unit in Norfolk, Virginia. I was in uniform. I walked in and saw this lieutenant commander that I hadn’t seen in several years since I was an airman in the Navy. I explained to him that I really didn’t miss those drills. I had been transferred to the Marine Corps and that I didn’t think I needed to go on active duty in the Navy. He was very accommodating and they squared that away real quick. I had a problem when I went to Greenville, North Carolina, which was the county seat of Pitt County. I went over there and met a lady by the name of Mrs. Rogers who was the civilian head of the draft board and explained to her that I couldn’t be drafted in the United States Army because I was a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. But that didn’t mean anything to her.
RV: Were you in uniform?
CW: Yes, but she didn’t care. All she knows was my name was on that and I had better get myself to Riley’s for a physical examination to go into the Army. So it was kind of interesting trying to get that squared away. I finally had to find someone in her office that understood what was going on to make that work. Very shortly thereafter, my wife and I put everything we owned in a little U-Haul trailer which wasn’t much. We headed down to Pensacola, Florida, with my little girl to flight school.
RV: Okay. How long was flight school going to last?
CW: Well, flight school, traditionally, in the Navy is eighteen months long. It’s a very comprehensive flight school that actually takes a pilot trainee all the way through advanced instruments. Now, it’s a little different from other services in that some of the other services like the Air Force will graduate you at about the same point that we are when we finish basic. Then they will finish their training after you’re designated as an aviator and a pilot in the Air Force. We have to go all the way through. At that time, all naval aviators that were being trained except those few that were going through Army flight school, we had to go through the entire process. We were all trained as fixed wing pilots first. If you’re going into helicopters, then you transition into helicopters. So I actually went through the carrier qualifications, the gunnery qualifications, the formation flying, the whole nine yards in the T-28 Trojan aircraft. I was very fortunate to be able to actually land and take off a carrier in an airplane, basically a World War II, Korean vintage before the jets came. So I was fortunate in that. But, the flight school that was normally scheduled for eighteen months, the Marines were being pushed through, especially those of us that were helicopter designated, at a rapid pace because they needed helicopter pilots during the Vietnam War. We were flying sometimes twice on Saturdays and once on Sundays. We finished flight school in just about a year, no more than thirteen months. In fact, I finished my training about three weeks before I was designated simply because the next designation ceremony wasn’t until at such and such a time. I was fortunate enough to actually fly actual missions as a copilot without wings, but that were actually doing something constructive. We worked with Eglin Air Force Base on developing some weapons and things.

RV: Now, when did you exactly arrive down in Pensacola?

CW: I arrived in Pensacola, let’s see, November. Well, it was November of 1968. Excuse me. Let’s see. I’m sorry. Let me back up. I graduated in November. Yeah, it was November 1968.

RV: You went through into 1969.

CW: I went through—actually, we did not start the actual flight training. You had to go through some indoctrination and things of this nature. So that took about a month. Then you had a Christmas holiday. So I actually graduated from flight school in January or February of ’70. But a couple of interesting little notes along, first of all, when I was
designated, the Great Santini was the one who, along with my wife, pinned my wings on me.

RV: Really? Wow. How did that work out?

CW: Well, he was the Marine Corps head of flight school, Colonel Convoy, the head of flight school. But I think one of the more interesting things and a really rude awakening to this country boy was when I arrived at Pensacola. I’m hesitant to tell you this, but I guess it’s part of who I am.

RV: Yes, sir.

CW: I arrived at Pensacola. I was a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. I had a guaranteed aviation contract I was going to flight school. I had a degree and I knew how to fly an airplane. So, when I arrived there, I reported to the naval flight training center and they said, “Congratulations. Welcome aboard. Are you scheduled for your preliminary round of qualification tests Monday morning?” I said, “Well, what kind of test are you talking about?” They said, “Well, proficiency tests. We have to measure your proficiency in certain areas before you can start your ground school.” I said, “What areas are you talking about?” They said, “Well, your physics, your trigonometry, your algebra.” I went, “Oh, my God. I am going to be a platoon leader leading Marines here in three or four weeks.” So I promptly took my algebra, physics, trigonometry and geometry tests and I failed all four of them. I said, “What’s going to happen now? Am I out of flight school?” They said, “No. We have an advanced study procedure for those people who don’t quite meet our qualifications as far as being ready to handle the academics.” They put me in a program with a lot of others. I wasn’t by myself, with some second class and first class petty officers who were probably honestly better instructors than anybody I had ever seen in college or high school. They put me on a program with workbooks and a certain level that you had to attain and even basic computer technology there. I learned—of course, I was motivated. You have to understand you’re motivated in that particular situation. But I learned more math, more about concepts and more about formulas and more about applications in a three-week period than I had learned in all my years of education ever together. It was just absolutely—I said, “My God, if somebody had done this to me when I was in high school, boy, how much better my college experience would have been.” But of course I was a different person at this time. I think I
changed. But in any event, then I started through the flight program, which was still a
good part of physical fitness, a good part of swimming and other things that you have to
do, flight physiology and ground school before you actually start to fly.

RV: When did you actually get into an aircraft to fly it?

CW: We went to T-34 training at Saufley Field. This was probably after the first
of the year, right around January, I think.

RV: How were you with a T-34?

CW: I think it was a great aircraft. It really was a military version of a Beechcraft
Bonanza. It was fully acrobatic. I enjoyed the aircraft. However, just because one knows
a little bit about an airplane doesn’t mean anything. It’s almost like being on the rifle
range. There’s a right way, a wrong way, and a Marine Corps way. It’s very precise, your
course procedures, the way you do things have to be exact. No more than five knots plus
or minus an air speed of fifty feet plus or minus an altitude, headings—all these things
are so that you were like a rubber band wound as tight as you could be when you were in
the cockpit with your instructor behind you. But I loved it.

RV: How did you do?

CW: I did well. I did well in the flying part. I did very, very well. Academic, I
was mediocre, but I learned a lot about weather, meteorology and things of this nature. It
was fascinating. I enjoyed every aspect of it, but I thought I was going to have a heart
attack several times. Watching your friends wash out who you considered good Marines
or good naval officers or good pilots. They’d wash out for various reasons.

RV: What was the most common reason?

CW: A lot of it was instruments. That was our number one thing. Some of it was
in carrier qual and some of it was in night formation flying and cross-country navigations
because we did it the old way. We did everything before we had the glass cockpits and
attack ends and everything, you were plotting it. You had the old jets and computers. You
sit down. You had to plot everything by altitude, windage, elevations, things of this
nature. In fact, I can remember on a cross-country trip to Ellington Air Force Base in
Texas. I was sitting there. This is one of my final T-28 cross-country flights. I was sitting
there in the Air Force Base in the operations center trying to get a weather brief and I was
using a handheld computer to plot my course back to England Air Force Base, Louisiana.
This gentleman in this blue flight suit that I’d never seen before, walked up to me and his name was Frank Borman, Colonel, United States Air Force. He had a big massive patch on him. He said, “Lieutenant, can I borrow your computer?” I said, “Oh, my God.” I almost wanted him to autograph it. So I can say that Frank Borman borrowed my computer. But anyhow, that’s what we did. It was quite comprehensive. Then when we finally finished our flight school—well, finished our basic and advanced instruments, we had to transition to helicopters before we even were designated naval aviators.

RV: Why did you go into helicopters?

CW: Well, that’s a very good question. First of all, you had a naval flight school which trains Marine, Navy, and Coast Guard candidates. I wanted to fly jets. I mean, I wanted to be a jet pilot and I wanted to go over there and shoot MiGs down. So when we went to our basic flight training for T-34s, there was a flight called flight sixteen which is kind of a group of students. It was called flight sixteen and it was the Marine flight. They had a couple of Navy people. Most of us were Marines. They were all Marine instructors. All these Marine instructors had been helicopter pilots in Vietnam. They started to tell us that real Marines flew helicopters. They got down there with the grunts and talked and supported them and put them in and pulled them out. Those jet jocks were a bunch of Air Force removed type so and so’s and not that bad, but the point is that there was a tremendous camaraderie, tremendous soul searching of getting back to your roots that you’re actually in contact with the troops on the ground. By the time we left, they had converted just about everybody there that wanted to be a helicopter pilot. But the biggest point was simply this, in 1970 things were going pretty good as far as the I Corps area in Vietnam. We were still winning every major battle and we did even when I was there. They kept telling us that the jet program was going to take a lot longer to get through. We were going to have to go to Beeville and you were going to have to go to Corpus Christi and then you were going to have to go to a ready air group. That if you went in the jet program, it was probably going to take you another six or seven months to get to Vietnam after you get your wings and there’s a good possibility the war would be over before you got there. We said, “Holy smokes. Don’t let the war be over before we get there. I mean, that’s why we’re here.” So we didn’t want to miss the war.

RV: So you really did want to go to Vietnam?
CW: Yeah. Definitely. That was the only thing going and that’s where I was supposed to go. I remember when we graduated from OCS and I was in line. Of course we had the commanding general of the school was there, obviously. He was a major general. I remember someone trying to sound very prophetic and asked a very intelligent question of the general. They asked him, “Sir, what advice can you give a young Marine lieutenant to make sure he has a successful career?” I over heard the general say, he said, “Lieutenant, attend every war.” I said, “Man, I don’t want to miss it.” Of course, I had been an Audie Murphy fan and everything else. I was living a dream world. I realize I probably wasn’t totally in reality, but I had to get to Vietnam. It was just something I was supposed to do.

RV: Was that feeling shared by your fellow Marines?

CW: Oh, yes. It was. In fact, it was amazing. I mean, it was to the extent that if President Johnson had said, “The war is over right now,” there would have been a tremendous number of disappointed people right there. But flight sixteen was something that really galvanized the esprit de corps in you. A tremendous number of us were talked into going into the helicopter program that had previously wanted to go into the jet pipeline. Now, I must admit that the jet pipeline was an exclusive pipeline that out of a class of fifty people, normally only about four invitations were extended to top members of the class to go into the jet pipeline. It just was interesting in that when our class was going through, evidently the Marine Corps must have graduated every jet pilot that they had. They came up and they said, “You guys are so fortunate,” because we had like fifteen of sixteen slots. Well, what really blew the Navy’s mind was that they just felt like, My, gosh, you’re going to have a bunch of Marines all ready to go and the next day only like six or seven people had signed up for those slots. They couldn’t believe it because all the Navy guys would have jumped on that in a heartbeat. So they actually had to come in and try to recruit Marine aviation candidates to go jets.

RV: Now this is after you all had talked to the helicopter pilots?

CW: Yes. We had been converted back into primary. Now, we were in pretty much basic training now. They said, “What in the world is wrong with you guys?” They actually ordered a few Marines to the jet pipeline that had designated helicopters. So that was kind of interesting. That doesn’t work out all the time, but it did.
RV: Right. Let me ask you another question. How did your wife feel about your attitude about wanting to go to the war?

CW: That’s why I was so fortunate. I was fortunate then and I’m fortunate now. She respected my patriotism and my desire to do the things. I think that was one of the things that kind of led us together. I have a good friend, well, not a great friend, but a friend of mine who I met in college in music appreciation who was an anti-war peace activist. He had long hair back then and the whole nine yards. I remember a couple of guys picking on him and I’m not a big guy, but I kind of stood in front of him and took up for him at times. I said, “Leave the guy alone. He’s a neat guy. He’s just expressing his views.” Well, he is now a Ph.D. over here at University of North Carolina at Wilmington in charge of the religion and philosophy departments. We still don’t see eye to eye on anything. But his name is Ken McClaren and he’s written a lot of publications and knows a publish officer and was involved in a lot of things that I was on the other side of but still a neat fellow. So, I had a pretty good introduction to both sides of it, but she really supported me in everything that I wanted to do. That was a big, big help. I saw a lot of wives that didn’t.

RV: Yes, I’m sure it was. What were your thoughts on the anti-war movement at that time?

CW: It really wasn’t gearing up too much in the south. It was probably more in the Midwest and the Northeast. But I just thought it was a bunch of unpatriotic, selfish individuals that I didn’t realize they had an actual, maybe a political agenda and had studied things in great detail maybe more than I because I just really went into it unquestioning anything. But the thing was that I noticed that a lot of the antiwar people that I noticed were people from the arts community or people from the hippie community or people that seemed to be against everything. That just happened to be the latest phase right then. Although I enjoyed getting into the crowds once in a while before I got married, but meeting some of the gals, I never enjoyed their philosophy. I didn’t associate them probably with being real men a lot of times. I thought they were just out for their own glory and that was the thing that got them some dates. So they decided to go with it.

RV: Did that attitude persist through your time in Vietnam and when you came back?
CW: Well, I think I realized by the time I got back there was some hardcore anti-
war people who had their own agenda, right or wrong, whether I agreed or not. There was
a greater diversity of people involved in that movement than I had initially thought. But it
was very evident and it was very disheartening to those of us that were overseas. The east
coast was totally different from the west coast. The west coast was like being in enemy
territory. Gosh, I can remember landing at Norton Air Force Base coming back from
Vietnam and I was almost like hands off *persona non grata*. It wasn’t so bad when I got
back to the east coast.

RV: What did you think about the Vietnam veterans who were demonstrating
against the war?

CW: That was a tough thing, I must admit. That was a tough thing because I said,
“You know, these are guys that have been there.” But then again, I was trying to
rationalize things to your own viewpoint as we all tend to do. I said, “Well, a lot of these
guys were lower ranking enlisted guys that really didn’t understand the importance of
why we were there.” I would rationalize things like this and that’s not right. These guys,
I’m sure, were a lot of very smart people who saw things in a lot of ways that I didn’t
look at or just against war in general, not so much the Vietnam War. But when you get
over there and you see some things and the atrocities and things that you see in war,
we’re all anti-war. They were just more or less vocalizing themselves. I’m probably as
anti-war a person as you want to see right now. But I realize there are times that it’s
necessary. If it is necessary, I believe that you need to do the job and get it over with. I
think more lives are saved like that than dragging it out.

RV: Right now, in the year 2003, do you see any parallels between the anti-war
movement that we’ve seen and witnessed in our lifetime here recently with the war in
Iraq, any parallels with the Vietnam War anti-war demonstration?

CW: I really don’t see any parallels with the Vietnam War protesters. What I do
see a parallel is there’s always going to be a group of Americans who are against any
type of armed conflict regardless of what it is. Unless their actual hometown was
invaded, I don’t think that they would be in favor of even their National Guard going out
and stopping anybody. I mean, there’s always going to be a group of people who think
you can rationalize and reason and deal with any type of a situation and war is
unnecessary. Unfortunately, that’s not the real case, but they’re never going to change. So
you're always going to see that. Then there’s a bunch of people who are going to use it
for political reasons. That you may see some similarity to it because the shoe on the other
foot, I feel like they would have a slightly different impression of what’s going on.

RV: Let’s go back to Pensacola and flight school. You mentioned in your
questionnaire there were some accidents and some people were killed.

CW: Yeah. We had some fatalities and that was tough.

RV: What happened? Can you tell me about that?

CW: Well, I can remember two or three incidents, but it seemed to be that the
number one killer was the vertigo. You have to understand once again we were flying a
World War II type of aircraft. It didn’t have some of the electronic and safety procedures
that you have now. Some of your tactical aircraft that young men and women train in
now, push comes to shove, you get into real bad shape, you can just push a button, take
your hands off, the aircraft will level itself out and you’ve got a little time to get your
thoughts together and get back together. This was a hands on, World War II basically,
fighter type aircraft. When you started flying in marginal weather at night in and out of
clouds or scuds started coming in or the moon went behind a cloud and things of this
nature. The chances of getting vertigo were just absolutely astounding. When you did, it
took every bit of training to go against your instincts to try to keep that aircraft straight
and level much less bring her in for a landing or bring it back to a field when you’re on a
night navigation hop not using any type of electronic instruments. I know a couple of
cases where students were trying to land. They just couldn’t put it together. They were so
mixed up with their equilibrium that they actually rolled the aircraft inverted and it went
right into the ground. You knew what was happening. You could even hear them on some
of the tapes that we heard on the radios with the tower trying. They were trying against—
everything in their body was telling them to do one thing and they were trying so hard,
but they just couldn’t overcome it.

RV: Did it ever happen to you, the vertigo?

CW: Oh, I’ve gotten vertigo, unbelievably. I can't even hardly imagine how to
tell you, but I knew what was happening. The worst case I ever got was in a helicopter
flying back from Pensacola when I was stationed at New River with a bunch of nurses in
the back who thought we were the greatest pilots in the world going through several
thunderstorms and they didn’t realize they were all about to die. This other guy and I
were being bounced around. We had fuel bladders in the back of the plane. We were in a
lightning storm. We were both captains. We were both instructors. We were both
instrument instructors. It was all that either one of us could do to hold the airplane for
maybe fifteen minutes and then the other guy had to take over. Even landing the aircraft
back at New River that night, I did a slide on landing with skids and the tower says,
“Okay,” whatever our call sign was, “You’re clear to taxi back to the line.” I said, “You
don’t understand. We cannot lift this aircraft off the ground. We’ll flip it upside down.
We’ll still scoot up. You’re going to have to come and tow us in.” It’s bad. I’ve had it in
fixed wing aircraft. I’ve had it in combat even, at night, and that’s really tough.

RV: Can you describe what happens when you get vertigo as a pilot?
CW: Okay. Well, it’s as if your inner ear system totally is out of sync with
reality. For example, let’s assume that you were sitting in your chair straight and level
and your equilibrium says you’re straight and level. Then let’s assume you take your
chair and you lean it to forty-five degrees one way and after a while, that forty-five
degrees seems to be straight and level. So when you flip back straight and level, you body
says, “No, turn back left forty-five degrees.” Try that in three dimensions where your
body tells you you need to be forty-five degrees left and maybe twenty degrees nose up
or twenty degrees nose down and you just want to go that way. But that’s not right
because if you go that way, you’re going to slow roll and dive into the deck or pull a nose
up and stall the aircraft and flip over and die. You have to fight that and the only way you
can fight it is by believing in the instruments that are on your aircraft that tell you you’ve
got to put the nose down, you’ve got to level the wings even though your body is telling
you this is not right.

RV: I imagine at night it’s much worse.
CW: Oh, gosh. Imagine if you’re lost or you’re trying to navigate and you’re
trying to talk and your fuel is getting low or if you’ve got a hydraulic or electrical
problem or some other kind of emergency you’re trying to deal with.

RV: Somebody shooting at you.
CW: Or somebody shooting at you. It’s amazing.
RV: How do they train you to deal with the situations? They just said, “Look at the instruments.”

CW: Yeah. They put you into the back. We actually fly in simulators and then you fly actual aircraft with an instructor in the back. They actually put a black total covering over your head over your cockpit where you cannot see an ounce of daylight. You have to, in advanced instrument training, actually take off, fly to a destination, shoot approaches to a runway and fly all the way back. The only time they popped that bag is just before your wheels touch down. You come out of those things, you lose ten pounds in sweat or you got a headache for two days. You can't eat. You go home, you’re wife just walks away from you. It’s just devastating to you, but it saves your life.

RV: I’m sure you relied on this when you were over in Vietnam.

CW: Oh, yes. In fact, the last few weeks that I was in Vietnam, our unit actually pulled out and went to Hawaii. I was looking forward to going to Hawaii. They said, “No, we’re leaving four Cobra gunships and crew,” because the Army came in and took over Marble Mountain. They said, “We’re leaving four gunships and crews to fly night gun cover for the Army Medevacs,” because the Army pilots were not instrument trained. The only time that Medevacs went out at night were in actual emergencies. We were getting shot at so much by that time that the Army wanted the Cobra gun cover. The only instrument qualified Cobra pilots were Marines so we stayed and flew for them for four weeks.

RV: We’ll talk about that in detail when we get to that point. Tell me about helicopter training.

CW: That was the most amazing thing in the world. Here I was, basically a naval aviator, have carrier qualified gunnery formation, cross-country and I really felt really good. We go over to a place called Ellington Field which was where the Navy helicopter program was. We had the OH-34s and the new Hueys. The Hueys were new so half the classes were getting H-34s and half the class were getting Hueys. Everybody wanted to fly the Hueys, but I got H-34s. The first day that I went out, we tried one aircraft and it wouldn’t start, went to another aircraft and it wouldn’t start. So I went back inside and this other instructor said, “Hey, my student is sick. So I’ll take him.” He took me over to a Huey and I hadn’t even trained or studied for that, but bingo, I got to fly a Huey. But
the very first day, they took us to this big field and we landed in this field. We practiced
hovering a little bit and different things. It was already a kick. It was the most amazing
thing to have a three dimensional flight. Then he put me in a corner. We taxied over to
the corner of this field where the fence comes in and he says, “Okay, now,” he says,
“Neil, you can't go left. You can't go right and you can't go over ten feet. What are you
going to do?” I said, “I don’t know.” He says, “Well, back up.” That just blew my mind,
being able to back up. I had to call my wife. I said, “You won’t believe what this thing
can do.” Then being able to look down and control your environment at a much slower
speed, see what was going on, I really, really enjoyed it. Although I went through the
aeronautical engineering phase of everything. I still don’t understand exactly how they
fly, but the same tube, they break a lot.

RV: How did it come to you? Was it difficult to pick up the helicopter?

CW: I think that a young gentleman that is going to Army flight school today
which only flies helicopters probably had an easier time transitioning into helicopters
than those of us who had flown fixed wings and landed on carriers and initially picked up
because we had to unlearn a bunch of things, concepts. We still fly helicopters a lot like
fixed wing aircraft in the Navy and Marine Corps. We still taxi out to the runway just like
airplanes. We call short. We fly the helicopters just as if we were a fixed wing aircraft
where the Army flies a lot out of these little pads and LZs (landing zone) and they’ll just
lift right up and go from wherever they are. But it comes to you. I felt like after it was all
over with, we had obviously a superior training.

RV: So it was relatively easy for you.

CW: It wasn’t that difficult. It wasn’t that difficult

RV: What kind of things did they put you through?

CW: Well, the most difficult thing I think, by the time you go into the helicopter
phase, you have to understand we’ve already been through instruments which is really the
same in the helicopter with the exception of a few things. It’s transitioning really to the
aircraft itself, learning the capabilities of the aircraft. The most interesting thing in a
helicopter is the concept of auto rotations. In an airplane, if you have an engine failure,
we have to keep our air speed and altitude as long as possible, look for a place to crash
land the aircraft basically, leave your wheels up, put your flaps down and try to belly it in
some place in a field and hope you can walk away from it. In a helicopter, we have
something called the concept of autorotation which is amazing. If you have enough air
speed and altitude or even very little, you can immediately disengage the transmission
from the rotor system which the rotor starts to turn much like a pinwheel if you would put
outside of a car. You have a limited number of RPMs (rotations per minute) that would
keep you in the air. As you start to fall, you build those RPMs so you’d keep the aircraft
in a controlled descent. You can actually cut your engine off in a helicopter at almost any
altitude that you’ve got any forward airspeed and turn around and land it without even
damaging the aircraft at all. In fact, what we did was, we actually taped eggs to our skids.
When you were good enough to shoot an autorotation and not break your eggs, that was
considered pretty good.

RV: I would say so. So that was the most difficult thing for you to learn?
CW: Autorotation, yes.
RV: Any other experiences come to mind that you feel like you want to relate
about your helicopter training before you graduated?
CW: The one thing that was kind of unique with myself was that, as I mentioned,
I finished the flight syllabus a few weeks before the next ceremony where they
designated you as a naval aviator. So I got to fly with real pilots on real missions. One of
the missions that I got to fly on was over at Eglin Air Force Base. They had a weapons
program that was under way to develop something called a CBU (cluster bomb unit), a
fuel air explosive type of a bomb, which was being dropped experimentally. Parachutes
came out. We helped recover those devices, spot them when they dropped off the
airplanes and we recovered those devices. Little did I know that six months later, when
these devices were actually introduced into Vietnam that I would be one of the first ones
to actually drop those devices myself from a helicopter. So that was kind of interesting.
CW: January or February—January of ’70, yeah. I believe it was January of ’70.
RV: Had you received your orders for Vietnam at that time?
CW: No, I hadn’t. But my orders at that time were to report to—you either went
to Camp Pendleton, California, or New River, North Carolina. When you got to New
River, North Carolina, you reported to the Marine air-training group which was forty.
Then and only then did you find out what type of helicopter you were going to fly
because you had to—it was based upon the needs of the Marine Corps. If they needed
heavy lift CH-53 pilots or Huey gunship pilots or pilots to fly the CH-46 which was the
most prevalent aircraft that we had which was our medium hauler that you actually saw
them still using in Iraq the other day. So, most of us felt like we would fly CH-46s. When
I reported to MAG 40, Marine Air Group 40, at New River, another unique thing
happened in my life. I was the only one to report missing a key little line on my orders.
That is called a DIFOT (duty in flying status, operational or training flights), D-I-F-O-T.
It means here are your orders to MAG 40 and it has DIFOT, duty involving flying and
operational training. But for some reason, it wasn’t there. So they said, “Well, without
DIFOT orders, you can't go through the training syllabus.” So all my friends started
going through their regular training syllabus to fly 46s and they said, “Well, the only you
can fly is test ops. I mean, you are a pilot, but we can't train you so you can go out here
and fly test ops while we’re waiting to find out where this mix up is.” So here I am flying
with test pilots flying around while my friends are starting to go through this very
involved syllabus. I feel like I’m getting behind. I’m over at the O Club one night sitting
in a booth. I hear the executive officer of the air group talking to another person in the
booth behind me. He was talking about Cobra training and that the United States Army
had five slots open each month in their Cobra classes down in Hunter Army Airfield for
Marines. Well, I didn’t even know we had any Cobras in the Marine Corps. In fact, we
didn’t. But the Marine Corps had just purchased, in-country, while it was in Vietnam,
about thirty Cobras from the Army, painted them green and they were actually doing
basically training as you go over there, but they were starting to allow five Marines to go
through each sixty man class at Hunter Army airfield in Cobra transition. I said, “Hmm,
okay.” So the next day, I walked into the group commander’s office and asked to speak to
the executive officer. I must admit, there were some other things I overheard in the
conversation that were not related to Marine Corps that I decided to use.

RV: Such as?

CW: Such as some personal stuff. So I walked in and said, “Colonel, my name is
Lieutenant Whitehurst and I want one of those Cobra slots because I don’t have DIFOT
orders right here.” He said, “What are you talking about?” I said, “Listen, I understand
there’s five slots going down in Hunter Army Airfield. I don’t have DIFOT orders. If I get any orders I know they’ll have them and I’m gung ho. I want one of those spots. By the way, I would like to congratulate you on some other stuff that I heard.” He decided it may be a good idea to get this boy out of town as fast he could. So I ended up getting one of the coveted slots to go to a one-month transition. You have to understand, this was only a one-month transition that the Army did to transition their pilots into Cobras. The 46 transition program that we were going through at New River was much longer.

RV: So you actually get in-country quicker.

CW: So actually I got in-country two months faster than my friends then and I got to fly, basically, the dream aircraft at that time in the helicopter community. But we learned something. We went to a lot of interservice schools in the Marine Corps. There’s always a lot of pressure put on you when you go to these schools to do well. I’m assuming that would be the same if an Army soldier went to a Marine school or anything else. But when we reported in to Hunter Army airfield, we met the Marine Corps liaison officer there. He says, “Gentleman, there’s sixty people in this class and there are five Marines and you will finish one, two, three, four, and five in this class. Are there any questions?” So no pressure at all. It was a difficult situation. But we did well. We finished it. Outstanding instructors there, just unbelievable. Most of them were warrant officers or limited duty officers that had survived a year in Vietnam which basically I saw the Army as using Vietnam as the advanced flight training. These guys were great.

RV: Did you guys finish one thru five?

CW: We finished two, three, four, and five. Actually, there was a young Army guy there that was super and I have to give him credit. He is, without doubt, our captain. But in any event, we immediately got orders to got to Vietnam.

RV: Tell me about the Cobra.

CW: The Cobra gunship was just a unique—it was the G-model, the very first one that Bell Helicopter developed on their own. It was almost like taking an Echo model Huey and squeezing it into a ham sandwich. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the aircraft, but it’s configured very much like a fighter plane. So here I had the best of both worlds. I was fixed wing qualified. So here I was almost like flying an airplane again, but I had a rotor system on it. It literally was an aircraft like a little sports car that you just
strap on. After a while, it just became an extension of yourself. You almost think what you wanted to do and it would do it. It was unbelievable.

RV: What kind of armaments did you have?

CW: Well, the armaments that we had, we had a 7.62 minigun and a 40 millimeter grenade launcher in tandem in a nose turret, a moveable nose turret. We had wing pods which had four hard points, two on each side. They could carry a variety of things, but primarily we carried 2.75 inch folding fin aerial rockets. It could carry up to four nineteen-shot pods, but the traditional was nineteen-shot pods in board and seven-shot pods outboard. There were a variety of type of rockets you could carry, Willie Pete rockets or flechette rounds or you could carry a ten pound or seventeen pound warheads and there were different types of warheads. Later on, the aircraft were adapted to carry the CBU-55s which were their fuel air explosive bombs that I was telling you about, outboard. They were tremendous, but they weighed almost nothing.

RV: You said it handled almost like a sports car. It was that versatile and mobile.

CW: It was that way. First of all, you had a bubble canopy. So it wasn’t like sitting in the traditional helicopter in a cabin. You had a stick between your legs and one on the left that was very similar to a fighter plane except you had the additional collective and things that are involved in flying a helicopter. Everything was right in front of you. There was nothing off to the side. Your ordinate switches, everything was right there on the console on the stick. It was like a fighter plane canopy and cockpit. Plus you had your stub wings. You couldn’t carry anybody, only your gunner/copilot up front. The pilot sat in back and you were armed. So it was great.

RV: What kind of cargo space did you have?

CW: None.

RV: Okay. It was just the two of you?

CW: Just two. A pilot and a copilot gunner and your weapons platforms on your stub wings and anything else was full of ammo.

RV: So you received your orders there at Hunter Army Airfield or when you got there?

CW: I had my orders before I left for Hunter Army Airfield. It was just go down there and transition and come back and leave.
RV: Tell me how you felt about that when you actually got your orders and knew you were going in-country?

CW: Well, I felt good. I really did. All the traditional feelings were still there, but I was still living in a little bit of a fantasy world. I was saying, “Everything will be okay.” I was reading papers. I was seeing all the protests. I was saying, “Well, don’t worry because Neil’s coming and when he gets there, he’ll take care of everything and then put all this to rest.” I mean, that’s basically the way I felt.

RV: Did that attitude, that idea that you had, how soon did that change?

CW: It lasted a good almost twenty-four hours and was completely gone within forty-eight hours after I got there. When we first landed in Vietnam, I got off the big 707, I guess I flew in on. I said, “Okay, I’m here. Between John Wayne, Steve McQueen, and myself, the rest of you guys can go on home.” Then we went over and got some gammaglobin shots in the rear end. It was very hot. It was raining. We were in a monsoon season. We were told in a few hours we were going to get on some six by trucks and they were going to take us to Marble Mountain. We got on these trucks. We had everything we owned in a sea bag. Just as we started to go over this big bridge called the Cao Dao bridge over the big river in Da Nang, I started noticing all of these Vietnamese in uniforms which were ARVNs (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). About half way across the bridge, they all open up with M-16s. I didn’t know exactly what was happening, but evidently they were shooting at anything that was floating in the muddy water because they were afraid that sappers would come down and attach satchel charges and try to blow the bridge. But it just struck me all of a sudden, all these automatic weapons going off all around me and I’m in this truck. I don’t even have a pistol. I’m saying, “My gosh. I could be dead. I am so vulnerable. I am just out here in the open and nobody looks like anybody from North Carolina.” When we pull up to Marble Mountain, another interesting thing because there’s this red post that has a sign, “Welcome, Marble Mountain,” over the gateway. It was laying on its side. I asked the sentry what happened. He said, “Well, two guys came by on a motorcycle and fired RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) at us the other night and they hit the sign and blew it over. I said, “Oh, lord.” But I said, “That’s okay. I’m here. I’m on the base now.” I got this guy in a jeep to drop me off at HML-367 (light helicopter squadron) which was my squadron that I was going to.
RV: Before we get into the detail of that, how did your wife feel about you going over when you got the orders and you were actually leaving?

CW: I had a wife and a little girl. She was concerned. But she knew it was just something I had to do. I mean, she knew it when we married. It was just fulfilling part of my destiny, I think.

RV: How about your parents?

CW: They were hard to read on it. I don’t think they really understood everything that was going on in the world. They were kind of—they just knew that I had joined the military, that I was very patriotic, that there was a war, that they had been to a couple of funerals and that something could happen. They were just praying for me and that was it.

RV: Tell me about the trip over. How did you get there?

CW: Well, I launched out of Jacksonville on a commercial airliner and flew to Los Angeles and then flew from Los Angeles to Okinawa. At Okinawa, we were at kind of a staging area where they issued us our camouflage, utilities because we were still ground marines first and aviators second. I went through a little indoctrination. Supposedly got all our orders and everything ready to go to Vietnam. It was there that I had my first little bit of trouble. When I was in Okinawa, I went over to get my orders because I was ready to go to Vietnam. We had a couple of days’ leave. I said, “To heck with the leave. I’ve got to go.” I picked my orders up and I looked at them and I said, “What is this gunny? This says ‘Iwakuni, Japan.’” He says, “Yeah, you’re lucky. We needed some SAR (search and rescue) pilots in Iwakuni and we’re going to send two of you guys to Iwakuni to fly search air and rescue.” I said, “Not me. I’m supposed to go to Vietnam.” He said, “You don’t understand.” He says, “You can go to Japan and fly SAR. You don’t have to go to Vietnam.” I said, “But I want to go to Vietnam.” He said, “You lieutenants are crazy. You’re just crazy. You’re the third or fourth one I’ve tried to give these Japanese orders to and nobody will take them.” So when I got to my unit, I didn’t have a full set of orders because he had actually already sent my package to Iwakuni.” So I got there and I told them that my orders had been lost and they were on the way. But that was okay because—well, I may have alluded to it in the material I sent to you, but I was under the impression that once I reported in that you would have an indoctrination period. There’s something that we have to learn at every base called course rules, what
the base flight patterns are. You need to check in with—there’s always a check in sheet
that you have to go through and check in with the Army, check in with the flight
equipment, check in with dispersing and all the things that you have to do that normally
take a day or so. Then you have to find your quarters and where you’re going to be
staying and do you have to draw anything that you need. So I was anticipating a couple of
days to get myself indoctrinated. I walked into the squadron area and I put my sea bag
down and I said, “Hi. My name is Lieutenant Whitehurst and I’m reporting in.” There
was a guy who is now a dentist, but his name was Silver. He was the operations duty
officer. His name is Herb Silver. I’ll never forget, he said, “Oh, Whitehurst, glad you’re
here. You’re flying tonight.” So that was quite interesting. That really was.
   RV: Yes, sir. Let me ask you a couple of general questions. When you had got in-
country and this is what, February of 1970?
   CW: Let’s see when it was. I’m trying to remember it. No, it was not February
of ’70. It was probably April by the time I got there.
   RV: Okay. Did you have any different feelings or any different perspectives on
why the United States was in Vietnam or was it still the same thing that you thought
about earlier?
   CW: Well, at that time, we were picking up some vibes. I was picking up some
vibes as to some political implications as to was the SEATO thing really that big a
situation and did the Gulf of Tonkin incident ever happen and what was the long term
objective. We had had some political assassinations within Vietnam. The Prime Minister
had been overthrown. There’s a bunch of things that were going on and that I started to
realize that this was a much deeper political situation than I realized to start with, but that
I still had a job to do, that I was there, that there were Marines on the ground, that the
best thing that we could do was to get in and end this war and allow the ARVN to take
over their own country and allow the President and Prime Minister of Vietnam to do their
own thing. I didn’t realize the corruption involved. I didn’t realize the infiltration of the
Viet Cong within the hierarchy. I didn’t realize any of that at that time.
   RV: So the Vietnamization process had already begun. How did you feel about
that, about the capabilities of the South Vietnamese to fight their own war?
CW: When I originally arrived, I thought it was well under the way. As I started
to see different elements and operations, I realized there was a tremendous difference
between different units. Some of them were no more than just groups of people with
uniforms on. Others were fairly well trained. Some were very patriotic, almost to the
extent that they were a little morbid. Others looked like that it depended upon which way
the wind blowed they would switch the next day. I got to the point where I wouldn’t trust
anybody and I wouldn’t turn my back on anybody. I was starting to get very disillusioned
with the Vietnamese people themselves after a period of time because they didn’t seem to
realize that I was there to save them from the terrible horrendous communist hoards that
were coming down and didn’t seem to give a big flip whether I was there or not, that I
was really just another inconvenience in their life that they had been suffering for
hundreds of years and we were just another chapter. That was kind of discouraging.

RV: Did you think that the ARVN and the South Vietnamese Marines and the
Air Force were capable of defeating North Vietnam?

CW: I thought that they were capable of holding their own once we defeated
North Vietnam. That was what I thought we were there for. That certainly changed after a
while when I realized that the politicos in Washington really didn’t have any intention of
allowing us to prosecute the war according to the way General Westmorland or anybody
else wanted to that we were back into some kind of modified police action. We would
take an area and then leave it. There didn’t seem to be any concrete line in the sand that
we wanted to draw. But once we exploited an area, we would pull back before we could
complete the job.

RV: When did you have this realization?

CW: I started to realize that primarily, I guess, about half way through my tour,
reading Stars and Stripes and things of this nature saying, hey, the United States Army
Amernical Division just took all this. The Marine Corps 1st Division just took this and then
two weeks later they pulled them all the way back because we were told by Secretary
McNamara or something that we couldn’t stay in that particular area and that the ARVNs
were supposed to go in and they would immediately either run out or turn into VC (Viet
Cong) themselves or whatever. But Lam Son 719 was my eye opener. That was a big
awakening for me.
RV: Why don’t we go ahead and take a break right now?
CW: All right.
Interview with Cornelius Whitehurst
Date: August 11, 2003

Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Neil Whitehurst. Today is August 11th, 2003. I am again in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library interview room. Mr. Whitehurst, you’re in Wilmington, North Carolina. It’s a little after one o’clock Central Standard Time. Sir, why don’t we pick up where we left off? You had just arrived at Marble Mountain. I wanted to ask you just a couple of general questions before we get into the details of your flying, especially that first night. You arrived in a time period when the United States was beginning to transition out of Vietnam implementing the Vietnamization policy. Could you describe what you saw as the morale of the American troops in your unit, the guys you flew with, the ground units, and also just in general? What was your impression in 1970?

CW: Well, we actually thought, of course, I’m very limited with just the Marine Corps picture here because we really didn’t have an opportunity to talk one on one with too many other branches of service. We were pretty much of the opinion that we had solidified our area of operations, that we had done about as much as we possibly could as far as securing the northern I Corps for the Vietnamese to take over and that every battle that we had gone into, every skirmish that we had gone into we had won decisively. We actually felt like that even though we like to have a total military victory, that’s what we were all trained for, that within the limitations that we had, we had obtained or were on the process or on the way of obtaining our objective. I never, in my wildest dreams, did I ever entertain the thought that we were leaving unfinished business or we were leaving because we couldn’t win this conflict. I was at that time very positive about what we were doing and was very glad to be there because I didn’t want it to be over before I had a chance to get there.

RV: Yes, sir.

CW: Now, I will say that within the last month that I was there when we pulled out of Vietnam, it really wasn’t until our base was occupied by an Army outfit prior to the last four helicopters in our operation leaving, that I started to have any second
thoughts about what’s really happening out there. That was simply because during all the months that I was there, the indicators such as rocket and mortar attacks were very, very rare. We had an area called a tactical area of response building, of operations, which extended from the Marble Mountains and all the way up through Elephant Valley and the Que Son Mountains almost all the way to Hue and Quang Tri. We pretty much controlled that area whenever we wanted to. Now, I realize at night, the VC and people came out of Cambodia. When we wanted to make patrols or we wanted to conduct operations and in the evening, we did not receive too much harassing fire. We received very few rocket mortar attacks as had been in the past. I really felt like we had a pretty good handle on the situation. Da Nang was not under attack. We sporadically got some unguided remote 122 rocket or mortar attacks, but it was very, very rare.

RV: What would you do when those attacks would come?

CW: Well, when we first got there, the first one or two, everybody ran to their bunkers that were outside their little hooches. Then the next one or two, which they were spaced—then everybody climbed on top of the hooches and tried to take pictures of what was going on. By the time I left, they had removed the bunkers because of rat infestations. So there were no bunkers to go in.

RV: Would you say that the morale in your unit, the Cobra helicopter unit that you were serving with, was it high or low or somewhere in between?

CW: I think it was extremely high. In fact, to give you an indication, we had various mission designations. Mission 40 was a Medevac, 55 was a resupply, 60 was inserting troops. We had a mission called 70 or 72, I can't remember. That was a dangerous mission. That was recon in contact. That meant that we had a small recon team out that was being overrun and people were dying. Sometimes we had a mission 72 package that was ready to launch, but other times we had to constitute because this was at the last minute and something you had to scramble. Whenever you had a mission 70 or 72, especially if we were going into Laos or up near the border, if you tried to just say, “Hey, I’ll go,” you actually had to fight for one of those positions. I mean, guys, the more dangerous the mission, the more people wanted to go.

RV: Wow. Why was that?
CW: If you had a mission that literally says you have a twenty-five percent chance of not coming back, you would have guys say, “Wait a minute. You got to go the last time. This is my turn.”

RV: To what do you attribute that?

CW: Just esprit de corps, just the fact that we had such a close bond with our ground troops and the fact that we felt like we were making a difference as far as giving them some accurate cover and making sure that those 46s could get in and out and do their job. It was just a really good feeling. I never really had that type of feeling in my life ever again.

RV: Could you describe your base camp, kind of where you lived, your living conditions, food, supplies, et cetera?

CW: Marble Mountain was a helicopter facility which it was certainly different from Da Nang, which was like a large air base, which had permanent buildings and barracks and things of this nature. Marble Mountain was right along the ocean there. You were right on the oceanfront. It was primarily a one strip runway with parking ramps off of either end. There were a series of fortified hangars that were steel reinforced hangars. But the rest of the place was mostly Quonset huts made out of metal or high back tents with very few permanent buildings. The chow consisted primarily—we did have a chow hall if you were fortunate enough to ever be there. We could eat once in a while at the Officer’s Club if you really made arrangements and if you weren't flying at that time. But most of the chow was C-rats at that time. We didn’t have MREs (meal, ready to eat). C-rats in the field, whatever. If you did get to the chow hall, I always thought was pretty good no matter whether it was the enlisted chow hall or the officer’s chow hall or some of the field messes out in some of the outlying fields. But one thing I do remember was that you worked 24/7. Once in a while you would go through the officer’s club and it was noon. They would be cooking steaks and you knew it was Sunday. That was the only way that you knew it was Sunday.

RV: So it was difficult to keep up with the days.

CW: It was really hard.

RV: Where did you live exactly? What was your hooch like?
CW: I lived in a Quonset hut made out of metal, a half moon shape Quonset hut. There were six of the pilots in that one Quonset hut.

RV: Did you have air conditioning?

CW: No, we did not have air conditioning. We had some fans if you were fortunate enough, but we were hardly in there during the day so the hottest part of the day was when most the time we were gone.

RV: So you flew mostly during the day.

CW: Well, we were gone—unfortunately, the way the Marine Corps worked was even though you were a combat pilot and sent to Vietnam to fly helicopters, your primary job was whatever administrative duty that you were assigned to. For example, if you were S-1 administrative or logistics or operations, it was almost as if you had a forty, fifty, sixty hour a week job to do that and then you flew whenever you got on the schedule. If you went out and flew six or eight hours one day, when you came back, you still had to go back and do your regular job.

RV: What was your daily job then, daily administrative duties?

CW: My job was working in the awards section of the administrative department and the S-1 where we kept up with people who had been awarded air medals or wrote up commendations or citations or received or sent out requests from other units for someone to verify a particular action or something of this nature.

RV: That was very time consuming or not?

CW: It was extremely time consuming. I had three people besides myself because we had some other administrative procedures in there. We also handled the post office and some other things that fell under the collateral side of our duties. But we were quite busy.

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and describe that first day? You said you arrived and you were instructed that you would be flying that evening.

CW: Yes, that was quite a surprise. I arrived the first day. Normally when you check into a new base—of course, I’d never been to a combat situation before—you had some time to go through a check in procedure, which we still had to do. You have time to get acquainted with the base, maybe have an orientation. You’re normally assigned quarters and draw any type of materials or equipment that you need. Then you probably
would receive some indoctrination as to the flight operations and the area of operations, probably get issued some maps, have someone to sit down with you for a little while and go over what we refer to as course rules, the proper way to enter and exit this particular airfield under different situations. All of that really came to pass, but it didn’t go in the sequence that I was anticipating. I caught me a ride from the main gate over to our squadron area. I walked into our squadron area, reported in, threw my duffle bag down, a parachute bag that I had and said, “My name is Whitehurst and I’m here to check in.”

The lieutenant in charge of operations that night says, “Oh, Whitehurst, I’m so glad you’re here. You’re flying tonight.” First of all I said, “Well, this is ridiculous. I mean, there’s no way that”—I mean, I wanted to. It didn’t bother me that much. I was a little apprehensive, but I really thought that there has to be some type of procedure. There has to be some type of orientation. They just don’t do that. That’s not safe. Then I found out there was a method to the madness. I was scheduled as copilot with the executive officer on a night Medevac standby. What that meant was that the only Medevacs that went out at night were emergencies. During the day you had routine, priority and emergency Medevac. But at night, the only Medevacs that went out were emergency Medevacs because it was dangerous. It was bad weather, et cetera. So the procedure for a night Medevac standby was that you reported to your aircraft, you got your briefing, you went out and you preflighted the airplane. Then you launched around the airfield, flew it one time around the airfield just to make sure all the systems were okay. Then you would land at the Medevac bunker which was on the other side of the field. Your aircraft was loaded, primed, everything but the turn on switch. Then you went into the Medevac bunker and you basically stayed in that bunker all night long unless the call came out for an emergency Medevac. Then and only then would you launch. The way you did it, is the pilot ran to the airplane to start the aircraft, the copilot took the brief, then jumped in and took off following the two working birds which were CH-46s. In most cases, there were hours, if any was—there might not have been any Medevacs at night, but in most cases, there were several hours between a launch. The executive officer thought that this would be a good time for him to sit down with me, go over the course rules, procedures, indoctrinate me a little bit to the airfield, especially the once around, give me a chance to meet some of the people and teach me how to use the whiz wheel which was our
decoding device and brief me on some frequencies and areas where some of our units were, which was not a bad idea.

RV: Unless you got called out.

CW: Unless we got called out. We had circled, went around the field, landed. I was still sitting on the bunk with the XO (executive officer). He was just giving me some frequencies of some of the local units. It had just started to get dark. Of course, it was getting dark early because of the rain. The horn went off. When it went off, it was once again a recon unit that was in contact that was taking fire and had wounded. So it was not only a Medevac launch, it was basically a mission 72. The mission 72 package had already launched. We were following in trace, but by the time we arrived where we needed to go, there was a full-fledged firefight going on. Aircraft were already expending all their ordnates. I was asked to fire at hostile targets which I had no idea where they were.

RV: Did you know what to look for besides muzzle flashes?

CW: The only thing I could tell was the red tracers coming at me, I tried to put some back in the same place. I was extremely apprehensive because I knew we had friendlies on the ground. I could not really make out terrain all that well. I could put together enough from my training to know where our troops probably were based upon the radio conversation, but I was also having a very hard time deciphering information over the radio because both the ICS (integrated communication system) and the Fox Mike were in operations as well as the UHF (ultra high frequency). It took sometime before you could actually hear three conversations at once and your brain could sort them all out in different compartments. But I was able to do a pretty credible job that evening.

RV: How long did the firefight last?

CW: Well, I knew that by the time we got there, the section of Cobras that had arrived on station had already been laying down some suppressive fire to try to protect the recon unit who had already suffered some casualties. Then as we came in, they were basically running out of fuel and ammo. So we started some suppressive fire trying to get things knocked down enough so that a CH-46 could go into a hover and put the sling down to start pulling out the recon team. What we ended up doing is we didn’t just pull
out the Medevacs, we pulled everybody out on what we referred to as a spy rig. So that
was quite an experience that very first night.

RV: It’s like, “Welcome to Vietnam.”

CW: Oh, yeah. I was as worried about the weather as much or more as I was the
bad guys.

RV: Right. What do you think you learned on that very first mission?

CW: I really was able to take a giant step towards putting my position and my
mission into perspective. It was almost like getting a master’s degree real quick in what
was going on. That was really it. Of course, I laid awake all night long thinking about it.

RV: Can you describe the tactics you would use when you came on scene and
how you would actually replace the other Cobras when they peeled off and what you
were learning there about how to handle such an action?

CW: Well, we had standard tactics that we practiced in the States, we practiced
throughout the war. We only modified them as necessary, went back to them at any time
that we could. Right on up to the day in Iraq, we do the same standard type of things. We
referred to it as section and flight group division section integrity. Unlike the Army
which would use an air assault move where they would have a whole line of aircraft that
would go into a large operational area and all land at one time and hundreds of soldiers
would come out and assault an area. We first of all don’t have that luxury as far as the
aircraft or the number of personnel. Our whole concept was to, everything we do, we fly
it in sections. Hardly ever a single bird, unless it’s an emergency. Each person is just like
a fighter aircraft. Your wingman always covers the other. So, when we would go out on a
mission, it typically would be two gun birds and two CH-46 working birds. We would go
to an area. The Cobras would go in first, get the brief, talk to the people on ground,
survey the area, make sure it was safe before we would send in our transport helicopters.
If we needed to soften up the area or prep a zone or lay some smoke down or something
of this nature, we would do that before we even brought our CH-46s into an area that they
could be in danger. Then we would go out and we would circle the area 180 degrees out
in a circular motion so that our turrets could always cover each other and the ground the
entire time. Then we would bring in one bird and one bird only and bring that bird in,
cover it all the way down, let that person either let his troops off or bring the troops on
Medevac on. Then we would cover that bird as it came out of the zone. The high bird would stay high. The low Cobra would come in and just come in right behind the 46s that lifted out so that you had total cover the whole time. If we needed to put somebody else down, we would bring the second bird in. If it was a large enough operation where we had four Cobras or two Cobras and four birds, then we might put two in at one time. But at no time would we endanger more than the one or two aircraft. We would always have another aircraft standing by so in case that one got shot up or got hit, we could lay some more fire down and then bring the other bird in to take the crews and everybody out. So, that was the way we operated and it worked very well.

RV: It was very effective?

CW: It was very effective. We lost very, very few aircraft.

RV: I was going to say, my next question was how many craft did you lose during your tour?

CW: Well, during our tour, you have to understand that the Cobras that we had in our squadron were the only Cobras that we had in the Marine Corps. We actually bought them from the Army and changed them from brown to green. So, we did not have a large base like Vung Tao which was a big Army supply place. If they crashed an airplane, they could just go down and uncrate another one. We lost it, we didn’t get it back. So we had to be very careful with the aircraft. That didn’t mean we didn’t do our job or that we shunned our duty. We were just as professional as we could because we had to be. We did lose a few aircraft to enemy fire, not too many. Most of them we were able to get back or even if they had to go down, we were able to get the remains back and put it back together. But we lost some to weather and we lost some to mechanical failure. We lost more to weather and mechanical failure than we did to enemy fire.

RV: So these tactics you just described, were these standard throughout the war or your tour, I guess, and standard whether it was day or nighttime missions?

CW: It was standard. The standard procedure, everybody knew exactly what was happening at all times.

RV: How was communication between your Cobras and the other helicopters on scene despite how many there were and the people on the ground?
CW: Well, communications were fairly well when we were working with the troops on the ground and aircraft in our vicinity. We used the FM radio was the aircraft to aircraft and aircraft to the ground. The UHF was frequencies that we talked, yes, aircraft to aircraft, but primarily to towers and to DAS (direct air support) and to controlling agencies for fixed wing aircraft. The ICS was simply the inner communications system within the aircraft that we talked to one another.

RV: Did you ever have a need to talk with other branches, say the Air Force, calling in any other air strikes, things like that?

CW: Well, yes we did. The only problem we had was when we were flying low, if we had to have UHF communications between ground components such as Da Nang or if we were trying to call back to Hue/Phu Bai, if we were too low or we would get behind the mountains, we would have a hard time communicating. But as far as communicating with fast movers, fixed wings, other people, we did that a lot as far as the fixed wing because all the Marine Cobra pilots, every single Marine Cobra pilot was a qualified FAC-A. That was a Forward Air Control airborne. I ran many sorties of fixed wing aircraft from all the services including the Australians on targets throughout northern Vietnam. Now, the only communication problem that I ever really suffered was when we started to work with the Army during Lam Son 719 up in Laos. The Army just did not want to give us frequencies or for some reason, the word didn’t get down. We just did not know what frequency a lot of times to operate on. We were given a mission and our frequencies to operate within our mission component, but if we wanted to call other Army aircraft in the area, or try to assist other Army aircraft in the area on a Fox Mike frequency or call their controlling agencies, that was very difficult. We, after a period of time, of course, started to, like anyone else, glean a little bit of information here and there and we would pass it on. But, there was a little bit of a problem with interservice communications at that time. That’s something that the services worked on very hard since then and it’s no longer really a problem.

RV: Could you describe what your typical day was like there?

CW: Yeah, a typical day would be about a 0600 get up reveille. Chow, if you had a chance to go to chow hall, you did. By seven o’clock you were at your office working in your workspaces. You’d check your flight schedule, see when you were scheduled to
fly that day. You would draw any ammunition or gear or maps, anything that was necessary. You’d make your brief. You’d do your flying, you’d come back, you’d go right back to work. A lot of times you had night flights. You could fly at two or three o’clock in the morning or you could be scheduled for a flight that was only going to last two hours on a mission 55 to an outlying field and because of combat operations, you may end up out there all day long. So things were very fluid.

RV: If you flew at night, say at two o’clock or three o’clock in the morning, would you still have to get up at 7:00 and go through your regular day or was there some kind of respite there?

CW: There was no official respite and it all depended upon your workload. You had to get your mission accomplished as far as administrative no matter what. After a while, I, even as a first lieutenant, I was a senior man in my little portion of the world. We had a cot or two in the operations area. Sometimes people would come back in at two or three o’clock in the morning, they would just flake out for two or three hours on that cot or if they just couldn’t go anymore, get up or get them something to drink or a sandwich and just go right on into the workspace. It was almost as easy to stay in the squadron area forever, really, than to go back to your quarters.

RV: How far away were your quarters from the squadron area?

CW: It wasn’t that far, maybe a quarter of a mile, 3/8 of a mile.

RV: Would you walk?

CW: You could but most of the time you just hopped on a jeep or one of the 715 trucks going that way and just very dangerously stood on the floorboard or stood on what was a bump. You did things that OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) would be extremely disapproving of.

RV: How would you describe the quality of intelligence you had?

CW: That is kind of a difficult thing at the level that I was at to describe. I really don’t think that our S-2, which was our intelligence division on the squadron level was really in a position to make any assessments. We only responded to information that we received from our group headquarters which was a group to an air wing, a squadron is similar to a company and a group is similar to a battalion. I’m not sure that our group assessments were always had enough information. That of course came down from wing,
such as a division. Once in a while, I was privy enough to go to a briefing that was held at
the group bunker, command bunker. Being a young first lieutenant, I guess I reacted
differently than the cool heads of the older people who had been there for a while because
I can remember some Army Special Forces operations people coming over with some of
their Republic of Vietnam counterparts requesting some assistance to conduct a particular
operation in a particular area. Of course, and I had to keep my mouth shut and that was a
real good thing because I was saying, oh yeah, lets go right now. The senior officers said,
“Well, let us think about this and talk about it and look at out intelligence reports and
we’ll get back to you.” So, cooler heads prevailed all the time.

RV: Did you feel like you had enough supplies, for your helicopter, also for
yourself on the ground?

CW: Yes, I did. I felt like we had sufficient supplies. The only thing that I would
have liked to have seen was that when we went through the one month indoctrination
course at Hunter Army Airfield that the Army did, their aircraft were equipped with an
operation called a feeder delay current or a drum ammunition container versus the old
ammo box where the shells came out in a belt. That was more or less supposedly
experimental. Those things worked great. We never had a problem with those at all while
we were training down in Hunter Army Airfield. But when we got to Vietnam, the birds
were equipped with the traditional belt fed machine gun type of ammunition loading
system. We had a lot of jams with that system. So, several times you would go out in
combat and you’d be firing your mini gun. You’d fire maybe a third of your ammo and
you’d jam up. Of course, there was not anything you could do to fix it. But, of course, we
had rockets and we had 40 millimeter that seemed to work very well. We still had
something to shoot with.

RV: Can you describe the Cobra for me specifically and how it performed in
combat, what you had on board, how you were armed and things like that?

CW: Certainly. The Cobra was the G model which was the first one. It was a
single engine type of aircraft. It was a sleek, thin, aircraft with a Fore and Aft canopy
with a bubble canopy with small stub wings that had four hard points on the wings that
accommodated rockets or other types of ordnates. The rotor system and the transmission
and the power plant was really basically the same as a Huey. But because of the
aerodynamic shape and because of the fact that it was not configured to carry any cargo, only ammunition, it was much faster. It was sleeker. It could maneuver very nimbly once you got it in the air. It could carry a tremendous amount of firepower at that time compared to anything else. It even looked bad. We had of course, dragon’s teeth painted on the front of it as warriors will do.

RV: What was its average speed and how would you actually fly it?

CW: Normally we would fly the aircraft in formation with other birds. We were much faster than any other aircraft that we escorted. The Cobra actually had a top speed of 190 knots. It wouldn’t do that straight and level, not with full ordinates. But most of the aircraft would only do about 110, 120. We could easily fly ahead sometimes, go to the target, assess the target, circle the target, prep the target, and sometimes fly back and come back around the side of our working birds just about the time they started to go into the zone. We could sometimes send a bird out ahead of time to scout an area such as if you were going between a pass that might have brought you within range of some ground weapons. We could kind of shoot through there real quick and come back before we even brought our 46s or 53s or Hueys in there. So it was almost like you normally would drive a nice Chevrolet. Of course the working birds were then a nice pick up truck, but someone gave you a Corvette and said take this. I mean, it was really a hoot. You really strapped it on. It felt just like you strapped the aircraft on and after a while it became an extension of yourself and you just about flew it by thought.

RV: What was the most effective weapon you had there on the Cobra?

CW: The most effective weapon was probably the 2.75 inch rockets because you could fire multiple types of warheads, high explosive armor piercings, seventeen and ten pound flachettes, Willie Pete, but also I have to say that the 7.62 mini gun was a psychologically important weapon.

RV: How so?

CW: First of all, it had such a sustained rate of fire. It would fire at a rate of several thousand rounds per minute to the extent that you did not even hear individual sound. You just heard this hum. Since every fifth round was a tracer, but they were firing so fast, that when you fired the weapon, it was as if there was a red fire hose that you were shooting a red fire hose. So, it really, you didn’t even need to use the sights on the
weapon. You would just put the red line on whatever you were shooting as if it were a
laser beam. It made such a noise that the noise itself was almost the sound of death if you
were on the ground and were facing this sort of a weapon. So it was a boost for us and it
must have been a terrible thing to be on the other end of it when you were actually
shooting at a particular area. You could shoot in an area of a quarter acre or half acre
patch of jungle and just move the gun around a little bit and feel like you put a round
every seven or eight feet.

RV: What kind of damage would it do?

CW: Well, it was really 7.62 which really is the same thing as a 308 Winchester
rifle. The military ammo according to the Geneva Convention obviously had to be a solid
projectile, full metal jacket. It couldn’t be like hunting ammo that would mushroom. But
when you fire three thousand of them in thirty seconds, it was devastating. The 40
millimeter that was beside it, that was very similar to a 40 millimeter grenade launcher,
the M-79, that you see the troops shooting one at a time. But it would fire at a rate of
about three hundred rounds per minute. So you could prep a zone with a 40 millimeter
with twenty or thirty rounds and just about do the same job as you could with two or
three well-placed rockets. You could aim it a whole lot better.

RV: Did you ever speak with the men on the ground with whom you were—?

CW: Oh, yes. All the time. We were in constant contact with people on the
ground at all times. Without the contact with the troops on the ground, we could not have
done our job.

RV: I was really talking about once the mission was over, once you were back at
base, did they kind of say, “Hey, this really works well,” or “You guys did a great job
here,” or—?

CW: We had the opportunity to brief quite a few times, not as much as the
transport pilots because the transport pilots which actually carried the troops, obviously
those pilots had a chance to talk with the squad leaders or the platoon leaders or company
commanders more often than we did. They would debrief and of course their debrief
would be passed on to us. However, when we were operating in outlying fields such as
LZ Baldy or some of the other places, Hill 55 where we were basically landing in a
Marsden matting strip right with the troops. Then they would come over and of course
they all wanted to see the airplane and talk with us. There were a couple of times when
we had some pretty dramatic rescues that we landed right behind the CH-46s at some of
the forward firebases and some of the Marines would come over and really tell us just
how much they appreciated us being there in many ways.

RV: How did that make you feel?
CW: It made you feel about ten feet tall because you realize this is why we’re
here. We’re not here to be hunter killers. We’re not fighter pilots. We’re not like some
particular units maybe in other services that go out and look for the enemy to engage. Our
job was to make sure that we could escort our guys in safely and get them home safely.
Anything that happened along the way was just something that we were trained to handle,
but that was not something we went out—we didn’t go out look for trouble. There was
enough trouble out there for everybody. We went out there to try to make sure that people
didn’t get hurt anymore than they needed to.

RV: Can you describe your uniform and what you wore when you flew?
CW: I was in a flight suit just about from day one that I got Vietnam. There were
very, very few times that you had the opportunity to even put on your utilities which were
camouflage utilities. If I were going over to Da Nang for a briefing or if I were going to
White Beach because we had to pick up something or this nature, I would put on some
utilities or BDs, battle dress uniforms. But most of the time we were just in a flight suit.

RV: What kind of weapons would you carry with you?
CW: Of course, in the Cobra, it’s a very limited space. It’s like flying inside of an
F-15. We had a little .38 that I was issued that fit inside a pocket in the vest that I wore
for my survival vest. But I also carried a .45 caliber pistol and I carried it in a holster on
my hip. But when I sat in my airplane, I would move it over and put it between my legs.

RV: Was that for protection?
CW: Well, it would do two things. One, it wouldn’t fit because we were in a little
armor plated seat. So I had to move it around. Two, it gave me a little extra protection in
the crotch area because I had an armor plated seat that held underneath and the sides of
them, but I didn’t have anything that would really protect me other than the flak vest that
I was wearing if I got hit in the front in a dive. When you went into a dive, into a gun run,
the aircraft bubble canopy became, you were looking straight out so that was your most
vulnerable area there. Then I carried an M-1, A-1 grease gun which because there was a stock that would fold all the way up and the thing was only about eighteen inches long with a clip in it. It would sit right between the bubble canopy and the armor-plated seat, so I carried that. It also had the same ammo that I was shooting in my .45. The .38, the only reason I really carried that is I had tracers in that so in case I went down I could shoot the tracers up in the air so somebody could see where I was. I wasn’t going to fight any battles with a .38.

RV: Right. Did you have escape and evasion tactics already down pat in case that came about?

CW: Well, we had talked many times, first of all, of course on section integrity and things of this nature insured almost under every scenario that there would be a rescue vehicle nearby. But when we went into certain areas, there were certain specific briefings that we had as far as what we would do in the event that we went down and we could not be recovered. When we went up far north over toward Laos, we actually carried a package with us that was specifically designed to aid us in escaping with some foreign currency, some other types of things like that that the intelligence people provided to us.

RV: Did they tell you if you were shot down in Laos that you would have to deny that you were American or any special circumstance like that of identification since we were not supposed to be in Laos technically?

CW: Not really, because it would have been pretty obvious. But, the thing was that if you went down in Laos, unless you could be picked up within minutes, it was extremely difficult to get you because you had to be on the move. You just could not stay static. Once you started moving, that just compounded rescue operations. The place was just crawling with NVA (North Vietnamese Army) right on the Ho Chi Minh trail. It was almost like being on I-95 as far as enemy territory was concerned. There are a lot of amazing tales if you ever get to talk to some of the Army folks that flew in Lam Son 719, especially some of the young Army spec 4s and corporals and sergeants that ended up on the ground as a result of their aircraft being shot down, most of their crew killed. They ended up marrying up with some of the South Vietnamese forces. There were a lot of stories of E-4s in the United States Army actually leading entire companies or battalion
minor strength Vietnamese back to safety because their own officers didn’t have the
ability to do it. So there was a lot of heroic activities with the Army over there.
RV: Yes, sir. Let’s take a break just for a moment.
CW: Okay.
RV: Can you describe the difference between daytime flying and nighttime
flying?
CW: Yes, I guess I could. First of all, weather is a big factor. There’s nighttime
flying and then there’s nighttime flying, what we call field grade night flying. That is,
when there’s a bright moon that’s at least two thirds of a moon, that’s when all the field
grade officers decided they needed to do their night flying because they could see what’s
going on. When it was pitch black or bad weather, they said that’s company grade night
flying and all the lieutenants and the captains had to get up and somehow try to get back
down. Of course, daytime, just having your visual references is the whole world. It’s like
flying in 3D in daytime. At night it’s like flying in one or two dimensions and you know
there’s another one out there that you can’t see. Today, with the night observation devices
and things that the military uses, it turns basically night into day and it’s a whole different
world. But it was one scary thing to go out at night into the mountains in bad weather.
Even we had the luxury of orbiting over the zone and those guys in the CH-46s and 53s
that actually went down into those zones at night taking fire, couldn’t see what’s going
on, fog and everything else to rescue people is just absolutely unbelievable. I just don’t
even know how they did it sometimes. I really don’t.
RV: One of my questions I wanted to ask you was what was the bravest action
that you witnessed while you were there in that one year? Would it be these Medevacs?
CW: It would have to be both Marine and several times I had a chance to watch
some Army Dustoff pilots go in. That was just—you can take all the John Wayne shoot
‘em ups and there were several and returning fire and having the NVA shooting at you
with all kinds of weapons and you were rolling in hot and blasting away and the pucker
factor getting up. But none of that to me holds a candle to a young warrant officer in the
Army or a young lieutenant in the Marine Corps in a 46 going into a hot zone hovering
there while he’s dropping a jungle penetrator or a wench and some corpsman going down
to strap on some wounded Marine or soldier, pulling them back up while the door
gunners are on the 46s blasting away and that guy’s just holding that position in hot weather sometimes at high altitudes when the aircraft won’t hardly fly. I tell you, I don’t know how to describe it.

RV: Could you talk about the enemy a little bit? What were your general impressions of the NVA and the Viet Cong?

CW: Well, I tell you, I was fortunate enough to be advised before I got there that the NVA were much better trained, organized, equipped and disciplined than what we had been led to believe in the early media type or movie portrayals or things of this nature. They were right. The North Vietnamese Army was experienced. They had veterans of many actions. In their own way, they were fighting for their cause that they believed in probably as strong as we did. That was an entirely different situation from the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong could have been anything to a fairly disciplined militia that had a defined mission and dedicated people to a bunch of street gangs that you see in the world who were out to solidify their turf. You really never knew who was who. As we saw later on, several of the politicians in Saigon after the fall of Saigon emerged as high officials within the Viet Cong hierarchy. We had some things that predated my visit such as there had been an attack on Marble Mountain maybe a year before I even got there. There were some stories floating around. One of them was, of course, sappers had finally gotten through the wire. They had some fights inside the compound. That’s why we slept with weapons at night and that in the morning when they were checking all the wounded and the dead NVA or Viet Cong in the wire, that they found two of the base’s barbers. I heard that from multiple camps. I assume it’s true or at least some portion of it is. But the point is that we had a G-5 division which handled the civilian workers on base and that some of the civilian workers had ended up being Viet Cong and participated in a raid on the base that night.

RV: What would you say were the strengths of the NVA and the Viet Cong?

CW: Well, I think the strengths of the NVA was from experience. They had been fighting a long time. They had avenues of approach and they knew that we were tremendously restricted in our rules of engagement and they exploited that. Had we been able to fight as we have basically anywhere else other than the limited action that we had in Korea, we would have negated half of their tactical advantage. They knew where they
could go across the border and hide. They knew where they could shoot and no fire could
be returned. They knew that they could go into a hospital or temple or schoolyard and
disappear. They had an unbelievable network of tunnels and avenues of escape that of
course they used to their advantage. But they also knew that if we attacked in strength, a
particular area, that they could fight as well as they could and then all they had to do was
retreat because we really didn’t have any doctrine that allowed us to maintain an area that
we occupied that after a few days we’d probably load everybody back up on trucks or
helicopters and fly them back out and then they’d just come right back out and go right
back to where they were which was very frustrating to all of us who saw that type of
operation.

RV: How much were you all aware of that?

CW: Well, we were pretty much aware of it. You have to understand that I didn’t
really get there until 1970. I had the luxury of reading actual publications and books such
as *The Siege of Khe Sanh* and things of this nature. It was almost as if I was living history
when we actually went back to Khe Sanh. I never thought I’d ever see that place. So I
was very familiar with NVA, NVA tactics, Soviet tactics that they used. The Viet Cong
was a little bit of a different sequence, but we had pretty good intelligence on that. The
information that we were taught as far as our indoctrination and intelligence briefing was
pretty much on target.

RV: How about weaknesses of the NVA and Viet Cong?

CW: Well, the weaknesses simply would be that the Viet Cong lacked a lot of
discipline. If they had a coordinated attack, which that’s using that term very loosely
because the command and control was not all that good. Any type of sustained resistance
on our part or offensive operation on our part would turn around and break it and they
would scatter and go different ways. But they would just kind of come back together later
on. The NVA, sometimes they were too disciplined. They didn’t have the ability to I
think, really think like our NCOs do where you can take a young corporal or sergeant and
he can make a modification to his particular squad or fire team or if he happens to find
himself in charge like many of them did when all the officers or staff NCOs were killed,
he could pretty much keep his unit together and join with others or reconstitute or fight a
delay in action. The NVA, a lot of times, they blew the bugle, they would attack and they
kept on attacking until someone blew the bugle to retreat. If the bugler got killed, they’d
keep on attacking until they all died just about. It was kind of like Pickett’s Charge or
Gettysburg. They didn’t realize that there were better ways of doing things on a unit
level. Now, their officers and their staff NCOs knew. I think that they were excellent as
far as their ambushes and their night movements and their logistics ability to move
supplies and things of this nature. But there were other things that their command and
control I don’t think was nearly what it could have been.

RV: I want to talk about Lam Son 719 in a separate question, but before we get to
that, can you tell me what your experiences were with combat? When you look back at
those times when you went out on missions, what stands out in your mind’s eye? What
do you see? What incidents come up?

CW: Well, I’m trying to think. Of course, the very first day was an eye opener for
me. But I think, after that as I started to indoctrinate myself into the environment, the first
thing that really surprised me was that when I arrived we had a monsoon going on. Most
of the countryside was basically flooded. So my vision of the green fields and the rice
paddies and the lush tropical environment, that was shattered because there were
basically little islands all around of hooches and homesteads with people trying to survive
a flood. My first operations other than a few combat operations were more rescue
operations where we were rescuing civilians for almost two or three weeks there that
were in danger of drowning. Of course, there’s something to be rescuing pregnant women
and people like that and then the house next door was shooting at you. That just didn’t
compute. But that was one of the initial impressions. Then as time went on, the concept
of looking down into Que Sanh, looking down at the rocky terrain and the vegetation and
realizing that I can't tell the difference between people and rocks. It took a long time
before I was able to adapt my vision to where I could actually see friendlies and enemy
on the ground and figure out what’s going on, much like if you were hunting and trying
to really see. You were looking for the whole deer instead of looking for an antler or a
leg. You realize later on that you just don’t see things the way you thought you would.
Radio communications, another part of combat, a tremendous part of combat. First, it was
just a lot of noise like a lot of people in one room talking before you could actually start
to pick out little bits and pieces of conversation and remember things that were necessary.
The tactical area of operations, initially you pulled out your map and you were trying to plot where you were, where you were going and look down and look at terrain features. We didn’t have GPS (Global Positioning System) or anything like that. Once in a while you could use a TAC (Tactical Air Command) and DME (distance measuring equipment) radio, but that wasn’t always accurate when you were down low. Later on you almost memorized your area of operation in your mind to the extent that when someone called in and say I’m at X-ray Papa or 2446, that in your mind you knew where the 26th parallel line was and the 40th. So you knew you just had to go a little bit north of 40. 26, you’d be in the area. You just started to learn. That all took time. Of course, that’s the difference between the NVA and the American military. We were on a one-year tour. So you were there about nine months, eight or nine months, you really were at your peak. All your senses and knowledge and things and your ability to hear and see—you were really, really there. Then of course, you only had that for a couple of months and then you started winding down getting ready to leave whereas, the NVA, of course, they were there all the time. They just passed that knowledge on and kept it and kept on building on it. Heck, they knew what units were located where and in some cases, who were some of the individual commanding officers or ranking officers within various units. The way they got that is when you the 53rd OCS graduating class from Quantico, Virginia, they would just get a copy of the Virginia Pilot Magazine that year and know who all the people were.

RV: What did you think of that one year tour policy?

CW: I thought it worked out pretty good in that type of operation. I really did. I actually was wanting to stay for a longer period because I didn’t really feel like I’d gotten my full measure because we pulled out a little bit early. I was making provisions at one time to take a forward air control position with the ROK (Republic of Korea) Marines, but my commanding officer said, “Well, you can do that, but you won’t get any leave.” That kind of upset me because normally the procedure was if you spent a year or your first tour and you decided to stay longer, you could get a thirty-day leave period and go home for a while and then come back. That was one of the things that didn’t work out. But anyhow, the one-year tour, with all the pluses and minuses, I think it worked out pretty good. It gave you a goal. You knew if you made it to certain point, especially for
the ground troops and young soldiers and Marines on the ground. It was tough. They knew, hey, just a little bit more and a wake up and I can get on that freedom bird and go home.

RV: Are there any incidents that you’d like to talk about that happened to you while you were flying?

CW: There are a couple. I know we were on a Medevac standby just like the very first one. We went out one evening and as we were flying around just prior to going to the Medevac pad, the tower came up and said that they had some sampans that were getting too close to our base and they shouldn’t be there which was very suspicious. They could have easily launched RPGs or could have had a mortar in them or something of this nature. So they asked us to make some dummy gun runs because they were almost right in front of the O Club which was right on the water. We had made one or two gun runs and it looked like they had started to turn back. Then I looked and I heard my wingman said, “I’m making one more gun run.” This is a bright day, beautiful day, right. Some people sitting on the front porch of the O Club and everything else. Then just as I looked over my shoulder, he impacted the water at about a 45-degree angle and the aircraft just completely disintegrated.

RV: What happened?

CW: At first we didn’t know if it was mechanical failure. We didn’t know if he had taken some enemy fire. Of course, you can't hear outside the cockpit of a close—or if he just didn’t pull out in time. But both of the pilots popped to the surface and then we came around. Being a Cobra, we had very little rescue capability. We came around and I blew my canopy off and started to unbuckle. My pilot, I was the copilot and I was going to step out and jump in the ocean. By that time, one of the guys went under and then a CH-53 came in and took over the rescue operation. So that was pretty traumatic. I’ll never forget that.

RV: Did you ever figure out what had happened?

CW: Well, it actually appears that he got target fixation and just waited too late to pull it out. That’s what it appears like.

RV: Did they survive?
CW: One of them did, the copilot who had been in-country like three days. That was his second hop, I think. He survived. The pilot, who was a friend of mine, didn’t.

RV: Anything else? What other incidents come to mind when you think back?

CW: I think about an operation at a place called Thuong Duc. Here we are talking about Vietnam and the jungle and everything, which was a metropolitan area, a city with apartment complexes and high rise buildings and which was south of Marble Mountain going down towards Phu Bai area. Evidently an entire North Vietnamese regiment had come down a dry riverbed at night and attacked the United States Army Special Forces A Team or B Team at Thuong Duc. We got a call that they were under siege and that there were multiple Medevacs. We launched everything we had to go to Thuong Duc. I remember that because that was a heck of an operation. Once again, everything worked the same way, section integrity, but there were like five sections there. We formed up into divisions which would be four aircraft and then flights which would be eight aircraft. We flew out of Thuong Duc. The CH-53s were trying to external some 105 millimeter howitzer shells into the Army Special Forces guys. They actually had the old compound just very similar to what you see in the John Wayne Movie. So around them was a city. We encountered something that I’d never encountered before. In fact, I didn’t even know there were such a thing that were called airburst mortars. I’d seen antiaircraft fire and the old World War II flak guns going off, but I’d never seen airburst mortars in which the NVA would fire a mortar round and of course as it peaked its trajectory and started down, at some point in the air, two, three, four hundred feet, it would explode. Of course, this was specifically to take care of helicopters. That was really an eye opener because we were getting shot at almost from above as it was dropping down instead of coming up. There was an airfield nearby. They had these military revetments where aircraft had normally been placed to try to keep them from getting shrapnel in case they were to get bombarded in one way. They were saying that we had a lot of Medevacs. I can remember flying over that particular area and seeing many, many people huddled in these revetments and stretchers and things of this nature. We actually put, at one time, five CH-46s down at one time which is highly unusual for us, but we were covering them. They were just loading them up with Medevacs just as fast as you can, many of which were ARVN and civilians and I’m sure a few soldiers. I
didn’t think we had too many Marines in the area. We had over fifty emergency
Medevacs in that one operation. But the thing that I remember about it was that and the
old stupid rules of engagement. While we’re circling, 180 degrees out protecting these
birds on the ground, we’re taking fire from an apartment building from an AK-47 or
SKS. I went by, maybe the eighth or tenth floor one time. I was eyeball to eyeball and I
looked in the very end unit. It was just like you were at the beach. There’s this NVA
soldier and he was a tall guy. He was a nice looking fellow. He had a weapon. He was so
disciplined that he was taking careful aim and firing single shots at me, not my airplane,
but at me. Every time I went by, I’d kick my rudder just so I would turn my tail to him a
little bit which would prevent a little less of a target. I was the pilot at the time flying in
the back seat. The rounds were landing like a foot behind my head every time. In fact, he
actually ended up shooting my air conditioning unit out which just really T-ed me off. I
kept talking to my section leader and I’ll never forget it was Terry Cruz and I’m saying,
“Terry, I’m taking fire. I’m taking fire from the tenth floor or eighth floor, whatever, end
unit, permission to return fire.” He said, “No, we’re in a civilian area. We cannot return
fire.” I knew that the young boy in front was going to be nailed very shortly and I knew
that this was really not good. So when the last of the five planes lifted off, I was fortunate
enough to be the last bird that came around, that chased the planes out. The lead bird was
leading it out and I was chasing it out. Just as I got up to about to level with that floor, I
said, I can't stand this anymore. I selected ripple salvo on my nineteen shot rocket pod
and hit hard left puddle and turned my aircraft ninety degrees and I was not more than
three hundred yards away, two hundred yards away and I just put about thirty-eight
rockets in that corner of that building.

RV: It took care of him, I imagine.
CW: Yeah. I don’t feel like I hurt anybody else. I mean, they all went in very
small areas. I expected to hear something about it when I got back, but I didn’t.
RV: No one said a thing?
CW: Not really anybody really said a whole lot.
RV: Did you talk about it?
CW: A little bit because there was a 53 pilot that was coming out of the zone
after he had dropped an external load. He was making all kinds of noises about, “Did you
“see that?” and this and that, “Good God,” and this type of thing. It was hard to ignore during the debrief.

RV: Right, 38 rockets into an apartment window.

CW: It took out just kind of a corner of the building. I wasn’t that proud, but I know it was a mixed feeling. It’s one of those feelings you get when you’re twenty-three years old that you probably wouldn’t do again if you were thirty-five.

RV: He was targeting you specifically though.

CW: He was shooting at me. I could see him. I could see he was looking at me. I don’t know. It could have been the number of the aircraft. I’ve always had aversion. I was flying 22 that day and every airplane I’ve ever been shot up bad and had to land or every crash always had the same number, 22. To this day, I won’t fly in an airplane that has the last two numbers with 22 on it.

RV: Were you ever wounded?

CW: No, I wasn’t wounded. The only injury I ever suffered was during one of the very few rocket attacks that we had when we first got there. I was in the top bunk and a rocket landed pretty close to a parts supply place at the end of the runway and blew me out of the rack. I fell down and hurt my back and ended up going to the flight surgeon because I didn’t want to tell him. No one wants to tell because you’re afraid you’ll get grounded and can’t fly. But I was hurt pretty bad. I went in and he shot me up with some painkillers because I had to fly and said, “Hey, you want me to put you in for something?” I said, “No, this doesn’t qualify for anything.” I was fortunate. I’ve had rounds all through the cockpit. I’ve had rounds that part of the Plexiglas around scratched my visor. I’ve had right behind my ear, my air conditioning shot out. I’ve had them hit the armor plating underneath my aircraft, but I never, never got a scratch.

RV: You mean to tell me that a round hit your Plexiglas on your goggles?

CW: The round went through the Plexiglas of the cockpit, which is not unusual. As a result of either the round or a portion of the Plexiglas, there was a big scar across my visor. I remember it happening and there was a little almost like fizz from my—of course, I think that was the air conditioning all escaping out the hole. I said, “Man, I can't see.” I flipped my visor up and I said, “I can see pretty good now.” It wasn’t until I got back and
dropped my visor down that I realized there was a scratch across there like if you were to take a quarter and turn it on its side and scratch all the way across your visor.

RV: So were you shot at most times you went out or was it sporadic?

CW: It was sporadic. There were times when you knew you were going to get shot at. If it was a mission 60, a mission 70, there was a pretty good chance. Missions 40 and 55, you didn’t know if you were going to get shot at or not. I got a nickname by one of the young captains. They called me magnet ass. I said, “Why do you do it?” He says, “Every time you come back, you’ve got rounds in your airplane even when you’re on a routine resupply just to take C-rats to the field.” We’d come back, somebody would take a pot shot at you, but it seemed like I always would have one or two little holes in the airplane but nothing serious.

RV: Now, how did you feel about that? Was it an exciting thing? Were you fearful?

CW: No, I don’t think fear. The only time that I can ever remember a little twinge of fear was when we went on an operation up to Khe Sanh and Lam Son 719. The CO, the commanding officer of the squadron, was the lead bird. We had four cobras and our job was to go there and escort 53s and 46s taking supplies to the ARVN as we initially made the operation into Laos. When we landed, we landed off the runway at Khe Sanh in basically some great big bomb craters that looked like they’d been made by B-52s. They were big enough almost to put a helicopter in. As we got out and we were going across the runway for a briefing, we started getting mortared. I mean, they looked like they were walking right down the runway and they looked like they were just going to blow our aircraft and everything else up. We all ran and we dove into foxholes or bomb craters, or what have you, the best we could. I ended up landing in a bomb crater, and I looked over and there was this young Army warrant officer there and I recognized him from one of the guys that I had been in that Army transition course with. He looked at me and he says, “Hey, Whitey.” He says, “You want a cigarette?” I had quit smoking again and I figured, “Well, I’m going to die so I might as well go ahead and smoke one.” So he gave me a cigarette. About that time, the CO yelled, “Let’s get these birds out of here,” which I don’t like the idea of running through mortars to get birds out of there, but I also didn’t like the idea of my plane getting shot up. So we all run to our airplanes and
we get in and we crank up. I look over there and the CO’s plane, his rotor’s not turning.
So I jump out and I run over there to him and his battery is dead. So I said, “Okay, let me
get you my battery. I’m already cranked up.” It’s just like a car. Unplug the battery in the
nose of the aircraft. A seventy-pound NiCad (nickel and cadmium) battery. I’m carrying
it across this unsteady terrain full of holes. I take his old one out, put my in, clip it in and
he cranks up. I said, “Hey, I did a good job. Maybe he’ll appreciate this.” I’m carrying
my battery back and just about the time I get to my airplane, he takes off with the other
two birds. I guess he thought that since he saw mine turning that I was there or
something. So he takes off. I said, “Man, this is not good.” So I just tossed the battery in
the nose compartment and shut it, didn’t even hook it up. I jumped in and they had
already gone down Highway 1 through the Hai Van Pass near Rockpile. When I started to
go in there, the clouds were closing in and all of a sudden .50 cals opened up on both
sides. I said, “Man, I can't even go through here now.” So I turned around and I was kind
of like Jackie Gleason saying, “This is a revolting development here.” I came back. Of
course you couldn’t go near Khe Sanh because it was under attack. The only clear sky
was to the west and the young copilot says, “Where are we going?” I said, “Right now
we’re in Laos and we’ve got to get over these mountains.” They had all kind of rough
weather. He said, “What are we going to do?” I said, “You know, I don’t really know.”
So, I started messing around with the TAC and I knew I was in bad guy territory, an area
that I didn’t normally fly which they have all types of high altitude anti-aircraft weapons
and we normally flew right on the deck. I got a lock on to as best I could tell was several
hundred miles away which is just unbelievable, but it appeared to be Udorn, Thailand, or
someplace. He says, “Where are we going?” I said, “I think we’re going to Thailand.” I
was already out of the area, not even in an operational area. Nobody would have known
where we were, just a worse case scenario. I was more worried, not so much for myself,
but for this young guy in the front who’d only been there a few weeks. So I started kind
of going down the back side of the mountains until we finally got to a little place where
there was a break in the mountains. I switched over to Da Nang and I got a 101, I believe,
was the attack. I got kind of a blip and I said, “We’re taking a lift.” We ended up coming
in the back way through Elephant Valley and Lam Son coalmines which was really like
the badlands of South Dakota where you just never went. I came in the back way down
the side of Laos and then cut across. I got there just as the flight of three was coming in from Hoi An the other way. The CO actually called for a flight of four to Da Nang and that just burnt me. No one had the guts or the balls to tell him that they basically left me back there, whether they either thought I was coming and just didn’t catch up. I called Da Nang to ask if I had to have clearance, I didn’t want to get shot down. I was coming in from the other end and the CO berated me over the air for not closing up the formation. That’s when I realized that obviously he was mentally challenged and probably shouldn’t be there.

RV: What initiated that whole sequence of events, I asked you about fear. Where was the fear in this? I imagine it was at Khe Sanh?

CW: It was when I realized that I couldn’t get through Route 1, that the weather was coming in and that I was pretty much committed on the path that I was from an altitude and from a speed and from a fuel standpoint.

RV: Now, are you talking about Route 9 going east/west?

CW: Route 1, which comes up through Hoi An and then Route, I guess it’s Route 9, that goes right through Vandegrift combat base up through the Rockpile up through Khe Sanh. By the time those first three guys went through there, it was already registered. They knew that the next guy that came through, they would meet and I couldn’t make that because the clouds were so low I would have to go below the height of the mountains and that was just—Camp Carol was in the area. I would have never have made it to Vandegrift. They’d have shot me out of the sky. So I went around the other way. You may have a map in front of you. I can't remember exactly.

RV: No, I don’t but I can visualize it. Now, that’s the only time you felt fear?

CW: That’s the only little twinge in my stomach that felt like it was turning over, rolling over. I think the only reason was because I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t have an immediate fallback. I didn’t have any training for that exactly because it seemed like everything else, when you brief or you have a primary or secondary or tertiary thing to do. It became automatic and that wasn’t automatic. I had to put together something. There was a little bit of time I almost got behind it.

RV: It sounds like you did a good job of improvising.
CW: Well, I think most people would have come up with some solution, but I remember that because I remember the young guy in front. Here I was, I hadn’t been in-country that long, but I felt like an old man compared to this young guy. What’s going to happen if something happens to him, not to me, but something happens to him?

RV: Was that common amongst pilots and with yourself? Did you not think about death and every flight could be your last flight? Did that go through your mind?

CW: No, not really. The only thing that went through my mind was somebody may have a chance to get into a real big, heavy firefight and I’ll miss it. That was the way we were. I guess that’s why young men fight wars. It wasn’t an equivalent to a young PFC or lance corporal having to go out on patrol or having to have an LP (listening point), an OP that he sitting out on a night ambush in just total fear and sweat. It wasn’t like that at all. It was one hundred degrees from that.

RV: Even when you’re making those runs into a hot LZ and you’re opening up with your weapons, you’re being shot at, your canopy’s exposed?

CW: The adrenaline is so high, it’s just unbelievable.

RV: Now, are you talking to yourself?

CW: Oh, yeah. In your mind, you’re going through everything. But I can remember having a very bad crash one night years later over in Italy. You only had moments to react. Every bit of training that I ever had in my entire life came into play in just that very few seconds. It was as if I was just sitting with my legs crossed sitting on the back watching me automatically do things. I had no input at all. It was already pre-done, predestined. That’s the way it was. You just reacted—or it was for me and it seemed to be for many others.

RV: Okay. Why don’t we take a break for a moment?

CW: Okay.

RV: Okay, sir. Could you tell me what your operations were, your mission was and what you did in the operation Lam Son 719?

CW: All right, I guess I need to preface this with the fact that originally, the Marine Corps was not supposed to be involved in Lam Son 719. In fact, from a security standpoint, it must have been pretty good because it had been going on for a few weeks and I knew nothing about it. What happened was that the Army had an aircraft called a
CH-54 sky crane. It was their heavy lift helicopter. During Operation Lam Son 719, the concept was basically to hop from one mountain top to another during the assault phase and set up fire support bases to support the invasion of the Republic of Vietnam ground forces. They were basically hop scotching all the way across a good portion of Laos. Then they were putting these 105s and 155 howitzers on board on top of these mountains and then they were supposed to be able to cover the ground troops as they made the advance along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It sounded like a wonderful idea. The Army used CH-54 sky cranes because that was the only aircraft that the Army had that was capable of lifting 155 millimeter howitzer and carrying it in. Evidently, something from a mechanical standpoint appeared with the CH-54 sky crane’s airframe. As they will do often when they discover a problem, they will ground the fleet or put a restriction on that aircraft not to do a certain thing because it's been involved in some crashes or some structural damage and it could be dangerous. When that decision was made, they looked around and the only other aircraft in-country that was capable of lifting a 155 millimeter field artillery piece was the Marine CH-53 Delta that we were flying out of Marble Mountain. To make a long story short, evidently the Army got permission to involve the Marines. I was in the club one night, this is another one of those little stories, but I was in the club one night. I’m not sure what was going on, a USO (United Services Organization) show or something. A bunch of Army people came in which was unusual. Once in a while we would see some Army officers in the club but not very often. They went around—obviously it was important that they even came in to have a drink. They were talking to various people and then I saw half a dozen or more of our pilots get up and leave. I recognized all of them being from Dimmer which was the call sign of the CH-53 squadron. Of course there was always a running rivalry between the rest of the squadrons at Marble Mountain and Dimmer because they had the newest airplane and it was supposed to be capable of doing all this and we thought they were a bunch of primadonnas. Then we said, “They must have got in trouble and the Army’s coming in and the MP’s (Military Police) going to arrest a bunch of people and they all deserve it. So they took them all out. But you realized that this is really unusual because a couple of those guys you knew didn’t get involved in anything. So, we said, “Well, I wonder why.” It was kind of a buzz factor going along. So I went back and went to my hooch and was
in bed probably early hours of the morning. Our duty driver came in which is the one that
normally wakes us up when we have to fly or we were put on the schedule. He always
hates to do that because everybody in there is armed and he hates waking people up that
sleep with knives and guns under their pillow. He woke two or three of us up and then
says, “You’ve got to come to the squadron. There’s been a new mission.” So I grab my
gear and went down to the squadron. What had happened was when the CH-53 squadron
was told that they were going to now get involved in Lam Son 719 carrying 155
millimeter and 105 howitzers into Lam Son, they said, “Fine, we’ll go, but we’re not
going without our own Cobra cover.” In other words, they did not want the Army
providing them escorts because the Army was not familiar with our tactics. If they didn’t
know how we operated and it just wasn’t a good thing. So they decided then, well, they
never had anticipated us being involved, the Army didn’t. When they were told, “Hey,
we’ll go, but we want our own escort,” that’s when they came and got us. So, we didn’t
exactly know what was going on. The S-2 was putting some maps together. A bunch of
us showed up and started getting a briefing. Then we were told as much as they knew, we
didn’t have enough frequencies. We were told to go to this place and wait and somebody
would tell us. We knew that something big was going on, but that’s how we got involved.
It was an afterthought. So for the rest of the time that Lam Son was going on, we escorted
our CH-53s and some CH-46s, but mostly our heavy lift helicopters as they took
bulldozers and different types of things into Laos.

RV: What exactly did you all do? You did the escort.

CW: That was what we did. Our primary job was to escort the CH-53 heavy lift
aircraft into areas of Laos that were identified that needed heavy lift items. Now, one of
the other things that we did get involved in was since all of us were FAC-As, Forward
Air Control Airborne, that there was just an endless amount of air stacked up in the air
with ordinates waiting to bomb targets that were either defined targets or targets of
opportunity. Several times, and there were a lot of fixed wing aircraft getting shot down
because that’s the first time I ever saw SAM (surface-to-air missile) missiles and things
like this going up, 55 millimeter and 70 millimeter anti-aircraft weapons. I’ve never seen
anything over .51 cal. So once we completed our mission in the CH-53 which could
move pretty fast, about as fast as we could. It would be hightailing out of the area. A lot
of times I would just listen and I’m sure other guys did this. I would listen on the UHF radio frequencies and I’d hear, “This is Navy Tiger 2 with a flight of four with Mark 82s on board. Anybody got a target? We’ve only got ten minutes left.” Then I would be listening to ground frequencies and I would hear somebody on the ground popping smoke or calling for some support, but they couldn’t talk to anybody. I would turn around and just say, “Hey, Navy Tiger 241. We’ve got a target of opportunity.” I’d give them the coordinates and I’d run that air. Then I’d leave because it was just like that. It was just unbelievable. It’s hard to describe. It was very similar to the movie, The Longest Day to me. There were so many helicopters and airplanes in the sky. I didn’t know that there were that many helicopters in the whole world and the Army had them. We came across a hill into an area called Camp Carrol with our little four-helicopter contingent. I looked on the ground and there were helicopters as far as I could see, like dragonflies in a field. Most of the blades, they were painted one blade white and the other brown. So you can imagine that kind of lopsided look as it was—we had no communications. We couldn’t figure out where to land because we’re used to flying like fixed wings. We’d come into a runway. We’d call the 180 downwind of approach just like you would in an airplane. These guys all just landed in little clusters all around. It was totally foreign to me. I couldn’t find a tower and I finally got a tower frequency, but I didn’t know where it was. I mean, there were several towers around. When we landed the first time in the only place that we saw a little patch of ground and I remember the pilot in the other plane got out. His name is Yuskovik. He got out and he took about two steps and he froze and then he started back tracking in the same steps. I said, “Oh, my God.” Then Yaz go back in and he said, “Yep, Whitey, we’ve landed right in a mine field.” We got out of there and finally they told us where to land and we found some more aircraft. It was like that. But there was so many airplanes involved in that operation that as we went out route 9, it was right hand traffic. You went down the right hand side and everything else was coming down the other side. Every third or fourth plane that was coming back, helicopter that was coming back, was externaling the wreckage of another Army helicopter. They lost more helicopters shot down or destroyed. Later on when I was reading Time Magazine, they didn’t consider an aircraft lost if they were able to bring it back even if it was in pieces. But I saw more aircraft externalized almost in a day or two than we had in Marble
Mountain. So it was just unbelievable what was going on. Then when we went across that hill and there was Khe Sanh, something I’d read about in a book. There was a new runway laid down parallel to the other one. It was just unbelievable. Things that we would do from a safety standpoint went out the window. For example, we would land in a fuel pit and we were almost five thousand feet high and it was hot. So you just didn’t have the pile. We would shoot a no hover landing to a fuel pit. While we were there, we would say, “Well, we might as well arm.” So we would be loading rockets in the fuel pit, I mean, things you would just never, ever do.

RV: How long did your participation last in the operation?

CW: Unfortunately or fortunately and this is something that my wife would debate, I would say my participation period spanned a period of about a month, maybe a little less. But unfortunately, I had an R&R (rest and recuperation) popped up right in the middle of this thing. Yes, I wanted to see my wife more than anything in the world, but I didn’t want to leave because this is a chance of a lifetime to be involved in something like this. I know that a good portion of the one-week I was in Hong Kong, my mind was there with my wife, but my mind was also back at the squadron saying, “Somebody else is flying my airplane now.” I tell you, Richard, when I got involved in Lam Son and I saw what was going on, I saw airplanes shot right out of the sky. I saw eighty-nine Army aircraft destroyed in front of me in a blink of an eye because of the tactics. I fully felt like I wasn’t going to come back from this, but it didn’t bother me. It didn’t bother me.

RV: Why not?

CW: It just didn’t. It just felt like that’s what I was supposed to do. It just did not bother me at all.

RV: You were supposed to do your mission obviously, but it didn’t bother you that you might die doing it?

CW: It didn’t bother me, not at all.

RV: Did you tell your wife this on R&R?

CW: No, but she figured it out. But I had no idea that it would collapse and fall apart as quick as it did. When I left, it looked like it was going to be a pretty good operation. They were moving all the way to Sophie and Lola and all these other fire support bases. It was during that interim while I was gone that the NVA had a brilliant
strategy for just such a thing. First of all, the intelligence, they knew what was happening. They had spies everywhere. But they had preregistered every single possible fire support base with mortars and rockets. So they would wait until everything was in place and all the guns were in place and then they would start to pepper them with rockets and mortars. Then when they’d call in for Medevacs, they would wait for all the planes to land and then they would blow them all up at one time. That became a trap and then it became a mass confusion. ARVN units broke apart and then they started running and it just fell apart. It was amazing. Then it became a salvage and rescue operation.

RV: Do you think the United States should have gone into Laos earlier and gone in with force?

CW: I think that we should have used our rolling thunder or carpet-bombing with people on the ground, but not an invasion like that. I think that we could have, both in Laos and Cambodia, completely disrupted a good portion of the flow of supplies had Mr. Nixon been allowed to do what he wanted to do in the first place.

RV: Were there any special instructions about flying into Laos? I asked you that earlier, but on this particular mission were you told anything different as far as if you were shot down?

CW: Not really because they said, “Hey, you know”—by that time, a good portion of Southeast Asia knew that the ARVN units were making an invasion. What they didn’t say was that they were being supported by U.S. military. Then when it finally came out, because even when I was in Hong Kong, I started getting news, bits and pieces that the United States Army was assisting. That’s what they were. Really, there were no American ground combat units involved. It just ended up a lot of American crewmen that had been shot down ended up forming combat units made up primarily of South Vietnamese Marines or Rangers or troops. They were leading them or participating in operations, finding their way back to Vietnam.

RV: What was your opinion of the South Vietnamese military forces?

CW: A few of the organizations that I saw I thought were okay, average. There were a couple of hot dogs that I ran into that were South Vietnamese Air Force pilots that were flying Delta model Hueys with mini guns. They seemed to be—I don’t know how to describe it. It seems to be that they were a member of an aristocracy type group and that
they considered everybody else peasants and that their job was to kill all the VC, but if it
looked like a VC, they’d shoot that too. That bothered me. I said, “Wait a minute here. What is this?” Here we are letting people go. I can remember one little incidence—I guess this is digressing a bit—that we were involved in in Elephant Valley. It was put in a company-sized unit into a little ville to sweep the area for enemy troops. It was basically a search and destroy type mission. I remember we put four 46s down in a rice paddy and we had two gun ships circling. I was the copilot at the time. The guy named Archer Ratcliff was flying my plane. As we put these guys in, they started taking fire from this village. But I could see women and children and little people in the village, yet they were taking fire because you could easily see the rounds hitting the water in the rice paddy coming up. I mean, the guys weren’t shooting themselves. All of the sudden these troops got behind this dyke and they were telling us they needed some support, but I didn’t know what to shoot. I couldn’t just go shooting indiscriminately into these houses that these people were in. So we were flying around and I mean we were really low. Richard, we were too low. I mean, we were flying around almost cutting the trees as we. I saw this one little kid, he couldn’t have been ten years old, eleven years old. He was just like a kid and he was just flying around this corner in the traditional black pajamas with the hat on. I remember the captain flying the plane, Captain Archer, he says, “Get that guy, get that guy, get that guy!” I said, to myself, “This guy doesn’t even have—this is a kid. He doesn’t even have a weapon.” He kept screaming at me to get him. So I turn around with the mini gun and fired a burst behind him.

RV: On purpose.

CW: I wasn’t going to shoot that kid. So we went around again and as we came around the next time, that kid popped up out of a hole with an AK-47 and shot the mess out of us.

RV: Really? Then what happened?

CW: Then I put the mini gun in the hole with the red stream and all that kind of stuff. But, gosh knows, that was an eye-opener. It really was.

RV: How did you—you obviously made a moral call there the first time around, but when you came back and he was shooting at you?
CW: Well, when we came back, that’s the kind you like. You know there’s a bad
guy. He’s got a gun, you’re shooting it. But I was a little bit upset with myself that, one,
that I hadn’t reacted better and that I had even questioned someone who had been in-
country longer than I had. But it was a little bit of a moral dilemma because during what
little bit of time that I ever had off, I worked over at a place called Sacred Heart
Orphanage. I was looking at all these orphans and these little kids and hearing their
stories and things like that. I’m saying, “These are the people that we came here to help,
to liberate.” I want them to say, “Thank you GI for coming over here and helping us get
rid of the evil communist people that are trying to dictate to us so that we can be free and
have a wonderful life.” But things don’t always work out that way.

RV: I want to talk about the orphanage quickly. How much contact in a situation
like you just described, in the air, when you're actually on operations, on missions, did
you have in dealing with the civilian population?

CW: Well, not a whole lot. I didn’t have a whole lot. That was just one of very,
very limited few incidences, which I was eyeball to eyeball with a situation like that.
Most of my operations were military operations all the way with the exception of when
we first got into country and we started saving some people from floods. Even then, they
were not in my airplane. It’s really kind of a detached situation when you’re flying an
aircraft that doesn’t carry any passengers or cargo or anything like that.

RV: Tell me about your opinion of the Vietnamese civilians in the contact you
did have and including your work at the orphanage.

CW: It was very interesting because when we went to the Sacred Heart
Orphanage, we still didn’t have a whole lot of contact with civilians out in town. The
reasons I say that is because you see these films and things of GIs walking the streets of
Saigon and different places and going into the cat houses and the bars and things. We
weren’t allowed to do that. We did not get liberty in Da Nang. They locked us in at night
and let us out to fight in the morning.

RV: Why not?

CW: I don’t know. Of course we were all upset. We couldn’t go to Duck In a
Box or Kentucky Fried Duck or any of those other places. But we just weren’t allowed to.
I don’t know. I was told one time that Marines got in trouble so much that it was for our
own interest to keep us locked up or something. But we never did. So a lot of the things that I heard about opium dens and bad guys and buying souvenirs just didn’t materialize simply because we were not put in that position where we could even—I would ride through town once in a while on the back of a six by on a jeep going to Da Nang or someplace and have limited contact just by watching the civilians, but I never stopped, never bought a thing, never—it was just going from point A to point B.

RV: What was your impression of the civilian population?

CW: I guess I always try to see the best of it. I just kept seeing a bunch of hard working folks that were trying to make the best of a bad situation and how amazed at how they continued to operate in any capacity at all. When we went by this particular area which was a trash dump, that was heart breaking. First of all, the stench was for miles. I mean, it was just an unbelievable smell, you’ll never forget it. Then you go by this place and it’s just piles and mounds and mounds of garbage. You’d see kids and people up walking through the garbage, digging through the garbage trying to find things to eat or something like that. That stuck with me. You would fly over the beach in the morning and you would see people walking out into the beach basically, into the ocean to relieve themselves. But you realized that was just their way of life, just as if you were in India or Pakistan or someplace like that. My contact with the hooch maids was my only real contact, that and the few people that worked at the PX (post exchange) or something like that. They would joke, but evidently they weren't joking. They would always say, “My son a VC. He get you someday.” I thought, “Hey, they’re just joking because, hey, look at us. We’re the good guys. We’ve got the white hat on. We’ve come here to help you. So why do you say things like that to us?”

RV: Would you say that to them or would you think that yourself?

CW: Yeah, actually, in fact, my hooch maid was named Na. Even when I went to Hong Kong, I made a point to—I bought a little wind up train and train tracks for her grandson. Then I bought some material, some silk material so she could make an ao dai. I brought them back and I gave them to her and she was happy and said thank you type thing in broken English that we could barely get by. But one day, the hooch maids would all get together and do laundry and things. Of course they couldn’t read so you never got your own laundry back. I saw them laughing over there where they were eating out of the
little rice bowls. I went over there to see what was going on and that train that I had
gotten for the little fellow, they had that train set up on the ground and had put like little
boards, little pieces of wood over the cars. They were laughing because they would put a
rice bowl on it and then the train would go around to the other side and one of the girls
would take it off. They were using it like a lazy Susan. I said, “I’ll be doggone.”

RV: Did that upset you?

CW: Well, in a way. I had bought it for what I thought was her grandson who
now probably was a sergeant in the VC. I don’t know. It was just kind of interesting like
they didn’t really care about why I did it or later on I got to thinking maybe if she had
taken it to her grandson that people would have said, “If you got this from American GI,
that’s bad news. We don’t want anything to do with it,” or something.

RV: Tell me about your work at the orphanage. Was this voluntary?

CW: Yeah, it was voluntary and I didn’t get to do a whole lot, but we kind of
adopted this orphanage as a public relations project, public service project. So I called my
wife and a lot of us sent letters. A lot of us sent letters home and the local churches that
we were involved in and organizations gathered a lot of materials, clothing and personal
care items and things and mailed the boxes. The U.S. Government shipped them over to
Vietnam for us. We would take these down to the orphanage to give to the sisters in the
Sacred Heart Orphanage and to the children. Of course, they had a little cottage industry.
They would take these brass shell casings from 105s, which seemed to be almost
indestructible to me, and mallet those into items that they would sell in the market and
things, brass casings and turn them into different things which is amazing that they could
cut them and bang them into little pieces using wooden molds. I would see all these little
children, I mean little toddlers. To look into the little dark eyes, they were so neat. In fact,
I fell in love with this one little fellow named Charlie and had I had the means and time, I
would have certainly brought him home. But I noticed that all the little kids, I’m talking
thirteen, fourteen, fifteen months old had a little spoon and a little bowl. Every day they
had the same thing. It was basically some kind of rice soup or gruel or something. But
they always held on to their little spoon and little bowl because it was the only thing they
had other than their one little set of clothes they might have had. They kept themselves
clean. They were very orderly, but they would just love any kind of attention. If you’d
pick one up, my gosh, they’d just fall in love with you right then.

RV: How much time were you able to spend there?

CW: I probably went around there three or four times, really. That was the extent
of it. But I often wonder what happened to all those kids. I often wonder. The nuns spoke
only Vietnamese or French. My knowledge of French was only slightly better than my
knowledge of Vietnamese, but somehow between French, Vietnamese, and English, we
knew what was going on. That was amazing.

RV: What was your impression of Vietnam, the country?

CW: Well, South Vietnam, even the southern part of I Corps which is the
northern part of South Vietnam was where we started to get into the rolling hills just
north of there, the Que Son mountains and what have you. That was really a gentle,
pleasant area when it wasn’t covered in clouds and what have you. What I was really
impressed with is when I got up into, actually into Laos and a portion of that area in
extreme North Vietnam, northern South Vietnam where they actually had a lot of the
caves. It looked almost like religious shrines and things built into the side of mountains.
Not nearly like Angkor Wat or anything of that nature in Cambodia. But having been
interested in archaeology and anthropology and things, I was fascinated about some of
these things built in the side of mountains that had to have been centuries old and was
saying to myself as I was flying along once in a while, “Gosh, I sure would like to rappel
down from the top of that cliff and go and scout around in there.” Of course, it wouldn’t
take long before reality would come back to light or someone would pop out of one of
those things. But the Hue Citadel, that area, I would love to have the opportunity to go
back and actually just tour the Citadel and things of this nature.

RV: Let me ask you a little bit about your living there on base and your
relationship with the men. What kind of relationship did you have with the other men in
your unit? How would you describe that?

CW: I think we had a real, real good relationship. We had some captains that had
been there and several of them were on a second tour. They kind of looked after the
lieutenants. Then there were some field grade officers that did their things. But the
troops, we had a really good relationship with our troops because in an aviation unit, you
go out and fly this airplane, but it really doesn’t belong to you. It belongs to the plane
captain and the mechs that work on that plane. You kind of—they kind of entrust it to
you to and bring it back and don’t break it type thing. Since your lives depended upon
them and their ability and the armors to fix things and make sure the weapons worked,
you really got right down and worked with them on it. You’d help them if you could. It
was just a big team effort. To be quite honest with you, Richard, the young mechs and
hydraulic guys, they looked at you as a pilot getting to go fly their airplanes in combat as
a gunship with a certain amount of adoration. It made you feel like a sports star or
something of this nature. You felt like you couldn’t let them down. They looked up to
you and you just wanted to make sure you didn’t disappoint them.

RV: Did you ever encounter any racial issues?

CW: Not really. There were some incidents that occurred. I don’t think it was so
prevalent with us, but there were some incidents. There were some problems that did
exist on base that sometimes I’m the last one to see things. In fact, we actually had an
internal procedure on base. We had a company called Zulu Company. Zulu Company,
when people started to become a problem, they were sent to Zulu Company. Zulu
Company was a compound within a compound. It was actually, basically a stockade
within the base for people who were sometimes problems or habitual problem type
people were put in this compound. If you were a sometimes problem, you could actually
come out and work sometimes but you had to go back in there. If you were a habitual
problem, they put you in there and you just worked within that compound serving food or
whatever. That was our malcontents and misfits. We even had one problem. I had never
even heard of a fragging, but we had actually one fragging that occurred in Zulu
Company. It was one of those bad situations where a young guy was getting ready to
leave, a lieutenant, and he came over to see another friend of his who was one of the
lieutenants of Zulu Company and decided to spend the night with him before he left the
next day or so. Somebody rolled a grenade in on him and got him and the other guy.

RV: Killed them?

CW: Yeah. And I thought, this is not a situation where anybody could have said
that they were hurting them in combat or anything else. That just didn’t compute. That
was really kept kind of quiet. We heard about it only because one of our captains had
been temporarily assigned over there right about that time. They actually sent him in and
he locked the place down for about a week and a half. When it was over with, he had the
two people involved and the place was a lot better.

RV: Let me talk about your life there at the barracks or in your Quonset hut.
What kind of entertainment did you guys have? What did you do?

CW: Well, we had a reel-to-reel tape that one of the guys had. We had a radio,
Armed Forces radio station. Of course there was no TV. At the club, once in a while there
would be a USO show, but not like Da Nang or anything. We were just kind of on the
off-Broadway circuit. But they had movies at night. The movie screen was located about
a hundred yards out in the ocean on pallets. Of course the projector would be on the front
porch of the O Club which was looking through the barbed wire fence that separated the
ocean from the compound for security. So that was kind of neat. You’d watch a movie,
but it would actually be out in the ocean. Then they had the bar. I spent a lot of time at
the bar.

RV: Was alcohol ever a problem?

CW: Well, I probably drank a whole lot more than I should and I probably drank
more than I thought I could. It was almost like it was expected of you to be a young,
rough, tough Marine. If you couldn’t drink, you ought to learn how. We drank a lot of
beer and a lot of wine. Then we’d have parties once in a while to be sure that half a dozen
or more people would be off. We’d have a little party and everybody would bring
something. We would cook whatever we could find. There were some times when the
routine got to the point where I knew guys that would have two beers for breakfast. That
was their breakfast. They’d brush their teeth and have two beers and then would go to
work all day. Water was something that you used to hydrate yourself and to cool off with.
I can remember one night, in the bar, this young chaplain who was a priest. For some
reason he struck up a friendship with me. I saw him two or three times. I was sitting in
the bar one night and I don’t even remember his name. But he was a lieutenant in the
Navy and all of the sudden he really got down. I mean, really got down. He’d been
drinking with me pretty hard. We walked outside and all of the sudden he started crying. I
said, “My, gosh. What is it?” Basically, what he was saying was that twenty-four hours a
day, seven days a week, he had been there ministering to troops. All he heard everyday
was horror stories and problems at home and wives and infidelity and being in debt and
kids being left. All he had heard ever since he had been there was just bad news. Finally,
it just got to him so much that it almost overwhelmed him and he just about had a
breakdown. I went back inside and found a flight surgeon and put them two together and
I never saw him again after that. But he had done such a—he had done all he could and I
guess too much of it just became too much for him.

RV: How much access did you have to religious facilities, churches, ceremonies?

CW: There was a chapel and there were a couple of chaplain assistants, but we
didn’t have church services or if there were I never had the opportunity because we just
didn’t have a schedule. A lot of times you’ll see on television, you’ll see improvised
church services. If we had any, it would have been standing on top of an ammo box and it
might have been a priest or a rabbi wanted to know if anybody wanted to talk or if it was
Easter or Christmas, maybe something special. But most of the time, the chaplains were
busy handling personal problems with people, with relatives back home or people who
had been wounded or correspondence and things of this nature. Of course, we didn’t have
email. The only thing we did was we had letters or messages if it was real important, you
might get through with the necessaries. Our mail wouldn’t necessarily always come in
sequence. I can remember getting a letter one time from my wife and she said, “Well, my
daughter Laurie is doing okay now and we’re going to take her cast off before long,” and
that was the first time—I said, “What?” Then a couple of days later I got the other two
letters that had been sent before telling me about injury on a bicycle and the other stuff.
So, it’s just kind of interesting the way things are.

RV: How much contact did you have with home?

CW: Only by mail and I had two MARS (Military Affiliate Radio System) calls.

RV: How were they?

CW: That was really cool. I mean, to actually be able to talk to your wife even
though somebody was having to go over and switch back and forth. It was from a phone
booth, you know, just a phone booth. I just thought that was the coolest thing. Of course
that was the days before satellite calls. That was a big thing. I think we had talked once
before she left for R&R which we were supposed to do part of it in Thailand and part of it
in Hong Kong. It got changed at the last minute and had to be all in Hong Kong.
RV: Tell me about that R&R. What was it like?

CW: Well, it was really cool. I actually borrowed a set of Charlies which was a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of green trousers and went over to Da Nang and then caught a charter hop that was specifically flying to Hong Kong for that purpose. I got off the airplane there and I had even somewhat of a semblance of a mustache which I’d been trying to grow ever since I’d been over there. It was a pathetic looking thing, but it was the best I could do. I walked inside and looked for my wife who was kind of a short, stout blonde girl. I didn’t see her. But I saw this good-looking skinny girl with long blonde hair with sunglasses with a flashy outfit on. I said, “Well, I’m going to smile at her, but I’m going to get in big trouble,” and that was her. So that was kind of neat. I got to spend about a week in Hong Kong.

RV: What did you all do? Did you spend a lot of alone time or did you try to go out, see the sights?

CW: We went out quite a bit. We kept riding the ferry over to Kowloon and went up along the border with China and saw most of the sights, but as I always do when I go overseas, I got off the main trail a lot. Sometimes that’s not the best thing to do, but I did. We discovered these little restaurants out of the way where sometimes even in Hong Kong people were having trouble speaking English. Being a British colony, you have to get off a little bit to run into that situation, but it was a good visit.

RV: Did it help you to conclude the remaining part of your tour?

CW: It helped me. I think it did. I mean, I had gone to Hong Kong saying, “This is an excellent opportunity to see my wife one time before I go back and die.”

RV: You felt that at one time or you felt that the whole time?

CW: Well, I did not think that to the extent that I did once I got involved in Lam Son. When I went to Vietnam, I’ll be honest with you, I did not expect to come back. In fact, I had a mobile home that I owned. I moved my wife into a rental unit. I sold my mobile home. I had a little Volkswagen convertible that I would love to have, but I sold that. I got everything ready for her to make it as easy as possible so that when she got the word that I was gone, she could pack up a few things, sign a few forms and go. I did not plan to come back. When I got to Lam Son 719, I felt like that was even more surer than ever. I was mixed emotions in wanting to see my wife and wanting to be there, but
wanting to be involved in that operation at the same time. It’s hard to relate exactly what I’m saying.

RV: What would you say about the leadership in Vietnam, your direct superiors and then overall for the United States?

CW: Overall was—I have to be real careful because I’m a student of history myself so I have to realize that hindsight is one thing, but what happened while you were actually there is something else. Within our leadership, I thought it was rather good. I did have some concerns about my commanding officer there, the second one, simply because I thought he was more career oriented and watched out for his career more so than he really cared about me. He was a Naval Academy graduate and he really—if you weren’t a Naval Academy graduate, you were still an officer in the Marine Corps, but you were a sub officer. That was really interesting to see that. I thought I was career minded. I was very conscientious. I said, “If I survive this, I want to be a career Marine officer.” The guys who seemed to do the best were those who just didn’t give a big damn. They were in it for the tour. They were going to do the best they could. They wanted the action, the excitement, but to hell with it. Once it was over with they were going to dental school or going back or whatever.

RV: But you had set your sights on a career.

CW: I had set my sights on a career. That was what I thought I always wanted to do. I had no idea I would get out later on.

RV: How much did you keep up with what was happening back in the United States, the controversies of the war and just general news?

CW: Well, you got a little news through correspondence but not a whole lot. But the *Stars and Stripes* did a pretty good job even though I’m sure they were edited and censored to a certain extent. You knew what was happening as far as Berkley and southern California and things at Kent State and this type of situation. It made the news and it was kind of depressing, but I guess they felt like they’d better try to set the record straight so that there wouldn’t be too many rumors running around.

RV: What songs do you hear today that take you back to Vietnam?

CW: Well, the number one, there’s really one and that’s *The Green, Green Grass at Home* because all the USO girls would sing it and they were all Asian. So it came out,
“Gleen, gleen, the gleen, gleen grass at home.” They couldn’t say “g”. So whenever I hear it I think about the USO shows talking about the, “gleen, gleen grass.” Then there were a few others. Maybe *Danny Boy* once in a while and things like that.

RV: How much did you work with troops from other countries?

CW: Really the only troops we worked with were the ROK Marines which were down south of us. We would do some support missions for them. There was a Republic of Korea Marine Observations Squadron that was there at the base. They flew the little O-1 Birddog. We would run into those guys once in a while and talk at the PX or once in a while at the club. I even got one’s name one time. I tried to do one of these Hands Across the Seas. I gave him my first lieutenant bar and he gave me the two stars that designated him as a first lieutenant in the Republic of Korea Marines. I went back and kind of stuck it on my nametag which people did a lot of little things on the nametag. My CO saw it and blew his stack because he had fought in Korea. He says, “You want to be a Korean Marine? I can make sure you can be a Korean Marine. I’ll send you over there tomorrow unless you get that thing off your vest.” I said, “Yes, sir. Not a problem.” That didn’t go over too good.

RV: Tell me what you think would be—or a series of incidents—some of the more humorous things that you experienced in Vietnam.

CW: Well, one of the things was we had this guy in our outfit named Buck Simmons. He was from Massachusetts and we called him Fire Base Simmons. He was so concerned and his wife was too. Buck, if he went down sometimes, if he jumped out in the water, he’d drown because he’d have so much ordinance and ammunition and things on him. Buck was always kind of getting into—he was not a controversial person. But for example, Buck got hurt twice in Vietnam and they were self inflicted wounds because he would practice throwing his knife which was like a big k-bar we had. Every now and then that thing would stick in a piece of wood and spring back. Once it sprung back and stuck him in the foot and another time it hit him in the leg. He actually had—his wife found these things and sent them to him. He actually had like rubber tubing tourniquets you could put on your legs and arm ahead of time. Then if you got hit, all you had to do was grab the tubes and pull it tight.

RV: Kind of fatalistic.
CW: He would carry three or four weapons with him, a lot of ammo. One time he came back from a mission and plane captains were out post-flightting the aircraft. Buck had left a couple of hand grenades in the airplane and of course the CO went out of his mind, “What are you doing with hand grenades in a closed cockpit airplane? Don’t you realize you could blow everybody up?” Buck’s idea was if he went down, he was going to lay down a base of fire and start throwing hand grenades at the bad guys. He was something else, I’ll tell you. That was one thing. I can remember a couple of incidents at USO show, some funny things that might have been kind of interesting where somebody went and sat in somebody’s lap. It was always somebody that they had prewarned that the USO girls that this person is right next to a bishop or someone absolutely in no way whatsoever would do anything even the slightest bit risqué. But then people would always take pictures and send him to his wife.

RV: You mentioned in the questionnaire, hooch maids mixing up the laundry. You already mentioned that.

CW: Yeah. We wrote our names on our socks and all our laundry, but they couldn’t read. All they knew was you gave them ten shirts and six pair of skivvies and six pair of socks and you got them back, but they didn’t necessarily meant that the socks were the same, the same size or anything else. So, it would have really been something if someone had been shot and stripped down to their underwear and left for somebody and taken their i.d. tags because I keep thinking here’s some soldier or SEAL (sea, air, and land) team going in and says, “We’ve got this guy and he’s got Johnson on his skivvies and Mathews on his shirt and Benson and Roberts on both socks. So who is this guy?”

RV: You also mentioned finding snakes in unlikely places.

CW: Yeah. When we first got there, as I told you, the monsoon, we had this massive flood from a typhoon that had come in. The Hoi An River which ran just south of the Marbles, basically drained to delta and out to sea. A lot of grass and clumps of vegetation and water type plants were all funneling into the Hoi An River delta. Evidently, of course, all the snakes and things were coming out of holes. They were getting on anything, any type of plots and any type of elevation that they could. They would wash out into the delta and then they would disperse along with the tide either up or down the coast and then wash back in with the tide. They would crawl up the hill and
try to find the nearest high ground. Of course, the nearest high ground, a lot of times if
they’d come up north just a little bit was Marble Mountain. You would go in and I can
remember some of the mechs actually going in and opening up these little metal cabinets
to get some screws and nuts and things out and actually snakes had worked their way up
behind the metal cabinets and curled up into little drawers. We had so much water across
the base at times, even the runway would be under water sometimes, that we had pallets
to walk to the shower, where the group shower was. There was a sign up for a long time
for two or three weeks that we actually were not permitted anywhere without boots on.
So you would see all these naked guys walking to the shower with black boots on
carrying a towel. So it was kind of interesting to try to keep us from getting snake bit.

RV: What about drug use? What did you witness?

CW: I never, ever witnessed a single incident of drug use in Vietnam. I knew it
happened but not that much. It was probably more prevalent than I realized. My first
really realization that it had been a problem, but not nearly as much as some other bases
that had access to the city or something. When we went back to Okinawa after my last
little adventure there, the guy that had been my NCO of the post office who was an
exceptional young Marine, I was in Okinawa and someone told me that the MPs had
arrested this young guy on possession of drugs. I could hardly believe it. I thought
certainly somebody must have set him up or it must be a mistake. Then I found out that
once he got back to Okinawa, he had been confined to base and he did not have all of his
sources or supply and things had been cut off and he’d basically gone into some type of
stressful situation and done some stupid things and got caught. I actually went around to
see figuring that this can't be true. He said, “Yeah, it was.” But he had just been so cool
about it nobody had ever known. I said, “Man, I must be blind.” He said, “Don’t blame
yourself. I was good about it. You would have never known.” That was kind of a rotten
thing because he was a fine young man and he’s ruined his life.

RV: Did he ever get straightened out? Do you know?

CW: No, I don’t know. I don’t know because he was still in Okinawa when I left.

RV: You mentioned on your questionnaire, the question about awards citations,
commendations that you received three single mission air medals. Do you remember
what those missions were?
CW: They were mostly all recon in contact in the pass area off the valley. Really, there was probably fifteen or twenty times it was just like those three times. But what happens was once in a while when you get back from an operation like that, most of us were not even award sensitive even though I was in the awards department, it was more routine than anything else. What we took care of was end of tour awards or strike flight awards, things, just making records. But once in a while, somebody on the ground or somebody in a 46, one of the working birds, would write up a recommendation for an award and send it up to group headquarters saying, “Whoever was Scarface 38, I don’t know his name but I recommended him for such and such action because he saved our ass,” or something. Then it would get back down to you that way.

RV: When you were getting short, did you change your ways of everyday life or did they change it for you?

CW: It was changed for me. We had a rather unique situation. It was kind of a bittersweet situation. We knew we were pulling out and we were going to turn the base over to an Army unit and that our squadron was going to go to Hawaii. I was looking forward to that like everyone else. But there are hidden agendas that you’re not aware of. When the Army came in, one of their concerns that they were operating there in an area that they had not really been operating in before. There was more bad guys around that were willing to take on people than they had run into before. They had an outstanding group of Medevac pilots, the Dustoff pilots. But since Dustoff would only fly at night in an emergency, they didn’t have any qualified Army instrument gunship pilots. So they requested from the Marine Corps that some of our Cobras be left behind along with aircrews for the specific purpose of flying gunship cover at night under bad conditions to support the Dustoff pilots. They decided to leave four aircraft and eight pilots and a cadre of support armors and mechs back to support the Army for what was supposed to be about a month or so. Then we were supposed to then come on to Hawaii. I was selected to be one of those. Well, that was kind of good and bad. I mean, I wanted a little more combat time, but in the last six or eight weeks, I guess, when we were in-country, there was something called MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), Marine Corps Command headquarters over at Da Nang. Well, that had been dismantled and they had already moved out to Hawaii. So they said, “Well, no more awards, no more heroes
because we don’t have anybody to report to anymore.” That was kind of interesting because things started heating up as the Army started coming in and we started moving out. We started taking more fire and got involved in more operations. I guess in the last six weeks I did a whole lot more than any one of those single mission air medals would have qualified for. There were a couple of people had put several people in for things, but there was no place to send it. When everybody left, we woke up the next morning in our regular hooches. We went to work. We met the new Army people that were taking over our operation. Then that night we went to fly for a large operation that was going on that they were using the spotlights and the infrared stuff and stuff we really hadn’t used a whole lot. We flew with them. When we came back and went to our hooches, everything that we had had been stolen, our flight jackets, our souvenirs, just about everything we had was gone. That just was unheard of. We could leave things unlocked before. Nobody ever took anything. We said, “Hey, listen. It’s my Navy flight jacket that I’ve had since flight school. It had my patches on it and all this. It meant everything to me.” They acted like they could give a big flip. So we went and complained to this Army major and he didn’t think too much of us and didn’t think we needed to be there in the first place. We had a real adversarial relationship. Then when our troops started saying they were having the same problems, then we started getting mortared at night and we were wondering about what kind of security we had. We decided, we pulled everybody together, the enlisted and the officers and we went down and took over four hooches at the very end of the base next to the POW (prisoner of war) compound and put up barbed wire and said, “This is Marine country. Nobody comes in here.” They wouldn’t even let us in the PX. We couldn’t go to the chow hall. So we had to eat C-rats. We only came out to fly. We brought our mechs and our gunners and everybody right back in our compound. We even took over the observation tower that was guarding the base at our corner because ol’ Fire Base Simmons went up there one night and both of the soldiers that were up there were basically passed out and they didn’t even have an automatic weapon with them. So he got a little bit upset and tossed them over the side and they fell outside the compound. From that time on, we said, “We’ll guard our own little tower.” The last thing we want to do is get killed by sappers when we were getting ready to leave.

RV: How long did this go on?
About two weeks and then they said, “Okay, you guys are leaving.” So we thought, “Okay, we’re going to Hawaii.” Then they said, “No, you’re going to Okinawa.” That was a bummer because when we got to Okinawa, we went to this kind of a replacement squadron. They had sixty pilots in there and only two helicopters. Of course, no one knew us so there went your end of tour award or anything like that that you would have normally got. I was fortunate enough that I got to fly some because it was basically VIP birds for the commanding general operation. That was an interesting experience too because everybody then in Okinawa started buying motorcycles. In a period of about three weeks, we had two fatalities on motorcycles and several people injured including myself. The CO at operations says, “No more motorcycles.” He said, “We’re losing more guys on motorcycles than we were in combat.”

That was your getting out of Vietnam experience?

That was my getting out of Vietnam experience.

Wow. You flew military craft back to Okinawa?

We had a couple of Echo model Hueys that had been rigged out to be VIP birds. So I got to fly a little bit in the Huey a little bit while I was there.

What did it feel like leaving Vietnam?

I felt like I was not really ready to leave, but I wanted to—I almost wished I had gone with the Korean Marines because they were a pretty good outfit. I did not feel like I had a relationship with that Army outfit, but I probably could have worked in the Korean Marines. I don’t mean to—I need to straighten something out real quick. The Marine Corps was like one big unit. I mean, if you were in the 1st Marines, the 2nd Marine, or 3rd Marine Division or Air Wing, there really wasn’t a whole lot of difference. But in all fairness, with the United States Army, they had some outstanding units, I mean, that you would love to be a part of. Then they had some units that you figure, “How did they get in the Army?” It wasn’t the same. You could work with the 101st or the 82nd or the 173rd. You could be with some very professional people. Yet, you get with this other brigade or some kind of aviation element or something and you say, “My, gosh, they must have sent all their misfits or people that didn’t fit anywhere else here.” It was just really a difference. Of course a good portion of the young soldiers over there were draftees and didn’t want to be there. Although we had a few draftees in the Marine Corps,
most of the guys had joined the Marine Corps. Although they didn’t want to get hurt, they were trained and indoctrinated in such a way that it was a lot more camaraderie or *esprit de corps*.

RV: So there was a pretty big difference.

CW: That was a big difference to me. It really was. Of course, I have worked with some Army units, Air Force, and Navy units that I would have been proud to be a part of, some exceptional bunch of people, but not that unit.

RV: Tell me about your motorcycle accident in Okinawa.

CW: Well, you’ve got to have transportation to get around and the guys were buying—we had a Stan’s motorcycle shop right at the bottom of Fatima Airbase. Stan sold Yamaha motorcycles. I went and bought the smallest one they had. It was just a little 90 trail bike. But guys were buying bigger bikes and what have you. They didn’t have anything else to do and they were showing off their skills and doing wheelies and things like that. Being kind of analytical, I said, “I want to do these things too, but I want to go off someplace secret where nobody can see where I am and practice until I have it down pat. Then I’ll come back and do it in front of the public instead of busting my rear in front of everybody.” I found this place, some place on base a couple of miles away from the runway which had been—I don’t know. It was all broken concrete and things, but there was some old pads and things around it that were fairly slick. I said, “I’m going to practice here. This is a good place.” But I never really asked anybody about how to do these things. I thought I would do a little OJT (on the job training). So I started popping some little wheelies a little bit at a time and then I felt like I was ready to really do it. I popped one and got up and then the motorcycle fell on its side and I held on. It carried me across the concrete, broken pieces of metal and everything else, just ripped my left leg, holes all in it and everything else. I got up and I was bleeding from about six places. My handle bars were turned ninety degrees and the kickstand was bent. I said, “Now, this is a hell of a situation here I’ve got myself in. Nobody knows where I am. I’m sitting here.” So I tied myself all up the best I could and bent my kickstand back out, got it cranked and putted my way up to the corpsman’s shack. He came out and said, “Oh, my God. Another one of them stupid lieutenants tried to kill himself on a motorcycle.” They patched me up the best they could and I was limping and went back to my BOQ (bachelor officer’s
quarters) room and there was a notice on board that I had been selected to do a little swap
for ten days with the ground pounders. They were going to send ten officers over to learn
what it was like to be aviators and then they were sending ten aviators over to see what it
was like to be ground officers.

RV: In Vietnam?
CW: And this is in Okinawa. So here I am all wrapped up and they tell me I’m
going rappelling and driving amtracks and tanks. So I was in pain for the next ten days. I
did everything, but I was hurt.

RV: How long did you stay in Okinawa?
CW: Well, I stayed in Okinawa. I think I was over there about six weeks and I
got to come home a couple of weeks early because they worked out a deal and a couple
of us got to come home a little bit early.

RV: That was basically the end of your Southeast Asia tour?
CW: That was the end of my Southeast Asia tour.

RV: Where did you come into the United States?
CW: I came into Norton Air Force Base. Evidently they had just had an
earthquake in southern California. I remember riding in a taxicab over to wherever it was,
John Wayne or LAX or some place like that. You could actually see damage around. I
said, “Isn’t that a heck of a note.” Then I flew—but I didn’t tell my wife I was coming
home. I was going to sneak in. So I flew from there to Boise, Idaho, to see an aunt and
uncle that used to live in Alaska.

RV: Were you in uniform?
CW: Yes, I was. It was not a pleasant experience.

RV: Tell me what that was like. What happened?
CW: It was like if you had your hunting clothes on and you went to a PETA
(People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) convention. (Both laugh) I mean, just the
eye contacts and the looks, people ushering their children away from you. Maybe not
quite that bad, but you got the sense. I went to Boise and actually didn’t see my uncle. He
had passed away just before I got there. I saw my aunt and then I flew into Jacksonville,
North Carolina, and took a cab home. I had a rifle with me that I picked up in Idaho. It
was kind of interesting because I just took the bolt out and carried the rifle right on the
airplane with me not matter where I went. Nobody bothered me.

RV: Different times.

CW: Different times.

RV: Yes, sir. What was it like seeing your wife? Was she surprised?

CW: Well, she was surprised, but not surprised because I had mentioned
something about it. We were looking at a house. I had a friend who was a retired master
sergeant and he was kind of helping look after things. I said that she had been telling me
about a house she had been looking at. I said, “Well, I’ve got a friend of mine who’s
coming back from Vietnam and I trust his opinion explicitly. I’ve asked him to come by
and just take a look at it to let me know.” She had a feeling that friend might be me. But I
slipped in on one rainy day and my little girl that I was really wondering about how is she
going to remember daddy? What’s it like being gone a year in a child’s life like that? I
knocked on the door and my little girl opened the door. She was about four years old I
guess then. My fears were just completely evaporated when I heard Linda holler down
the hall, “Who is it?” She said, “It’s my daddy.” So that made me feel good. Exactly nine
months later, her sister was born. (Both laugh) She didn’t really know I was coming
home, that sure, but that was okay.

RV: Why don’t we stop for today?

CW: Okay.
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Neil Whitehurst. Today is August 14th, 2003. It’s 1:30PM Central Standard Time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Whitehurst is, again, in Wilmington, North Carolina. Sir, why don’t we pick up where we left off? You had returned home and I wanted to talk to you about your transition from flying in Southeast Asia, flying in Vietnam, being in combat and then coming back to the United States. You continued in the military, but what kind of transition was it before when you came back?

CW: Well, I think one of the things that I noticed when we returned was with the advent of most of the Marine Corps forces being withdrawn from Southeast Asia that the tempo and the change at the Marine Corps bases was different than when I had gone over the first time. Everything was geared up to getting guys ready to go to Southeast Asia and very little time off and working on weekends. When I came back, I was primarily assigned as an instructor for the AH-1J which was the new Cobra helicopter that had come in to the Navy/Marine Corps inventory. I was at New River, North Carolina. It was really amazing to basically be on a five-day workweek with exception of those weekends that you had to fly. I was trying to train new pilots and making sure that they benefited from all of the experience that you had knowing that maybe someday they would face a similar situation. But it was more geared to going back to the amphibious side, operating off of naval ships and things of this nature where we had basically been land based before. So, that was a little different. We were also dealing with something that I had not, until that time, really been faced with. During my initial training and going through OCS and flight school, everything had been gung ho, get ready, go do your thing, patriotic for your country and corps. When I came back, I started to see some of the problems from stateside from some of the recruits and young Marines who really didn’t want to be Marines.

RV: What do you mean by that?
CW: Some of the discipline problems that we started to see in all of the services probably started to crop up in the Marine Corps. Some of the racial tension started to crop up, things of this nature that I really hadn’t been exposed to before we really didn’t have time to pay attention to before. I noticed that we started to have a large number of people that were trying to get out for various reasons. They had done their time. Then we had—it seemed to me that the senior officers were walking a very fine line. Almost every time they tried to impart any type of discipline whatsoever, they were coming under the auspices of some congressman or some senator was always checking on some complaint about a particular recruit who had called home to momma or daddy. They almost got to the point where they didn’t want to do the routine discipline, the routine summary court martials, the routine office hours. They were letting a lot of things slide. This was really hard for me to take because I’d always been used to, hey, you give an order, you take an order, you do your thing, you come back, and say, “Yes, sir, its accomplished.” I had a problem with maybe some young lance corporals or PFCs being insubordinate or in your face. When I tried to take appropriate action, I was told, “It’s not a big thing right now. Right now you don’t want to make a whole lot of waves. A lot of attention is on the Marine Corps. Anything we do that might cause someone to come down and take a hard look at us is really not advantageous to us.” It was a really sheepish period right there where I didn’t think there was a lot of backbone. I guess people, knowing hindsight and as I became a senior officer later on, I understood what they were trying to do. They were trying to avoid a bunch of harassment by civil rights organizations or equal employment opportunity organizations or NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) or any other organization that seemed to just be looking for causes to rally the wagons around.

RV: How much do you think that attitude and that environment, that atmosphere shaped the Marine Corps at that time but specifically, how much did it affect you preparing these young men to go over to Southeast Asia? I mean, the war is winding down for the United States, but they are going. How much did that affect what you were trying to accomplish?

CW: I think it did have a certain affect as far as the officer-enlisted relationship, not so much the staff NCOs. They were still pretty professional people. They had re-
enlisted. They had wanted to be there. But we did have a little bit of a problem as far as the junior enlisted and some of the officer relationships, especially the captain area and maybe some new majors. The first lieutenants, they still were so involved in training, they didn’t know a whole lot.

RV: What was your rank at the time?
CW: I was a senior first lieutenant. I made captain shortly after I got back from Vietnam, but I was in the Mediterranean when I did that. That’s another thing. It wasn’t too long after I came back, Richard, that the old concept of coming back and being able to stay at home really didn’t apply so much to the Fleet Marine Force because no sooner than I returned, it was just a short period of time before I was scheduled to do a six month deployment in the Mediterranean. At that time, we did not have the policy enforced where you do two six-month deployments, let’s say, within an eighteen month period of time that it counted as an overseas control date. It was just counted as something you had to do and it did not affect the next time that you were due for an extended overseas tour.

RV: How much did you talk about what had happened in Vietnam with you, first with, I guess, your fellow Marines and then secondly, with the civilian population?
CW: I really didn’t have a whole lot of contact being in a military town, a military community and going to work basically everyday. Most of the people in eastern North Carolina were fairly supportive of us and what we had done and tried to do. I noticed when I would go home or go somewhere else, it was at least ambivalent and more of a neutral situation where in other places, the further I got away from a base activity or North Carolina, even, the more negative vibes that I felt. Now, I would always say that there were certain environments that you would go into. It doesn’t matter if communist China invaded Florida, they would still condemn us for trying to defend ourselves. That was unfortunately some of the academia areas that I was involved in. That was quite interesting because there was very little middle ground there. There were either people who supported your or just absolutely opposed you. That was strange because later on as I got into the Marine Corps Reserve, many of my friends and fellow officers were all master’s degree graduates or Ph.D.s and working in the Citadel and other universities. Here they were, Marine Corps officers. So, it was interesting talking with them. I was fortunate. I really didn’t have a whole lot of negative reaction once I got back to North
Carolina. There was a time or two when I still had some contact with high school and
some college classmates which was very limited. They were not negative about the war,
but they were very up front about the fact that they had done everything they could not to
participate in it. Which I don’t harbor any hard feelings against anyone whose name
didn’t come up in the draft or who didn’t volunteer, but I was extremely disappointed at
those individuals who had taken off for Canada or had burnt their draft cards or protested
against the war.

RV: What was the reception like for you when you went back to Bethel?

CW: I did attend a function one time at a friend’s house who was a graduate with
myself. He and his wife both had gone to the same university I did. They both were
teaching in the local schools. They were very happy that the husband in that particular
regard did not have to go. We did not have a great number of people from my little small
town of a little over a thousand that participated in the Vietnam conflict. We had one
young man that was killed that I happened to know and another young man that was in
the Air Force that, believe it or not, I ran into him in Vietnam. So, very small world there.
But they were just glad that people were coming home and glad they didn’t go and were a
little bit suspicious of me, why I seemed to have wanted to go in the first place. I’m not
so sure that they ever held me in very high esteem, but I don’t think I made any points
there. Maybe I didn’t lose any actually.

RV: How much did you personally keep up with the war effort once you came
home?

CW: I was very much—we were watching it all the time. I had put in a couple of
requests trying to get back into the operations because I felt like I didn’t get a chance to
finish my part in it. The only thing that the Marines were doing at that time were there
were some in the Saigon area providing some embassy and security duty. There were
some fixed wing outfits flying out of Udorn, Thailand, still flying in support. We finally
had a few Cobras go back over but they operated off of LPDs (amphibious transport
dock) going up and down the coast around the DMZ (demilitarized zone). I tried to get
with that operation, but they were primarily out of MAG 39 out of California. I was with
MAG 29 on the East Coast.
RV: What were your thoughts at the time as 1973 comes around, the United States is withdrawing from South Vietnam? What were your feelings at that time and what did you think of U.S. policy at that time?

CW: Well, when Mr. Carter became president, that’s the lowest point I’ve ever felt in my life being a U.S. citizen.

RV: This is 1976.

CW: Of course, that was just about time I decided to get out. Up until then, there was a great deal of resentment against Mr. Nixon, obviously for various things that went on who I held in extremely high esteem because I felt like that anything we did get out of the Vietnam War was due to him.

RV: Can you expand on that? What do you mean by that?

CW: I felt like he had the gonads to do certain things that saved a lot of American lives even because previously Mr. Johnson or the Congress had put kibosh on anything that was aggressive enough to actually pound the enemy into the table. I mean, we had policies that you couldn’t hit Haiphong. You couldn’t hit he ports. You couldn’t hit ships that were unloading missiles. You couldn’t hit certain airfields and certain areas because civilians. You couldn’t hit this because it was a power supply, supplying power to the cities even though it was supplying power to the enemy aircraft facilities. You couldn’t hit the dams. You couldn’t hit so many things. You couldn’t go downtown. You couldn’t go after the hierarchy. You couldn’t do any of these things and you couldn’t even bomb certain strategic areas that were main supply routes. When Nixon came in, he said to heck with some of that, but gave the green light to take care of a bunch of stuff in Cambodia which was a main infiltration route of NVAs and supplies to the southern part of Vietnam. Then he also worked out the deal with the South Vietnamese so they could do Lam Son 719, at least try to do something and reinstituted B-52 bombings of certain key installations in North Vietnam with Mr. Kissinger working on it. That finally brought them to the table regardless of whether it was a great table and a great discussion or not. At least we were able to do something. I believe that if Mr. Nixon had been present the whole time, we would have actually had an end of hostilities on much better grounds for the United States. But in any event, there was a period of time there from about 1971 to about 1974 that we basically had to purge ourselves of some problems within the Marine
Corps primarily in our troop rank. That started to turn around about 1974. There was a lot of animosity when we went overseas especially in France and things of this nature. We were not treated very nice by the Europeans.

RV: European military or European civilians?
CW: European civilians. We would pull into port and there would be signs and protests and demonstrations and calling us baby killers and all kinds of things. The only people that you really found that were fairly friendly to you were much older individuals who had possibly been through World War II or something of that nature. That was kind of an interesting time when I was in the Mediterranean.

RV: Did you think that the United States achieved peace with honor as was said at the time?
CW: With Vietnam?
RV: Yes, sir.
CW: At the time, I thought that things were better than they actually were. At the time I felt like we had negotiated some type of contract with North Vietnam that would possibly give South Vietnam a chance to establish themselves. I really didn’t understand just how inadequate, not only was the South Vietnamese Army, but the entire stability of the South Vietnamese government. I certainly didn’t realize how much the South Vietnamese government and public officials were infiltrated with Viet Cong and northern communist sympathizers. Of course hindsight is always better than that. But seeing that, now I see that, I think it was a tremendous political ploy on behalf of the North Vietnamese just to allow us to get out so that they could basically pave the way to do the job that they started to do in the first place.

RV: Do you remember how you felt at the end of April 1975 when Saigon fell in South Vietnam?
CW: I really felt bad. I felt bad. In fact, I remember one of the gentlemen that was on board ship with me, the last time I was on board ship, I actually flew a CH-53 in that operation and was part of the evacuation and talking with him. It was just a heart rendering type of situation because we felt like it just fell apart too fast. So fast that almost as if it was an inside job. It’s almost as if someone turned around and opened the gates and said, “Okay, today is the day. Come on in and everybody just run and lay your
arms out.” Then I was familiar a little bit with what was happening in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge and the Pathet Lao and then now the Viet Cong. I’m saying, “Man, this whole house of cards is going to come falling down now.”

RV: Let me ask you about a couple of U.S. policies. One, what did you think of the body count policy? This was in the late ‘60s. This McNamara policy of really that’s how you can gauge progress in a war. Whether we’re winning or not is the body count.

What did you think about that?

CW: Well, as a young combat warrior, you like to hear the fact that we killed 2,500 of the enemy and we only lost 150 of our own troops to casualties. Then later on you saw that they had an endless supply of individuals that that was not a factor at all and that unless you could actually win an objective, occupy a piece of terrain, a territory, or cause some type of change in what was happening, it really didn’t mean a whole lot. It’s hard because I used to get into some discussions with people and they talk about the performance of the U.S. military in Vietnam. I have to say, “Every single engagement that I was ever involved in or that the Marine Corps was ever involved in, we won everything. We never lost anything and yet they were saying, ‘Well, how does it feel to be a part of the military that lost the first war in U.S. history?’” or something of this nature. For a long time, I just couldn’t accept that terminology. I said, “Hey, when we left there was an armistice. When we left, so and so.” But I think that’s more political posture than anything else and it still is today. I have a hard time of that even talking to you on the phone right now when I think about it.

RV: What do you think the United States learned from Vietnam? What kind of lessons?

CW: Well, I think two things come to mind. One is that you never ever go into an extended operation without a clear objective that has been defined, accepted, and agreed upon by both the people that are fighting the war and the people that sent you there. Two, that you never ever can trust the American public any more, more than ninety days after an operation takes place regardless of what they said in the first place.

RV: Do you think the United States learned that and employs that or has employed that since Vietnam?
CW: I think they have done a pretty good job. We flirted around with a little bit of disaster in the Bosnia situation. I was really afraid that we might get caught in something because we didn’t have a really clear objective there. In the Iraq situation, I think we had an objective and we met some of the initial objectives, but sometimes you wonder if the resulting winning the initial portion of the conflict might be more trouble than we had anticipated in the first place. I was all in favor of that and I still am.

RV: The Iraqi War?

CW: Yeah. I think about the consequences had we not, the potential consequences, but it’s a heck of a mess and there’s no way that you're ever going to convince everybody that you—it’s a tough situation for the commanding chief whomever it may be whether it had been Al Gore who I think would have probably been involved in it regardless of what he said or George Bush. It’s a tough situation.

RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the Vietnam War?

CW: I really was disappointed at the media coverage. I met many media people, especially in the Khe Sanh area there in Lam Son 719. They were intent on trying to get a scoop, but they always wanted a negative scoop. For example, I remember one time we had—and of course I admire the tenacity—but we were in Quang Tri and there were ten or twelve people form UPI and API and Reuters and different news services trying to get us to fly them into Khe Sanh. We said, “No way. It’s absolutely too dangerous to do that.” They finally talked a South Vietnamese pilot to getting them on board an H-34 I believe it was, and took them into the area. I saw them one time on the ground. They interviewed a gentleman I knew named Max Cranford. The next time I read about him in the newspaper that they’d all been killed when the aircraft got shot down when they weren't supposed to be there. But the article that came out in Newsweek was my friend Max Cranford who later died in Hawaii in a crash. He said, “I don’t know where they got all this information from, but it wasn’t anything that I said.” In fact, they were actually getting the Army and the Marine Corps mixed up and attributing things to him that couldn’t even be because it wasn’t even related to us. I think a lot of the news people had an agenda and they probably in their own heart felt it was fair, but they were looking to validate their agenda, not so much to be objective.

RV: Do you think it’s changed today?
CW: I think it has changed to a certain extent simply because the media with
different industries and different type of networks and that there is actually a place for
someone that’s more objective or conservative. Where in the past it was primarily a very
liberal type of organization and I don’t think you could have advanced within the
organization if you were not of the same mindset.

RV: Looking back, what do you think about your service personally in Vietnam?
How do you feel about it?

CW: I was proud to go. I was very glad I got to go. I think it was something that I
was supposed to do. I still am old fashioned. I think that every young man and woman,
but especially every young man owes a debt to this country. If there’s an opportunity to
participate in a conflict for theoretically good over evil and the betterment of the civilized
world as we know it and the American way, then I feel like you ought to go for it. Of
course, I realize, if you’re twenty years old, you look at things from a totally different
perspective, but I was.

RV: Is there anything you would change about your experience in Vietnam if you
could?

CW: Well, I was really fortunate to get to the unit that I wanted to go in and fly
the aircraft that I wanted fly. I felt like I was about three months late getting there
because I had a lot of vinegar in me that I probably might not have come home if I’d been
there three months earlier. But there was some mistakes I made, some things that I did
just in the normal working day, the consequence of certain operations that I wish maybe
I’d been a little more insightful, but you did the very best you could with what you had at
the time, the intelligence and the tempo of operations. So, I couldn’t change a whole lot.

RV: Do you have anything in mind when you talk about some of the mistakes
you made?

CW: Well, for example, the time I told you about the young man, young boy
running and that I wasn’t aggressive enough. I was still trying to be the real nice guy that
attended Sunday school and saw the best in everybody. That happens probably more
times than I would like to think. But I didn’t consider myself a gunship warrior. I
considered myself a gunship pilot who was an armed escort. So that’s what got me
through.
RV: What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned personally during your tour in Vietnam?

CW: That’s a heavy question. It really is. I’m just thinking. I think the number one thing is that it goes back to the objective conflict. There’s a lot of time, a lot of money, a lot of manpower and lives that were invested without a plan to reap a reward in the end whether it be obtaining an objective for a piece of ground or some type of economic interest that we were just twiddling our thumbs and playing status quo for the politicians while they could not make up their minds, not why they made up their minds. A lot of times I think we were almost pawns to a certain extent, not so much that they meant us to be, but one group of legislatures might say, “We need to do this,” and you’d start on a comprehensive program to do this and somebody else would come in and say, “No, we don’t need.” So they’d say, “Stop, come back.” That was extremely frustrating to me. It was also frustrating that we were operating in an area which we did not have clear, concise rules of engagement. I never want to do that again. In other words, I want to say this is good guy territory and that’s bad guy territory. You come into bad guy territory, then you are considered an enemy combatant. Certainly that doesn’t mean rolling in on a schoolhouse or a van full of women and children or anything of this nature. But when you’re taking fire, automatic weapons fire from a little ville and you’re told you can’t shoot back at that because you haven’t been cleared by the local village chief who’s probably the one shooting at you in the first place, that’s a bunch of crap. When you see satellite pictures and SR-71 photographs of ships in a harbor offloading SA-2s and 3 SAM missiles that you know they’re going to be shooting down Air Force, Navy, and Marine pilots and you can't bomb those ships, that’s a bunch of junk.

RV: Today, what do you think the war has meant to you? How has it most affected your life?

CW: I will say initially it was the old concept that you realize that you can be gone in a second and that you smell the roses and that you appreciate life and everybody a lot better. That was true but of course we have short memories sometimes and we fall back into the old lackadaisical ways sometimes of not really appreciating what’s going on. Fortunately, I kick-start myself back into that mode every now and then and I appreciate it. I saw things that I will never forget especially with children and civilians
and devastation and smells and sights. I haven’t forgotten and I’m not sorry that I saw
those. In fact, I think as a result of seeing those, I’ve been a little bit more compassionate,
conservative type person. I think I’ve appreciated things a lot more. In business, I’m not
as aggressive as some people would have liked to see me because I enjoy just, if I can get
by, I’m okay. If I can get in the woods and go hunting a little bit or catch a fish, that is as
important to me as winning some type of award. I felt like in my military career later on
as I moved up in rank and as I got into the Reserves and was more associated with the
ground side of the Marine Corps, that it was a tremendous plus because I could talk with
the young men and women and the Marines and impart to them some of what the aviation
and the wing side was all about and dispel some rumors and establish some liaison. I
think that has been a strength to me in my life.

RV: Do you suffer any disabilities from your service in Vietnam?
CW: No. No.
RV: Have you ever suffered any posttraumatic stress disorder incidents, anything
like that?
CW: I don’t think I could ever have been diagnosed with that. I think many of us
when we first came back from Vietnam were extremely anxious about things. I must
admit, even going home, there was a long time you slept with a weapon under your bed
or under your pillow. Every little noise or backfire or something of this nature, someone
sneaked up behind you or if you encountered someone and surprised them. But I think
that was just normal, just natural. I don’t think there was anything abnormal or psychotic
or mental in nature.

RV: Have you read any good books on Vietnam that you would recommend or
do you read about the Vietnam War?
CW: I read about the Vietnam War. I watch a lot of documentaries and things of
this nature, but not so many novels or anything of this nature, but maybe articles here and
there.

RV: Right. How about Vietnam movies? Do you go see those?
CW: Yeah. I went to see the Rambo series and I went to see one that I thought
was absolutely ridiculous was Apocalypse Now. I would not go see the The Fourth of
July. I still won’t, Born on the Fourth of July.
RV: Why not?

CW: First of all, I realize the agenda of the producer and extremely liberal, anti-war really. You knew it was going to come out in that. There’s certain things you just don’t want to subject yourself to because your blood pressure will go up and you’ll get so mad and you take it out on somebody else. You’re just better off not putting yourself in that environment.

RV: How about the more recent movies on Vietnam such as *We Were Soldiers*?

CW: I haven’t seen that, but I understand that that was fairly—I saw *Full Metal Jacket* and that type of thing.

RV: What did you think about the first part of *Full Metal Jacket*, the Marine Corps boot camp at Paris Island? Was that—?

CW: That was pretty good. It was pretty traditional. It kind of reminded me of old Jack Webb, DI type thing. I can pretty much, although I didn’t go through the Marine Corps boot camp per se. I went to Navy boot camp and Marine OCS, I ended up as the Assistant Depot Inspector of Paris Island as a reservist which was a full time active duty job. As a result, all the drill instructors were reported to our office any type of infraction. So I got to see everything, night and day and all hours. I have a great appreciation of the Marine Corps boot camp as it exists. There were some literary—I guess there was a little bit of extra information that was put in that that probably wasn’t completely accurate, but that was fine.

RV: What do you think of Vietnam today, the country?

CW: Well, it’s amazing isn’t it? I mean, by gosh. This is where I back up and say, “Well, Neil, you weren't right on everything.” One, I think that South Vietnam, even though it’s part of Vietnam proper is still maintained out of a separate identity from the North. It’s almost like Hong Kong is to China. There are a lot of things you can do in Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang that you can't do in Hanoi.

RV: Have you been back over?

CW: No, I haven’t.

RV: Would you want to?

CW: I have thought about it. Several friends of mine have actually conducted tours and people that I knew that are a part of a guides or agencies that go over and take
military people back to various bases and things of this nature. Yeah, I would like to go. In fact, I would like to go to the Marble Mountain facility, actually to the Marbles which were supposedly some Pagodas and shrines and temples and things because we found out later on that they were just honeycomb with tunnels. They were actually right outside the base as part of the radio and command and control facility for the enemy. I would love to see those parts, but I don’t know if they’re open. I would love to go back and see if the Sacred Heart Orphanage is even there. I’d like to go to Hue and Phu Bai and Hoi An and a lot of places, but don’t know if I ever will.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese in the United States?
CW: I see them everywhere I go in the barbershops and a lot of places in some of the larger cities. I admire them. I admire the tenacity of immigrants, especially Asian immigrants from not only Vietnam but Thailand and Cambodia and how they can come over here without any language skills or training at all as far as in our technical world, carve out a niche for themselves and make a living and become tax paying productive members of society while we have our own individuals in this country that just can't seem to make it work and they have all the things going for them. I really admire them. I understand that we are starting to enter into trade agreements and commercial agreements with Vietnam. In fact, I had a shirt on the other day and I looked at it and it said, “Made in Vietnam.” I said, “My God. I thought this was made in communist China.” But it’s just amazing. It’s not quite unlike I guess Japan and Germany, but it seems that every time we fight a war, we end up indirectly or directly helping the vanquished and in this case, the people we didn’t even vanquish. But I don’t know what is going to happen in the Muslim part of the world. That’s a whole different world.

RV: What do you think were the myths or the misconceptions or the misperceptions of the American soldier in Vietnam or the Vietnam veteran?
CW: Of the veterans?
RV: Yes, sir.
CW: Well, I think that there’s almost two tiers. You had the conscript, the young man that went kicking and dragging and screaming to Vietnam who didn’t have the best training as far as discipline is concerned in boot camp that was rushed through that didn’t want to be there that formed little cliques with others just like himself. Every fear was
multiplied and duplicated. Actually a lot of them came to fruition simply because they
made them come to fruition from night ambushes to going on patrols to things of that
nature simply because they weren't doing what they should. I have to say that that was
not so much in the Marine Corps side, but I'm being realistic now. Then you have those
young men and women who went to Vietnam who were trained correctly, had good
leadership, had been taught the history of the Corps or the Army or the service or
whatever and the proud traditions and history. They went over there anticipating things to
go along just like they did in World War II and that we would move from point A to
point B and the people would be glad to see us. They were extremely disappointed and
disillusioned about half way through realizing, “What’s going on? Something’s not right.
We’ve been here before three times,” this type of thing. I think following the conflict,
there was a real myriad of types of attitudes from those who said, “I don’t care how long
I’m supposed to stay. I’m home and I’m ready to go. I’m not going to do anything. You
can put me in the stockade. I don’t care because I didn’t want to be here in the first
place,” to those that wanted to stay and had really gotten involved in the military and
done a good job. Then they were told they had to get out because we were cutting the
military down to a third of the size that it was before. I even saw some very strange
circumstances. For example, we had a tremendous number of young soldiers that went
through the warrant officer program. Several of them had been spec 5s or sergeants and
gone into the warrant officer program. A lot of them had entered directly out of high
school or college into the warrant officer program. Many of them had seven, eight, nine
years, done a great job in the Army, were well trained and qualified helicopter pilots and
that was their life. All of a sudden the United States Army says, “We’re going to cut our
forces in half.” Many of these people were getting basically the equivalent of a pink slip,
telling them they had to go home. That was a real tough situation when you feel like
you’re making sacrifices and giving it your all. Then you decided, “Hey, I think I want to
stay,” and then you're told to go home. I saw one situation where the Air Force had a
procedure—and all of the services had a procedure of making your next rank, temporary
rank. Then later on you were given a permanent rank as far as the commissioned officers
were concerned. It wasn’t unusual to make captain and see your name on the temporary
captain list. Then maybe a year later, you’d get a letter saying your rank had been made
permanent. But the Air Force, in their zeal to build up to the number of personnel that
they needed on a very fast track and they had to grow real fast, they would actually have
temporary temporary promotions. For example, a young captain might make temporary
major and before he ever became a permanent major, he made temporary temporary
lieutenant colonel. At the end of the war, when the TO, Tables and Organization numbers
were drastically cut, they hardly made any of the temporary promotions permanent right
then. To stay for twenty years in the service as an officer, you had to at least make major.
So you had some guys with sixteen years in the service that were temporary temporary
lieutenant colonels and temporary majors. When the permanent major board came out,
their name was not on it. So all of the sudden they reverted back to captain and then were
told they were going to have to get out. We had a particular case over here at Seymour
Johnson’s I believe where a couple two or three of these temporary temporary lieutenant
colonels sued the government and said, “We don’t want to get out.” They worked out a
plea bargain agreement. They were actually allowed to revert to E-4s and stay the next
four years in the Air Force as enlisted E-4s. However, the rules say, “When you retire
from military service, you can retire at the highest rank you ever held.” They said, “Okay,
we’ll take our wings off and our wives will go back teaching school and we’ll stay as E-
4s. Four years from now I’m going to retire as a lieutenant colonel.” That was some
tough things going on during that period of time. It really was.

RV: Do you think the United States government has taken care of its Vietnam
veterans?

CW: That’s a hard one. I think that they’re by and large I think that they’ve done
a fairly good job when you look at the other periods of time in our history. I think sure we
could have done a better job. There seems to be, depending upon who’s giving numbers,
a tremendous number of Vietnam veterans who are destitute or in medical need or
homeless or whatever you want to say. But then again, I think that’s a lot from the two-
year draftees that didn’t want to go in the first place and they are using that more as a
crutch. I think they would have been in the same situation whether or not they had been
to Vietnam. But that’s always a rallying point, “Hey, I’m a Vietnam vet because I’m
homeless. Of course, I’ve been homeless for twenty years and only in the last fourteen
which had nothing to do with Vietnam.” They use that pretty heavily. But still, I think our
Veteran’s Administration needs to be overhauled as well as our entire medical situation in this country. Of course I have some ideas on that, but that’s another story.

RV: Let me pause for a moment so we can change out this disc.

CW: All right.

RV: Okay, continuing now. Let me ask you about the younger generation of Americans today, high school students, college students. To them, the Vietnam War happened a long, long time ago and their knowledge base is sparse. What would you say to the younger generation today if you had to tell them about the Vietnam War?

CW: That’s kind of interesting because I have worked with one of our local high schools, Hoggard High School, with the Junior ROTC since 1976. I have actually been volunteering, working with them. I’ve taken them to Puerto Rico and Corpus Christi and a lot of places around. In talking with their friends and others, it’s amazing because they can’t tell you where Vietnam came before World War II or after World War II. They just have no idea. Plus all the other battles that we’ve been involved in from Panama to Grenada and El Salvador and Nicaragua and some of the stuff we did in Angola. They have no idea, obviously. It’s amazing. What you have to do with young people, I wish we did a better job with military history as well as history and geography anyway, but we don’t. I just think where we’re missing the boat with young people today is trying to do things that instill some type of admiration for this country, for the military and patriotism for what’s happening now. We really can’t do a whole lot with them about things in the past. When they do ask, I try to just speak to them as an individual who has been there and make sure they realize that the United States was trying to do a good job, was trying to help someone that we had an agreement with and with any limitations, because that was a very special time and a very special time when our politicians couldn’t quite agree on what we wanted to do, but we just did the best we could with what we had to work with. Not too many questions are asked anymore on that level. They start asking me about Gulf War I more than anything else.

RV: Have you ever been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.?

CW: Yes, I did. Actually, it was an afterthought. I happened to be up one night at Kennedy Center to see a concert with the Marine Corps band. President Reagan was the guest of honor that night. I remember because he came in with the commandant. He was
supposed to stay for the first half and then leave. He changed his plans and stayed for the whole thing. So we couldn’t leave until his entourage left. I was wondering around at twelve o’clock at night and just wandered over to the Wall. It was a very moving experience to be there at midnight walking around kind of by yourself around town in Washington and looking at it. Of course, I’ve had the chance to see the replica of the moving wall down in Pensacola couple of times when we had reunions down there. But I do know several names there on that wall.

RV: What kind of experience was it for you?

CW: It makes you feel like you walked into a very—I don’t know—a very special place that you’re kind of surrounded by spirits, surrounded by an aura that you realize each person identifies in a different way with it. It’s almost as if you can put your hand on the wall and transport yourself back to particular points in time. You can actually—it could be a hundred degrees down in Escambia County, Florida, and all of a sudden you feel a chill run down the back of your back. I don’t know. It’s really kind of a spiritual thing.

RV: Well, sir, is there anything else that you’d like to talk about that we have not covered in this interview?

CW: No, not a whole lot other than one thing. From a Marine standpoint that not only in the Vietnam War, but later on as I progressed even from the battalion and the regiment and MEB (Marine Expeditionary Brigade) level that we are so tied, so close with our Navy brethren that I just don’t believe that anybody that is not in the Marines or was not in the Navy that was working with the Marine Corps can really understand that special relationship between what we call the green and the brown or the Navy. Our corpsmen, our chaplain, our doctors, our dental techs, all of those people who I’m sure, when they joined the Navy, had no idea that they were going to end up wearing camouflage utilities and be running around with a bunch of Marines and doing things, have just absolutely added a whole new dimension to my experience in the military. I am very, very proud of all of them. Now I have two son-in-laws that are in the Navy and a daughter that was in the Navy. I remember when an old acquaintance, Mr. Webb, became Secretary of the Navy for a short period of time. He had on his door up in Washington, D.C. that, “I’m Secretary of the Navy and Marine Corps.” He was the only one that ever
did that. But anyhow, you probably know him. But that’s it, just give due to the people that have really earned the praise and the glory. From my whole experience, once again, the people that I admire more than anybody else, other than the individual snuffy, the individual grunt on the ground carrying the rifle, doing the job, were the Dustoff pilots and the Army and the Jolly Green pilots and the Air Force and those young Marine aviators who flew the CH-46s and the OH-34s that just put everything on the line just to go in and get guys out that without them wouldn’t be here today. A lot of them went into pretty near certain harm’s way. I mean, they knew that they probably had no more than a fifty-fifty chance of coming out and they never hesitated. They just went right on. That’s why we’re here today because people did it in the Korean War. They did it in World War II. They did it in World War I and Lord knows even during the Civil War. I can only imagine the anxiety that those guys had with what they had to put up with. I appreciate you giving me a call, Richard.

RV: Well, thank you very much for participating in the Oral History Project. We’ll go ahead and end the interview now. Thank you, sir.