Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Ted Cook on the 2nd of October, 1999 in Las Vegas, Nevada at 3:00 in the afternoon. Mr. Cook, if you would, give us a brief biographical sketch of yourself.

Ted Cook: Okay. I’m 57 years old. I’m retired from the United States Army, retired in 1988, born and raised in Arizona, born in July of 1942 at Grand Canyon. I come from a family of park rangers so that’s the Grand Canyon Association. School in Arizona, went to elementary, high school, and college, college being the University of Arizona. Entered the Army in January of 1965 from the University of Arizona and again retired in January of 1988.

SM: What was the reason for your joining the military? How did you get into the military, how did you get commissioned?

TC: Started my freshman year in 1960 at the University of Arizona. All incoming male freshman had to take two years of ROTC. The University of Arizona is a land grant college, part of the land grant college system and that was one of the requirements of the time that all males would take it, mandatory ROTC training for two years. We had a choice of Air Force ROTC or Army ROTC and I took Air Force ROTC the first year. Kind of looked over at the other side of the drill field and saw that the Army ROTC guys kind of fit who I was, what I wanted to do and my interests, so I changed to Army ROTC my sophomore year and continued on. I discovered I liked it. I didn’t like the teachers, I liked my classmates and so at the end of my sophomore year
I entered [?UTA or UOA] and opted to go on to what they called Advanced ROTC, I think it was called at the time.

SM: And from ROTC you were commissioned and then went into the basic school when? Officer basic course?

TC: Yes, I went…of course took the Advanced ROTC training my junior and senior year. I did very well at it and was commissioned a distinguished military graduate which meant I was offered a regular Army commission. I took it. I was advised correctly at the time, I think by my instructor, to take that and did and then Arizona had a history of cavalry back in the 1930s, ‘40s, and even in the ‘20s it had been one of the two universities in the system that had cavalry, I think the other one being Yale or Harvard, I think. Of course then the cavalry association had translated into armor, it had evolved in armor so there was armor, armored cavalry association at the school, there was big interest in that. The armor instructors were dashing and flamboyant, et cetera, and I opted to take that. It came down from that and armor…and infantry, and I took a regular Army commission in armor.

SM: When you were in school later, the last two years, it was obvious things were kind of picking up in Vietnam. Was there a lot of discussion about Vietnam in your college or amongst the student body?

TC: Not amongst the student body, very little, but there was some amongst the instructors, the ROTC instructors and they began, at that time, to begin to try and educate us. A couple of them had been early on advisors who had been there and come back and so there was some discussion, considerable when I think about it because it was where we had really the only shooting war at the time going on. Keep in mind, though, this was also in the early ‘60’s, the height of the cold war, and there was also an awful lot of discussion about a Europe…this was during the, we had the Bay of Pigs took place during that time and the Berlin Wall took place during that time, so there were, there was a great deal of focus, and rightly so I might say, on U.S. Army Europe.

SM: Was there, when you mentioned the advisors, were there specific things that your ROTC instructors would discuss about the American advisory effort and the difficulties of being an American advisory there, or what kinds of things…

TC: Not really at that time. It was more of a general strategic, a, ‘Gentlemen, here’s what’s happening in this country, here’s where I have just come from,’ or ‘Here’s where…’ not
where you are going to be going, it was not assumed that we would go soon because all the
advisors at that time were senior NCOs and these were all captains and majors, back in the days
where it took several years to make that. But, it was just, ‘This is a place we may want to keep
our eyes on. This may be something that it’s bigger than it is.’ But they did not, at that point,
get into…we did not get into tactical discussions or training discussions or that. ‘Okay, here’s
what’s happening. Communism is spreading. Here’s what we’re doing. We’re helping the
Vietnamese,’ et cetera. More strategic in that nature.

SM: Than Cold War focused? Again, this is part of the Cold War, the fight against
communism.

TC: Yeah, there was a linkage, a definite linkage there.

SM: Was there concern as far as your instructors were concerned, about direction of
what was happening in Vietnam from other communist countries whether it be the Soviet Union
or People’s Republic of China? Did they emphasize that factor?

TC: I don’t recall them being that…I don’t recall them getting into that, into the geo-
political type of discussions, but more, ‘Hey, this is a place where you may find yourself as an
Army officer.’

SM: Okay. So how was OBC and armor officer basic course? How was that training?
Where did you conduct that training?

TC: Ft. Knox. I went to…seems I was commissioned in January headed for Ft. Knox,
Kentucky, and the training at Ft. Knox was totally oriented towards Europe and of course
number one that you’re taking a lot of very junior, very young, very inexperienced officers in
their first experience teaching them about the hardware. We had learned a lot about infantry or
light weapons, infantry hardware in ROTC summer camp, but here at the basic course at Knox
they began to teach us about the tank, and began to teach us about tank tactics, and also armored
cavalry, armored cavalry tactics; mortars, et cetera. So then, we were very much more
equipment oriented down there.

SM: Was that good training? Did you get a lot of good experiences?

TC: I thought it was good training. Yeah, I thought it was really quite good training, all
things being considered. To be very honest, I’ll add a little caveat. I’ve never been in love with
a tank, and yet here I was a careered armored officer so perhaps I didn’t apply myself as much as
I should have. I enjoyed the small unit or the light cavalry type of training. But the training, yes,
was quite good. The instructors were professional, and it was good. Again, totally oriented
towards Europe. Keep in mind, this was 1965.

SM: Now, the Gulf of Tonkin has already happened. Are your instructors talking about
Vietnam and are any of the instructors at armor OBC Vietnam veterans as advisors or whatever?

TC: I don’t recall a lot of them at Knox being veterans. Now at Benning, I think they
were talking about it, I think. My guess is they were talking about it a lot more than they were at
Knox. I know I tried at Ft. Knox as a 2nd lieutenant to volunteer for Vietnam. I wanted to go. I
sat down and wrote a letter to…when they came to interview you from the branch, they’d come
down and say, ‘Okay, now where do you want to go? What are your choices?’ et cetera. I put
my first choice as Vietnam. I still have the letter back in my files from the [?] branch chief or
assistant branch chief saying, ‘Hey, that’s well and good. However, we feel, as a regular armor
officer, Lt. Cook needs to go to Europe and learn his trade. There will be ample time for him to
get involved in Vietnam.’ I thought there was some insight in that and I still have that letter,
‘…there will be ample time for him to get involved in Vietnam.’ The thinking was, ‘Go to
Europe and learn your trade, son.’ If you’re going to be an armored officer, you’ve got to go to
Europe.

SM: And therefore be prepared for the communist, the Soviet onslaught through the
folded gap and all that, through central Europe. That was the major emphasis?

TC: Yeah.

SM: So after your armor basic course, where did you go?

TC: Went to Germany. Went to the 24th infantry division…well, first I went to jump
school. I attended jump school at Ft. Benning because again, at that time, regular Army officers
were supposed to go to ranger and airborne school, so I was signed up to both, eager to go to
both. Went to Benning, went to ranger school…correction, went to jump school, was all
scheduled for ranger school and they made some kind of a, some kind of a change happened in
between the time I got started in jump school and the time I graduated. Well, all of the West
Point graduates are required to take jump and ranger school, so my slot got taken up. This was
all second or third hand, I don’t recall quite how it happened but I know that all of a sudden the
slots of all of us who were slated for ranger school that summer, somebody said, ‘Nope. You’re
cancelled. We’re going to send you to Europe,’ because those slots were filled with the West
Point class.
SM: Did that create any kind of animosity or concern that West Pointers...was that a concern for you as a junior grade officer, the fact that West Pointers might be getting preferential treatment?

TC: Oh, they always did. Hands down, there was absolutely no doubt. It didn’t create a great concern for me because I felt confident that I could compete with them and do well out there and West Pointers that I knew, I liked and were good guys. It wasn’t their fault, it was the system. But absolutely, and again, the emphasis now was beginning, it was...I think about it, people were beginning to think more about Vietnam saying, ‘Okay, here are the classes.’ This would have been the class of ’65 just coming out. ‘We better get these guys squared away. We’ve got to send them to jump school, ranger school,’ because at that time, the thinking was that was more of a ranger infantryman’s training. But anyway, I guess the long and the short of it is that I did not go to ranger school. I went to jump school and then headed off for Germany.

SM: Okay, and your first unit assignment was?

TC: 24th Infantry Division, 2nd Squadron, 9th Cavalry, platoon leader in B Troop.

SM: And what was the training like that you received in Germany?

TC: Really, very good. We were constantly in the field. There was a cav troop, a cav unit, cav squadron in the division. Again, keep in mind that this was, that the time frame, lots and lots of training, constantly in the field. We also had a border mission and spent a lot of time on the Czech border. We were constantly patrolling the Czechoslovakian border, not just our unit but others, and the East German/West German border, so I learned how to read a map, learned a lot about equipment, but also began to learn an awful lot about troop leading and working long hours, hard hours with young soldiers and NCOs.

SM: How did those experiences prepare you for Vietnam? You talk about the troop leading aspect, was there any particular experiences early in your career, especially that first assignment, that were really important in how you became a commander or how you developed into a commander, especially for Vietnam?

TC: I don’t say especially for Vietnam. I think it was just, you learned to do that. We weren’t focusing on anyone, just those experiences helped me in general begin to learn my trade as an Army officer and a troop leader, which in turn did have carry over when I got to Vietnam.

SM: What were the greatest lessons from that? What were the best lessons from that first experience for you?
TC: That this was fun. To be honest, I said it was fun. It was fun to go out and challenge yourself and bring others with you to do things that none of you thought you could do and you didn’t want to do or you were too tired to do. I guess probably my greatest lesson was yeah, you can by a variety of techniques, most of them hopefully positive, can bring folks to do things that they do not wish to do or do not want to do. By virtue of your own example can do that, but you have to know your trade as well.

SM: You went from Germany back to the United States?

TC: Yes. I went back there to Ft. Willis, Washington. At that point now Vietnam had changed. The focus on Vietnam within a year time changed rapidly. We had the Goldwater/Lyndon Baines Johnson election. Was that right? No. I guess we…yes we did. That would have been, I’m thinking the Kennedy assassination…

SM: ’63, ’64 right?

TC: And then LBJ ran in his own right and Goldwater ran against him. LBJ won, and then there seemed to be immediate focus and buildup for units going to Vietnam where they then pulled hundreds if not thousands of us out of Germany to go open training centers to begin training young draftees and they were filling up divisions getting ready to head for Vietnam. So I headed for Ft. Willis, Washington.

SM: And what did you do there?

TC: I was a training officer. I was the executive officer for what they called the special training company at Ft. Willis.

SM: And you focused on training enlisted men, officers, both?

TC: Enlisted men, and the special training company took, at that point, hundreds of thousands of draftees, young draftees were coming in through all over. Training centers popped up all over the country. People were coming into the country to be trained keep in mind the draft, we still had a draft then, and they would take their basic training, it was basic training…(phone rings)…worth maybe a minute or two to talk about. And so they had these dozens of companies, basic training companies, that would crank out basic training and then when they were finished they would ship off to wherever, whether they went to infantry, armor, artillery, et cetera for advanced infantry training. But many of these youngsters at this, now let me back up just a little bit. Because they did not, and I think historical record will write this out, we did not call up any National Guard or reserve units so there were…those numbers had to be
increased by much larger increases in draftees who did not meet at that point the original requirements. So, under the directing of I believe Secretary McNamara, at least we called...these groups got to be called McNamara’s 100,000. He lowered the...I won’t say the standards were lowered, both physical and the mental standards were lower and so 100,000 additional troops who would not have made it came in. A lot of these youngsters then began flunking out of basic training and then they were recycled and they would be recycled and recycled and it was tough on them. I always felt, I’m not sure which is right, but anyway we set up a special training company where we would take these youngsters who were flunking out of basic training primarily at this point for physical reasons and give them additional physical training. We watched their diets closer, a lot of coaching, a lot of counseling. I was selecting because I had been an athlete in college and it was shown on my record that I’d been a coach, et cetera, and got tapped to come over there. Later on we also began to develop extra classes. We had two groups, we had the groups who were having difficulties for physical reasons and difficulties with kids who couldn’t pass the written exams who couldn’t read. Essentially, what it boiled down to was could not read so we taught reading and taught basic math skills to be an artillery man or to even do anything like that, so we began to do that and that’s where the special training came in. Excellent, great youngsters I thought. I had those who’d been dealt bad deals, bad, bad card hands their whole lives and they got drafted and couldn’t get through basic training and rather than be released they were recycled, and many of them went on. We got many of them out and through the system. Of course, they all went in the infantry units, most of them, and went overseas, but anyway that’s what I did and I have to say I enjoyed the association in working with the troops although I always felt a little bad for them.

SM: Did you ever come into contact with any of them in Vietnam?

TC: I did not, but I have a couple of letters that several of them, 1 or 2 wrote me months or within the year, who went on to graduate there and I have one that I think I...I hope I saved it, it’s somewhere in a box. I had a young man who wrote me the day he graduated from jump school that he had made it through and, ‘Dear Lt. Cook, you won’t believe this, but...’ or something to that effect, and, ‘Thank you for your help,’ kind of thing. That needs to be, that whole thing, those McNamara’s 100,000 or that group of kids, that group of youngsters, that needs to be historically looked at. That’s another editorial comment of my escape.
SM: I think you’re right. I’ve heard it mentioned before but I don’t think there’s any major studies about this. What did you do after your training?

TC: I went to flight school. By now, with each month, Vietnam is really cranking up. I mean, it’s on the news, people are excited about it. They sent the 4th Infantry Division to Vietnam which was at Ft. Lewis, they sent the 101st which was out of Campbell, the 9th Division is down and divisions are being plucked out of the United States and headed for Vietnam so all of a sudden we all know that’s where we are going. I’d always wanted to fly, always liked flying, I thought that I would and all of a sudden calls went out for people to volunteer for flight school so I did and went to flight training.

SM: Was it difficult to get into flight school?

TC: Not really. I had the class 1 physical. I was in good shape fortunately and my health was good. I had good eyesight, so I passed the physical.

SM: Was the flight school…

TC: And there were a lot of slots then. It had been difficult in the early ‘60s to get into flight school because there weren’t many slots. It was not hard because there were lots open.

SM: And this was good training as well, flight school?

TC: Excellent. Yeah, the training of flying an aircraft was superb and the tactical training that they gave us, that was probably as good a military training as I’ve ever received was in flight school.

SM: When you go through flight school, are you all trained on the same aircraft and then eventually selected to fly different kinds of aircraft? How does that work? For instance, how do you become a cobra pilot versus a huey pilot versus a LOHs pilot?

TC: The way it worked then is that you started out in basic flight training. You had a choice, well, just by luck of the draw we had the H23 hillier helicopters for a large number of the classes and then Hughes began building a thing called the TH55, T meaning for a trainer. So my classmates, I was on a hillier which was an older, and it was in fact an Army helicopter which was in the inventory, but at the same time these TH55s began to arrive and they were not a tactical aircraft, they were strictly a training aircraft so a lot of the students took the training. Then when we went to Rucker we transitioned into the Huey. At that point, we did almost all of our training in the Huey. Then, when you finished at Rucker, then depending on the type of unit that you had orders to, some people stayed on for additional training in gun ships. The cobra was
not in the inventory at the time, it was beginning to come but some stayed on for an extra week or two of gun ship training. But, you went to your unit and then took unit training for scout helicopter or for a higher model for a delta model huey or for a charlie model gun ship or for an H13 or for the OH6 LOHs.

SM: And what aircraft did you specialize in?

TC: I got tapped to become the service platoon leader of delta troop. The maintenance and all that came, so I got to fly them all. But, I got to take unit training. I did not go to any special schools, but I flew the Charlie model gun ship and the OH6 and the huey but I was because of that particular job.

SM: So after you finished flight school, where did you go?

TC: Ft. Hood, Texas. That’s where Delta Troop, 1st Cavalry was forming up. It had been the air cavalry troop of the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry which was the cavalry squadron of the 1st Armored Division. The cavalry squadron minus 3rd Cavalry Troop had already deployed to Vietnam. It was the only unit of the 1st Armored Division to deploy to Vietnam as part of Task Force Oregon and they were located down south of us so I never had any association with this squadron.

SM: And this is the unit that you went to Vietnam with?

TC: Right. Formed up with a unit, and we can maybe digress for a minute, I think we began to learn, the Army began to learn again that that probably is the best way. I did not go there as a replacement. I went to a place where a unit… we literally, we had no equipment and very few people. We all kind of came in over a period of one or two months, formed those bonds, began to train, began to learn about one another, learn about our equipment, learn about what we were going to do, did that at it was then called Killeen Base or Grey Army Air Field out of Ft. Hood.

SM: Your rotation into Vietnam was as a whole unit?

TC: As a whole unit, just like the banshees when they came in and you can see it I think with the relationships that are still there. You know, out there there was a group that was formed up and went as a whole there.

SM: Well that brings up the whole issue of rotation and the rotation policy in Vietnam, 365 days, the individuals coming in, the individuals leaving. So from your experience, this
obviously this unit movement, this unit rotation added unit cohesion, added morale, increased those factors?

TC: Oh absolutely, unit cohesion, morale, and I think maybe…and those, see, then make it much safer. And then you read the World War II histories of replacement troops coming into units that were already there that were being piped in one and two and three at a time that would arrive at midnight and be dead at 6 o’clock in the morning. People never knew their name, they had nobody to watch out for them and that also happened in Vietnam. People would come in in 1s and 2s. So yes, I think the obviously coming in as a unit, however small, it’s much better than coming in as an individual.

SM: How did your unit integrate replacements? Once you were in Vietnam you took losses and you needed men to replace those losses. How did you integrate those losses…those replacements for those losses?

TC: The 101st had a thing called SERTs, Screaming Eagle Replacement Teams or something like that, no, it was training, Screaming Eagle Replacement Training and so the youngsters coming in, enlisted men coming in, would go to this SERTs training for a week or two and get indoctrinated and so they would arrive a unit at least already wearing the 101st patch knowing a little bit about the unit’s history, knowing a little bit about this is a mortar, this is a pungee stick, this is, you know, those kinds of things. They weren’t absolutely green to be possibly ridiculed or kidded or that sort of thing by the old timers although we did a little bit of that in a good natured way. I can’t remember whether the pilots, either the warrant officers or the officers, went through that SERTs training or not, I don’t remember, but they would come in. I know that the squadron, though, went out of it’s way to try and make sure that when replacements did come in that they were welcomed correctly and made to feel a part of the unit as much as they could and I could remember being, when I commanded B Troop on one or two occasions having a helicopter land and one or two scared looking young soldiers get off who were replacements joining us in the field. We always, and the whole unit did, it wasn’t because of anything I did, I inherited the, if you will, the culture of the whole unit really tried to bond very quickly rather than, ‘Oh here’s a bunch…a new guy,’ or ‘Here’s a bunch of new guys,’ or whatever. It was, ‘Hey, how do you do?’ Or, ‘Come on, let me introduce you to some guys you’re going to get to know kind of quick,’ so I don’t know whether that was unique with squadron; I tend to doubt it. I think 101st tried really hard to try to rotate new troops in very well.
The whole policy, though, of going in for a year, coming out for a year, I think history will show and already has shown that that was not the best way to man, units to fight that war.

SM: You think the duration of policy of fighting for the duration of the war would have been better?

TC: Probably not for the duration, but not an automatic leave, you know, where you count the days, 365 days from when you come in. A year’s time is too short. You had constant turnover. You know, every month, every day, you had people coming, people leaving, which does break down, I think, some of the bonds of the units so some kind of way of rotating in and out like packages like the CBs or Marines do it. Come in, you’re going to work, maybe you’re there for a year as a group but then another unit comes in. Are you there for a year and a half or two years? I think a year’s a little short, especially for the leadership, the NCOs and the officers, consequently it was too short and the experiences and the leadership was not as good as it should have been and there were soldiers that have suffered from that.

SM: So your unit from Texas, when did it go to Vietnam?

TC: In July of 1968.

SM: July ’68.

TC: I took the advanced party over I think July 10th and I think the rest of the squadron joined us in about July 20th or 23rd, I don’t know those dates but they came a little less than two weeks behind us. I took twelve guys and we went over and met with the squadron and began to figure out, ‘Okay, here’s where we’re going to be, here’s the piece of real estate we have, here’s where we’ll park the hueys, here’s where we’ll park the gun ships,’ et cetera. And making the contacts, and we’re going to need water, all those kind of things in advanced party guys.

SM: What were your unit’s responsibilities in Vietnam? Where did you fit into the higher headquarters picture?

TC: Okay, every division then and I think now, every infantry or armored division has a reconnaissance squadron and reconnaissance squadron normally is an armored cavalry or now an air cavalry squadron and the 2nd and 17th, 2nd Squadron 17th Cavalry was the 101st Division’s reconnaissance squadron and then within the reconnaissance squadron there were troops that was organized into reconnaissance troops A and B Troop and D Troop Air and our mission was eyes and ears of…the primary mission is eyes and ears for the division. But, when you think about it, the concept was built around a European type war where you’re moving the contact, where you
have flank guards, where you have advanced guards, where you have a rear guard, those kinds of things. In Vietnam the role was similar but modified. We would go out and try to find the enemy and then the rest of the division then decides what they’re going to do with them. That was the pure mission. Often times we were used as infantry to go out and work with the infantry, to get it with…after we had found what we had found. The eyes and ears part. We didn’t have to do a lot of flank guarding for the division or advanced guarding or rear guarding or anything.

SM: Did you find that your experiences in Europe and your training regarding the European style of war, the European expectation of war, that that was less useful or less relevant for Vietnam?

TC: No, I found it relevant and I’ve gotten into discussions, and in some respects, arguments. The European, from my type of training, the European experience taught us to look a little bit beyond the immediate and look at the bigger picture just a little bit. Take instead of looking at 10 square meters of ground or 100 square meters or thinking in terms of 100 yards, think in terms of 1000 yards. So look a little bit bigger, and I found that seemed to help me and help those of us who had that experience or those who did not have that experience who immediately got involved in what’s happening right here around us and think, ‘Wait a minute, there’s something over here,’ or, ‘There’s something over here which might be further away that could come and bite us.’ So I found that training, in that regard, some of the Vietnam training maybe was a little too focused in my mind.

SM: So you didn’t have any problems with the tactics, with the strategy in Vietnam?

TC: Uh uh.

SM: You didn’t see any major problems with the way the war was conducted?

TC: Well I saw a lot of problems as a young captain with the way his superiors conducted the war. You bet, saw a lot of that as I’m sure a lot of my troops probably saw a lot of problems with the way I conducted my little war. But no, I learned the tactics of fighting in an air cavalry or an armored cavalry unit, those kind of tactics of fighting in the Vietnam war are tactics you would use a lot of places. You have to modify it, but these...

SM: What were the most significant experiences that you had during your tour in Vietnam with your unit? Any significant engagements, significant operations? What were the most important ones that you recall?
TC: You know, the time that I was there from July to ’68 from July to ’69 was probably one of the quietest times in I corps. TET of ’68 had absolutely decimated the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in that area. They absolutely were defanged. Now that didn’t mean they couldn’t fight a little bit and we got into some scrapes but we got into no scrapes while I was there that would be considered anything like TET of ’68 or other fights. So, we had some little fights and took some casualties but I don’t recall any horrendous, any life changing experiences. Keep in mind this is what I thought my profession was at this point. I liked kind of what I was doing. I was very interested in trying to be a good cavalry commander and a good cavalry commander was to go out and fight. Not try to just wait for my 365 days to be over. Again, now I don’t criticize anybody who looked that way, again, I had chosen this as a profession and looked at it like that, but we didn’t get into any real big battles. Now, later on B Troop ’68 from the middle of the year on, I say we didn’t get any big battles. That’s not…let me back up. Something happened in May of 1968 called Hamburger Hill. But my role and the role of my unit then, I was no longer commanding B Troop, I was back at the squadron and the 2nd 17th and with the squadron headquarters and the 2nd of the 17th had a role in that but the fighting was not near, I mean, we didn’t get involved in it, our role was different than that, than the 327th Infantry who fought like hell and we saw it from the air, saw it from the side but it didn’t have the significance for me that it had for my friends who were in commanding units on the ground.

SM: What were you doing in the squadron at that time?

TC: I was commanding, when I gave up B Troop in the 2nd of the 17th I came up and took over the command aviation section for the squadron headquarters and was flying primarily with the squadron commander.

SM: You were his pilot?

TC: Uh huh.

SM: Any harrowing experiences there?

TC: Not really. We, you’d asked for a significant…let me back up there as I sit here and think about it. We did get into, in Bravo troop, at that time, got into…I can’t remember the day or week. This would have been in about March or April, we went out and repelled into an LZ and it couldn’t land and that’s what we did was well. That’s one of the things that I had been instrumental in was beginning to work with B troop ground, to begin to learn how to repel out of helicopters so we could go into LZs without having to land and we did that on several occasions
and we went out and B troop had, now this is B troop air, had done…and most of the guys on
that ship had been my ground guys when I was…got shot down and a whole aircraft load of
people were killed and many of them halfway out, halfway down on the roads. Pilot and the
copilot, as it turned out later, we were to get them out later that day. This happened 6:00 in the
morning and we got them by about 6 at night. A big fight evolved there where we ended up with
two or three or four aircraft that were shot down all around that area with various crews and I
went in with several other helicopters at that point and we went in and hovered over them and
threw out ropes and tied them on and pulled them out, the wounded. We pulled out seventeen
wounded or something like that and I remember that as kind of a significant event and we were,
we received some nice accolades for that.

SM: Anything else stand out from your Vietnam experiences?

TC: Lots of little bitty vignettes, Steve. You know, little snapshots, little brushes of this
or that…no personal harrowing experiences there. I remember our first casualty, our first killed
in action, I remember that. I was shocked and frightened and saddened by it but I don’t
remember it as crippling me there. I got over that.

SM: What was the most humorous event that occurred as far as your perspective on
Vietnam while you were serving? The funniest vignette.

TC: Okay, let me think for a moment here. There were several. One of them is one of
our illustrious commanders who will go unnamed for obvious reasons but who liked to talk more
than do, you know. Was one who was the best shot, or had been the toughest, or his first tour
had done this or done that, you know, and we held this person in great awe until we got to
country and then discovered that a lot of that had been promise from hyperbole. But anyway, we
had one of our first rocket attacks that came and he was down in the latrine and the latrines were
pretty crude affairs. Little wooden boxes that had 50-gallon drums cut off underneath, and he
was down there and for some reason some reason some of the guys, and I never did so, would
wear these damn shower shoes, these thongs, you know out there, and he was down there in a
pair of cut off Levi’s and shower shoes, late night, well not late, evening, still dusk down there in
the latrine and a rocket came out and landed right smack next to the latrine. Scared him to death
and the sight of him coming out of there trying to pull up his pants, running in those shower
shoes, and then another one landed not too far behind him but far enough and he stumbled and
fell in gravel, and he skinned his knees and skinned his chest and skinned himself up and then
tried to make sure that he got put in for a Purple Heart for that. I think as the case went, I think he got it and we were all rather…it was humorous, but there’s some black humor in there, too. We were all pissed about that.

SM: I would imagine. Any others? Or maybe I should switch gears. What’s the most heroic thing you saw, the most heroic vignette?

TC: I saw some of…I guess both pilots early on, some of my pilot comrades in delta troop and later on some of the pilots in B Troop Banshee and A Troop and C Troop just doing…and while I was flying the boss around, you know, we would see this. We were either high or low or not necessarily ourselves but could see some pretty good heroics by the pilots, going in and going in to pick up people, or going in to look at things, going in to drop off supplies and that sort of thing under circumstances that were pretty doggone dangerous there. A lot of heroic things though happened daily, when I commanded the troop. Little things. No heroism on my part but a lot on the part of just one buddy looking out for another. A guy stumbling and a buddy grabbing him and helping him up to get him out, not necessarily being shot, but help to get him out of the way. A guy getting a bad letter from home and having a friend come sit down and smoke a cigarette with him. I see that as heroism, that kind of helping your friend make it through the day, make it through the month, make it through the year. I saw a lot of that. Someday I want to sit down and try to write a little bit about that, but it’s funny. You sit here and nothing really jumps out at me as a flag on [? Iraboche] or sadness or even the humor. No one real incident jumps out. I don’t know why.

SM: How about the craziest thing you saw, craziest stunt by a pilot. I mean, I’ve read some stunts that are on the website for the banshees and some of the things some of those pilots did.

TC: Now, by the time the banshees were there I was there in the other unit. I was not one, not a pilot with them, so the funny things that I saw would have been with the delta troop, more with the delta troop and those pilots. I saw during a rocket attack saw a young crew, full crew run down and get in a helicopter that was on my maintenance pad at the time without a tail rotor and tried to start the helicopter and got it cranked up and couldn’t figure out why, every time they’d go to roll the throttle on the helicopter and the helicopter would start to turn, they could not control it with the pedals. Because the damn thing was in maintenance and had no pedal! It happened to be their ship and it was with a unit that the group commander I think set
the wrong tone and he would agree with me. He gave every crew their own aircraft. You know, ‘Okay, this is your aircraft, this is your aircraft, this is your aircraft,’ and there are some good things to that, but when an aircraft went in maintenance then here’s a pilot and copilot down here, ‘God dang it, get that, I want that airplane, you know’ ‘No, why don’t you go fly that one? That one’s good and ready to go.’ ‘No, that’s not mine, I want…’ I want to fly my own airplane. So it happened to be their airplane, they saw the tail rotor, or no tail rotor, ran down there. One of my chief warrant maintenance officer, old crusty as they’re supposed to be and played the role of help. Came and tapped me on the shoulder and he saw this one and he says, ‘Hey, now what’s this? What’s this?’ And it was on PSP so and of course their radios are crackling and people are roaring off to go to war and we’d go out there and get whatever we can and they’re trying to roll that throttle, and the things starts turning, and they’d roll it off. Look at one another, roll that throttle on, it would start to turn, they’d turn the sucker off. We were howling out there watching them. Another thing is some of the stick pilots got a little bit jealous of all of the war that the LOHs and the gun ships got in everyday. They normally just hauled troops in, haul troops out so their platoon leader and two or three others rigged up some kind of bomb, some kind of things to drop and hooked it onto the cargo hook unbeknownst to the troop commander and went out and tried to strafe a target or trying to bomb a target with absolutely zero results and then one of them hung up and wouldn’t drop so they had to fly back in and hover while folks got it off and I think the old man grounded the crew for a day or two, but that held them up for some ridicule.

SM: Did you lose many aircraft?

TC: We did not. Again, this was a time…now when I say we I’m back to my delta troop list and not Bravo troop…where it was relatively quiet. We lost a lot, several, of the O86s. They got shot up and then consequently would crash and crash badly. We lost several of those. We lost maybe one or two gun ships. I don’t remember us losing a huey at the time I was there. We lost one ship, that was when we lost our first pilot, he was killed. He hadn’t been in country four days I don’t think, five days, two weeks, and we went out at night and fortunately met two pilots in the aircraft. They took rounds through the…they saw something out in a rice paddy, flew out to look at it and it turned out to be some kind of an armed squad of probably Viet Cong because most NVA don’t know. They hosed the aircraft down and he took a round in the head. They
would have crashed but the other pilot was able to fly the aircraft back, but in landing it, it was damaged. So long answer, we lost some aircraft but not many.

SM: When LOHs went down, would you generally be able to salvage the crew or if a small bird like that went down did you also end up losing the crew? Would they be killed?

TC: The crew? No. Most of the time, no. We would get the crews out. LOHs were very forgiving and yeah, you hear of lots and lots of helicopters being lost and shot down. In most cases we were able to get the guys. Certainly in my experience, we were able to get the crews out, often times injured. Probably more injured by the crash than by gunfire, although sometimes both but we were able to get them. And, oftentimes then we would go out and salvage the aircraft. That’s what I did and what our platoon did there. We served as alternates to go out and see if we could salvage the aircraft, with oftentimes pretty good results. In fact, most of the pictures I have of aircraft seem to be two or three or four LOHs that are all busted up that we drug into the runway there.

SM: Any other experiences or memories that you’d like to relate about Vietnam?

TC: I guess a lot of memories are really roaring around in my head right now that I hadn’t thought about in a long time. It would be kind of hard for me to catalog them. One incident, a minute ago you asked me one of the things that stood out in my mind when I was commanding B Troop and I’ve thought about this, I’ve talked to a few people about it, not many. I took over command of B Troop and I’d like to think I did a pretty good job. I guess my superiors seem to think that I did. I don’t know, I hope that my soldiers felt that way, I don’t really know although the indications are that most of them did. Again, it was not a…we didn’t get involved in any great things, but anyway I can remember going out and I tried to go out with them and not be a company commander who stayed at home and sent the platoons out. When I had a platoon out, I would normally…I didn’t have any platoon leaders at that time. I had excellent platoon sergeants, superb platoon sergeants, but I would go out with them and I think there’s a role for both an officer and a platoon leader if you will, not a platoon sergeant. It’s unfair to ask the platoon leader or the platoon sergeant, so I would go out and I certainly would go out if I had two platoons. But we started going out, and the troop had not been out for a long time and the Spartan commander, when I took over, I said, ‘One of the things is I want to get you guys out in the field,’ so we were out a lot. I remember really the first real test that I had was late at night. We’d been up for a couple of days. We’d send missions out at night. We’d walk
around and thrash around in the jungle all day and we didn’t sleep much is my point. I can
remember had an ambush set out, way out somewhere and it got blown and I was up the rest of
the night and we did some things and called in artillery and flares and I had a borrowed platoon
leader from another unit who was also out there with part of his platoon and the point is we did
great things I’m told. I was on the radio and we had helicopters finally come in and had lots of
things happening and everybody afterwards said, ‘What a great job you did!’ I went to sleep and
when I had awoken and I can’t remember exactly the circumstances behind it, I cannot
remember, I don’t know why, and I can remember up to it and I can remember people saying,
‘Boy, what a great job you did.’ I can’t remember what went on.

SM: Did the unit that you engaged against, the Viet Cong, NVA…

TC: It was a small little squad coming down the trail, but enough to create a problem for
us and one of the troops out there on the ambush sight went off the deep end and got on the radio
and started calling in and saying, ‘Hey, I see tanks, I see…here they come with flame throwers,
there’s hundreds of them coming in,’ and all of that and trying to keep him calmed down and
keep headquarters calmed down and all, and I did it I guess. But if I go back and try to
restructure what I did, like some people can remember exactly he said, she said, this kind of
thing, I can’t. I don’t remember. Hey, it all worked out and that’s kind of, I guess that’s the
weirdest thing that happened to me in that saddlebag. That was the weirdest thing.

SM: What did you think about the policy of…you mentioned earlier Hamburger Hill and
one of the most controversial things about that particular event was the fact that here we were
just bound and determined to take this piece of real estate and then turned around and left it after
such a huge sacrifice of men. What did you think about that aspect of the war? That there
wasn’t this, and you also mentioned previous wars, World War II, send in these armored forces
and they aren’t just going in to get rid of the enemy forces, they’re taking terrain and once they
move forward that terrain is ours to keep. That didn’t happen in Vietnam. What did you think of
that?

TC: Well, a different war. The terrain to keep was we were moving, in World War II we
were moving east and we didn’t want to move west and once we moved east we didn’t want to
move back. In the Vietnam War there were pieces of terrain but it was not a terrain war. It was
a war for the hearts and minds of a culture, of a people and to give us a chance to make head
rows we had to protect them or destroy or keep the pressure or the extended power of the North
Vietnamese from being able to use their influence and the way, one of the only ways to do that, was to destroy the units that came in. So I am not, although I think perhaps Hamburger Hill, some of the tactics and some of the egos of the commanders involved or the senior commanders and I’m not talking about General [? Zaste] but maybe some of the egos of the commanders probably cost or probably…and I don’t want to accuse them of that, but perhaps maybe should have been fought differently. The basic premise of, ‘That’s where the enemy is, we got to get up there and kill them,’ you know, ‘or destroy that unit,’ that’s okay, and once that was done we really…I think the facts show that we probably did a pretty good job. What would be the use of keeping that hill and then just other units would go on around it. It wasn’t a strategic hill. Were we able to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail? No, not so much there. The reason behind Hamburger Hill is because that’s where the enemy was, much like Robert E. Lee coming across the field at Gettysburg. ‘The enemy is there, that’s where I will strike,’ kind of thing. Now, could we have done it better, differently? Yeah, I think we probably could have. But, that aspect of the war I kind of understand that we had to go out and try and destroy units, not take property. There were no real lines much like you would think of in Europe and the European theater.

SM: What did you think about the emphasis on the statistical aspects of determining whether or not you’re successful by body counts.

TC: Hated it.

SM: And was that heavily emphasized in your unit?

TC: It was, it was. And, I guess I’ve kind of kept that one buried down a little bit, no pun intended here, I’m figurative speaking here. I hated that. I think it was wrong. I think that’s the wrong way. The Vietnam War was violent and there are, but I think there are ethical ways to fight war. There are unethical ways. I can recall an incident early on in my command of bravo troop. We were out on the ground, I think perhaps, and I’m glad I brought this up. I need to ask one of the other 2 bravo troopers who are here about this incident, if he remembers it. We went out and we were on this operation. It was on the ground. We were functioning as infantry primarily and we were out and I recall at about 9 o’clock in the morning where we’d come into this little area and there were obviously some fresh graves there and calling in [?] and back, and the word came back from, you know, the troop called the squadron headquarters, squadron headquarters then would call, if we were working for a brigade and et cetera, well we happened to be working for a brigade in the area and word came back, ‘Dig them up so we can count the
bodies so we can get a body count.’ And I’m a relatively new troop commander, we’re kind of figuring and I said, ‘Ah, what the hell is this? Okay guys, God dang it, here’s the words,’ so we started digging these graves up. Didn’t take long for us all, including me, to be sick and I can remember first we all were disgusted by this and so I said, ‘Guys, stop it. Quit it.’ I called back and gave a number and I’m not proud of that. I’m proud of not making my troops dig those bodies up, but I gave a number, ‘Okay, fine,’ went on. So, we had a body count, or the brigade that we worked for, had a body count of about five or six what have you added to their statistics. The thing is, that had been an engagement. We knew it. Those of us out on the ground knew there’d been an engagement there three or four days before by another unit who’d gone on an ambush, killed three or four or five NVA or Viet Cong soldiers, sometimes it was hard to tell if they weren’t in uniforms, if they were just wearing black pajamas, and they’d been counted then, you know. Then they left, Vietnamese came in and I surround the graves, we come along and dig them up and count them again. I think that was disgusting, I think it was wrong, I think it created a whole list, host of problems as well as being just a damn inaccurate way to try to weigh success. I’m astounded how General Westmoreland allowed for that to happen. I don’t understand how that happened.

SM: Do you think that aspect of the war, later on, had a more negative impact at home, especially when after ’68 Tet Offensive, after Johnson decided not to run for reelection, Nixon comes into power, he makes a decision of Vietnamization, and progressively while that’s happening into the early ’70s it becomes more obvious the American people are losing flavor for the war? Do you think this, such things as body counts, casualties…

TC: Certainly a contributing factor. I think there, and of course people saw it and saw a lot of it, saw it on television and saw the violence and I tend to think, I wonder how we would have handled Omaha Beach had we seen that. How would we have handled Guadal Canal and then how would we have handled Pearl Harbor? I don’t know, so it would have created problems for the commanders, no doubt about it. But, back to Vietnam. Yeah, I think it was certainly a contributing factor of the way we were perceived as soldiers, I think as things we ask soldiers to do, and again I just don’t think it made sense. I don’t know if it was a good statistical measure. It was a bogus statistical measure. It was bogus, everybody knew it was bogus, and yet we went on and did it and that undermined our credibility, the Army’s credibility as well as the politician’s credibility. The Army’s credibility I think was undermined terribly by that but
then we all came home and said, ‘Guess what? This is…’ told our friends, so yeah. That’s an aspect I have great difficulty with.

SM: What are the major lessons you think we should take from the Vietnam War, the Vietnam War experience?

TC: I think we’ve taken some already. I think the Gulf War showed that. The number one lesson is not fight unless we’re ready to really fight, and if we do it, let’s do it with the utmost power that we can bring to bear. Following the concept of the rules of land warfare and ethical warfare and just war, i.e. there is a such thing as the maximum amount of force required but we don’t need to drop…we don’t need to kill gnats with sledge hammers. But, you don’t need to go in there piecemeal I think we did that. We had no clear objectives. I think history has shown that we really did not there. Now, keep in mind, too, I’m only looking at it from not anymore the eyes of a young company commander but as somebody who read a lot about it. When I came home I still had some of these feelings. I was glad to be a soldier, I thought we were doing the right things, but I did not know quite what was our real purpose and was, in fact, communism this great threat? More specific lessons I can give you is a little more training as units and back away from this year in, year out that says everybody has to get a little bit of war experience, otherwise their careers are dead. You know, talking about, now, the career Army where everybody had to have their year and everybody had to have a military side. I’d get away from that. One other point that got away fro me, I forgot what it was.

SM: You mentioned the idea of being proud of what you did. When you were in Vietnam and when you first came back were you proud of the job that the American forces were doing? Did you ever become critical, or were you always…

TC: No, I’ve always been proud of the soldiers did, and we did, I did, and the soldiers did. I think we struggled with some units and I know what the point is that I was going to make is that you’ve got to call up the National Guard and the reserve. You have got to get the society involved and this worries me today that we end up with a military that’s a separate little sub society of the society they are to protect. We become, are we the blue collar soldiers? Are we the warrior ants of this colony but not yet quite good enough to mingle with the rest and only be used when we are there? So no, I think we have to get the whole society involved in a war or in a political act which that is and you cannot do it unless you have all segments of that society involved. Go back to World War II. You have sons of Congressmen, sons of generals, sons of
Supreme Court justices totally involved. Vietnam War they all were able to, who wanted to, were able to run and hide and I find that despicable number one that they would do that but more in the way that I find it, personally is that it hurts our ability to then unite behind what it is we want to do politically and that’s what an Army is and what fighting is all about. It’s an extension of what we want to do in the interest of our country. Where were we? What was the basic question here, Steve, again?

SM: Well you answered…

TC: Did I get that answered?

SM: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Were there any other points you’d like to make?

TC: You asked, yeah, what lessons we should learn, take away from that, and I think as an Army we learn them in the ‘90s. I don’t know whether we’re going to have to relearn them again as we start again pulling away from giving our soldiers the best equipment that we can, giving them adequate pay, adequate status in the society in which they’re apart of. I see that beginning to change from what it was in the ‘80s. I was in Europe in the ‘80s during the Reagan years when lots of, you know, all of a sudden soldiers came in and were well trained and highly qualified, had the best equipment, building them nice barracks and all that. Boy I tell you, you could really feel it. I understand that’s changing again, that we’re under a…we have not kept the momentum up of that. Lessons of war in Vietnam is that we have to be ready to make the commitment or don’t make it.

SM: Do you think we should fight Vietnam’s again? Keep fighting wars that are like Vietnam still?

TC: Depends on what our interests are. Yes, if that is in the best interest of the United States, then perhaps we need to do that and not necessarily of a threat. I think some humanitarian efforts keep mass genocide from happening as an adequate reason to perhaps become involved, but we have to do it very, very, very carefully and we have to do it correct. But again, it would boil down to what is in the best interest of the United States and that’s tough. And don’t do it until we have determined as a society that yeah, this is in our best interest and then do it right. Easier said than done, partner.

SM: Yes sir. Anything else?

TC: No. This has been fun. I hadn’t thought of these things in a long, long, long time. Let me, can I make one point, one closing point before I go?
SM: Oh absolutely.

TC: One closing point here before I go is that I had it a lot easier. Those of us who made it a profession when we come home from Vietnam, those of us who were NCOs, those of us who were officers who then elected to stay in the Army had it a whole lot easier adjusting and having support systems of coming back and then being able to kind of make the adjustment and go on with our lives than the poor guys who came back and then got out and had to face their peers, their contemporaries, their families, their friends, their, you know, and throughout the country who viewed them with hostility. I can take comfort in when I finished my work at the end of the day and went down to have a beer, I had a beer with people who were all had the same, you know, we’d all been there, we all knew it, and we could close ranks and to hell with the protestors and to hell with them. But the guy who went back home to Eerie, Pennsylvania or small town Ohio or large city down there and walked in and said, ‘Hey, I’m just back from Vietnam,’ and was shut off or closed down or treated shabbily, that has bothered me. I was personally never accosted that way, maybe because I was insulated. I was off on an Army base and we could kind of close ranks and could support one another. So I was extremely glad to see the shift begin and it took, what, ’80, into the ‘80s into the Reagan administration and the building of the Vietnam wall and the interest and the attitude shift that finally began to come about where they said, ‘Wait a minute, we as a society maybe had treated our soldiers shabbily. Maybe we better kind of say we’re sorry,’ and I think maybe we’ve done that. But, before we did a lot of damage to a lot of people here not allowing them to get on with their lives or forcing them to get on with their lives without being able to be proud of their service. And, I think maybe that’s a lesson that we have learned or maybe certainly need to relearn or be ready to be aware of should we do this again. Again I sound like a political announcement, I guess, an announcement, but I think we have to get involved our entire society in our military motive. We do that with the draft and we do it with involvement of the reserve and the guard units.

SM: Well thank you very much. This concludes our first interview with T. Cook.