Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University initiating an oral history interview with Paula D. Wright. Today’s date is the tenth of August 2005, and both Paula and I are in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock. And Paula, I just want to confirm with you that it’s all right with you that we make this interview available to researchers through the Vietnam Archive.

Paula Wright: It’s perfectly all right with me.

LC: Okay, thank you. And also to clarify, that in the time that you served in Vietnam, you were serving as Paul D. Wright.

PW: Yes.

LC: Okay, I just want to confirm those things. And let’s start off with asking about your growing up. Where were you born and when?

PW: I was born in Lubbock, St. Mary’s Hospital. What is Godbolds, Gobold, Godbold Center.

LC: The Godbold Center.

PW: Yes, February 9, 1950, lived six months in—well, we were living in Post. Dad was teaching and operating a Case dealership down there. And lived down there for six months, lived in Lamesa for a little while, lived in Littlefield for a little while, lived in our farm in Anton for four years, four years and one day. Why I can remember that is because we moved on my fourth birthday onto the farm and then on my eighth birthday
and so many, you know, we moved here to Lubbock. And then I grew up here in Lubbock. I considered it home. Graduated from Coronado High School May 30, 1969.

LC: Paula, tell me a little bit about Lubbock and what you remember as a high school student in your junior and senior years in terms of the political environment here in town, 1968, 1969. What was it like here in Lubbock? We know what it was like in other places like Berkeley, California, and so on.

PW: Yeah, well, you know, Lubbock was a little bit different. We’ve always been kind of conservative.

LC: Sure.

PW: But we have done a 180-degree change because when I was growing up, this was a Democratic town. City council, mayor, everybody was Democrat. Preston Smith was lieutenant governor. In fact, in 1966, ’67, I was in the Coronado High School band and we were Preston Smith’s official band at his inauguration as lieutenant governor. So we got to go down to Austin and march in the parade.

LC: That’s cool.

PW: And we were presented on the Senate floor. I think Matt McAllister was the senator then who used to have KSEL Radio AM 950. Let’s see, here at Texas Tech, we did have the ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps). The ROTC here as far as I remember, we never had any of the break-ins or explosions or anything like that. Really, the peace activists were kind of, they were, if you want to say discriminated against, they were really—everybody would be, you know—

LC: Opposed to them?

PW: Opposed to them.

LC: What did you think about the war? You clearly knew it was going on. What did you think back then? This is way before you entered the service, but as a high school student. A lot of folks were—

PW: Back then I was very gung-ho about it. We had a—I still think this, we had a compact with them. And we had to, I think if we did not honor that compact, then why should the other allies that we have, per se at that time, say like NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), you know, why should they honor us if we turn and ran in Vietnam.
LC: So the United States had a duty to South Vietnam?
PW: Right. And I thought that, and I still think that we was over there trying to spread freedom and everything because I remember when I was in the eighth grade we studied communism. And my final question, essay question for the year was, “What do you think about communism?” And I remember putting in, I said communism is the devil or is kind of like the devil and I think we should do anything we can do to stop it.
LC: Wow.
PW: And I still feel this way. I’ve changed my mind a lot since—I will say this, I think Afghanistan was the Russian Vietnam. As far as per se the other soldiers, from looking from the soldier’s point of view, not from the government’s point of view.
LC: That they were involved in a war over there that—plus, it certainly wasn’t popular in the Soviet Union when it was going on.
PW: Right. Well, and definitely not popular in Afghanistan.
LC: That’s also true, yeah.
PW: (Laughs) You know.
LC: Well, let me ask about your thinking about what you would do after high school. Did you have a plan, did your folks have a plan or—?
PW: I had a full set of plans. I was going to make the military my career.
LC: Okay.
PW: I wanted to be a pilot. At first, I thought about going to Tech ROTC. And in fact, I applied with the Air Force Academy to go to the academy. It’s funny. My dad was a math teacher and I’m not very good at math. (Laughs)
LC: You didn’t get any of that.
PW: I didn’t get any of that. And I mean, really, it wasn’t till I grew up and I got out of the military and went back to electronic school. I had an instructor that the way he taught made it all open up to me.
LC: Oh, is that right?
PW: Yeah.
LC: What was his name? Do you remember?
PW: I can’t remember. But anyway, he said, “There’s two ways to teach. A student’s way: How do you get the answer? Teacher’s way: This is how you get the answer.” And when he presented it both ways, he made it interesting.

LC: And it made sense to you.

PW: And it made sense to you.

LC: You know now they—

PW: Excuse me for snorting.

LC: Now of course there’s a lot of research on different learning styles, but back then, that was actually pretty innovative.

PW: And that’s 1975. Yes, that was very innovative.

LC: Yeah.

PW: And it wasn’t a public school, it was a private school.

LC: Where was that?

PW: This is Bell and Howell Schools at DeVry Tech at Dallas, Texas. And he was teaching, I can’t remember the name, the book says. Heck, I just saw the book the other day. Anyway, it was about electronics for technicians, electronic technicians.

LC: Now you wanted to go into military service.

PW: Yes.

LC: Did you want to go to college?

PW: Yes, I did. I thought about it. Like I said, I applied for the Academy.

LC: Right.

PW: And my mom didn’t know what—I did not know this, but my summer of my junior year, my mom got a letter from the Coast Guard Academy and she sent my name off to the Coast Guard Academy.

LC: Is that right?

PW: Looking for future cadets, you know. Well, I don’t know what the Coast Guard calls them, you know, swabs or you know—cadets is West Point. But anyway. And I was in my senior year of high school, two weeks into the summer and we got called, there was nine of us and we got called down to Mrs. Andrews’s office who was the senior counselor’s office. And in walked this Coast Guard ensign or excuse me, lieutenant. And one of the guys came up and he kind of joked and he says, “Well,” he
says, “Is the bus waiting for us to take us to basic training?” But anyway, I did not know this, but Mom sent it off and they talked to me and the whole thing about it, if I had—I was taking ICT my senior year—

LC: Which is?

PW: Industrial cooperative training.

LC: Okay.

PW: And if I had not been in that or if it had been like the first week, I could’ve got out of that and you know, gone, you know, have the other classes that I needed to get in. And the Coast Guard Academy is different from the Naval Academy, service academies because there’s not a competition like what there is for the service academy.

LC: Right, there’s not the congressional nomination—

PW: There’s not congressional or anything in fact, you know, but anyway. You can go from enlisted and you can go to the academy and get an Army appointment.

LC: Was that of interest to you, the Coast Guard?

PW: The thing that was nice about the Coast Guard, they said I could fly. When I was in the ninth grade, eighth or ninth grade, ninth grade, we had to pick the two careers I wanted to be. And I picked—my parents, my name was, they named after St. Paul and King David. So they dedicated my life to God. So I was going to be a flying preacher. (Laughing)

LC: Cool. You had some good ideas here. You got close to flying.

PW: Well, yeah. Well I mean—

LC: We’ll get to that in a sec.

PW: Yeah. But anyway, no, I mean, that was the main thing. And so I mean, I was going to be, you know, like I said, either a pastor or—and my dad he came up and he said, “Man,” he said, “If you follow me you’re getting in careers that don’t pay the money.” You know what I mean?

LC: That’s true.

PW: And you know, money’s not everything, but it’s nice to have. So I mean, no, that is why because they told me that I would go in guaranteed as an aviation officer.

LC: But that didn’t work out. How did you come—?
PW: No that didn’t work out because, you know, it would’ve meant me going to
summer school and at that time, I was ready, you know, I was ready.
LC: Well, did you ever receive a draft notice?
PW: No, no I didn’t. I volunteered. I take that back, draft notice, no. I didn’t
receive the draft notice, but a week, the day after—I graduated the thirtieth of May, the
first of June, I got my draft card changing me to 1-A. So whatever student was 1-4 or
whatever it is. Because see, I stayed back in the fourth grade, so I was already nineteen
years old when I graduated.
LC: Okay.
PW: So I had my last eighteen months in school, I was registered for the draft.
LC: Right.
PW: Of course, knock on wood, they weren’t drafting non-high school graduates.
You know, if you were going to high school, they wouldn’t draft you.
LC: Right. But as soon as you graduated—
PW: But as soon as I graduated, the day after I graduated, I got my draft notice or
reclassification.
LC: And so did you then make the decision that you wanted to volunteer?
PW: Well, Texas Tech was just opening the first year, I’m kind of—I’m getting
to the point—
LC: That’s okay.
PW: The law school was going to open up in August in ’69 as the first class. I
was accepted. I was one of the first thirty-five students accepted to Tech. So I you know
pre-registered and all this and the reason—because I didn’t know what I wanted. I knew I
wanted to fly, you know. And I had even talked to other—Central Texas College, they
had a professional pilot program and I talked to them about it, you know. And basically
and everything, no offense against Dad and everything, but did the same thing to me as
he did to my sisters, “I moved to Lubbock, Texas, so we would be close to Texas Tech. I
graduated from Texas Tech. If you want to go to a different college, you can come up
and you know.”
LC: He wasn’t going to make that easy.
PW: Well, I mean, he’d help, but yet you understand what I’m talking about.
PW: So really, I didn’t know. I thought about a history major because I’ve always liked history and he came up and he said, “Well, why don’t you be a lawyer because you love to argue.” (Laughs) So I said, “Okay, fine.” And I had applied, waited too long, I didn’t find out—to get a ROTC scholarship, either Air Force or Army. I would’ve had to apply the year before. So if I would’ve just gone to Tech and got a ROTC scholarship, it would’ve just been for three years.

LC: I see. I see.

PW: Instead of the four years.

LC: Yeah.

PW: And really, by the time I graduated and everything, I was tired of school. I didn’t want to, you know, I just knew I wanted to get the heck away from Lubbock. And really I thought, well you know what, and I had talked like in February of ’69, I’d gone down and talked to the Army recruiter about the warrant officer program and warrant officer flight candidate, you know, and warrant officer flight training. So I had already made up my mind kind of and of course, Dad’s thinking, he was in World War II.

LC: Is that right?

PW: And that was a sore point between me and Dad because he got prostate cancer. And I kept telling him and everything, I said, “Look,” I said, “You’re a veteran, you served during a war. Yeah, you might have to go down to the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs) and sit down there all day to be seen. I’ll go down there with you.”

“No, that’s different. You were in combat, you know, you deserve it.” “No, I don’t deserve it better. You deserve it just as much as I do.”

LC: So, he felt because he hadn’t gone overseas and wasn’t in combat—

PW: Right.

LC: That he really shouldn’t access VA benefits?

PW: Right. And of course, the thing about it, he might not have qualified for it because he would’ve been a class C, which is economic. And you know, we had the farm out here at Anton and the property here. So he might not have, but what I was thinking
about, Mom and him both had cancers and like one pill of his alone was like seventy-five dollars a month.

LC: Yikes.

PW: And so I mean, you know, I borrowed money from him one time, I said, “Well, I’ll tell you what, instead of paying you back, I’ll pay for your medication.” I never did that again. If I borrowed money, I paid the money back.

LC: Yeah, right, right.

PW: Yeah.

LC: Well, that’s actually interesting that he had that feeling. What year was this about?

PW: This was, God, ’86, ’87.

LC: Is your father still with us or—?

PW: No, he passed away.

LC: What unit of military was he in?

PW: He was Army Air Corps.

LC: He was Army Air Corps. Where did he serve?

PW: He was drafted, went to Wichita Falls. He was drafted here in Lubbock. A really interesting story. When he was six years old, he got his eye, one of his eyes, I can’t remember right or left now. But anyway, knocked out by a boomerang, homemade boomerang. So whenever Dad was a schoolteacher down at Crane, Texas, he was not only a coach, but he was a math teacher.

LC: Right.

PW: Well they came up and they told him, they said, “You won’t get drafted because that’s critical—“critical”—

LC: Work—

PW: Work, yeah, occupations. He tried to go. He went all the way to Dallas and I saw the paperwork. We’ve still got the paperwork on him. Went all the way to Dallas, Texas, to try to volunteer to go into the service and everything and they turned him down. Two weeks after they turned him down, they drafted him.

LC: (Laughs) The right didn’t know what the left hand was doing.
PW: So anyway, they come up and he told me, he says, when he got up to Wichita Falls up to the base up—no, they took him to Burkburnett. And they swore him in and he stayed there overnight or something and they come up and they asked him, they said, “What do you want to do?” And he says, “I don’t care. Give me a rifle.” You know, at this time, he didn’t, you know, before, you know, he might’ve had a choice, you know. And of course, with him having a fake eye, they weren’t going to put him in infantry.

PW: And then they said, “Oh, we see you’re a math teacher.” And he said, “Yeah.” And they said, “Would you like to teach it? Have you ever done any flying?” And he said, “No.” And then they said, “Well, would you like to be a teacher, teach pilots how to do instrument navigation?” So that’s what he did. He lucked out.

PW: He was at Chinook Field for training and then he was in Marianna, Florida. And then he was in, Greenboro? Greensboro, North Carolina.

PW: He got notified to go to Europe and he said if he’d gone over there, he would’ve never flown because of his eye.

PW: You know, but he would’ve stayed, you know, done maintenance or you know, something you know. And in fact, he sent my—he was in Greensboro, North Carolina and he sent my mom and my oldest sister home. And a day or two days before he’s supposed to ship out, they cancelled his orders. And then so they brought him back or he brought them back to Greensboro. And then right before Europe ended and everything, they put the listing up and his name was redlined, right above his name. They had so many openings and he was the, you know, redlined, so I mean twice—

PW: I had an uncle that was in the Marine Corps and he was wounded on Guam.

LC: Wow. So military stuff was running in the family.

PW: Oh yeah, I have two brother-in-laws that were in the military. The oldest brother-in-law was career.
LC: Oh, is that right?
PW: From out here at Reese.
PW: Yeah, Air Force. And I just knew I didn’t want—you know, of course my
sister is trying to get me either—and before I went in, I went out to San Diego and my
brother-in-law Bob was headed out that way for training. He was going to Guam and they
got out to Phoenix, Arizona, or Tuscan and their car broke down, the motor went out on
the car and so Bob had to go ahead and go on in, report in. And so my sister flew, paid
for my plane trip out there and back so I’d be with her. And I flew to Tuscan and she
picked me up and then we went to Coronado Island, San Diego.

LC: Right.
PW: I did get to see how the Marines, I did see MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit
Depot).
LC: (Laughing)
PW: So I knew I did not want to go to the Marines.
LC: Well, it sounds like the Army was where you were going to be—
PW: The main reason I went to the Army is because they guaranteed me that I
would fly.
LC: And the recruiter did this?
PW: Yes.
LC: Okay. When did you actually then volunteer, was it right after you
graduated?
PW: Right.
LC: Just as soon as that reclassification came in, you were like: “I better go ahead
and volunteer?”
PW: Well, I had an old girlfriend that I went and spent a week with after
graduation. And it’s really funny because I was dating my ex-wife at that time, but I
mean, you know, we weren’t, you know what I mean?
LC: Yeah.
PW: But anyway, so I went down there and I had made arrangements to be with
Kay a month before. She called me up and got to talking and everything and she said,
“Hey, why don’t you come on out?” And I don’t know if I should say this or not, but anyway, you can edit it if you want to. I guess I turned into Dutch uncle and everything because all my old girlfriends call me up and everything when they’re having boy problems and everything. (Laughs)

LC: (Laughs) Now you’re the source of information.

PW: So I guess I’m the girlfriend if you want to say. You know what I mean?

LC: That’s right; you’re the one they can talk to.

PW: But anyway, I went out there and I spent several, you know, weeks with her and then I came back. And I had already got a letter from the recruiter, Army recruiter saying to come talk to him and everything. And the wife of one of the coaches that Dad worked with, she knew that I had planned on going in the military because I had told her. But she didn’t tell her husband and she didn’t tell Dad, you know what I mean?

LC: Right, so—

PW: So I mean, you know, there was a few people—you know, I had it in my mind and everything because like I said, I knew I was ready and I was, you know, I was ready to do something.

LC: So is it accurate to say that you entered service then in like June or July of ’69?

PW: I entered June 30, of ’69.

LC: And where did you—

PW: I’m sorry about that. You asked me about that. That’s the third time you’ve asked me.

LC: No, it’s okay, I was wondering where you went for basic?

PW: I went to basic at El Paso, Texas. They lied, the first time I got lied by the Army. “Oh, if you wait two weeks and everything,” they said, “If you go in and sign on now, you’ll be in the last group, basic training class that’s going into El Paso the next three months. And your folks will only be 300 miles away and they can come down and see.” Yeah, I had three other classes after I got there come in, you know what I mean?

LC: Oh, yeah.

PW: So you know, first, you know—

LC: Sixty-nine—
PW: The Army lied to you, you know.

LC: I know, shocking. Well, how did basic training go?

PW: It sucked. (Laughs) Rude awakening, you know. I’m sorry. You know, I didn’t like my dad yelling at me, you know. You know what I mean?

LC: Yeah.

PW: And I can understand why they do that, but why the physical violence? I have never, I don’t—

LC: What did you see? By physical violence, what do you mean? I mean, do you remember?

PW: Standing there, you know, standing there and the sergeant comes along and hits you in the gut or you know, grabbing you and throwing you or you know, taking you out behind the barn or something like that. So, my senior year, I weighed a 175 pounds starting out. When I graduated, I weighed a 128 pounds. And I didn’t work—well, I worked as a welder’s apprentice. So I guess lifting, even with the chain, lifting that steel and everything worked it off or maybe just me working. I ate right or, you know what I mean. But anyway, I lost, you know, a good forty, fifty—well I take that back, I was about 180 pounds. I was a hefty guy.

LC: But not by the time you were at basic?

PW: At basic training, I weighted 125 pounds, 128 pounds. And my drill sergeant, Nick Petresy, he made me the road guard. “You’re a fat boy! We’re going to put your road guard where you have to run all the time to get that fat out of you!” And I said, “If you think I’m fat now, you should’ve seen me nine months ago!” “You sassing me asshole?”

LC: Did he really say stuff like that?

PW: Huh?

LC: Did he really say stuff like that? Wow. Did you think maybe you had made a mistake?

PW: You know how I looked at it, you know what, since most of the time, I’ll be an officer, and he’ll have to call me “sir.”

LC: There you go.

PW: (Laughs)
LC: Good attitude.
PW: You know what I mean. Another thing, make a mistake of being one of the OCS (Officer Candidate School) candidates, possible candidates. Sergeants, every sergeant I ever met in the Army, career sergeant I ever met and some of them I believe them because they would’ve made good officers. But I mean, in the first six months, I met every sergeant that says, “I could be an officer if I wanted to.” You know, I learned very quickly after eating dust or desert, you know, to keep my mouth shut.
LC: Yeah, absolutely.
PW: But anyway, you know, some of them and everything, but Nick Pretresy was, he was a Marine DI (drill instructor) and he got ten thousand dollars to transfer over to the Army to start the DI program.
LC: Wow.
PW: And so he still thought he was a gyrene.
LC: So he was going to make you guys pay.
PW: Well, I mean, you know, he treated us—and okay, yes, yeah maybe the Marine, you know, I’m sorry, you know, the Army came up and everything and said, you know, like General Patton said or you know, American soldiers job was to make the other son of a bitch to bleed for their country, that’s true. This stuff of, you know, infantry deal is following me, you know what I mean. Yeah, we’ll follow you, you go out there and you can shoot, you know what I mean. You have to take it, yes, there are certain times where you have to take it no matter what the risk. There’s another thing, you’re taking that hill because some rear end told you to take it.
LC: Right, without any real clear reason—
PW: You know, without any real clue or anything like that.
LC: Right, right.
PW: It was nice because about a week after I got in basic, he became the field first, which meant that he’s in charge, making sure all the training was lined up. We get the truck busses when we’re supposed to. You know, sometimes they screwed up. And there were several times we went through chow, what they said, “Regulation states that we have to make you three meals a day, don’t mean you have to eat three meals a day.” You know, stand in, get your chow, and then the drill sergeant is standing there telling
you to dump it out, and you go get on the bus or on the car or truck or cattle car or whatever you were going to. So I can understand, you know, I mean, if it was the CQs (charge of quarters) were supposed to wake us up at nine or earlier, and he didn’t, that was his fault; that wasn’t ours. But the old expression, “Feces flow downhill.”

LC: Well, where did you go to advanced?

PW: I went to advanced at Ft. Rucker, Alabama.

LC: How did that go?

PW: That was great. That was—really what it is and everything—that was a lot better because I was learning what I wanted to learn. I came up and took the flight test, and I came up, and there were three of us, and they said, “One-third of you, only one of you will go.” Historically, one-third. Well, I could have taken the test again and passed it. But anyway, I just said, “Oh, I’ll just go ahead and go in.” If I go as crew chief, I’ll fly anyway. What about door gunner? Because I mean, the life of a door gunner, you know, the life of the sniper is ten seconds. The life of the door gunner was thirty seconds. So you know, I had three times as much life expectancy as a sniper would or a point man would.

LC: Did they tell you that?

PW: That was the scuttlebutt going along, you know what I’m talking about?

LC: Yeah. Well, were the people who were doing the instruction, had they been to Vietnam?

PW: We had two different deals. We had—I’ll relate it to what the civilians and what the civilian mechanics go through, like a general, where you go through the first three weeks. You go through, you learn how to read the manuals and how to look stuff up. We had to do a little bit of sheet metal, how to do the rivets and stuff like that. Just general stuff, and then after that, we were sent over to our advanced company, and all of our instructors had been in Vietnam.

LC: Did they tell you guys stuff about it?

PW: Oh, it was really nuts because they us, they says, “You have to learn this stuff here. But I’ll tell you this, as soon as you get in Vietnam, forget what you learned because you’ll do it the way you have to do it there.” Which is true, but I still remember the torque values on certain bolts. You never forget that. That’s drilled into you.
LC: And they were, just to clarify this, they were, for future listeners, they were training you in helicopter maintenance.

PW: Yes, UH-1s. Hueys.

LC: UH-1s only?

PW: Yes, UH-1s only. But a lot of it and everything went into other—helicopters are helicopters. Operates the same thing.

LC: The different models.

PW: The different models and everything. You take a UH-1—or, excuse me, you take an OH-1 and a UH-1, they’re going to take off the same way, they’re going to fly forward the same way, they’re going to hover the same way. The principles are the same, but the specifics for the maintenance and everything like this is different.

LC: Now when you finish advanced training, did you feel like you were ready to take care of helicopters?

PW: Yes, and I was an honor graduate.

LC: Is that right? Well, did your folks or any family come along? I mean, there must have been a ceremony.

PW: No, they didn’t. Dad was teaching at that time.

LC: I see.

PW: Mom and Dad, the fourth week we was in basic, Mom and Dad came down and saw me.

LC: To El Paso?

PW: To El Paso and saw me. They didn’t come up for my graduation because it was on a Friday, and Dad couldn’t get off. That kind of pissed me off a little bit. He wasn’t coaching anymore, you know what I mean? He can take, you know, my God, Dad. But, yeah, it pissed me off a little bit but I can understand. “Well, we just saw you four weeks ago.”

LC: Right, right, but still.

PW: You know what I mean? But, still. “Well, would you have been here if I was leaving basic and going straight to Vietnam?”

LC: Did you see them after you finished advanced? Did you come back here for a leave?
PW: Yes, I came back here for thirty days. Got engaged. I remember I was leaving the old Lubbock airport. What is it, Silent Wings Museum now? And my ex, Barbara Jean, was going to beauty school. And so we went by, I guess it was my mom and dad. I can’t remember if my sister was here, or had she gone to Guam? I can’t remember if my sister was still here or if she was waiting to go to Guam to be with her husband. Anyway, but I know it was my mom, dad and my grandmother, and so I told them and everything. And of course, they weren’t too thrilled about—well, me going to Vietnam, but also me getting married because of course, everybody knew what the deal was. “What happens when you get over there, you decide you shouldn’t have been married, or you get killed, or you get maimed?” You know what I mean? Of course, thirty-five years of this, I can understand—

LC: They were—

PW: —their feelings. But anyway, I told them and everything, and I said I wanted to stop by and get Barbara Jean. And I said, “Well, I’ll just put it this way: if you don’t want to stop by, fine. I’ll get a cab, and Barbara Jean and I will go out to the airport.” And so they took her, and I remember right as they called the plane and everything, I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her. Stupid, I know. Please, Mr. Custard, I don’t want to go. (Laughs)

LC: Didn’t work out that way, did it?

PW: Well, you know, it’s really kind of funny because I ended up in Mr. Custard’s outfit the second time I was over there.

LC: Yeah, that’s right, that’s a little ironic, isn’t it?

PW: Yeah, so I mean, you automatically have eighteen months ahead of time.

LC: Yeah, but it worked out.

PW: You know what I mean? But it worked out and everything.

LC: Well, what was the trip over to Vietnam like? Do you remember that?

PW: Long and boring.

LC: Where did you leave from?

PW: We left from—I reported at Oakland. We left from Travis Air Force Base. And I’ll say this: every time I got transferred, I was very lucky. Because usually most guys I know of and are transferred, if you’re not an E6 or above, you know what I mean?
Where you have a side unit and everything like this. You get put on details. Man, I got there. Well, I left three days I was supposed to be there, the sixteenth of January, report the sixteenth, no later than midnight the sixteenth. My aunt from—of course, I was going to leave here on the sixteenth and go. Well, my aunt from California called me up and said, “When do you report?” And I said, “The sixteenth.” “When are you coming here?” And I said, “Well, I’ll be there the sixteenth.” And they said, “No, we want to see you.” Which was nice because my uncle, I told you about that, was wounded in Guam. It was his sister, so I got to talk to him. I got to talk to my other uncle, and they talked about—my other uncle was in Korea. So I got to talk to them about, “I’m sorry, you can’t talk about combat unless you’ve been in combat.”

LC: Well, where did you arrive?
PW: Okay, I left Oakland, went to Anchorage, Alaska. This is in January of 1970. Had to walk—the one thing, every time I went to Vietnam, we landed at Anchorage. And they’d always come up and say, “Well, this sky jet is not working.” So we had to walk from the airplane to the airport, you know what I mean? You know, January! It was four below, and I just had jungle fatigues on! You know what I mean? Yes, it might be fifty yards. But I mean, that’s fifty yards, you know what I mean? And I didn’t know how come I got out and everything like this, you know. I thought, “Oh, it’s about thirty-two, thirty-three.” Comparing it to here, and then on the way back, one of the stewardesses or—excuse me, flight attendants—was talking, “Oh, it’s a warm day. It’s four below zero.” (Laughs) Went to Anchorage, spent an hour there. Went from Anchorage to Japan, spent an hour there, and then we landed in Vietnam at midnight on January the eighteenth.

LC: Did you go into Tan Son Nhut?
PW: No, we landed in Bien Hoa.
LC: Okay.
PW: At that time they were still going to—it wasn’t until ’72 they stopped Tan Son Nhut—or started going directly into Tan Son Nhut.
LC: Tan Son Nhut instead of Bien Hoa.
PW: They were going to Bien Hoa. You know why I know ’72 was because I was in Bien Hoa when they stopped. And it was a Braniff Airline, the last freedom bird that landed there.

LC: Is that right?

PW: Great, blue colors. I said, “I’ve gotta catch that plane! That goes to my home!” You know what I mean?

LC: Well, tell me about your first company assignment, where you were and what your tasks were.

PW: Like I said, we got there about twelve o’clock, about midnight, and I remember them shutting the air conditioning off and opening that door. Man, the just freaking humidity; we were soaked. And the smell, my God. Worst thing. You think a feed lot stinks.

LC: Here in Lubbock, yeah.

PW: You know what I mean? You know. So they came up, and they took us, and they said, “Okay privates, your baggage will be—” They said, what was it? “G-9s and above go off the plane first.” What was it? Said if you’re an O-6 or G-9 or above will go off first. Of course, the ones in the first few rows, you know what I mean? And the rest of us went off, and we walked over to the terminal. Got halfway to the terminal, and somebody yelled out, “Mail call!” And then all hell broke loose. And I didn’t know—luckily I knew what mail call was.

LC: What did that mean?

PW: Mail call means that Charlie was sending you a little greeting present, sending you some mail. We started getting mortar attacked.

LC: And what did you guys do?

PW: They told us, they said, “If we started getting incoming and everything,” said, “Head for there.” And they had bunkers and everything. I started flying when I was sixteen years old. I know what aviation and fuel does when it ignites.

LC: Yeah, see, you got that.

PW: You know what I mean? So I got—

LC: Out of there.
PW: Assholes and elbows. If he can hear it, it’s not going to hit you. When I was at El Paso, they came up, and they told us, they said—well I got there right before the Fourth of July. So I was on, in the reception station on Fourth of July weekend. And that first night there, they came up, and they said—we’d just gotten twenty-five dollars, and they said, “Okay, company area, your restricted to company area. Company area is this building.” You know certain buildings. “You do not go to this building. This is the teen center.” “Why not? I’m 19, I’m a teenager.” “No you’re not. You’re a man.” I didn’t realize until that day what he was talking about. “Hey, quit, you’re grown up now. You’re doing a man’s job. You gotta act like a man.” And I found out very quickly—you know why they make you blouse your boots?

LC: No.

PW: So if you shit your pants, it doesn’t go all over the place.

LC: Really? I didn’t know that.

PW: (Laughs) Excuse my language. I’ve heard that and everything, but it just makes it easier to clean up. No, really, the reason they blouse your pants is because, one thing, it looks neater. Another thing and everything, you’re working around aircraft and everything like that, it’s not going to get caught when you jump down and everything like that. But I mean, mainly neatness and everything like this.

LC: But the scuttlebutt was—

PW: Yeah, the scuttlebutt.

LC: I believe it.


LC: So you were assigned to the—

PW: I was assigned to the 22nd Replacement.

LC: Which was like a holding company?

PW: Which was a replacement company, right. And I got there, this is about one o’clock on the morning, and they come up, and they said, “The following people fall out over here.” And they called me and twelve other guys out, our names out. They said, “Okay, fine,” said, “You go over there.” So we went in, had our records, got processed in about six o’clock. The next morning, we were at our unit. We was at our brigade headquarters.
LC: Which was where?

PW: Which was—brigade was Long Binh, 12th Group. I was further assigned to
Bearcat. Which I got to Bearcat—there was twelve of us that went through. I was held
over about a week, ten days in basic because I’d gone to OCS, and they were trying to
decide whether—the only reason I didn’t go to OCS, they had twenty-two openings, I
was number twenty-three.

LC: Oh, okay, so you had an extra set of days?

PW: I was in charge of some details of the new company. “Not because you
deserve it, because you’ve been in longer than those assholes have.” You know what I’m
talking about.

LC: Exactly, exactly.

PW: I was still a one stopper, just like they were. But yet I had two extra months.

LC: Seniority.

PW: Yeah, two months in rank. But anyway, so when I went to Alabama, there’s
a guy that was in 3rd—I was in 2nd Brigade, and 3rd Brigade has graduated. And so the
guys that were going to Alabama, they went there. So there were twelve of us that went
to El Paso and Rucker together, and we all graduated together and everything, you know.
And we got to Vietnam, we got to 1st Brigade, there was only me and three other guys—
two other guys—that made it back. And they told us—they had the buddy system. They
told us, they says, “Buddy system is you go to the same basic, get through the same IT
(individual training).” Well, they found out if a buddy—if you started depending on your
buddies to watch your back. You says, “Oh, he’ll watch it,” and another says, “Oh, he’ll
watch it.” Then you get killed, so they started breaking them up when they get into the
units.

LC: And is that what happened? They broke you guys up?

PW: Yeah, they broke us up. And I went down to Bearcat 240th Aviation
Greyhounds. We had a letter from the Greyhound corporate offices and everything
giving us permission to use a Greyhound. And our unit insignia was the Greyhound dog.

LC: The dog, yeah. And, essentially, what was the mission of the 240th?

PW: The 240th, what we did, we supported American and allied troops in
interdiction of enemy soldiers.
LC: In what area?

PW: In III Corps and IV Corps. We supported—I was in two different units the first year I was there. Both years I was there in two different units, but four units in two years. People say, “Man, you must have been screwed up.” And I says, “No, I just—”

LC: Actually, they were, because of the units, they were all helicopter assault units, as far as I know. And you were doing maintenance and repair.

PW: Well, you know, like the last coming out, and I was in the last combat unit that came back from Vietnam. So we were in the Vietnamization process. So therefore, they would send units—it’s very good. You’d go to sleep at night having six months left in-country and wake up the next morning and you’re going home because of the drop and everything.

LC: Right. But the skills that you had were at absolute premium, I would have thought.

PW: Oh, yes. Yeah.

LC: They probably couldn’t train, I mean, I’m going to guess they couldn’t train guys fast enough.

PW: We were supporting—at the 240th and everything, we had, well, our sister company was 135th Aviation. And they was half American Navy—or American Army, and half Australian Navy. And it was B Company 135th. And I was going through the web search. I found the web site for it.

LC: For that unit?

PW: For that unit.

LC: Wow.

PW: But anyway, this is several months ago, so I’ve been viewing sites to find—

LC: Find those guys who were over there.

PW: Find those units and everything like this and everything.

LC: And they were organized.

PW: Yeah. And so, like, we had some Vietnamese pilots that we would train. But mainly whenever I first got out there, we were supporting the 9th Infantry Division and the Thai Army.

LC: Did you spend any time in flight yourself?
PW: Um-hm.

LC: Can you tell me the circumstances?

PW: Okay. Well, I stayed there for—I got there, and I was a Hog mechanic, which was a Charlie-model gunship. In fact, I went out here to the airport one time, and one of the guys came up, and he says, “You look familiar, what’s your name?” He and I was in the same squad.

LC: That’s weird. I love that stuff.

PW: In Vietnam.

LC: That’s so cool.

PW: I reckon—I didn’t say anything to him, but I recognized him.

LC: That’s cool. Love that kind of stuff.

PW: Not that we were enemies or anything like that.

LC: But it’s just interesting.

PW: You know what I mean? And when I worked out here at Reese, ran into a guy that I was in basic training with.

LC: That’s wild.

PW: But anyway, no, I was there for like two months, and then they stood the Big Red One down. And so they took me and another warrant officer and sent us to brigade, and then there was like—there was twelve of us. You remember in the movie *Dirty Dozen*? We called ourselves the Dirty Dozen because for forty-eight hours, we couldn’t take a shower. Oh, God, we stunk.

LC: Oh, geez, I’ll bet.

PW: But anyway, you know. So we got sent to 173rd Assault Helicopter Company.

LC: And you stayed with the 173rd for the rest of this first tour, is that right?

PW: Right.

LC: And you were doing the same thing.

PW: Well, I went from being a Hog mechanic. I worked on Slick platoon, Slick helicopters, which were the transport supply helicopters.

LC: Right. So not the gunships?

PW: Not the gunships.
LC: Were those helicopters any more demanding of maintenance, the delivery ships?

PW: Well, okay, I take that back. You know what? I did work on the Hogs because we worked Hogs and Slicks. We did.

LC: At the 173rd?

PW: Yes. Well, I mean, we were the squadron, fifteen helicopters. One gun platoon, two Slick platoons. White, yellow, white, yellow flight and white flight. I was Yellow Flight 2nd Platoon.

LC: So you had to work shifts, essentially?

PW: No, what we did, we’d get up at seven o’clock in the morning and work until we—not normally five o’clock at night and all that. But I mean, let’s see, I got there in January. In March, I got transferred to Lai Khe 173rd. I worked from March until last of April. I’m trying to think because it was like May 1st when we went into Cambodia. I guess until the sixteenth of May I worked maintenance. And what we’d do and everything, if we had a Slick, we’d work the Slick. If we had a gunship, we’d work the gunship. Gunships had more demanding maintenance. It had two hydraulic systems because you can’t fly it with one hydraulic system.

LC: So there was more to repair if something went wrong?

PW: More to repair if something went wrong and everything like this. The blades were wider, bigger, wider, heavier.

LC: Did the repair—?

PW: We finally got Mike models in, which what they did is they took the original Charlie models had L-9 engines. Whenever you’d go in for ten thousand flight hours, they’d go in there, strip it down and redo it and everything. With the Mike, the only difference was is they put an L-13 engine, which is the same engine as what the Slick had. Which really is better because that way you got fifteen helicopters with all the same engines.

LC: Standardize them.

PW: Standardized. Yeah, you don’t have to worry about—
LC: Did you guys have repairing, the maintenance crews; did you have
everything you needed? Did you always have enough parts, always have what you
needed?
PW: We didn’t get—we really. (Audio cuts out) Going on because we really
started getting parts of everything, and then two days later, about a week later, we went
into Cambodia.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit about that. How long were you over in Cambodia,
do you know?
PW: From May 18th until August.
LC: And where were you?
PW: Oh, we never did stay in—we’d fly in there and then fly, you know.
LC: So you would go in as a maintenance crew or—
PW: Oh, no. I started flying the eighteenth of May. How I remember that is
because—I take that back, I started flying the fifteenth because we had just come back
from a mission, and I got to my room and put my helmet up and everything like that.
And the guy across the hall from me had a TV. And the news said, “Lubbock, Texas,
was hit by three tornadoes.”
LC: No kidding. You actually heard that while you were over there? That must
have scared you.
PW: I was at Lai Khe and everything.
LC: That must have scared you.
PW: Oh, I was more worried about Mom and Dad then I was me, you know what
I mean?
LC: Yeah, absolutely.
PW: Well, they said it went downtown, and Dad worked part time at Sears. And
Sears was city hall, really. Now it’s city hall. So I was more worried about, “Well, was
Dad working?” And of course, I know they said that if a tornado comes up they’d always
go to the bottom. You know, get an alert. But if it hits, from what I hear and everything
like this, like KSNY will say, “Lubbock tornadoes and tornado, hit the shelter;” and that
was it. You know what I mean? They didn’t have time. So that’s what I was afraid of.
LC: I’m going to guess that everyone was okay?
PW: Yes.

LC: How long did it take for you to find out?

PW: Like the next day. Luckily, one of the guys that worked on the avionics, he worked in the MARS (Military Affiliate Radio Station) radio station there at Lai Khe. He was working that night. And we was only allowed one MARS call a month. And I’d already made mine. So I called him up and explained the situation to him, and he was nice enough to get me through. I tried to call Mom and Dad. The phones were out. My grandmother was living at Anton. They called her. They couldn’t get her. The operator kept saying, “Yep, this is the long distance operator, the MARS operator. I’m calling Paul Wright. Paul Wright is calling to talk.” And she kept thinking that they were asking for me. And of course, I could hear her, but she couldn’t hear me because I was in receive mode, you know what I mean? It was only one way.

LC: Yes, you were in receive mode.

PW: I was in the receive mode, so I couldn’t hear her. And so, I went back and told my platoon sergeant about it. And so the next morning after formation, they took me off the flight and after formation, the CO (commanding officer) had orders waiting for me. And I was getting ready to land at Camp Alpha there at Tan Son Nhut. And they called up, and they said, “We’ve heard from the Red Cross. Your parents are alive.” So I couldn’t come home, which I’m kind of glad because I wouldn’t have really—you know, when I left there, I wanted to not have to go back.

LC: Absolutely. It was a pretty frightening situation to be in.

PW: Really, that night and everything was worse. And in fact, I remember saying, “I don’t drink.” And those people said, “Well, why don’t you drink?” In fact, I had my first platoon sergeant there in Vietnam tell me, he said, “You’re a doper or a drunk.” And I said, “What if I’m neither?” And he said, “Man, you’re going to be lonely.” And that’s really kind of true because you either got drunk or you got high.

LC: Did you see a lot of drug use?

PW: Yeah, I did. Not really. I did not think I saw as much drug use as in some other—this may sound prejudiced, but I don’t think—aviation, we had a higher IQ. You had to have a higher IQ to get into aviation than you did in infantry or artillery, or something like that.
LC: That’s right.
PW: If you didn’t have a high school diploma, they wouldn’t even consider you.
LC: So you would say that there was probably less abuse of—
PW: Less abuse than, say like, in a line unit. Of course, how smart did you have to be to be a cook? But I mean, I’m just saying, on the average. But no, I did see it. We went to, we had to go to—head of the IG (inspector general) come through. The first sergeant and I didn’t get along too good. And so he was afraid I’d go to the IG and complain to the IG.
LC: About, whatever?
PW: Shit going on. “This is my unit,” you know, “I’ll run it any goddamn way I want to. If you don’t fucking like it, you can kiss my ass.” I mean, when they come out with court martial, and they say, “You remember the inside of the court martial because you’re going to be next.”
LC: They would say stuff like that?
PW: They said it to me personally. But anyway, so we went, and one of the others guys that had gotten transferred when they were building the company up because whenever they stood the Big Red One down, they took a bunch of people home. And so they had to build the company back up. Well anyway, we stopped off—we went and got our ammunition that we needed, like ammunition that we use during—the big stuff like the rockets. Rockets was usually hauled in by the shithook or Chinook. And we had like the flares, survival flares or 22-flares, hand grenades, little stuff that we didn’t use much of. And it was really funny because we had a grease gun. And we went into Long Binh one time, and they wouldn’t let us take the grease gun. I said, “Why?” And they said, “It’s an unauthorized weapon.” Said, “This is issued to us.” Said, “We know you’re in the field that you had at Long Binh, you say unauthorized weapon.”
LC: (Laughs) Stuff like that was going on.
PW: Stuff like that, you know what I’m talking about? I mean, since we were working with an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) unit, we got a lot of stuff that other American units didn’t have.
LC: May not have had, yeah. Let me ask you about the whole Cambodian episode. First of all, were you thinking about whether this was a good idea for the United States or not?

PW: I thought, at the time, I thought it was a good idea, yeah. Here, you know, personally, I think we should have bombed the hell out of Hanoi. You know what I mean?

LC: Why do you think that?

PW: Political, political.

LC: That there were political restrictions?

PW: Right. Well, I mean, you know what? If the president of the United States comes up, says, “We are not going to bomb any public stadium,” all this stuff and everything, where the hell are you going to put your supplies? You sure as hell ain’t gonna put it in military dump. You know, come on!

LC: Did you guys think that at the time? Were you guys talking about that at the time?

PW: Yes! Yes! We were talking about how stupid—you know what I mean?

LC: So you thought, essentially, it was a good idea to go into Cambodia and try to clear out the VC (Viet Cong) refuges.

PW: We were stopped again. Because, actually and everything, if you look—if you can believe Newsweek, you know what I mean? I remember reading the deal and everything, lookings, known, confirmed areas of NVA (North Vietnamese Army). What were the Cambodian communists called?

LC: Khmer Rouge.

PW: Khmer Rouge, yeah, but mainly NVA and everything. And then two weeks later or two months later after we stopped and everything, there was more.

LC: After the Cambodian excursion.

PW: After the Cambodian deal, excursion. And I remember, like you said, well, did we have enough supplies and all that? Well, for awhile we did. I mean, we had a hundred percent availability. The only, I think out of thirty helicopters, we only had two down, and that was every hundred hours we had to do maintenance. So that was the only—we had twenty-eight helicopters up, and I mean, 4:30 in the morning. Usually we
took off at sun up. You know 5:30, 6:30, seven o’clock in the morning, 7:30, you know. We’d have formation at seven o’clock. We’d see the helicopters. We wave to them and everything. Four-thirty in the morning, here goes not only our unit, but the cav unit, too.

LC: It must have been impressive to see those going out.

PW: What is impressive is to sit there and see Puff work out. That is impressive!

LC: Now explain for someone who doesn’t get the reference.

PW: Puff the Magic Dragon is a C47 with Gatling gun on it. And on both sides, it covers—how should I put this? Every square there would be a bullet in every square yard of a football field. And I mean, just like (imitates noise).

LC: And just in that amount of time.

PW: Just in that amount of time. And this happened on Thanksgiving 1970.

LC: What happened, can you tell us?

PW: I was going on guard duty. I couldn’t understand this. We were able to carry the ammunition. As soon as I got over there, I got ammunition, but no weapon. We’re traveling and all this, there’s no weapon and everything. And you get in the buses, and the buses got chicken wire over the deal. My God, are we in prison? I can see (having) a barbed wire fence to protect and everything. Come to find out, what that’s for is because you’d be going down the street, and ol’ cowboys come up—and a cowboy was either VC or a twelve year old kid or whatever, somebody that just got a—you want somebody to get killed? Come up with a hundred bucks, and I’ll get him killed. Value of life over there was not too high. In fact, if you killed a kid, you paid less money than you would if you killed—if you killed a water buffalo you paid more than what you would if you killed a kid or a papa son.

LC: Now, what happened on Thanksgiving?

PW: Well, I was going there, and I got my ammunition. So I said, “Well, I haven’t done enough time.” We’ve got a ground attack. All of sudden, and I mean, all this stuff and everything like this.

LC: Where were you?

PW: I was standing in front of operations building where we normally had the deal, and I’ll never forget it. One of the helicopters, III Corps flight—in III Corps flight, every Wednesday, we were supporting 3rd Infantry Vietnamese ARVN regiment. Every
Wednesday morning, we’d pick up the general and fly him out to the different fire bases. 
Tiger 1, 2 and 3.

LC: These would be around Lai Khe?

PW: Right. And then in the afternoon, we’d fly him down to Saigon for the meeting and we’d pick up the mail, and we’d go to the PX (post exchange) there at Tan Son Nhut and pick stuff up and everything. A lot of times his meeting got extended—so who knows? Which was all right because that meant we could haul poguey-bait back, and we made money on that.

LC: I’ll bet.

PW: You want me to explain what poguey-bait is?

LC: Sure, go ahead.

PW: Poguey-bait is—I was at a forward unit. So the only PX we had was for the MACV, which is Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and they were the advisors to the Vietnamese units. Well, they only got in about once every ten days or something like that. Well, we stayed there every night because—unless we had a ground attack or something like that where we had to fly out, we were back there every night. I had warm water, clean sheets, clean boots, so I mean, wasn’t like a ground pounder. To a grunt, I was a REMF (rear echelon motherfucker). To a REMF, I was a grunt. So, I mean, I was in the middle. But anyway, so what we did is we’d always find out who was going to Saigon, and we’d go, “Hey, have you used all your beer and wine ration?” “Would you go to the PX and pick this up for me?” “Hey, my stereo is coming in from Japan, would you go pick it up?” Stuff like this. Cigarettes, booze. No women! No women.

LC: But you could make money on—

PW: We could make any money on that. By the way we’d do that and everything.

LC: You had a little carrying charge or something. I mean, is that fair?

PW: Yeah, a carrying charge.

LC: For your time and effort.

PW: Yeah, because it was like here’s Camp Alpha and here’s the PX. But it’s all fenced in, so you had to go—you have to hire a taxi to go all the way around to the PX unless you wanted to carry all that stuff.

LC: Right, and you’re not going to do that.
PW: The longest I carried a duffel bag and everything was from the car—maybe fifty yards. That’s all I ever did. That’s what I liked about flying. If I had to go anywhere, I knew I was going to fly.

LC: Did you feel safe flying?

PW: Yeah except one time. But it was just a—we were taking off, it was foggy, and it was early in the morning and then the control tower didn’t know. And I just knew a C-130, I had a heard a C-130 say they were landing in on a re-supply mission, and I just knew we were just going to taxi right out there. Here’s comes this great big ol’ C-130 with those great big ol’—and hit me the first thing. But I mean, as far as—yeah, I got shot at. The first day I flew I got shot at.

LC: Go ahead and say something about that experience. Can you tell—?

PW: We went eight miles into Cambodia. And our mission that day was to evacuate the village because at two o’clock that afternoon, there was going to be a B-52 strike there and completely annihilate that area.

LC: So they sent in—

PW: So they sent us in. But what we did is we flew in, and we picked up—flew into Qui Non or Qui Nhon, however you say it. And we picked up the Vietnamese soldiers that was going to provide security, and we flew in combat assault, gunships, live fire, free fire zones. We had dropped them off, secured the area, then the Chinooks came in and took all the people.

LC: All the civilians?

PW: All the civilians out.

LC: And then did you guys get out of there?

PW: And then we got out.

LC: Were you under fire as you left as well?

PW: No, they did find—they went in, and they found enemy tunnels, supplies, stuff like that.

LC: And then the B-52s came in?

PW: The B-52s came in about ten minutes. We had to stay three miles away from the B-52. The B-52s fly in the formation of three. You’re talking eighteen miles from
wingtip to wingtip or from one flight to another. You know what I mean? What is it?

Three, six, nine, nine miles. Yeah, because they fly a nine-mile path, and just, you know.

LC: Did you actually watch one of those strikes?

PW: Um-hm.

LC: Can you describe that?

PW: It just—kind of like what you see on TV. You just see the blast wave. You don’t think—well, you see Hollywood version, the flames and everything, that’s a bunch of bullshit. That’s gasoline.

LC: But the concussion—

PW: But the concussion, because when a bomb goes off—unless it’s HE, high explosive or Willy Pete.

LC: Which is?

PW: White phosphorous. You’ll know Willy Pete, if you see white start shooting off and burning and everything, that is white phosphorous. You can’t stop that stuff from burning.

LC: And you guys called it Willy Pete?

PW: We called it Willy Pete. But it was just like a bunch of dirt coming up, dust clouds and stuff like that. But I mean, you see the concussion wave going along and everything, and I mean just big trees that—

LC: Just flattened.

PW: Yeah, you know what I mean? Toothpicks, toothpick time, you know?

LC: It must have been scary, impressive.

PW: Well, I mean, “Wow, I’m glad I’m not down there.” That’s really what you think. Man that’s cool, and then you got to take it, “All right, go ahead. Get in there.”

And really, and all Charlie was doing, Chuck was doing was sitting in his bunker laughing at us because it was so deep and so crisscrossed and everything. We weren’t doing a goddamn thing except tearing the ground up.

LC: Did you believe that at the time, that they had these underground works?

PW: Oh, I knew it. We had tunnels in our unit, old tunnels where my unit was.

LC: You mean VC tunnels under Lai Khe?

PW: Right, right
LC: And you guys knew it?
PW: Well, you know.
LC: But you understood?
PW: And you know, in-country plate, what they call it. Before you leave Vietnam, you went to Vietnam replacements, VRT, Vietnam Replacement Training. And I remember mine, they come up, and they says, “No matter what you are, if you’re a cook or if you’re a musician, if it comes time to shit, you’re all infantry.” Because that’s why they call it basic infantry training because they train you all how to operate as an infantry soldier. Marksmanship, all this. And that’s why I say, the Army and the Marines, we called the Navy and the Air Force trade school because they’re not soldiers. The only ones that would be soldiers would be like your SEALS or your Black Berets.

LC: The special ops guys.
PW: Special ops guys. Now those are soldiers.
LC: Let me ask you about coming to the end of your first tour. Were you keeping track like a lot of guys in the company did?
PW: I found my short-timer’s calendar. Mom had it in this stuff I told you about, yes. I hope you can edit this.
LC: Well, no, we won’t.
PW: I got down to sixty-eight days.
LC: When what happened? And you can say however much or little about this as you like.
PW: We bypassed Thanksgiving, didn’t we?
LC: If you want to talk about Thanksgiving—
PW: No, I don’t mind that. But I was sitting there, and there it was like—we usually had four guard men about 5:30, and then we go on guard duty at six o’clock. And so this is about 5:15, 5:20. I’d already gone to eat. Came back and everything was standing there. All of sudden hear this little pop! Pop! And of course, I’d been over there, January, what, nine, ten months? I knew what gunfire sounded like, and you really didn’t think about it because at night, anywhere from five to six o’clock, you had the ARVNswould do the perimeter guard, and they’d shoot at anything. They’d test your weapons, but it brings your attention.
LC: Oh, yeah.
PW: And I saw a little Lambretta going from, let’s see, had to be going, let’s see, the runways are going north/south, east, so he was going, okay. Which way is the east? He was going from the southeast to the northwest. Is that right? Yeah, anyway. South to north. Our runway ran south to north because we couldn’t have landed east to west because of the sun. When we stood formation, we faced east because the sun would be in our face. But anyway, I saw a little Lambretta coming up the road. And the Lambretta was like a three-wheeled Cushman and they used it for taxis over there. And I’d say it was about—you know how big the three-wheeled Cushman is, right?
LC: Yeah, not very.
PW: Yeah. I’ve seen fifteen people on those things. You know what I mean? You talk about sardines. That’s the nicest way I can put it, packed like sardines. But anyway, one guy was driving, and there was two guys in back, and one of the guys in the back, facing me, was shooting. And I don’t know why—I know he’s shooting at me. I don’t know if I saw the flash, the muzzle flash, or what, but I knew it was him. I guess our company was like halfway down the runway. And the runway, what, three, four thousand feet, something like that, whatever a C-130 can land in. Because every Wednesday we’d get C-130s in and get our supplies, like our helicopters parts and stuff like that.
LC: Right. Exactly.
PW: And the other aviation company, we had our company, 1st of the 9th, 1st Cav, and then we had an engineering road construction company there. And so, but anyway, and then all of sudden, we’s in the middle of the rubber plantation, old French rubber plantation. Our base is called Sherwood Forest. We were the Robin Hoods. I was Robin Hood 33 Golf, that was my call sign. But anyway, all of a sudden, leaves started falling out of the ground, out of the sky and all this, and I said, “You know what? They’re shooting at me!” And I was about, I don’t know, ten, fifteen feet away from the building. And we had sand bags three feet up inside the deal, and there was about, I want to say six inches, but I don’t think I was ever slim enough for six inches. When you’re getting shot at, it’s surprising what you can fit into. So I was about a foot away, you know, about two or three. Anyway, I jumped over that and got the deal, and they were shooting us up and
everything. And I’ll always remember this, one of the helicopters was coming back
landing after a III Corps flight, and I remember hearing this on the radio. They called up,
and they said, “Are y’all under attack?” And he was hovering there! And I mean, when
you fly and you figure all the helicopters over there are armed except, well, some of the
medevacs weren’t, but mostly. But anyway, all our helicopters and most of the units—

LC: He was sitting right there?

PW: Right. Most of the unit was back, and so I mean, we had like at least thirty
machine guns out there on the flight line, you know what I mean? And plus, the ten or
twelve from the gunships, you know what I mean? And here’s this—but when you get
into the pattern, you have to take the ammunition out of the gun, secure it for safety
factors. So here he is, sitting there getting shot at. And so he says, “Are y’all under
attack?” They said, “Yes, we are.” And you’re not supposed to—you have a torque
meter on a Huey, and it’s not supposed to go over fifty percent.

LC: Right.

PW: That pilot said it went up to over a hundred percent. Because of the
humidity over there and everything like this, it takes time to get up. Usually you go
forward and build your deal up. He’s just—

LC: He just pulled it up out of there?

PW: Straight up. Twisted the shit out of it. Twisted.

LC: I’ll bet he did, too.

PW: Twisted the tail. We had to take it down to Saigon and ship it back to the
States.

LC: And what happened to you? He’s moving up and out, and what happened?

PW: I hid behind the deal.

LC: Behind the sandbags?

PW: Behind the sandbags. So he didn’t get hit, and I know, and the gunners
finally, I guess, I don’t know whether the pilot told them to do it or they thought—and
they were in my platoon. But they finally got the—he was flying south, so the crew
chief, the left gunner, he finally got his machine gun into position, into action. Of course,
everybody on the flight line—the maintenance officer is out there running around with
his little .38, you know. And I’m thinking, “You’re dumb.” You know what I mean? I
mean, he’s running out there like John Wayne, you know, “Come on, boys!” Yeah, right. 
You know me, I’m thinking—I’d forgotten my ammunition. (Laughter) Only one there 
except for the flight line, and so one platoon sergeant, he said, “Shoot at ‘em, shoot at 
‘em!” I said, “I don’t have any ammunition.” So he threw a bandolier of ammunition. 
Bandolier is seven clips, 140 rounds. At that time we didn’t get the banana clips until 
about the second—

LC: Yeah, in your second tour.

PW: Second tour or something like that. If we had banana clips, they were out in 
the field.

LC: Yeah, they weren’t giving them to you.

PW: Yeah, we didn’t have a lot of stuff. We had a lot of guys, when a lot of the 
aviation unit was down—or the infantry units were stood down, the guys that were still 
left over there, “Hey, do you know how to shoot a machine gun? Oh, you’ll be a great 
gunner.” You know what I mean? And so, you know, they did, they come and 
everything, I mean if they were on jump pay, they got the same amount as jump pay. 
They just didn’t have them jump out of the helicopters and get shot at. They got shot at 
on the helicopters. So anyway, I put the deal in, and you know, it’s kind of, I thought I 
would be gung-ho and everything like this. You know what? That’s scary wondering, 
taking every step and wondering, “Am I going to get hit?” You know what I mean? So I 
went out there and everything and landed beside one of the helicopters and everything 
like this. And I said, “Shoot the sons of bitches!” You know what I mean? And they 
said, “Who?” And I said, “The Lambretta, the Lambretta, shoot it, shoot it!” And here 
and everything, and all this time, I had a little weapon, didn’t even a fire shot.

LC: But it sounds like you were the one who knew where the firing was coming 
from.

PW: Yeah. And nobody else knew where it was, but I don’t why, I mean, I’m not 
John Wayne. The sergeant, you know, really, the sergeant says, “Get out there, y’all.” I 
mean, really, that is tough getting out of the safe place.

LC: I’ll bet.

PW: Knowing and running and everything like this, and you know, if you can 
hear it, you know you’re not dead. Well, I mean, really, the one that gets you is the one
you don’t hear, you know. Because, my God, they’re going 660 feet a second. And it’s
not like the rocket that blew me off the top of my helicopter is the one that I didn’t hear.
I heard the one that hit before it and after it, not the one—

LC: Was that in the second tour?
PW: No, that was the first. July 5, 1970. But anyway, that was Thanksgiving, so
we went to—and eventually, how they killed, and you know, I think one of the reasons I
didn’t want to shoot is because a few days before, we’d had some drunk ARVN had fired
us up at night. And what I mean by fired us up, they shot at us. And so, I mean.

LC: You’re on edge anyway, probably.
PW: Right, you know what I mean? And so, I mean, we opened up and a bunch
of civilians had got killed in exchange or wounded.

LC: This was just a couple of days before?
PW: This just a couple of days before. They come up, and they said, “If you kill
anymore civilians, you’re going to be court martialed.” Well, I didn’t want to kill
civilians, and so that’s what you’re thinking about. I think that’s part of the deal, but you
know. But anyway, later on that night, later on that night, we got hit, and it was about
9:30 at night, ten o’clock, something like that.

LC: With mortars or do you know what it was?
PW: Everything.

LC: Everything.
PW: And I saw, they had—they were burning trash over in Lai Khe. And I mean,
it’s surprising how much that lights up the night. And I saw somebody move, something
move, and I just thought it was like, you know, you can’t judge distance in pitch dark. I
mean, so pitch dark, I’ve gotten as close from here to you to people and they wouldn’t
know I’m there. And that’s scary. But anyway, I saw something and everything, and I
didn’t think anything about it. Like I said, I thought it was just somebody walking front,
and then I heard the PSP (perforated steel planking) steel plank. They take steel planks
and put them together, make runways, portable runways. I heard that.

LC: You heard the plates knocking?
PW: Yeah, the plates knocking. And I looked, and the standard deal is, “Halt!
Halt! Who goes there? Halt or I’ll fire! Fire! Halt!” Bullshit! I clicked automatic and
pointed, you know. “Halt!” Boom! There goes that helicopter twenty-five feet away from me.

LC: What did you do?

PW: (Laughter) I’ll put it this way: I had to clean my britches. But, fired, killed him. I don’t know whether the shrapnel from them got it or whether I killed him.

LC: Or whether it was your bullet. But you were—

PW: I fired. And what I did, what saved me from getting, I guess, the shrapnel and everything is I had squatted down behind a revetment, so I was looking, because that revetment takes bullets a lot easier than me.

LC: And that’s the point of a revetment, is to protect the aircraft.

PW: Right.

LC: But also you, in this case.

PW: So, and then, we killed that and then a few minutes later, we had one of the wire out on the east side, west side is breached. I mean, big enough, our first sergeant was six-foot-five, and they went there in the day and took pictures, and the whole in the wire was bigger than him.

LC: Do you have any recollection or knowledge of what happened in that breach?

There must have been a firefight over there.

PW: Oh, yeah, there was a firefight. We went on alert and everything and—

LC: Did you stay where you were, though?

PW: Oh, yeah. I was on guard duty.

LC: Yeah, so you just stayed where you were.

PW: But while we had a reactionary force, and reactionary force, what it is, is like we had, okay, we had one guard for every five revetments. Reactionary guard, every revetment or every other revetment had somebody there. So like every fifty to a hundred feet you had somebody there. They bounced our helicopters, our gun ships. They bounced the 1st and 9th Cav helicopters, gun ships, and they were a hunter-killer company. A hunter-killer is a Cobra and a LOH (light observation helicopter). LOH would go down and draw the fire, and then the Cobra would come in. We’d do the same thing with a Slick and a Cobra. Anyway, they bounced them.

LC: When you say bounced, what do you mean?
PW: They took off fully armed. They were flying down. It was a mile from the center of the runway to the fence. They would fly down the center about a hundred feet up, two hundred feet up, no, a hundred feet up, fifty to a hundred feet up. They’d fly down the center of the deal, firing their rockets.

LC: At the perimeter?

PW: At the perimeter. They come up, and they told us that the engineering company was being evacuated, so basically, it was almost overrun. They hit them, I mean, they killed three guys there in the bunker. They blew the bunker up, one of their bunkers up. So it breached, you know? So anyway, they come up in, I mean, they were fighting and everything, and they told us, they said, “There’s X number of people.” They were coming in in their skivvies, you know? Steel pot, flak vest. You think I’ve worn the skivvies? I would shoot them if they were enemy. We had Puff flying along. He came down. He was a hundred feet over the runway. Told the helicopters, they finally went to rearm, so they flew down the center, and they just—Gatling gun just going. I got a burn, and they always told them, they said, “If you ever get where a Puff flies over, put your collar up like this and go down.”

LC: Why?

PW: Because the shells will hit.

LC: Hot shells.

PW: The hot shells. I got a little burn back there, so. “Hey, that’s why!”

LC: “That’s why they told me.”

PW: That’s not bullshit! You know what I mean?

LC: Paula, let’s take a break right there.

PW: Okay.
Interview with Paula Wright
Session 2 of 2
August 11, 2005

LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Paula D. Wright. Today’s date is the eleventh of August, 2004. And Paula and I are sitting together in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. And Paula, I want to welcome you back. Thank you for making time to come back and help us learn more about your experiences in Vietnam. Let me start by asking about a point which we left off yesterday, which has to do with the end of your tour. You were telling me that you had a short timer’s calendar that you have now, you have found at home. And I wonder if there were any events that happened as you came to the end of your tour that you wanted to talk about. Anything that you remember about leaving?

PW: Well, like I told you in my e-mail to you last month, this is the point that because on the ninth of August, today is August 11, 2005. On August 9, 1970, we lost six people that day.

LC: Let me ask if you don’t mind, Paula, to tell me what you feel comfortable with about what happened that day.

PW: I think I can talk about it.

LC: If you feel all right.

PW: Yeah, I feel all right. It was a Saturday, and we went out, and we had one of our helicopters shot down. It was a gunship, and we got the crew chief and the gunner and the pilot. I shouldn’t say gunner, I should say door gunner because the co-pilot in a gunship is considered the gunner. But anyway, the crew chief and the door gunner got out. They co-pilot got out. When the chopper crashed, it caused the instrument panel to be crushed, trapping the pilot in, so we had to leave him.

LC: We can just take a little break right now. Okay, go ahead, Paula.

PW: Anyway, the helicopter was on fire, and we were trying to get him out, and we couldn’t get him out. And so, he told us to leave him in, leave him there. So we had to leave him there.

LC: He spoke to you? He was speaking to you, to the guys?
PW: Well, whoever, one of the other guys in my platoon was there. I can’t remember where I was flying, but I was on a different mission. And I talked to him about that and everything and the other guys. And then about 6:15 that night, we got a mortar attack. It seemed like they’d always hit us between six o’clock, and for awhile there, it was like for a week we’d get hit between 6:00 and 6:30 everyday. And then other times, it’d be different times during the day.

LC: Just sporadic.

PW: Yeah, sporadic. But they were trained to hit the mess hall because they knew we ate. So, but anyway, like I said, about 6:30 we got a mortar attack, and one hit the maintenance squad that I was working in, and they were working that night. They were trying to get it out. The guy that took my place, shrapnel hit him at the back of his neck, and it just cut him where you could just—so he’d been in-country only a week, been in our unit for three days.

LC: Was he killed immediately?

PW: Oh, yes. Yes, but why I remember that is it could have been me because like I said, he took my place in the maintenance platoon.

LC: Do you know his name?

PW: I did at the time, but I’ve put it back.

LC: I understand.

PW: But a day later, we had the memorial service for him, and I can still see the boots, the helmets, the uniforms, all lined up across the stage. And so, this is the thirty-fifth anniversary of that, so I guess it’s really, this interview’s more poignant to me now.

LC: But it’s fitting that you remember him in this way, too. This honors his service that you remember him. That you were there, that you feel able to talk about that puts him on the record.

PW: So, a week later, on the sixteenth, well, my wife said it was a Saturday because we started calling it Black Saturday because we had so many, you know, we had like a total of fifteen people wounded, but those six killed. So like an almost three to one ratio, which I’m really glad because I wish it had been eighteen wounded instead of killed, but that’s the, you know. The chaplain would come up, and the preachers always
come up and talk about when somebody dies young and the Lord’s purpose, served,
fulfilled his service on life.

LC: Did that comfort you at all?
PW: Not really.

LC: Has it since?
PW: No, not really.

LC: Really, haven’t changed on that?
PW: And it gives me and every other veteran that every served in combat guilt
complex.

LC: And you feel that still, obviously.
PW: Yes, because you know, why them? Because you’re taught from the time
you go into military until you get out, you don’t leave your buddies behind. You protect
your buddies. And even now in the veteran’s organizations I belong to, we still think
that. We’re buddies. Might not like you, might not agree with you.

LC: But you still have this common—
PW: But we’re still buddies, and we’ll fight for what you need and support
whatever you do.

LC: Well, Paula, let me ask about when you left Vietnam in December, I gather,
December of 1970.
PW: Um-hm, December 8.

LC: What was your next posting?
PW: My next posting was Ft. Knox, Kentucky.

LC: Okay and how long were you there?
PW: I was there for eight months.

LC: And what did you do?
PW: I was a—excuse me.

LC: Sure. Okay, well what were you doing on this stateside assignment?
PW: I was a helicopter mechanic again. I got in, and I was a CO’s crew chief.

LC: What was your MOS (military occupational specialty) number?
PW: My MOS was 67 November 20, which is UH-1, oh, single-turbine rotor
utility helicopter.
LC: Okay, and so you continued to do that kind of work?

PW: I continued to do that and everything. Of course, we didn’t fly as much.

This was back in the States, and we didn’t fly that much and everything. So basically I got bored because I was sitting around playing cards all day with the POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) guys, and so I finally started working with the maintenance guy, working on maintenance.

LC: Well, how did it come about that you went back to Vietnam?

PW: I reenlisted in March of ’71 and got a ten-thousand dollar bonus.

LC: Is that why you reenlisted, or what was driving you, what was your motivation?

PW: Well, actually, what’s funny, I’ll go back. I’d been in-country, I’d been in the unit a week or ten days, and I went to formation one day. And they came up, and usually you have to spend for unmarried a year tour, for married usually eighteen month tour, and I’d just gotten married. And actually, I had requested an extension, a three-month extension in Vietnam because I wasn’t—until after my twenty-first birthday. Because my parents said they weren’t going to sign to let me get married. So I said, “Well, if I’m twenty-one, they can’t do anything.” Well, they came up and gave me a— two days after I requested my extension, they gave me a forty-five day drop. So I was afraid. I kept my mouth shut, and in fact, at the headquarters, I asked them, you know, I got sent to battalion headquarters. And they said, “Well, we don’t have your orders yet.” And I said, “Yeah, they’re going to send me back.” Because in the paperwork I signed said that if I got a drop I would, you know, waive it. Well, I guess somebody in the battalion lost the paperwork. So I thought maybe they caught that, and they had gotten me and somebody else—his and my last four were the same numbers. The last two numbers were switched. Like, mine is nine four, his was four nine. So he came up from Vietnam, so they couldn’t find him, so they sent it to me, and so they thought I was going back to Vietnam. And I reenlisted and got a ten-thousand dollar bonus. And this sounds stupid, but to me it seemed logical. They came up and took twenty-five hundred dollars out for taxes, and so I went back and that pissed me off and everything. And they switched out, switched me into a different job, which I didn’t like. And so I said, “To hell with this shit. I’ll go back to Vietnam. One thing, I’ll get my money, all my twenty-
five hundred dollars back.” And I said, “Screw it.” You know, I’ll go back to Vietnam.

“Screw you! You don’t like me?”

LC: Yeah, that was your attitude?

PW: Yes.

LC: And you got sent back, you did get it back?

PW: Oh, yeah, I got all of it back. It took me a year, but I got the money back.

LC: Well, so you were to start your second tour in the middle of ’71, then?

PW: I got there August. Every time I got transferred, I left the unit, and I had to report on the sixteenth of the month. I don’t know why they did that to me, like a lot of the people that were married and everything, they would like, the first of the month, you know what I mean? Me, I always got the sixteenth of the month, and what was bad and everything, you want to turn it off a second?

LC: Sure. So you’re arrival back in Vietnam, what did it feel like to be back there? Did it bring up stuff or were you ready to go and all right? Somewhere in between, maybe?

PW: Really, it hadn’t changed that much. It seemed like I hadn’t left.

LC: I believe it.

PW: I mean, you get there, and the airplane opens, and that jet fuel and charcoal. And the Vietnamese, they heated their houses with charcoal, they cooked on charcoal. I can remember when we’d take off in the mornings, the first time we’d take off, we’d fly over the village. And the first five hundred feet or first hundred feet, we’d be just like going through black smoke, you know, the charcoal smoke, and that smell and everything. I can’t barbeque. And I smell a charcoal fire, and I think about it.

LC: Even now.

PW: Even now.

LC: Where did you get assigned this time?

PW: I got assigned to 101st Airborne Division. We was ten miles from the DMZ (demilitarized zone). I was at Camp Evans, 101st Airborne, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne.

LC: And Camp Evans is huge, right? I mean, it was a big complex.

PW: Yep, it was big. Firebases north, well, they had some fire bases north of us. I think the 5th Division, 5th Infantry Division was just a few miles up the road from us.
And then they got stood down right before I got back over there or right shortly after
because we were the last American major base there on the north.

LC: Up on the DMZ area.

PW: Yeah, up by the— we were ten miles. We were a mile and a half from A
Shau.

LC: The A Shau Valley?

PW: Yeah. Okay. I’ve always said the A Shau, A Shau.

LC: No, that’s fine. And you were, what did your daily work look like?

PW: I got there, and I was supposed to go to C Company, 159th Aviation to take
over being crew chief on one of the helicopters. And that’s what I was assigned for. And
then the in-country replacement, they had changed orders from D Company, which was a
gunship, Cobra company. By this time, we had switched from C-model Cobra gunship
Huey.

LC: The C-model Huey to the Cobras?

PW: To the Cobra.

LC: Right and you said yesterday that it really, from a maintenance point-of-view
was not all that different to work on the two different ships. Obviously, there were
some—

PW: No. The basic frame was the same thing as a Huey, just a streamline shorter.

Had the pilot and the gunner, they were, let’s see tandem was side-by-side. I keep getting
that confused. Aircraft mechanic and I don’t know the difference between the two. But
anyway, the pilot sits in front and the gunner sits behind him. So I didn’t like it because I
didn’t get to fly. I could have been the crew chief, but you don’t fly, so there goes your
fifty-five dollars a month.

LC: Was that the pay difference?

PW: Right. Flight pay was fifty-five dollars a month.

LC: But did you also care that you would have rather have flown? Not just the
fifty-five bucks, I mean, that’s important.

PW: Yes, I’d rather fly. Well, I mean, that’s why all these guys are going, “Well,
you can volunteer to go jump out of airplanes and be a paratrooper.” Hey, paratrooper
pay and flight pay is the same amount of money. Why should I leave a perfectly good
aircraft and walk, when I can fly? I mean, I’m sorry, I might be Army, but these feet
don’t walk unless they have to.

LC: Well, were there any attacks on Evans while you were there that you
remember?

PW: No. Actually, we had, the worse thing we had was a typhoon. And it was
really funny. I’ll regress a little bit. When I got to Ft. Rucker, Alabama, two days later,
we had Hurricane Celia hit us. And then I get to Vietnam, and they’re not only trying to
shoot at us and kill us, you know, frag us or whatever, but we had to sit there for three
days in the typhoon! And we were like half a mile from the coast, South China Sea.

LC: And you guys were getting battered, probably.

PW: And they flew the helicopters out, so the pilots got to go out, but they left us
there.

LC: Right. So how bad was it? Can you describe it?

PW: Oh, God. Wind, constant roar, constant rain. And I mean, all you can do is
sleep or listen to the rain. And we had to go out—I was lucky because what I worked in,
the hooch I worked in—well, I worked in maintenance for awhile, couple of months,
something like that. And then I got, I can’t remember what happened. Anyway, they
needed communications people, and so I said, “Yeah.” Well, I raised a stink and
everything because I tried to get out of the unit and go into the Slick unit. And using the
old ploy, I reenlisted as a UH-1 crew chief and everything like that. I was told that I
would be that for three years. Or well, eighteen months, guaranteed eighteen months and
everything. And so, you know, I tried the deal and everything.

LC: But that didn’t—

PW: Maintenance sergeant said, “Well, if you don’t want us around there, you
don’t want to be here, why would I want you here?” So which really wasn’t no sweat off
my back.

LC: So you moved?

PW: So I moved over to—they said, “Well, we need somebody in the
communications section.” So I operated the switchboard for awhile, and I pitched, strung
the telephone wires for the field phones. Did that for awhile. I just couldn’t—people
can’t understand this: flying does not scare me, but I’m scared of heights. They said, “If
you don’t like and scared of heights, why do you fly?” I said, “Flying doesn’t scare me. It’s that sudden stop after the fall that scares me.”

LC: Right, right.
PW: I’ve been that way since—and my oldest boy is the same way. And I mean, with him growing up, I tried to get him, you know, teach him to not have the same fears that I did and everything like that. It might be hereditary, I don’t know.

LC: Yeah, they say that it is; that you’re born with it.
PW: But he doesn’t mind flying. He’ll do it. But he has, you know. But anyway, I did that for awhile. And they come up and the first sergeant needed somebody to run the details. And we had a Vietnamese boy and three or four mama sans that’d go around and pick stuff up, clean stuff up and do minor maintenance around the stuff and everything. So he needed somebody to do that, so I did that for the—I guess it was like two months altogether I was in maintenance and then communication. And then the last eight weeks I was in the unit, I did the detail stuff. And then we got orders to—they stood the unit down and sent the unit back home. And that hacked me off because I got in-country like the eighteenth of August, left here the sixteenth, got there the eighteenth.

But I didn’t get to my unit until about a week later because at that time, they considered it like high VC activity, so they would not transport us to the—take us from Bien Hoa, or from Long Binh to Bien Hoa because they were afraid the—of course, we’re unarmed.

And so, they’re afraid that—

LC: You’d be targeted.
PW: Targeted and everything. If I had been—like the first tour, if I had got there as soon as I’d gotten in-country, I would have had enough time in-country or in the unit to go back to the unit. So that would have meant I would have had an eight month drop.

LC: But instead—
PW: But instead, I got stuck.
LC: You got transferred.
PW: I got transferred to 1st Cav Division in Bien Hoa, 3rd Brigade.
LC: And this was with the, am I right with saying this is with the 229th? And that was part of the 1st Cav?
PW: Yes, it was 229th. How the 1st Cav had it in—it’s really funny because I always wanted to be in the Cav because one thing the 1st Cav proved that air mobility would work. The 1st Cav proved that they did helicopter evacuations for medevacs in Korea. But the 1st Cav proved that it worked, proved that we saved ninety-nine percent of the casualties that were killed, able to be saved.

LC: Get them from the battlefield out of there.

PW: From the battlefield out to a mobile evacuation hospital and everything. So, but and of course, and it’s really, like I said yesterday, like I told you yesterday, I ended up in Colonel Custerd’s outfit.

LC: So, the 7th?

PW: First of the 7th Cav. And that was—and the brigades, they had three brigades, 1st Brigade, 2nd Brigade and 3rd Brigade. And the aviation for the 1st Brigade was 227, for the 2nd was 228, and then for the 3rd was 229. So that’s how the other two division headquarters and the other two brigades had been taken back, sent back to Ft. Hood, Texas, so we were 3rd Brigade Forward.

LC: And this is at Bien Hoa?

PW: At Bien Hoa, yeah. Bien Hoa, the first time I was over there, Bien Hoa was the division headquarters of the 1st Cav Division. But really what’s funny is Camp Evans and everything like this, used to be 1st Cav until the 101st came over, early on. And the A Shau, the 1st Cav went in. They went in, they put out a deal, and they said, “This is the year of the horse, we are the horse, and we’re going to kick your butt.”

LC: This is the 1965 battles in the Ia Drang Valley and all that. When the 1st Cav and the 1st of the 7th.

PW: First of the Seventh was the first combat unit in Vietnam. They had the first American Vietnamese major battle.

LC: Right, North Vietnamese.

PW: North Vietnamese battle. In fact, the film, what’s the name of it? We Were Young and Brave?

LC: We Were Soldiers Once, and Young.

PW: Yeah, We Were Soldiers Young and Brave, yeah, that is an actual true, how the story of the 1st of the 7th Cav.
LC: And, I mean, you must have been, in some way, a little torn, I mean, wish that you’d gone home.

PW: I was torn because my mother-in-law came up and said, “Well, I guess Paul got tired of it.” Because I got married on December 27, and here, seven-and-a-half months later, I was shipping out. So, yes, I was torn because I missed that. And what’s really funny is when I got to the 101st, instead of putting me—I had made an allotment. I had most of my money go to my ex, and I took twenty-five dollars a month because I didn’t need that much. Had three square meals a day and a place to sleep.

LC: So the salary was basically staying with your wife?

PW: Yeah, because we had bought a new house, or a trailer. It was a house to us.

LC: Sure.

PW: So she had to pay, you know, had a new car. So, had bills to pay and everything. And anyway, first month came around, and I didn’t get paid, so I went down to division. “Well, next month, you’ll get paid.” Next month, I didn’t get until three months. My wedding anniversary on December 27, I went and walked over the airbase, and they had a MARS station over there with a direct phone line from Vietnam to Oakland Army Base. And then, so all I had to do was pay for the phone call from Oakland to wherever it was in the States. And so I got permission to go over there, and it was after work, but we were, our squad was working on a helicopter because it had flown that day and we were taking it in. So I got permission to take off work, go over there and call because it was my first anniversary. I found out that they had me listed as missing-in-action, and that was why I wasn’t getting paid.

LC: And that had been true for three months?

PW: And that had been true since August, and this was December.

LC: Had they told your wife that you were missing-in-action? That’s very strange.

PW: Not until she wasn’t getting paid and everything, so I kept saying, “Well, okay, all the paperwork.” She’d write me, and I’d write back, and I’d tell her and everything. Finally, what she did and everything is she went to the finance officer there at Ft. Knox. And she found out December 24, they called up and everything, and he said, “Well, we have all this paperwork and everything like this, so what we need you to do, is
we need you to go to the—" Of course, the last two weeks, I was up in the 101st, they
wouldn’t let us write. We could get mail, but they wouldn’t let us write because of
security concerns. Because they knew, they was afraid, and the people going home, they
were allowed one phone call, say: “I’m coming home, I’ll be home soon.” But they
couldn’t say a date. We knew a date, and really, that’s stupid because, I mean, you know.

LC: They were trying to prevent—
PW: If somebody knows the date, it’s going to get around.

LC: In Vietnam that—
PW: Right, the security, like World War II and everything like this. But I mean, really, Vietnam was different from—I’ve seen letters that my uncle had sent and
everything like this, and you can see where it’s censored, you know what I mean. So,
Vietnam was, we were not censored. We could talk about whatever we wanted to and
everything. We told them where we was at and everything.

LC: And do you think that was a mistake?
PW: No. It was put on the news anyway.

LC: Really? So it wouldn’t have made—it wasn’t a security breach in that sense
because this information was already available.

PW: Right. One thing I did see that I never thought I would see, we had general
orders signed by the commanding general of the 101st saying that we could not talk or
give rides to any correspondent unless they had approval from general headquarters.

LC: By correspondent, you mean American news correspondents?
PW: American news, any correspondent.

LC: That’s strange. Did you ever see one? Did you ever see news people over
there?
PW: Um-hm. I was on the national news one day.

LC: What happened? How’d that happen?
PW: Guy was—I was getting in the helicopter to go down to the USS Corpus
Christi to pick up some parts that was being repaired, some instruments that were being
repaired. I was waiting for the helicopter to come out, I turned out, about a hundred
yards away I saw this guy with a great big ol’ news camera and everything like this,
taking pictures like this. I flipped him the peace sign and everything, a week later I get a
letter from home, “I saw you on the NBC news last night!” Really?

LC: No kidding.
PW: I mean, they zoomed in on me.
LC: So you were doing the peace sign.
PW: Yeah, I was doing the peace sign.
LC: Cool. That’s actually pretty neat. Well, it was probably exciting, I mean,
you must have been thrilled when they recognized it was you.
PW: Well, Marva did, you know?
LC: That would be your wife.
PW: Yeah, that was my wife. I don’t know, my parents, I don’t know what, they
didn’t see it.
LC: Well, she must have been darn excited, too.
PW: She was back in Ft. Knox. And she was over at—it’s funny, the lady’s name
was Antoinette, and we called her Tony. Her husband’s name was Jack, and why I’m
getting into this is—well, anyway. So, they was over there, and they were playing
pinochle. That must be an Eastern game, Eastern United States because I haven’t found
anybody.
LC: No, not out here.
PW: Well, I take that back, some guys that went to UT played pinochle in basic,
but I mean, you know. Anyhow, they were playing pinochle, and she was sitting there
listening, and they said, “We go to our correspondent so and so in Bien Hoa Army Base,
Vietnam.” And so, she happens to look up, and she sees me, and she goes, “Uh, uh, uh,
that’s Paul! That’s Paul!”
LC: That must have been quite a moment.
PW: And everything, so she said—well, she hadn’t heard from me for a few days.
LC: She knew you were okay.
PW: She knew I was all right, and I asked her and everything like this. I said,
“Well, did you call my parents?” She said, “No, I didn’t think about it.” But she called
her cousins that stayed with her when we first got out there. In fact, her cousin was in
Vietnam the same time I was for his second, or, I think it was his third tour. At least
second tour.

LC: Now this happened in December?
PW: Well, not, this happened in like, you know.

LC: Earlier?
PW: No, let’s see, this happened like in February or March. It happened in
February. Why I say that is I went home on R&R (rest and relaxation) in March, and she,
you know.

LC: When you say you went home, did you go to Hawaii or did you go all the
way home?
PW: It was cheaper. They came up, and it was real good. The first time I was
over there, I was going to pay for Barbara Jean to fly over to Hawaii. I talked to our
chaplain, and he got me in touch with a chaplain that he knew there in Hawaii, and we
were going to meet there and get married. And I get a letter from Barbara Jean, and she
had talked to my parents, my mother, and my mother talked her into—she came up and
she says, “I’ll shack up with you.” She says, “I’ll shack up with you, but I won’t marry
you.” And then I come back, make an honest woman out of her anyway. So, you know,
I mean, we just, well, I don’t know. But, the idea that maybe, and I agree with Mom and
everything, if I got back, well, one thing, what if I got killed? Spend a week together for
our honeymoon and get killed. Or what if I come back and I’m disabled? Physically,
where she had to take care of me. And yes, I’m disabled, but I’m just a little crazy,
nothing bad.

LC: You can get around.
PW: Yeah, but anyway. Certified by the VA crazy. (Laughs)

LC: Well, let me ask about going back to the 1st Cav and the time you spent with
them.
PW: Yeah, go ahead.

LC: What was the feeling, I mean, we’re talking about 1972. What was the
feeling in the unit that you were in, in terms of whether the war was going to end soon,
PW: We had gone, then, from standard stint of like five hundred thousand other soldiers down there, and I mean, we were rank heavy. I had got promoted to E-5 before I left 101st, acting Jack. Which meant if I had kept it for thirty days in combat, it would have been permanent. Two weeks, or two or three weeks after I got promoted, we got our stand-in orders. So I said, “What’s going to happen?” They said, “Well, you’re going as an E-5.” As soon as I get to 1st Cav, and I said, “What happens to my E-5?” “Well, that depends on your first sergeant.” As soon as I report to the first sergeant, I’m not longer an E-5; I’m an E-4. A squad has one NCO (non-commissioned officer), an E-5, a corporal—let’s see, there’s twelve people, so that’s two, eight. Four or five E-4s, PFCs and the E-1s. Our squad, the lowest rank was E-4 or E-3, excuse me, I take that back, it’s E-3.

LC: So there were just a couple people below you, and they needed you to be further down, otherwise it would be too top heavy as a squad.

PW: Well, we were too top heavy. We had, I mean, you know, squad leader was a—we had E-5s going private of the guard.

LC: Well, by 1972, that doesn’t surprise me.

PW: So, I mean, the last herd, like when I got there in August of ’72, I say we had like a total of like fifty thousand. By February, it was down to twenty-five thousand. And it seems like every single one of us was at Bien Hoa. We were the last combat unit left, active combat unit left in Vietnam.

LC: And how far afield were the helicopters going? I mean, were they going all the way out to the border?

PW: We was going all over.

LC: All over the place. So the mission area wasn’t restricted at this point.

PW: No, no, mission area, the Vietnamese had completely taken over I Corps and II Corps. We had III Corps and IV Corps.

LC: So you might have choppers that were going all the way down to the Delta?

PW: Right.

LC: In the course of a day, and coming back.

PW: Right.
LC: What were the losses? I mean, I’m just wondering how much, how many hits were the choppers taking in the course of a day? Would they come back with bullet holes, were they still taking fire?

PW: Yes, they were still taking fire and everything. I'll tell you what happened. In April, and I got—they come up, and they said, “Oh, we’re standing a unit down. We’re sending the brigade home.” Folding colors, sending them back to Ft. Hood and everything. Okay, they come up and everything, and they said, “All right, I’m getting me a four month drop.”

LC: Right, and?

PW: So, I process out, go to Camp Alpha.

LC: This is in April?

PW: April, ’72. Process out, go to Camp Alpha, get up the next morning, get on the bus, go through customs, get on the Boeing, get on the bus, coming up and everything, get off the bus, getting ready to go on the airplane, and the MP (military police) jeep pulls up. Me and two other guys were pulled out and sent back to the unit.

LC: What explanation did they give you, any?

PW: The NVA was twenty-five miles away from Bien Hoa. This is whenever, this is when the NVA started Spring Offensive. The Vietnamese and everything, within two days, they had completely taken over the 1st Corps, I Corps. You asked if I had an action at Evans and everything. I didn’t, but we left, like, we left the twenty-first of December. New Years Eve it got heavily shelled. I found that out as I saw, they had an Air Force radar site that controlled the strikes up in Hanoi and Hai Phong. And I knew one of the Air Force guys, and I met him at Camp Alpha when I was going on R&R and he told me about it. And he said, it was heavy artillery, rocket, everything, and a ground attack, and he said he lost everything they got because all they did, they had enough time to fly shithooks in and get them out and that was it.

LC: And this was up at Evans?

PW: This was up at Evans.

LC: And so you had some preparation, some idea of how much progress the NVA had made?
PW: Well, this happened like in December and everything, so I knew, yeah, and
we had—it didn’t surprise me that the units were folding.
LC: But how heartbroken were you when you got pulled off the flight line
practically?
PW: If I had had a gun, I would have hijacked the aircraft. (Laughs)
LC: I believe you.
PW: Because what pissed me off, if we had been in the airplane and the doors
shut, they would have left us alone. Because once they shut that door, they had only a
certain amount of time to be on the ground.
LC: So how close were you, ten minutes or less from getting on the plane?
PW: Five minutes, three minutes because I was getting off the bus, we were lining
up, standing in line to get on the plane.
LC: So they came through and said, “Wright, you’re with me?”
PW: They called the names and everything like this.
LC: And these are MPs that were doing this?
PW: Well, it was somebody from Camp Alpha and everything.
LC: Right, and so they said, “You need to get back up here?”
PW: So they said—they didn’t tell us, they said, “You’ve been pulled off the
flight.” They just told us that. They didn’t tell us until we got back to Camp Alpha.
They’re not dumb. They knew we would, you know. No, I mean, but anyway.
LC: Heated up.
PW: But I spent the next seventy-two hours humping rockets, working twelve on
and twelve off. Humping rockets because all we had at that time was anti-personnel
rockets. And they had T-54 tanks that they were going against, trying to stop.
LC: Now these are the rockets that were loaded onto the undercarriage of the
helicopters. And what kind of rockets were they?
PW: They were anti-personnel.
LC: So that’s not going to be much against a tank, is it?
PW: They just bounce off.
LC: So that’s pretty dangerous for the guys who were flying.
PW: So what they did, if you get it underneath the turret, yeah, it would, you know what I mean?
LC: You might get infantry who might be walking with the tank.
PW: But as far as in—
LC: Taking the tanks out, that was not going to do it.
PW: Not taking the tank out, and at that time, I was glad. And I wanted to fly it in, but you had to have so many other people. In a roundabout way, I did want to fly, but first time I was single, young, you know, the old expression, young, dumb and full of cum. Now I was married, I had a little bit more responsibility. Yes, it would have been nice to fly and everything. If I had a chance to fly, yeah, I would have taken it.
LC: But that didn’t come up.
PW: But they had too many people. They had too many people that wanted to fly.
LC: When you say you are humping rockets, are you saying that you were moving the rockets from wherever they were stored?
PW: What it was, they flew, at that time, they had the first TOW, which is tactical optical weapon in Germany. It’s a wire-guided anti-tank rocket. Well, they didn’t expect. We didn’t have any in Vietnam because that was an unconventional warfare. You know jungle warfare and everything like this. We had tanks, but you didn’t expect, you know. So what they did is they air-lifted C-5 to the helicopters from Germany nonstop, and they based them there. And so what they did, and so also with the C-5, they brought in, they left the ammunition at Saigon under more secure because really, we were told not to except—well, I’ll put it this way, said, well, they said, “Write all your personal stuff down besides your military uniforms, stuff like that. Turn it in, and we’ll keep it.” Because they were talking about and everything, if it got too bad, we was going to boogie out.
LC: Meaning bug out, fold up and get out of there? To Saigon, presumably or did you not know?
PW: Well, they said we’d bug out to Bien Hoa, and then they said, “By that time, we should have the 141s and whatever here to take you out.” In other words, we were going to let them have everything. Blow the helicopters in place.
LC: Blow up?
PW: Blow them up.

LC: Wow.

PW: So, I mean, that’s kind of—gives you an incentive.

LC: Very nerve-racking. I mean, I can’t imagine.

PW: Like, we had rearm point and everything, but yet, really not—well, one thing, we didn’t have the area to store the ammunition that they needed. And so what they did, they’d fly in enough ammunition to arm everything and take them off, and then they’d, you know.

LC: They’d bring in more?

PW: Bring in more while they were out.

LC: So this is kind of an airlift of ammo, effectively, into the base so that the helicopters could be armed and fly out. And they were doing this many times a day?

PW: We flew 24/7.

LC: For at least three days, or was it longer than that?

PW: For at least three days.

LC: And did you get any time off in there, or were you running pretty much—

PW: We worked twelve hours.

LC: Twelve-twelve?

PW: Twelve-twelve. And really with that and everything going on, it got close enough we could hear the artillery was going off all the time. It was even in—they’d fly the 105 shells in and set it right there by, you know—

LC: Now after this period, this three or four day period that was really intense—

PW: We stopped them five miles from Bien Hoa.

LC: The NVA?

PW: The NVA.

LC: And what happened next over the next few weeks? Did you guys—

PW: Well, we was able to take over the areas, re-takeover the areas and everything.

LC: Was it pretty much constant, you know, battle stations effectively? You guys were working to keep the choppers in the air?
PW: We were wearing flak jackets and steel pots and underwear. (Laughs)

Uniform regulations was relaxed just a little bit.

LC: And this is, we’re talking about now, probably May of ’72.

PW: This is like April.

LC: April or May.

PW: April ’72, and everything, mostly. It might have been May, I don’t know. I just remember, you know—

LC: When did you actually, then, get to finally leave Vietnam?

PW: I was supposed to—I left June 30, 1972.

LC: This is pretty much right close to the end.

PW: But see, they told me, they said, “Your tour is extended until your DEROS (date of estimated return from overseas) date.” You know what DEROS is?

LC: Explain it for people, if you would.

PW: Date expected return from overseas. Everybody had a twelve—you had to spend ten months, at least ten months in-country to qualify for a drop. A tour was considered ten months. Ten months, five days. I don’t know why ten months, five days. Why not ten months, you know what I mean? Why not ten days, one month? Or ten days, one week?

LC: There’s no explaining it. But anyway, that’s what it was.

PW: So, the first time I spent over there ten months, twenty-nine days, twelve hours, fifty-four minutes. Don’t ask me the seconds. I don’t know. Sorry, that was a smartass remark.

LC: That’s all right. But you got it pretty closely figured.

PW: Actually, why I know that and everything like this is because on my discharge papers, on your 214s, they give the exact amount of time that you spent in a combat zone.

LC: Do you have a copy of your DD-214?

PW: Yes, I do.

LC: Would you mind depositing one here, a copy of it I mean, obviously, to add to the collection here?

PW: Yeah, no problem.
LC: And let me ask what it felt like to—I assume you flew home. What was the plane ride like?

PW: Well, I went to work, and what hacked me off is when I was working, when they pulled me off, I wasn’t even working in my MOS. They put me in another job. I was working in maintenance, but I was in charge of the hydraulic shop.

LC: And they had done this to you a couple of times before?

PW: Well, you’re 67 November, you’re not a, you know what I mean, so your MOS is critical. So, I mean, I didn’t mind, you know what I mean? You know, if I was doing my job, that’d be different.

LC: But they had you sidelined.

PW: They had me sidelined.

LC: Doing this hydraulic stuff.

PW: Doing hydraulics and everything, which is, you know, I mean a little bit—

That’s how I got put on TV because I had the hydraulic shop and also the special tools and tool shed. And one of our—we kept all the testing equipment, and one of our test equipments had to be repaired, so that’s how I ended up because they flew me down to—

that’s how I happened, and that happened like in February. But in March I did get to go home, all the way, went all the way home. Took one week of R&R. I found it was cheaper for me to fly all the way home than it was for my ex.

LC: To go to Hawaii.

PW: To go to Hawaii. And it’s a shock to go from 110-degree day and everything, and you land in Louisville, Kentucky. In Kentucky, there’s half an inch of ice on the ground and six inches of snow and all you are is in light clothes. You know what I mean? And I mean, you know? Tan. You know what I mean? Looked like a Mexican.

LC: Well, the next time that you were able to fly to the States was your demobilization, essentially.

PW: Actually, what came up is I had went out for formation, and I liked this unit because we only had formation one day. Every Monday we’d have formation. Rest of the time, if you didn’t have to work, you didn’t get up. You go to work when you got to work, you know, when you got work. So I was off, and somebody came banging on my
door, woke me up, and said, “The first sergeant wants to see you.” And I said, “Okay.”

I’m going, “What the hell did I do now?” You know? So I walked in and he says,

“Here’s your orders. Clear post.” I mean, I went from, let’s see, I was supposed to leave
the sixteenth of August, so thirty-one, forty-seven, forty-nine day drop.

LC: And you were out of there how fast?

PW: Two days. That happened at eight o’clock in the morning. At 5:30 the next
morning, the came banging, woke up me, and they said, “You got thirty minutes to turn
your shit in, get to brigade headquarters.” Within twenty-four hours, I was home. They
came up and I was waiting—they took me to brigade headquarters. And they still called
it division because it was, well, in April, I had—we were changed from 3rd Brigade
Forward to Task Force Gary Owens because 1st of the 7th was Colonel Custerd’s outfit.
In fact, our brigade song was “Garyowen.” And somewhere I had my orders, and my
orders were signed personally, not by President Nixon. It was presidential direction

sending us home, pulling us out.


PW: He usually has this, from the adjutant general and everything like this. Or it
says by DOP or whatever. RMN, Richard Milhous Nixon. And I didn’t know they were
presidential orders until the morning when I was waiting at battalion headquarters.

What’s funny is what our battalion headquarters was, the first year was the in-country
replacement Vietnam training center that I went to, so I mean, that was like—

LC: Full circle.

PW: You know what I mean? I’m back where I started!

LC: When you first got home—

PW: They came up, and they told us, they said, “Okay,” said, “We can have you
on the plane.” Said, “It is ten o’clock. We can have you in Saigon in two hours, and you
will be leaving tomorrow morning. If you don’t want to process out and wait until you
get back to the States to get paid. If you wait here, it will be tomorrow before we can get
you to Saigon.” By this time, they’d shut down Long Binh, the replacement company
and everybody was going through Camp Alpha at Tan Son Nhut. You know what? I was
the first one in line, “Process me out.”

LC: Yeah, “Get me out.”
PW: Are you sure you don’t want, and everything. Because I knew as soon as I got—I knew we had to go. Well, they had changed it on me, but I knew we had to go back to Oakland. You know what I mean? So anyway, they operated twenty-four hours a day. You get there at two o’clock in the morning, you can get paid at 2:30, and at five o’clock, you’re on the freedom bird. So they said, “You got any money?” I said, “Well, I got a bank account. I got my check book. What do I need? You want me to write you a check for the flight? Get me to Hawaii, I’ll get home.”

LC: Right, you were way willing to go.

PW: You know what I’m talking about?

LC: When you got home, those first days how did it go?

PW: It was great.

LC: I mean, not only being glad to be home, but did you get any gruff from anybody? About them, obviously, recognizing that you had been in Vietnam?

PW: No because I was still at Ft. Knox.

LC: You’re still at Knox.

PW: Yeah, I was still at Knox. But it was funny, I got back to Oakland, or Travis and I come up, and we get out and everything like this. And my wife said, they changed it up. They come up, and they said, “Okay, the ones that got paid over in Vietnam get on the bus. That bus is taking you straight to San Francisco International so you catch your flight. If you didn’t get paid, get on that bus, so it will take you back to Oakland.” I got back thirty minutes too late, and that’s before the fiscal year was in the first of July, they had shut down the account to balance the book. So I spent all night, and I spent three-and-a-half hours on the telephone with my wife. And the Army paid for it.

LC: Good for you. Well, they ought to have. Good for you.

PW: Because the CQ (charge of quarters) and everything, the guy that was there and everything like this.

LC: Gave you the phone?

PW: He gave me the phone. He looked at this way, he said, “You come back and never paid me a dollar. You deserve it.”

LC: Did you—go ahead.
PW: Got there, flew in. Had to wait overnight and everything. Like I said, I called. Of course, I didn’t even call from Japan—we stopped off in—the only time I flew to Hawaii is when I went on R&R, and the rest of the time I went the northern route, you know, Japan, Alaska. When I flew R&R, I flew to the Philippines, Guam. Didn’t—you know, waited and everything, and she got pissed, “If you had told me, I would have flown up there with you, I’d be waiting for you.” (Laughter)

LC: You didn’t have time.

PW: No, really, we didn’t. Well, I don’t know what she would have done. She would have hopped in the car and driven out there. I mean, she would have.

LC: Well, I believe that.

PW: Because that’s what she told me. She told me, she said, “I will be at Oakland at the reception, at the guest house.”

LC: When you get there.

PW: “When you get there. Come by the guest house, I’ll be waiting for you.”

LC: So, but the next day you were able to fly out to—

PW: They took me, and I got paid. They opened it up at six o’clock, so they didn’t want me to have to wait until eight. And by twelve o’clock, I was headed home.

LC: Let me ask you, you remained on active duty for how long after that?

PW: That was ’72. I got out in ’75.

LC: Okay, and in the interim there, you served in Germany?

PW: I came back, like I said, I got assigned to Ft. Carson, Colorado, because they were building the 4th Infantry Division up. And what gets me is the guys that left, when we left and everything, General (James F.) Hamlet who was the brigade commander and he was also the assistant division commander in 101st, so he went from 101st to 1st Cav, and I did, too. Well, he made two-star, and he became the first black to command a division in the continental United States. I got, me and him and eleven other guys got sent to Ft. Carson, Colorado. Everybody else got sent to Ft. Hood. That pissed me off! I wanted to be four-and-a-half hours away from home!

LC: I can sure believe it. Well, just because we’re running out of time, let me just ask you a couple of other questions. You stayed on active duty. Where were you assigned in Germany?
PW: I was assigned at Wurzburg, 3rd Infantry Division.

LC: And did you do maintenance there, too, maintenance work?

PW: Nope.

LC: What did they have you doing there?

PW: I was a cook.

LC: They had you cooking.

PW: Fly out of Colorado Springs and they assigned me to a—they had a total of four helicopters, two medevacs, or excuse me, five, two medevacs, two Chinooks and the general’s helicopter. And we had 175 crew chiefs.

LC: So they found something else for you to do.

PW: So they put me in maintenance, and they came up, and they said, “Okay, fine, you can—” Since I was career status, so they came up and said, “Well, we’re going to make you (unintelligible) so you have your choice.” Every job I wanted I had to be E-5, you know what I mean, and everything. So they sent me to a reclassification board, and they said, “You got your choice between infantry, artillery, and cooking.” Well, this is Colorado Springs, Colorado. This is October of 1973. Okay, and October of 1972, on October 31, we had six-and-a-half feet of snow. We were fixing to go to the field for thirty days. I thought, “Okay, tanks are made out of metal. Metal is cold. I gotta be in the field. If I cook, I’ll be around a stove.”

LC: You’ll be warm.

PW: I’ll be warm.

LC: Good thinking.

PW: So I went to cooking.

LC: Did they try to get you to reenlist again?

PW: No, I came up. I personally, I think it was PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). I started having problems, military problems. I got busted down from E-4 down to E-1, and finally—so they gave me a general discharge. And really, come to find out, the attorney I had, he knew they were screwing me over and everything like this and all this, and he kept saying, “Please, let me ask for a board. Since you’re career status and everything, they cannot kick you out like this without a board and a hearing and
everything.” And at that time, I had an FTA (fuck the Army) attitude, you know. You want me to say what that means?

LC: No, I think probably everybody will get that.
PW: Intercourse the Army, but anyway. I’ll clean it up.
LC: That’s very good.
PW: I’ll clean it up. So, I mean, you know, it’s really funny. We had—every time you change uniforms, you have an inspection to make sure your uniforms are up and everything, so it changed from winter to summer, so here we were in khakis and everything like this. I had my two rows of ribbons over here (gesture) and my Silver Star, or, excuse me, my Bronze Star, my ARCOM (Army Commendation Medal), my Good Conduct Medal was not only there, but I’ve got the Duck (Honorable Service Lapel Button, also known as the “Ruptured Duck), all my ribbons and everything. My Presidential Citations, my Vietnamese awards, all that. Four rows of ribbons, carrying a little ole E-1 stripe on me and everything. And everybody else there and everything like you know, E-5s and E-4s and everything like this, looking at me and everything like this, you know. And the only thing the officer could come up and say is my shoes weren’t shined enough.

LC: So that pretty much sums that up.
PW: Yeah. He had to say something. It was an inspection.
LC: Sure, of course, that’s their job, right. Has to say something.
PW: So I mean, what I’m saying, I was a squared away soldier. I was a soldier, I was proud to be a soldier. I kept, you know, I was working with an, had an E-6 that if not every day, every other day beat the shit out of me. Slap me or push me up against a wall or something like that. Everybody knew about it, even the CO, and he wouldn’t do a fucking thing about it. So I had a piss-poor attitude. Five-thirty in the morning and everything and got pissed off and everything and battalion commander was walking through. It wasn’t a battalion commander because I was in AG (air to ground), so whatever support command, I can’t remember now. But anyway, he was coming in because commanding officer supposed eat least once a month in the mess hall. So he’s coming in for breakfast and everything, and so me, “Fuck this goddamn mother fucking Army, and fuck you. Court martial my goddamn ass out. I’ll go to fucking Leavenworth
for six months and get out and everything. So they started processing me out. The day I
got out, for a month, well, that started in November, and they said, “You’ll be home for
Christmas.” Christmas rolled around, passed, I was still there. “You’ll be home by New
Years.” New Years rolled around, passed, I was still there. I pulled payroll guard with a
.45. And usually, on guard duty, once you get a weapon, you don’t turn it in until you’re
relieved. I guess Lieutenant Wilson was afraid that I’d shoot somebody there at the mess
hall because when it went time for lunch, he took mine. He said, “Let me have your
weapon and I’ll put it, lock it up in my safe here.” I knew I was going home. I wasn’t
dumb, you know what I mean?

LC: Exactly.

PW: Now, if it’d been Vietnam, and they did something like, you know what I
mean?

LC: And stuff did really happen like that.

PW: It might have been a little bit different situation, but I mean, I was going
home for good. But anyway, he kept coming up, and he said, “Let me—” He says
normally—his job was to handle the ones that were getting on what they call a Chapter
13. And he said, “Normally and everything, I’d just process the paperwork, let ‘em go.
Please, let me ask for a board.” Said, “Man, I haven’t even opposed any of this.” And
so, I mean, I had two years left on my enlistment, two years and about three months,
something like that. About two-and-a-half months, two years, something like that. I
would have got out on March of ’77.

LC: So the discharge date that’s on your records was in ’76?

PW: Seventy-five.

LC: Seventy-five. Let me just, just because we’ve got just a little bit of time—

PW: But anyway, come to find out the day that I was leaving. I was standing there
and talking to people in formation and everything they do, and everything. And the
platoon sergeant walked over, called me, and said, “Fall in.” So I got out of the deal and
everything, and then he called it to attention, called everybody to attention, told them to
present arms, he turned around and all of them saluted me. So, you know, that’s cool.

Big freaking deal, right?

LC: Actually, it is.
PW: To me, it is. But anyway, come to find out, the warrant officer that was in charge of personnel—he was a sergeant then he became the warrant officer—he knew me, and he told me that morning. He said, “Do you know the reason why it took so long to process you out?” He said, “Because the general wanted you to ask for a board because,” he said, “With your record—” The general’s son worked as a civilian in the mess hall, so he knew what was going on, and he had talked to the general. But yet, the general could not influence, you understand what I mean? And he knew, and this is what the officer told me, he said, “With your record, he looked at your record.” Of course, he had to because he had to sign off on it. “But your record and everything, two years in battle,” all this stuff and everything. So, but like I said, at the time, you know? Maybe I’ll just have to say the Lord had another path for me to go.

LC: Let me just update this to confirm that now, Paula, you are active with TAVA. Can you tell me just a little bit about that?

PW: TAVA is—what time is it? Okay, I’ve a cab to pick me up at five, so I don’t have to call for a cab. TAVA stands for Transgender American Veterans Association. It is for the lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, either inter-sexed, cross dresser, male-to-female, or female-to-male, transsexual.

LC: When was it formed?

PW: It was formed three years ago. It was formed because Monica Helms and Angela Brightfeather was one that formed it. Well, actually, Angela formed it. I mean, Monica formed it. And Angela, they were on some other gay organization, and they were with the purpose of—the organization was more concerned with gay and lesbian and not the transgendered. So they broke off to make it for the transgendered.

LC: And to create TAVA on its own?

PW: And to create TAVA as its own.

LC: Can you say how many members you have right now? I’m sure there are a lot of people who are reading the web site and so on, but in addition.

PW: Last time on the, between 130 to 150. And they say we have a World War II transgender person. Last year whenever TAVA was made, the goal of them was to one day present, have the transgender brothers and sisters present a ring at Arlington National Cemetery. Last year was the first year we had sixty people, fifty transgender veterans,
both male-to-female and female-to-male, and ten significant others. We went to the wreath. It got out—we put it out on the web and everything like this. And how I found out about it is through another web site about sexual reassignment surgery web site and mailing list. This was in January of 2004, soon as I heard about it, I signed up, I made my reservations, and I said, “I’m going.” And it got out, somebody—CNN did a story about us even though, what’s that guy? The big fat guy on the radio that’s got a big mouth.

LC: Rush Limbaugh.

PW: Yes, yes! Flush Rush, please! You can edit that out if you want to.

LC: No, that’s all right.

PW: Anyway, Rush Limbaugh read the news piece from CNN. He didn’t even serve in the National Guard! At least the president served in the National Guard! And I mean, you know, he got up, and he’s going, “Yeah, I’d like to see these transgender veterans out there carrying a weapon.” “Hey, buddy, where were you when we was over in Vietnam, sweating our ass off, getting eaten by leeches, getting shot at, booby trapped? Bring it on! Bring it on!”

LC: And how important was it for you, Paula, to be there and present that wreath and be part of that?

PW: Very important.

LC: Why? Can you say a little bit about why?

PW: We have served—transgender veterans have served since the Revolutionary War. We have been in every war and revolution, or revolution, war, conflict since the creation of this country. We said, “Yes, I served as a man, and I’m proud of that service.” It’s different. At that time, I’ve always been like this, but part of that whole deal will make a man out of me. Well, what is a man? If they call me back in—I know they won’t because of my disability rating and everything—but I mean, if they call me in, I’d go in again.

LC: And was it important to you to be able to do this not just for yourself but then for the others?

PW: But always to recognize the ones that were buried there in Arlington. Right now what we’re trying to work out and everything in the plans is hopefully in three years, we will go to Normandy and present with the other Allied—we have already gotten in
touch with the organization. And the reason why we go TAVA-USA is because there is another transgender veteran’s organization that’s British and Canadian, and so we wanted ours to be that we were just strictly American. But yet we have in conjunction with the other Allied transgender persons and everything, go up there and present it.

LC: Paula, did you mention to me that there were folks there that gave you a hard time there at Arlington when you were presenting?

PW: Yes.

LC: Can you tell a little bit—

PW: Actually, all of the people there that were at the cemetery and everything like this, everyone of them—of course, a lot of it at that time when we had it, there was a couple of other gay or lesbian organizations that were having meetings. So they were there, but there was also non-, if you want to say, “straight” regular visitors there. They didn’t give us any grief, but going to it and everything, I walked past, and the ones that gave us the grief were supposedly Christians.

LC: Tell me about the little girl, if you don’t mind. The girl that you were talking about.

PW: We were sitting there, me and Darlene were sitting there, and there was this, waiting for the wreath laying ceremony. And it almost didn’t go off because whenever—we had four presenters for the wreath. And they got there an hour before the deal, when they got there, they couldn’t find the wreath.

LC: Oh, I remember something about this.

PW: So luckily, the sergeant major, he did his sergeant major deal. He says, “I don’t care what you have to do.” He chewed a little butt and guess what, it showed up.

LC: So it mysteriously disappeared, but then?

PW: It was found and everything. And what was bad, we tried to call the florist, and they said, well, “It was not delivered.” And the florist said it was closed for the weekend.

LC: But mysteriously it reappeared.

PW: Yes. Yes. But anyway, we were sitting there, and this little black girl sitting there, thirteen year old black girl from Ada, Oklahoma. She sat there, she said, “Are you here with TAVA?” She must have heard something about it, “Are you here to present a
wreath?” I said, “Yes, we are. Yeah, we’re here with TAVA.” And she asked, she said, “What is that?” And I said, “It’s Transgender American Veterans Association. We’re going to present a wreath to honor our other deal.” She said, “Hey, that’s cool!” She said, “Well, where are you from?” And Darlene, she didn’t want to—well, actually, she was pretty cute, and I thought she was about eighteen or nineteen years old, so I was kind of flirting with her. So anyway, I said, “I’m from Lubbock, Texas.” Or no, I said, “Where are you from?” She said, “I’m from Ada, Oklahoma.” And I said, “Hey, cool, that’s not too far from where I’m from.” She said, “Where are you?” So I said, “I’m from Lubbock, Texas.” And she said, “Where’s that?” I said, “You know where Amarillo is?” And she said, “Yeah.” And I said, “Well, we’re south of Amarillo in the Panhandle, you know, and everything.” She said, “Oh, I know where you’re talking about now.” I said, “What are you doing here?” She said, “Well, I’m here with our sixth grade class.” This is the way she put it, so that’s why I thought, well, she was, of course, like I said. I’m sorry, but girls develop a lot quicker than what they did I was growing up. I’ll put it that way.

LC: So you found out she was just a kid?
PW: Huh?
LC: You found out she was just a kid, really.
PW: I found out later that she was just a kid. But anyway, I said, well, you know, and she said, “Well, I’m here for,” said, “We were supposed to write down the name of some of the people that were killed, on the Wall in Vietnam.” She said, “Did you serve in Vietnam?” And I said, “Yes, I did.” And I said, “I served two years in Vietnam.” She said, “Instead of writing the name down, I’d rather have living veterans put their name down and talk about them than the dead.” And so, I wrote my name down. And I didn’t put my male name, and I put the unit I was in, and the years I was there.
LC: Now she was asking you to sign the T-shirt or something that she had?
PW: Right, she had the T-shirt.
LC: That’s pretty meaningful.
PW: That is. And whenever the sergeant came up, back ride, I’m sorry, but everybody cried, even me. “This wreath is presented by the American Transgender Veterans Association of the United States in honor of their brothers and sisters that have
fallen before them.” Lightening bolt did not strike us. The ground did not open up and
swallow us up. There wasn’t any boos or anything like that. See, I told you I was going
to cry.

LC: It’s all right. It was a proud moment for you, and I’m sure for the others.
PW: A dream, a dream. One person’s dream shared with, you know, other
veterans and everything. And we did it again this year. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to
go.

LC: But you’re planning to go to Normandy?
PW: If we get it, yes, I am.

LC: Paul, let me ask one more question.
PW: Paula, please.

LC: I’m sorry, Paula.
PW: That’s alright.

LC: Is there anything that I haven’t asked you in this interview that you would
like to just add as a postscript to everything that you’ve shared with us so far?
PW: I’m glad you brought up the fact that I’m transgendered because we have,
like I said, we have served in every—we are still serving. One of my sisters, our sisters,
whatever you want to call it, just completed a year in Iraq. She has come out and she’s
retiring, but—

LC: It’s important that we add this to the record.
PW: There’s still, you know, I just found out today before I came here and
everything that the Thai Army has finally, is finally changing their regulations allowing
transgendered persons to serve on active duty. Denmark allows gays, lesbians,
transgendered persons to serve. England does, too. All our allies—we are the only major
power in the world that still has a homophobia and fear letting an American citizen—and
treating us like second-class citizens.

LC: Well, I’m glad that through the Oral History Project here we can honor your
service, and that’s our goal. Thank you for participating.