Sabrina Frizzell: This is Sabrina Frizzell conducting an oral interview with Mr. Ed George. I am located in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University at the Vietnam Archive. Mr. George is located in Abilene, Texas. It is January 8, 2001. Mr. George, why don’t you start by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself leading up to your activity in the USO?

Ed George: I was born in West Texas, Ft. Stockton, and went to several schools. My father was a road construction worker. We moved around quite a bit. I wound up at Cisco Junior College in Cisco, Texas, in 1955. In ’57 I enrolled in Abilene Christian University. Finished my music degree there. I was the band director for eight years and took the job at Abilene Christian University in 1969 as orchestra director and I was asked to manage and direct a pop group there on the campus starting in ’69. We auditioned for a USO tour in ’70 or ’71 I guess it was. We went on our first USO tour in ’72. We did, with this group, different personnel each time. We did six USO tours in the Caribbean Islands, in Europe, and the Pacific Islands.

SF: Okay. What kind of activities did your job entail with the USO?

EG: Well, I was not working for the USO except when I was on these tours. We were entertainers specifically for whatever military bases they assigned us to.

SF: What was the application process like to go on your USO tours?
EG: Well, it was more or less send in a tape and pictures of the group and bios of
the experience of the group. Because it was always a year later, the group that I sent in
the tape and the pictures was never quite the same as it went on tour.

SF: Was there excitement on the part of the students to go on these tours?
EG: Was there what?
SF: Excitement on the part of the students.
EG: Oh, oh, yeah. It was great. Especially the first two or three. They were really
excited because in the late ‘60s early ‘70s, travel was pretty unique, especially with all
expenses paid. Travel even in the United States was pretty exciting thing at that time,
especially overseas.

SF: You said the Hill Toppers, which was the group you traveled with, were a pop
group. What kind of music did they perform? Was it modern music? Was it stuff that was
on the charts at the time?
EG: When I first took them over they were a Broadway group and I told the
administrators that I wouldn’t be interested if we had to remain a Broadway format. They
said, ‘Well, do what you want.’ I said, ‘Well, it’s going to be pop rock because that’s
what most young people want to hear, especially overseas.’ At that time we had designs
of auditioning and applying for a tour and I said, ’19-year-old servicemen are not going
want to sit still for an hour and a half of Broadway selections.’
SF: What kind of kids were in the group? Were they mostly upper class kids or
was there a wide variety?
EG: We had a lot of variety in the group. They were music majors, non-music
majors, and pre-med majors. We had animal husbandry majors in my experience.
Because of the nature of our university, it’s a private school; there are not too many poor,
especially poverty level people in the school. But we had a number on loans and special
grants that were not what you’d call upper middle class. They were lower middle class
and middle class.
SF: Were you prepared prior to your tours of the things you were going to
encounter or the protocol you were supposed to hold to?
EG: I think so. The USO at that time did a really good job of briefing us. We
generally had a person from the USO office come onsite. Especially the first couple of
times. After that, they trusted me to go ahead and let the students know what was ahead of them. But it’s really difficult for a young student to know what’s going to happen. I got them all excited about the trip, of course, and all the travel and all the countries we were going to be visiting and all the different cultures we were going to see. But still, you don’t really know what it is until you get there.

SF: What kind of the rules were the students held to by the school and by you?

EG: Well, again, the nature of our university is it’s a Christian background. We had pretty stringent rules about gallivanting around and drinking. We had a smoker or two in the group. It didn’t bother me at all because I had smoked when I was younger. There weren’t any problems for the most part that the students adhering to the rules. By some standards, they were very strict, but by our own standards, they were pretty normal.

SF: Did the students miss school and if they did how did they make it up?

EG: Only one time did we miss any school and that was when we took a tour to the Far East and over the Christmas break. It was six-week tour and generally the Christmas break was only four weeks long. We left just before the final exam week and we came back and enrolled a week later in the second semester. We had special permission from all the administrators. The deans, the president, vice president. Each student had to deal with their individual faculty members, teachers for how they were going be able to do the final. Some of them let them take the final early and some of them allowed them to come in after the trip and do the final exam.

SF: What was a normal day like on the tour? Were activities different depending on the time of the year, for example, like Christmas?

EG: Well, they were basically the same. On the tours, the days were long and arduous and sometimes we did three shows. I remember rarely doing four shows a day and that’s at a different site where we had to set up the equipment, make a sound test, do the show, tear down the equipment, move to another auditorium. Sometimes by helicopter or by a bus. Sometimes by truck and jeep. Basically the days were pretty long. We’d get up early, much to the chagrin of the students. I don’t know of any university student that likes to get up early. That comes with age, I think. We’d get up early. Generally make a run to either the heliport or sometimes the airport in a truck or a jeep or a bus or something and set up and do the show and sometimes tear down, run to another
show, set up, tear down, and sometimes run to a third show, which was generally in the
evening. On Christmas Day, 1975, we did four shows in four different camps. It was
great though. The guys were just really wonderful, the people we entertained. Sometimes
there were more in the group that there were at the show in the audience because we
might be up in the mountains in a real remote communication site. Normally, there might
be only five people on the job up there.

SF: When you arrived on military bases, what kind of reception did you receive?

EG: Most of the time, we were expected and well received and they were
prepared. Occasionally, and of course I always wrote the USO about it – we had to do a
daily report and I would really chastise the base and that particular officer or whoever
was in charge, or escort officer. Whoever that might have been. They got a bad rating
because we were not expected or they didn’t prepare for us, or they didn’t care or they
didn’t want us there and they had to go through the motions. Most of the time it was a
good experience.

SF: What kind of requests did you make for your shows? Equipment, things that
you needed?

EG: Just a place to plug in was all we needed. If we could get an acoustic piano in
decent shape, of course, we’d use it. But, that wasn’t to be expected, especially in places
where it’s real humid, like the Caribbean and maybe out in the Pacific, out on the islands.
Because the humidity is just awful and the pianos don’t last well. But all we needed to do
a show was a place to plug in and a flat place on the floor. And sometimes we didn’t even
get that. We’d get stair steps or risers sometimes. But we always managed to make it
work.

SF: You’ve talked about the kind of music, but what other kind of activities did
you do to entertain the troops while performing?

EG: Well, a lot of the entertainment was before and after the shows because these
guys who’d been overseas, they’d always call it the ‘real world.’ ‘How are things back in
the real world?’ We would talk about how things were going over in the States and what
the latest news was and the political situation and the economy. We’d always have those
hangers on. They were called groupies. They weren't like groupies today where you
wanted to get rid of them. They were really neat guys. Some of them, like in Panama for
example, just one example, they followed us all over the peninsula down there. Every
time we did a show, you’d see the same 10 or 12, 15 guys. ‘I thought you’d seen the
show.’ ‘Well, we did, but we wanted to see it again.’ So they’d drive over to the next
place on the other side of the canal.

SF: You went on the tours. While you were on the tours, you had the opportunity
to go into hospitals. Can you tell me what the conditions were like in the hospitals? What
did you see while you were in them?

EG: Well, they were not what you'd call grim, but somber. Because generally in at
place like that, you’re not there unless there’s something wrong with you. A lot of times
we’d get mental cases as well as the physical difficulties to deal with. But those were not
our favorite shows, but at the same time, I thought we did as much good there as we did
just about anywhere because of what we could accomplish while we were there just
walking through the corridors with an acoustic guitar and singing some harmony for
different places in the hospital. A lot of times we had the ambulatory patients brought in
to a rec room situation where we could set up our equipment and do a real show for them.

SF: Being that you went into those hospitals, was the group aware that they were
dealing with Vietnam veterans versus other soldiers?

EG: Yes.

SF: Knowing that, did you guys treat them differently?

EG: No, no. They didn’t treat them any differently. I think they were as nice to a
kid that had broken his leg in a backing accident or something as they were to the
Vietnam vets. But there was a special place in our hearts for those people that we ran
across in the hospital that had been to Vietnam. We didn’t treat them any differently but
we certainly thought of them as a different, not a class, but a different style of person
because we knew what they had gone through.

SF: What kind of reaction did you receive from hospital staff when you came into
the hospital?

EG: Oh, it's great. They were wonderful. I don’t know of any bad experience that
we got in the hospital, except the food. Sometimes they’d want us to eat it and hospital
food, by nature, isn't really that good and it’s not any different over there than it is here.
But we had some great experiences with the staff and the patients in the hospital.
SF: How did you deal with the ill soldiers? What kind of things did you do to cheer them up?

EG: Well, just talking to them. And I wasn’t as good at this as the young students. They could relate to these guys because they were all the same age generally. The females were also in the hospital in those days we were just beginning to get female military personnel. There was a lot of prejudice against that for many years. About the time we started touring, that was about the time we began to run across female military personnel. But, we didn’t have any problem with them. Like I said, the students related to them a lot better than I did but I still gave it the old college try. I would go from room to room. A lot of times we brought things. Little keepsakes, pictures maybe, pictures of the group, whatever.

SF: Did any patients act negatively or angry or annoyed by your presence?

EG: Sometimes at first, but generally we won them over. They had a reason to be negative and they had an excuse to be harsh. Most of the time, we could have them smiling before we left.

SF: Did attitudes of Vietnam veterans seem different to you than other military personnel?

EG: They were a lot quieter. Seemingly a lot more pensive than the other ones. But, as far as I know, as far as I can remember, I don’t think anyone ever acted really negatively to us. They were just not thrilled to be there for the reason that they were injured plus how they got the injury. There was a lot of negative feeling in those days starting about Woodstock and then the Kent State affair. Over in the States, we had a lot of negative feelings and I’m thinking maybe those Vietnam vets that were in the hospitals were thinking that here we are from the States and we might have the same attitudes as some of those people that were spitting on them at the airports when they came back.

SF: How did you tours change in attitude of the performers and the audience throughout the ‘70s into the early ‘80s?

EG: Well, it was a lot different. The military in the ‘70s, because of the Presidencies I guess in there, the Carter Presidency especially, there didn’t seem to be good feelings from the military of how they were perceived. They were looked at as second-class citizens. Then the Reagan administration seemed to change that and that last
tour I made in the early ‘80s, I could tell a vast difference in the attitude of the militaries
to how they perceived themselves because of how they were treated. They got a lot of
benefits that weren't available to them throughout the ‘70s.

SF: Do you feel you were having an affect on the lives of military personnel by
serving in the USO?

EG: I think so. That’s the main reason we went. Of course, it’s great to get all that
travel. I was in, at various times, in 30 different countries and you can't afford that on
your own. Because of what we were doing, that was available to us. But at the same time,
we didn’t even apply for that. It was just one of the side benefits. The true reason we
applied was to, not maybe change the lives – I don’t think we gave ourselves that much
credit – but to at least offer a little bit of respite from the burdens of whatever they were
going through at the time.

SF: What is your best and worst memory of your service with USO.

EG: Well, the best memory would be at a show on Helo, Hawaii. I think that’s the
big island, they call it. We had gone up to a training area called the Pulahoka Training
Site. And these gentlemen would be on this base and there were no females on this
particular site. But they'd been there 60 days, some of them 90 days. It was rigorous, very
strict, stark area. We were going to do a show out there. We were helicoptered out from
Honolulu with all of our equipment. We set up on a flat bed truck and it started raining,
just started pouring as it often does in that particular part of the world at a certain time of
day and these guys didn't want us to quit so they quickly set up a cover, a big tarp cover
for us. Here they were, still in this rain just pouring down. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen
it rain that hard. They had the generator cooking about 100 yards away to give us the
power. So we started the show again and I said, ‘Well, do you want us to pick up where
we left off?’ ‘No. Start from the beginning.’ So we did. There was a gentleman there who
got a 16mm movie of this thing and I got to see it later. About a year later. I remembered
it like it happened. These guys were sitting there in those outfits, those parkas, those
ponchos trying to stay at least warm, maybe not dry. And just enjoying our show to the
hilt. They were just really enjoying the show, laughing and saying, ‘I remember that
song,’ or ‘Could you sing that one one more time,’ or whatever. Our 75-minute show
wound up to be about two and half hours. We kept doing things twice and we’d start
again and do this and that. But that was wonderful memory because to me, that was what
the entertainment was all about. The bad experience that I remember was a Ft. Buchanan
in Puerto Rico. It was one of those situations where nobody wanted us there, especially
the people who were in charge of it. The guys treated us well when we got out to do the
show, but they didn’t want us there. They expected us. They picked us up in a station
wagon and just the people will fill a station wagon. Eight people. Plus we had all of our
instruments and all of our luggage and they brought to the airport one station wagon. It
was an old 60 whatever something station wagon. It was dilapidated. They had to make
about four trips of 20 miles where we were staying to get everything in and they left us
there without any food and we had to walk about three miles to a place to eat. They didn’t
make any kind of arrangements for our meals. That was a pretty bad five days at Ft.
Buchanan in Puerto Rico.

SF: What were your opinions of the Vietnam War when you joined the USO?
Have they changed, and if so, why? If not, why?

EG: No. From the beginning I was thinking, ‘Why should we be there?’ But it
didn’t affect my attitude toward the individuals. They were there because they were
drafted and they had to be. A lot of people joined the Army during the Vietnam War
because they believed in that cause. They believed in American apple pie and we should
thwart Communism and on and on, the different reasons they would join the fray. But I
didn’t have any kind of ill Feelings even toward those people but I didn’t agree with the
war. We did our first show in ’72 and I think it was in ’73 when they brought…

SF: The POWs were brought home in ’73.
EG: I know they landed in the Philippines at Clark Air Base. They were brought
from Vietnam from Saigon. I didn’t have any ill feeling towards the individuals but I
didn’t agree with the war. And it turned out we were right. Even the Secretary of Defense
at that time, Macnamara, would late confess that, it had been five years ago or so, that we
didn’t belong there. It was a big mistake. All you’ve got to do is go down to the Vietnam
Memorial in Washington, D.C. and just walk down and look at those names. And I
recognized some of those names. I went to the memorial to see some of those names. It
was a stirring, very sad event for me. That’s proof. What did we accomplish while we
were there? All we did is lose 50 something thousand young men in the process.
SF: What were your opinions of military personnel? Have they changed?

EG: Oh no. I have, especially; I have a great affinity for people in the military. Both my brothers served in Korea. I was too young for Korea and too old for Vietnam. I would have gone, I think. I didn’t agree with what we were doing, but I think if I had been drafted and taken over, I would have gone without protest, I believe. Just the other night, Saturday night, this past Saturday night, I played a dance at a VFW hall here in town. And I walked into this place and I had the strongest déjà vu of my life because it was a service club. It’s called the Vapor Trail Service Club here at Dyess Air Base in town here. I had that feeling of, well, we got to set up and get the show going. And not our show, but the USO show. I had that feeling. They smell alike. They all look alike. They all have dirty carpet and dark area where the band is supposed to set up. I had a real strong déjà vu. I was talking to the manager who was a veteran of Vietnam, and I told him about my feeling when I came in. He said, ‘Oh, I get that every time I come in here.’ Going into those service clubs over in the Far East. We had a great visit though, and I got acquainted with a lot of people that were in the military during those years. We had a good time.

SF: What were your opinions of the anti-war movement? Have those changed?

EG: No. I knew they were right. I knew their tenants were basically correct. I didn’t really care about the way they went about it. I didn’t like the way they dressed. Long hair, scruffy looking, unwashed as it were. That’s hard for a person my age to avoid, though. Because here we are with white sidewall haircuts. It really, basically, hasn’t changed. I’m nearly 65 and I don’t think I’ll ever change my mind about how people and it’s even worse now. The girls are shaving their head and piercing their bodies in the weirdest places.

SF: Were you ever criticized by antiwar, antimilitary demonstrators for your involvement with USO?

EG: Never. I had a friend once ask me why I would go entertain people that had been in Vietnam. I don’t think I had any problem convincing him why I did.

SF: What were your opinions of the U.S. government? Did you approve of how they chose to fight the war? If not, how do you think Vietnam should have been handled?
EG: Well, we shouldn’t have been there. We should have let it take place like nature would have done it. And that's what happened now. It’s like it should have been right now. All of our veterans are going over there and shaking hands and embracing those people because most of them realize that we shouldn't have been there. For the next five generations, we are at fault for some of the health of a lot of those people because of the agents, the defoliants we dumped on them. I saw a piece just the other night on television about that and how the people are still dying because of the birth defects that they acquired born in the ‘80s and even the ‘90s. The young children are experiencing ill effects from all the chemicals we dumped on that country.

SF: Were you surprised or unprepared for anything you saw while doing your tours?

EG: You never are prepared for some of the poverty. Not having to do with military, but just in the economy. Like in the canal zones. Some of those people were still living in grass huts and walking down the road carrying their burdens, ladies, on their heads. Huge, like 200 pound, 150-pound things, 100-pound weights, huge jugs full of water and big parcels on their head. That’s something you see in pictures but when you see it and smell it and experience it, it’s really surprising.

SF: Do you think you had any different affect on Vietnam veterans versus other soldiers by doing your tours?

EG: I think not. I believe they were all appreciative of what we were trying to do. They might not have enjoyed our music because even though we tried to do a variety of it, we were still a rock band. We tried to do a little country/western for the people. But, I don’t think we had any different reception from the two classes.

SF: Given your experience, would you change anything about your participation?

EG: I wouldn’t. I would like to go again. I’m too old. I don’t think I could handle it physically because its pretty rigorous but I was in the best shape of my life after one of those tours because we didn’t do anything but lift equipment and carry it and lift equipment and carry it back. Of course, there are three guys and four girls sometimes in the group, and guess which three of the group did all the heavy work? We all had a little job to do when we set up and the girls handled all the hooking up of the cords and moving the lighter things and setting up the mic stands and whatever.
SF: Has any military personnel ever commented to you about what you did, about
the groups?

EG: Well, yeah, we had reports of course in those commanders and a lot of times
the escort officer or the commander or the general in charge of the base or the colonel
would often write a letter of commendation to our college president. I have a number of
those in the files commenting on what a great group they were and what a good job they
did and what outstanding young people they were, et cetera.

SF: Well, those are all the questions I have. I’m going to end the interview now.