Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Eliseo Perez-Montalvo, Pete. Today, we are in Lubbock, Texas in the interview room at Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library. It is July 15, 2003 and it’s about 9:45 am. Sir, why don’t we being with a brief biographical sketch? Can you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about growing up?

Eliseo Perez-Montalvo: I was born in Monterrey, Mexico, August 27, 1943. My father was in the construction industry in Mexico and he traveled with work. He used to build commercial type buildings. An industrial building that he was in charge of building was in Tamaulipas in the jungle. It involved, he was building a building that would house a sugar mill for cane. It turned cane into sugar. This was back in the late ‘40s. In the ‘50s, my grandfather, my father’s father who had lived in the United States on and off since the turn of the century, pushed his sons into bringing their families to the United States for a better life. Life was very difficult in Mexico. It was a struggle. So in 1954, February 9, 1954, my family, which consisted of my father, my mother, an older sister, myself, and a younger brother, we came across into the United States as legal immigrants in Eagle Pass, Texas and we settled there for a few months. Before the school year ended, they decided, my parents decided to become migrant workers. So they pulled us out of school before the end of a semester and we traveled in the back of a truck to Colorado where we farmed for a gentleman by the name of Hinkel. We worked on a beet farm. Up there they grew
beets for sugar and we stayed there until about July of the same year. We were just about
trough with our commitment to the farmer. He provided us with housing and there was a
massive flood that came down the Rio Grande and it breeched the levies of the river and
flooded the city of Piedras Negras across from Eagle Pass. My grandparents lived there
and my father concerned for his parents, left my mother and the three children in
Colorado and took a bus to Eagle Pass to go find his parents. He located them in a
refugee camp on the Mexican side and once he was satisfied that they were safe, he was
returning to Colorado and he stopped in Lubbock to visit with relatives and there was a
big building boom in southwest Lubbock at that time. Houses were beginning to be
constructed southwest of what is now University Avenue and 50th. It was College Avenue
and 50th then. And so he hired on as a carpenter there and in about a week’s time when he
got paid he sent us money and my mother, sister, brother, and myself took a Greyhound
bus overnight from near Denver to Lubbock. I remember when we arrived in Denver at
the terminal, it was about dusk sometime in late July and that’s where I had my first
hamburger.

RV: Really?

EPM: In a restaurant, yeah, the bus terminal in Denver. So my mother brought us
here and that’s where we established ourselves. My father worked in construction. My
brother and I would work after school in the cotton fields, go pick cotton or during the
summer we’d go hoe cotton.

RV: Let me ask you a couple of questions really quick before we continue. You
were born in ’43, so you were what, 10 years old….

EPM: 10 ½.

RV: When you immigrated into the United States. What do you remember about
growing up in Mexico those first 10 years?

EPM: I remember my father taking me to political mitins, meetings, mitins in
Spanish where people, politicians I suppose it was, would speak about government
policies, government programs down there. I remember there was, it was a very hard
living. My father worked. My mother worked in the house. She was a seamstress. She
took on sewing. We sold water, potable water. The water was very scarce during the
summer months. They would ration it in a big city that Monterey was and water would
reach our house but no farther up the hill. And so people would come down with buckets and containers and buy water from us and take it up to their homes. Those are the biggest impressions I have of Monterey.

RV: How about school?

EPM: I attended a parochial school. I don’t remember how much my parents paid. It was, as I recall, a very good school academically. We went from something like maybe 7:30 in the morning or 8:00 in the morning until noon and the teachers would take a break and then the girls would come in, in the afternoon. And we would go home at noon. The boys would go home at noon. When I came to the United States I was placed in the fourth grade, the same grade as I was in, in Mexico even though I spoke no English. But I could tell that the math, I was far ahead of my contemporaries in my math, my understanding of math. I was already doing fractions in the 4th grade [?].

RV: How did you come to learn English, just picking it up at home?

EPM: Yes, at school and at home. Initially we lived near the barrio for a couple of years or so and I was not doing very well academically and I was getting in fights. You couldn’t help it. You couldn’t help getting in fights.

RV: Why was that?

EPM: Well, it’s just the nature of the people that lived there. They were very raw Hispanics, uneducated parents, transients by and large, migrant workers. My mother made an attempt to dress us nicely and make sure that we were presentable and that created a conflict with some of the other children. After a few years of putting up with us getting beat up or getting in fights, not necessarily getting beat up but just getting in fights, they saved enough money so that by 1957 I believe, we came in ’54, by ’57 my mother would take city buses to different neighborhoods after we went to school and go explore those neighborhoods where she thought we might find affordable housing. This was a woman that had very limited education because of the war in Mexico, the Revolution. She had not- she didn’t even finish the 5th grade I don’t believe. And way back then in the 1920s, 1915, 1918, education was very difficult to come by if you lived out in the country, which is where she lived. But she was a very smart woman and she knew what to do. She took buses until she found the property that we could afford and by 1957 or so, I don’t remember the month, we purchased our first home in the Untied States
and it was away from the barrio. I was the only Hispanic in the 6th grade class. I was in
the 6th grade by then. And that’s, at Chris Harwell Elementary school, that’s where I
really blossomed into myself as far as becoming more of an academic person and
scholarly. So I began reading books from the library and I had some very good friends
along the way that encouraged me, who would come to the house to play after school.
And among them, the McClarty clan, Marvin McClarty, III and his brother Tommy,
Butch Hancock, the musician that plays with Joe Eely and Jimmy Gilmore with the
Flatlanders. They would come to the house beginning about 7th or 8th grade and in later
years, now that we’re adults, I’ve accused them of coming to my house, not necessarily to
play with me but to eat my momma’s cooking after school and they haven’t denied it.
(laughter) Before I knew it, I was fairly fluent and I’m still learning English to tell you
the truth.

RV: Really?
EPM: Once in a while, oh sure. I read a lot and I come across words that I
thought, ‘Oh, I thought I knew them all.’

RV: So, once you moved down to Lubbock, what grade were you in at this point?
EPM: 4th grade. I repeated the 4th grade. I was in the 4th grade in Mexico and in
February, February 9th we came across. I was placed in the 4th grade in Eagle Pass. I was
removed from there before the end of the semester. I started school back in Lubbock in
the fall of ’54, I was placed in the 4th grade again and I just, I picked up a lot of
knowledge. I’m very grateful for the education that I received here.

RV: And you continued through the public school system here in Lubbock.
EPM: Yes, I did. I went to Atkins Junior High when Atkins first opened for
students. I think it was by 1957 or so, the fall of ’57. About 1960 I began studying at
Monterey High and I did three years at Monterey and I graduated there.

RV: What year did you graduate Monterey?
EPM: ’63. May of ’63, the end of May of ’63. Then about 10 days later I started
as a freshman at Texas Tech during the summer program, I was so ambitious. It was very
difficult. Texas Tech was very, very difficult. There were no role models for us. I’m not
aware that there were any counselors. My parents were not very academic. They
encouraged us to stay in school but they were not participating in any of our school
activities. They didn’t know the language. So it was very tough coming to Tech without any advisors or any support groups as they have now to encourage young people to remain. The academic portions, the programs were very difficult. They had duals, what they called duals. Because of my math background, I had a very strong math background, I did a dual that summer where I took – in a regular semester it was trigonometry and college algebra and trigonometry. But each of those programs should have been a regular semester. They crowded two programs into one semester and the assignments were massive. Every afternoon, we’d be in class ‘til noon and then go home and work math problems all afternoon. It was a recipe for a burnout real quick. It’s like, ‘Whoa, slow down.’

RV: What were your favorite subjects in school, junior high, high school?
EPM: World history was always one of my favorites, history of any kind to tell you the truth. Geography, math. I was always very strong in math. Literature I had a very big interest in literature. In time, I realized that I needed to learn Spanish grammar. I spoke Spanish very well because my parents would not allow us to talk Tex-Mex. So my Spanish was of pretty good quality but I had no idea of the grammar, the rules of grammar that make up a language. So in high school, I guess it was my junior year, I talked to the Spanish teacher and I told her what I wanted to do so she allowed me to skip the first year of Spanish and I plugged into second year where we were exposed not so much to learning words, but actually studying the grammar and the literature as well. And I did that my junior and senior year at high school and at Tech I took a 4300 level course from Dr. Overhelman. He’s retired now. But he was an inspiration. Dr. Tucker, she was also an inspiration. They were very encouraging to people like me that came from disadvantaged backgrounds to study.

RV: What was Texas Tech like when you entered? This is 1963, right?
EPM: 1963. It was a very small college. The agricultural program was very strong. Right in this are where we’re sitting and immediately to the west, there were pens, cattle pens and hog pens. The aggie students took a great deal of delight of coming into the Student Union building as it was called then, the University Center now and they would order food and when they got through eating they would put their boots up on the tables and of course they were full of manure. It was their proud thing, their pride thing,
you know. There were very few minorities in the student body. The faculty, I understand there was an African American. I forget his name. He was quite controversial. I don’t know what kind, I think he was a Muslim. I had a friend that took a class under him and he’d tell me about how eccentric this black gentleman was. But to the best of my knowledge, he was the only minority faculty person on the campus at that time.

RV: How about other Hispanic students?

EPM: Very few. Vincent Salinas is an attorney, very successful attorney here and in Ft. Worth. He has practices. He was like a role model to me. He was a year older and he was a man about campus already. He knew the ropes around the university, well the college then and he was about the most helpful he could be among the Hispanics. There were very few of us. There were very few Hispanics. Actually, I think there were more Vietnamese than there were Hispanics. The Vietnamese really stood out because of the costume that the women wore. There were quite a few Vietnamese women, ladies, attending classes. There were also quite a few Persians. That’s what they called themselves, Saudi Arabians I suppose, in the petroleum engineering programs. They were very snobbish. The Persians dressed, they wore tailor made suits from somewhere probably in London, you know, the big cities in Europe and they looked down on everybody on campus.

RV: Really?

EPM: Yes. The looked down especially on Hispanics because here we were, we were Americans but we were uncultured by their standards on travel and unread, unsophisticated. They were world travelers.

RV: How did they look at the white students?

EPM: Probably the same way. They always had very pretty Caucasian American girls with them. The Vietnamese kept to themselves. They were very studious. I knew nothing about Vietnam at the time although I soon learned about it. My senior year, right after I finished my senior year at Monterey High School, I was at a barber shop, a Mexican barber shop and I started talking with one of the barbers I guess and this gentleman that was there waiting to get his hair cut also, after he heard me talk he said, ‘My goodness,’ or words to that effect, ‘you should be on the radio.’ So I got a big head and I went to KSEL, which was owned by the McAllister’s, or what was the name of the
people. I don’t remember the last name. They were the people that eventually owned KMAC. They owned KSEL, Bill McAllister, the McAllisters. He was the program director at KSEL. They were the number one station. It was an AM and I went to talk to him about starting a program in Spanish early in the morning or late at night and he had no place to accommodate me. So I went to the next leading station which was KLBK 1340 AM. I talked to a fellow by the name of Ralph, I think his last name was Burgess. He was the station manager. I made my case that the nearest place to Lubbock where there was a Spanish station [was Floydada] and the gentleman that was the announcer spoke butchered up Spanish. So they put me on the air here for a few months at 6:00 in the morning six days a week. And we tried selling programming commercials and there were very few takers. So eventually the program died. I used to get paid, I think it was $50 a month for my efforts, less than a dollar a day.

RV: Did you play music or was it a talk show?
EPM: Music and I would use a little wit. Then, of course, as soon as I arrived, I would go to the teletype machine and grab, tear off a piece of the news and translate it while I’m playing music and doing my few commercials, I would translate the news and of course Vietnam was the place I began hearing about. This was 1965. No, I take it back. This was 1963, ’64. Vietnam was very much in the forefront. There were a few monks emulating themselves already and there was a lot of political infighting that was on the news with the Catholic regime that was in power for a few years. I forget the gentleman’s name, the president.

RV: Bui Diem Ziem.
EPM: Something like that, yeah. Like I say, I would translate the news and eventually it was a place that I came to know quite well.

RV: Before we move forward, tell me what kind of jobs you had in your youth. You said you worked picking cotton in Lubbock and how about in Colorado and then moving to Lubbock?
EPM: In Colorado, I was very young and my parents wouldn’t let me work the field most of the time. My brother and I would go through the fields with him in the morning. And mom and dad and my older sister were the three ones that would man the hoes. In time, there was a time after I badgered them enough that they gave me my own
hoe. Oh, man, I was going to set the world on fire. I got way ahead of them and then I ran out of gas. After we came back to Lubbock, my father got into construction and in time he and a partner, a friend, opened up a cabinet shop over on Erskine Road where they used to have ready built houses. There was a big building in the back and they rented that or leased it or something and then they would build cabinets there for other people. So on Saturdays I would go there and install hinges on cabinet doors and pulls and things of that sort. I would also clean the shop, get the sawdust out, you know. Later on, by the time I was 15, my father farmed me out to his friend so I could learn house framing. And in time because, again, I had a very strong math background already. I knew the Pythagorean Theorem and so forth and I learned how to use the square. Back then there were no prefabricated trusses so I learned to cut rafters, which is a real simple thing if you can use a square. I also learned how to make stairs. And again, just using the square. So by the time I was 18, I could be in charge of the framing of a house. So I did that. During the school year, I would work first at the Economy department store, especially right before Christmas selling men’s clothing and jackets and hats to braceros. Braceros were Mexican citizens who came, men, who came to the United States under an agreement to provide farm labor. Then at the end of the harvest they would go back to Mexico. Well, they needed supplies and this is what I would do. I would sell them their clothing. I did that for maybe one or two years and then I also worked at Karl’s shoes. Debby Reynolds was married to a gentleman whose last name was Karl or first name was Karl and he had a chain, nationwide chain of shoes. I took a job there selling shoes. That was about it. Construction and a little bit of retail sales.

RV: When you were a student at Texas Tech, were you working then?

EPM: By then I was working for my father. My father had gone into business. He branched off from just building the cabinets and doing the interior finish on houses. He actually started framing houses as well. So, I would do his bidding. I spoke English and he didn’t, not as well as I did. So I would take care of the business end of it. He took care of the work end of it. I also learned how to do the bookkeeping end of it. I would make out the payroll. I would make the quarterly reports to the IRS. Occasionally, I would go to the job itself and put on my carpenter’s aprons and do some construction work as well.
But I did more of the office end work in the construction company that my father had a for a few years.

RV: When you were working for the radio station, were you still enrolled at Texas Tech?

EPM: Absolutely. I would attend classes later on in the morning. I would get done at the radio station by 7:00 and I think my first classes were at 8:00 at Tech.

RV: So, you joined the military in ’65. Tell me what happened as far as Texas Tech and then getting into the military.

EPM: I was dating a girl and we broke up and I was pretty heartbroken and I was just kind of burned out with things here and this was shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. So, several of my friends were in the Marine Corps and they were, some of them were in the reserves. I think they were activated. They went into active duty through one method or another. I don’t remember how. There was a great groundswell of patriotism in Lubbock as often happens in this community, you know. So I got caught up in that and disenchanted with school and with myself and with my romantic life, my love life. So I talked to the Air Force recruiter, no one else. I wasn’t going to go into the Marine Corps.

RV: Why not?

EPM: I don’t think I was tough enough. Besides, by then, I was in my early 20s and I was a little bit too old. I had been reasoning more than most young men at that time do and I realized the Marine Corps was very tough and the kind of work that they did was not what I wanted to do. I thought the Air Force could use my education better and I had a better chance of staying alive. So I talked to the recruiter and he says, ‘Yeah.’ He tested me in my aptitude tests. There were four major areas that the Air Force tested you in, general, math, mechanical, I forget what the other one was. But the maximum score was a 95. I had three 90s and a 65. The 65 was in mechanical. So I wanted to go into languages so I talked to the recruiter and I told him what I wanted to do and he kind of conned me. He says, ‘Well, trooper, I need to meet my quota for electronics so if you’ll just enlist in the electronics code, when you get to San Antonio and they’ll have a meeting with you, you just tell them that you want to switch over to general,’ which would have been languages. Well, I believed him and I enlisted and when I got to San
Antonio, this particular day came up when we had to make our career choices known and so forth or verify our career choices and I told the sergeant in charge of that and he just laughed at me. So I got stuck in electronics, which was in retrospect, a very good thing. I learned a heck of a lot that I never would have been aware of, the types of equipment, then mechanical aspects of it, the gyroscope stabilize platforms, the gimbals, the accelerometers, the peak points and so forth and the analog to digital things and servos and so forth. These were all foreign things to me even at that point and I became familiar with them. So in the end I was glad that I was in electronics.

RV: That’s good. You joined in ’65. What month was that?
EPM: October, October 13, ’65.

RV: How did your parents feel about you going into the military?
EPM: Well, by now, they were okay with it. There was an earlier time when my dad talked to me about the military and how he didn’t want me joining. This was when I was just out of high school. I don’t know what possessed him to talk me about it because it was not on my mind. But he told me about it.

RV: What did he say?
EPM: Well, he especially didn’t want me to go in the Marine Corps or the Army or the Navy actually.

RV: Do you think he was thinking, ‘Okay, my boy can be more easily killed as an infantryman in the Marine Corps or Army.’?
EPM: I think so. Absolutely.

RV: So maybe, was he trying to protect you, you think?
EPM: Well, in the Navy, I had a cousin, an older cousin who had joined the Navy and he had some problems. He got in fights. He had been beaten up by the NCOs. I don’t know just anything of that but because of those communications that he had with his younger brother [actually, father] who was the father of this cousin [actually, my father’s younger brother], my father was dead set against me joining the Navy. But when it came time of the Air Force, he was not pleased with my decision but he lived with it. I think he understood that deep down inside me, I felt like I had to put something back. I had to do something of that sort to prove that I belong here.
RV: Why did you feel that way? I read in your questionnaire that you wrote that you felt like you wanted to prove that you belonged to this country or you wanted to do something for this country.

EPM: I guess its something that you probably pretty much have to experience as a foreigner coming in here. There was a lot of racial prejudice in this area. Although I was not subjected to it at the level that others were, I was kind of isolated because I’d become an academic kid. So white kids would call me and patronize me because they needed help with their homework. So I would help them. So I was very isolated from the prejudice that was all around us. But, in spite of it, I saw, that, I felt that I had to prove that I belonged.

RV: So serving the country was one way you could do that.

EPM: Absolutely the only way I could do it so I could come back and walk proud and not put up with the racial bullshit.

RV: Did that happen when you came back?

EPM: I didn’t come back to Texas because of that. I feared that my attitudes had changed to the point that I would wind up getting killed or arrested because when I came back, when I became a civilian, I was very American, very independent, very proud. I was not going to come back here and be anybody’s boy.

RV: Were you in fear of being drafted? Was that a consideration?

EPM: Not at all. I had an okay GPA. It was tough but I maintained a C plus or a high C, high C, low B average.

RV: Pete, what did you know about the Vietnam War at this point? You mentioned the Gulf of Tonkin, what did you know about what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia?

EPM: Very little to tell you the truth despite the fact that I was reciting the news, translating the news. I had no academic knowledge, no geographic. I looked it up on the map. I knew where Vietnam was. When I enlisted, it was with the thought that I would probably wind up over there. I wanted to go there. In fact, I volunteered to go there. I had two sets of orders to Thailand that I rejected and I could do so because Thailand, I was not a citizen yet. I was not an American citizen so I did not have an American passport
and to get into Thailand you have to have a passport. To get into Vietnam, you didn’t need one.

RV: Why weren't you a citizen?

EPM: I had never taken out my citizenship papers.

RV: On purpose?

EPM: No. It was something that I had thought about doing but I was young. At 19, 20 years old, your thoughts are elsewhere, not so much about becoming a citizen. There’s other more immediate problems that you're facing dealing with. So that was not one of them. Now, before I went to Vietnam while I was stationed in Tampa, Florida, I did initiate a naturalization process. I passed my interview. I think I even paid a fee and I was okayed to be sworn in. But the district courts that swear American citizens are based like in a large city like Miami. Then, at different times throughout the year, the judge will travel to other large areas, large cities and they’ll convene a court that will do the actually swearing in. Before I could be sworn in, I shipped out. So when I got to Vietnam, I notified, I wrote the court in Miami and I told them that I was serving in Vietnam and that I would not be available to be sworn in and could they hold it in abeyance for me. And they wrote me back and they said, ‘What are you doing in Vietnam?’

RV: Really?

EPM: So I had to write them back and tell them. When I came back from Vietnam, I notified the court again and they transferred my case. I was living near San Francisco but geographically I was in the Sacramento district court area. And so I was sworn in at the Federal court in Sacramento.

RV: Okay, so this is after Vietnam.

EPM: Right. But that’s how come I could turn down the orders to Thailand because I was not a citizen. I didn’t have a passport. Vietnam, that came along and I took it.

RV: Isn’t that interesting. You can go fight in the war in Vietnam but you can't go over to Thailand and debase there. Tell me about basic training at Lackland in San Antonio.

EPM: That was a piece of cake.

RV: You went there in October ’65?
EPM: Yeah. They were pushing us through real hard. All the intimidation, they do all the things that drill instructors are supposed to do. They yell at you and they test you. I remember my drill instructor, he was an E-4. Already he [had returned from Vietnam]. And he wore glasses like I wore glasses and trying to get me riled up, he yelled right in my face and called me four eyes.

RV: Did that work with you?

EPM: No. You’re in the hot sun sweating and we had pith helmets and you just kind of stare straight ahead and let it roll off.

RV: How did you do with the military discipline? Did you adapt okay?

EPM: Yes, I did. It was not, like I said, the Air Force was not like the other services and maybe the fact that I was a little bit older and more mature, I already had two and a half years of college behind me at that point. I had no problem with it. The biggest hardship I had was giving up beer.

RV: Really?

EPM: Yeah. I went about a month without drinking beer.

RV: Because you couldn’t get your hands on it down there?

EPM: Yeah.

RV: Can you describe kind of what you went through in basic, what your typical day was like?

EPM: In San Antonio, we did four weeks in San Antonio and we did two weeks at Keesler Air Base in Mississippi. In San Antonio, we would get up early in the morning, fall out, come back and make up our beds, clean up our area, tidy it up, march to the mess hall and then we would have classroom instruction of different topics of military history, military courtesies, military law. Then we would march, a lot of marching in formations. Since I was one of the older kids, they would make student leader out of the older ones, the ones that had the most college and they would identify us by putting a green rope on our right shoulder. If you wore the rope, they called you the rope. If you were a student leader, you were a rope. Green rope was the lowest level of leadership. Then the yellow rope was more responsibility. Then the red rope, he was like the honcho for the whole squadron for that shift. We did that and then they shipped us out on a bus to Keesler Air Base and they activated some ancient World War II barracks so that we could do more
basic training there. So we cleaned up the barracks. They had cracks in the walls. This was getting on towards thanksgiving so it was a little bit chilly at night. In the daytime we would polish boots and march around the quadrangle and we would sweep the area around the barracks for pine needles. There’s a lot of pine needles in that area of Mississippi from the pine trees. Every half hour you could sweep the area and you’d have extra, new pine needles. That’s basically what we did. We went to the firing range, fire the M-14. The day that we were scheduled to do the obstacle course, we got rained out so I never did the obstacle course.

RV: How’d you like the M-14?

EPM: It was a firearm. I had never handled firearms before so it was an experience. I followed the instructions and I think, I forget what our qualifying thing was. We got to shoot 60 rounds and I was among the top ones. I had a 58. I think earned a marksman’s ribbon for that. Like I said, I just followed the instructions that they gave us and it worked out because I had no experience with firearms before. My father didn’t own any.

RV: Besides giving up beer, what was the hardest thing about basic for you?

EPM: Probably the food. I was used to eating a certain way, the Mexican style, the way that my mother fed us. I was used to eating hot sauce. There was none of that. I had to get used to eating a lot more vegetables than what I was used to, different vegetables, spinach and things of that sort that my mother did not prepare at home. Probably the food was one of the toughest things.

RV: How long did basic last? Was it eight weeks?

EPM: Six weeks. Four weeks in San Antonio, two weeks in Mississippi.

RV: Okay. After you finished in Mississippi, where did you go?

EPM: We were sent to Mississippi because that’s where our technical school was going to be. So when we completed basic, we went into, like for about a week we did details. They had a hurricane through that area, so we got to go pick up branches on the beach in Biloxi, dead fish. We cleaned up things like that. There was an annex to Keesler somewhere out there in the sticks. We also had to go clean up over there. I forget what hurricane it was that year but it was just before I got there in November, October, November. We began 19 weeks of basic electronic principles as they called it and this
was five days a week at the time, five days a week and we had three shifts- A, B, and C. Each shift was six hours. You would march to school in a formation and then you would attend classes on electronic principles. Everything was brand new to me. Everything, conductors, resistors, capacitors, coils, vacuum tubes. We even worked with vacuum tubes. The transistors were just coming into the field. After 19 weeks of that, they gave us a week off or ten days. I forget how many days.

RV: How did you do with the basic stuff? You were good in math. Did that help you?

EPM: Yes, that helped me a hell of a lot. I had a hard time with names. I was still kind of learning English at that point. I knew a lot but there as a heck of a lot, the technical terminology I was not familiar with. So that was the toughest thing, learning what each thing was. I understood what they did, what each thing did, but remembering the names was kind of tough for me. When we came back, we were given a furlough and I flew back to Lubbock and then I flew back and when we got back, because of the urgency of getting people with our skills out in the field, I was a 301X4, that was Inertial and Radar Navigation Guiding Systems Repairman. They initiated four shifts, A, B, C, and D so that some groups were going to go to school from midnight to 6:00 in the morning and I was in that group. And they also upped it from five days a week to six days a week to get us through faster. So we would finish school Saturday morning at 6:00, march back to the barracks, have breakfast in the mess hall and then at that point we did not have to march back. We were free. So, I started hanging out with an older fellow. He was of Japanese origin. He had gone to MIT and dropped out. Brilliant man, Frank Yamisaki. He was already a veteran. He’d been to Vietnam. He was cross training into my field from a related field. People could do that. So, he and I hit it off really well. He had a car and he also liked to drink beer and so on Saturday mornings after breakfast, about 8:30 or so, we’d get into our civilian clothes and drive over a few miles to a place in Biloxi called Charlie’s Hideaway which stayed open I guess 24 hours a day. Biloxi was pretty wild at that time. There was gambling and prostitution 24 hours a day, although it was illegal, it went on. The sheriffs just looked the other way. So we would hang out at this bar until about noon. They even had a black woman who used to play piano, live piano there. Then we’d go back to the barracks, sleep and we would be
actually off all night Saturday to get drunk again. Then on Sunday we’d start getting
ready because Sunday evening we’d go back to school. It was very hectic. They put us up
in air-conditioned barracks. That was the one benefit of it. Our barracks were air-
conditioned. We were allowed, in fact, we were encouraged to paint our windows, our
glass. It looked silver on the outside, but on the inside it was dark. And we had blinds and
that’s where we slept. We had four and five men. They were large rooms. And its
probably six men to a room because we had bunks, upper and lower and we enjoyed
sleeping in air-conditioned quarters. Bed check during the school week was at 8:00 in the
morning. There would actually be somebody that would come around and open each door
and shine a flashlight to make sure we were in our bunks.

RV: Let me ask you something about basic and your advanced training. As a
Hispanic, did you encounter any kind of prejudice or any problems like that?
EPM: I was braced for it especially given the conditions, what was going on in the
country in the South, the civil rights movement. I was very apprehensive when I went to
Mississippi. Among the GIs, the people that I associated with, all of us had either a
college degree or some college. And all of us had a very deep math background. That’s
why we were selected for this program. So, the level of education and sophistication was
a little bit higher than in other fields. So, if there was anything, I never picked up on
anybody being prejudiced that way. In my free time, like I said, I was apprehensive and
that was dispelled soon because I was kind of a rambunctious person and on my day off,
what I would do sometimes is I would take a shuttle bus from the air base to the bus
terminal in Biloxi and I would buy fair on a intra-city bus and I would go to outlying
areas, 15, 20 miles away, little communities in the area and I would get out at the end of
the line and I would just walk the streets and sight see. I never experienced anything like
that as far as prejudice. I don’t even remember what community it was. I think they used
to call it- it was across the back bay, it was past Christian, I think and I got out there and I
started walking and I came up to this garage looking building with a lot of people
hanging out inside. It was a volunteer fire department. They were having a fundraiser and
they were cooking gumbo and they had beer. And I just walked up and they knew I was a
GI and they took me like a son, you know, like one of their own. These were people that
probably would have lynched a black person. But I passed the test. And they were [?]
they fed me for free.

RV: That’s great. You're drill instructor in basic, you said that he was a Vietnam
teenager. He had been over. Did he talk at all about his experiences with you?
EPM: Somewhat. He’d yell at us and tell us how worthless we were and we were
going to be killed because we couldn’t keep up, stuff like that. As far as war stories, he
never really told us any war stories. I don’t think, I don’t know what he used to do, but
evidently he had not really experienced a lot of combat. This is back when we were
advisors in Vietnam.

RV: Right. When you joined in October ’65 and then continued on through your
Advanced, that’s when the United States was building up its forces. Did you have a
growing sense of what the United States was doing there?
EPM: By then I did.

RV: What were you told? What was your understanding at that time?
EPM: Well, we were going to go to Vietnam. That was what we were being
trained for. They needed us. They needed our skills and we were gung ho. We were
competitive. We excelled in our academic portions, programs because we were, I guess it
was our patriotic duty. You get caught up in the fervor of youth and enthusiasm and
patriotism.

RV: So you knew you were going.
EPM: Absolutely.

RV: Did you have any kind of anxiety about that?
EPM: No.

RV: Finish telling me about your advanced training, the engineering, electronic
training.
EPM: Okay, well, the second portion of the program was called SETS and that’s
where we actually worked with and did signal tracings of the equipment that we would be
working on. We had this massive printouts that were stapled together. You unfolded them
and they would occupy a table. We had tables instead of desks. We had, they gave us a
different colored pencils and we would trace signals. This is what happens when you take
an analog reading and you convert it to an electrical input and the signal goes down this
wire, down this wire and up this diagram through this box and so on and so forth and this
is what we were doing. It was very interesting, very interesting. It was tough because of
the hours we were in school. We had problems falling asleep. We would stand up a
portion of the evening just to stay awake. We drank a lot of coffee.

RV: This was that midnight shift.

EPM: Yes.

RV: Did you ever get to switch off of that or was that you're permanent?

EPM: That was our permanent through the whole program of SETS. Our program
was 49 weeks all together and it was like, I think, about half and half, but because we
were accelerated, the second half was a little bit shorter.

RV: Were they accelerating you because of the war?

EPM: Absolutely, yes.

RV: What was your specialty when you finished the school? What were you
exactly trained for?

EPM: To remove and replace, troubleshoot, remove and replace boxes on an
aircraft. That was the primary function.

RV: Boxes?

EPM: Black boxes, gray boxes, the computer boxes, the transmitters, the signal
distribution units. The other thing that we also, those of us that had more skill, we learned
to repair the boxes as well. They taught us by signal tracing. They taught us how to
repair. And some of us would actually remove and replace capacitors, resistors,
condensers on the equipment, on circuit boards. We had circuit boards then. But the
primary function was to keep the aircraft flying and by that we had the bench where if
you troubleshoot a system that had a problem, you identified the source of the problem and
it was isolated to this particular box, then you would remove the cannon plugs from it. Do
you know what a cannon plug is?

RV: No, I don’t.

EPM: They're electrical plugs about that big [indicating size with hands]. They
have many, many little pins and there’s only one way that those can fit. They’re keyed.
The plug is keyed, the receptacle is keyed so you’d start it a certain way, you’d push and
you’d twist and you lock it in place and then we would safety wire some of them to make
sure that they would not vibrate loose. Safety wire was this high tensile strength steel that
they gave us rolls of and they gave us these pliers that were kind of like a ratchet and you
would clamp onto the wire, loop it through, loop it through little holes and you would
pull on it and you would make a nice twirly twist and that would secure the equipment
from vibrating loose. So that’s what we would do. We would replace the boxes. Then we
would sign off on the aircraft forms that the aircraft was safe to fly.

RV: You got work actually on the aircraft itself?

EPM: Absolutely, yes.

RV: What type of platforms were you working on?

EPM: We were trained to work on a system that was on the B-52s and also on a
system that was on the fighters, the Phantoms and there were other aircraft that had some
of that equipment. I was sent to McDill Air Base in Florida after Keesler.

RV: When did you go to McDill?

EPM: November or so of ’60…. I joined in ’65.

RV: ’66?

EPM: ’66, yeah. About a year after I joined I wound up in Florida. There we had a
wing of Phantoms, F-4 Cs and Ds and we were a training squadron, a training wing, a
replacement for Vietnam is what it was. All the pilots, sooner or later would wind up over
there because we’re the maintenance people. I remember that we, I joined the soccer team
on the base. We were lead by a couple of captains who were Academy graduates. They
were so cool. We were on a first name basis. If we saw them on the flight line, it was yes,
sir. But in our civilian time, we were playing soccer and drinking beer afterwards. We
would go to places like St. Pete across the bay, Clearwater, St. Pete where there were
other teams and on Sunday afternoons we’d go play soccer against them. And I got to be
[friends with?]. The pilots were the same way. We were friends over there.

RV: Okay, so you associated off the flight line together. What was your day like
at McDill? What were your specific duties?

EPM: I’d go to work in the morning and we were flying the devil out of the
aircraft just as soon as they came back, another crew was ready to go up and get their
flying time, do their bombing runs at the bombing ranges that they have near the air base.
And we stayed very busy pulling equipment and replacing it, talking to the pilots about
how the systems worked. We would find out before they landed that they had a problem
and we’d go out in our metro van out to the flight line where they were going to park and
we would go right up to the aircraft before they got out of it. We focused on the guy in
the back. He was the person that operated the inertial system. And we would ask
questions about how it functioned, the final coordinates were always important because
you were supposed to zero out, you would insert your present position coordinates before
you took off to your targets and then when you came back you would note the final
coordinates and depending on the way, say, you always came high by a few minutes-
ever degrees. If it was degrees it was a major problem. It was always minutes and
seconds. We would establish a pattern from the history of the final coordinates and we
would realize, okay, this particular aircraft, tail number triple nickel or whatever the
number might be, has been coming in with high coordinates so we had biasing knobs in
one of the boxes where you could tweak it maybe three or four clicks one way and then
you would notice the next pattern. And this was a way of making the equipment more
accurate.

RV: So what exactly did this equipment do?

EPM: It provided ground track. It provided altitude, the globe in front of the pilot
that floats. It provided that. More importantly though, it provided the navigation
knowledge that worked with the autopilot to make sure that when you got to your target,
you were on it. We took a great deal of pride in making precise bombings. The pilot
could only do so much. I guess we established a pretty good camaraderie with them
because we were their support. In a war zone, quite often, when a pilot was ready to
rotate back, I think it was 100 missions that they had to fly and regardless of how long
they’d been in country, they would rotate. Sometimes there would be pilots that maybe
two or three of them would pitch in together and get a pallet of beer for the maintenance
people. That’s a lot of beer. It wasn’t expensive. They’d do that.

RV: Because you guys kept them in the air and kept them accurate.

EPM: They were also guys that would give testimony, they’d tell us, ‘Hey, sarge,
when I was in weather up in wherever, if it wasn’t for the altitude in front of me, I
wouldn’t have made it back.’ The globe that presented them with accurate information as
to where they were and how they were flying, they would thank us for it.
RV: So you were at McDill for about a year.
EPM: A little over a year I think, yeah.
RV: Did you enjoy it down there in Florida?
EPM: Absolutely. McDill was a wonderful place, the town, the city. It was a city much bigger than Lubbock. The townspeople were very patriotic. The women were, they loved military guys. The women just loved us. Broke without transportation, or next to broke without a vehicle, it didn’t matter. The women looked out for us. I would dress up and put on a coat and tie and look very preppy and go over to the Llamas Club at McDill and Gandy Boulevard, McDill Boulevard and Gandy Avenue I guess it was. Oh, my goodness, it was just really heaven with ladies.

RV: Did your training at McDill get you ready for Vietnam?
EPM: You bet. That’s where you really learned it. The technical school was fine but where you really learned how it all came together was on the flight line doing it.
RV: So by the time you got there, you had been well trained, you felt comfortable with your job.
EPM: I was very knowledgeable. When I got to Da Nang I was very knowledgeable. As I mentioned earlier there were older NCOs that cross trained. They had the management skills that the Air Force needed but they were maybe in an obsolete field or a field that was not as glamorous, maybe that didn’t pay. Propay was an additional payment that they gave us and so these gentleman would cross train. There was an E-7. I forget his name. He was assigned to McDill to learn the equipment. So I was kind of assigned to show him. I was an E-4, I was an E-3 at the time. I was an E-3. And I would show this much older NCO how the systems worked. Well, I got to Vietnam and a short while later this same gentleman was assigned to Vietnam, Da Nang. And because of his rank and his knowledge as a supervisor- he had the supervisory skills and the training- he became my station chief. So, he was aware of my knowledge and he called me in one day shortly after he got there and he says, ‘Do you feel comfortable talking to pilots?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He says, ‘Would you like to work maintenance debriefing?’ Well, I knew what that was. That’s away from the shops where the pits were, the refueling pits. The aircraft would taxi right up to the building, the little shack that we had right on the flight line and the pilots would come in and we had six or seven of us
that were knowledgeable of the different systems, hydraulics, fire control they called it, that’s the weapons delivery systems, inertial and radar, that was me, the air frame I think they called it. Anyway, we had all these people that were knowledgeable and we would talk to the pilots about how the systems worked. Then we would call the shop and we would tell them, 653 came in with this and that, you know and the history of it. We kept cards on each aircraft, critical data. And we would diagnose what the problem was and tell the dispatcher at our shop what we felt was wrong with the aircraft.

RV: So you had pretty good rapport with pilots because they had to tell you honestly what was wrong and you guys had to fix it.

EPM: Yeah. And we knew when they were coming in, especially during the night. There were not as many sorties flown. And we knew within five minutes which way, when they would arrive. Well, we sat around all this time. Some of us would play cards. Some of the guys would take a nap in between debriefings. I would cook tacos. We had a refrigerator and I would hustle ground beef from the Navy, Navy people and I would hustle tomatoes and lettuce and onions. My mother would send me salsas and peppers, tortillas, but they were often spoiled. We found we could buy canned tortillas made by Old El Paso that came in a can and we would make tacos in the office there in between debriefings. Well, it just happens that just about every pilot that’s ever been trained in the U.S. has spent time in the southwest where the weather is favorable for flying, where we do most of our training. And they all have been exposed to Mexican food. And they would come in, and the odors- we put our food away when they came in. But they would look and they would say, ‘Sarge, it’s got to be you.’ (laughing). Well, I was invited to their quarters to make tacos for them.

RV: On more than one occasion?

EPM: More than one occasion. I’d go through the officer’s quarters. In fact, I got so bold I would go drinking with them at the officer’s club.

RV: Before we go there, let’s take a break. Okay, Pete, continuing, tell me how your parents felt about you going to Vietnam and the possibility of you going to Vietnam.

EPM: Well, at that time, they had very mixed feelings. I had hooked up with a lady in Tampa. This lady was from Milwaukee. She was a German Catholic and she and her girlfriend were vacationing in Tampa and I met her there. I guess a week later or so
she returned to Milwaukee but she said she was going to go up there and give notice and quit her job and move to Tampa.

RV: Wow. You must have made an impression.

EPM: I didn’t think she was serious, but sure enough she was. So she moved to Tampa and we moved in together. We rented an apartment. She took a job as a keypunch operator back when automated data systems were just in that stage. So she worked for one of the banks, one of the large banks there. Well, my folks drove out there and they met her and they liked her. Then, when I was going to Vietnam, she quit her job. She knew she could get a job in San Francisco. She wanted to be that much closer. So we came through here and visited my folks on the way through and I guess they were pretty excited about her because they sensed that we were probably going to get married, which we did once we got to the West Coast. We found an apartment for her and about three days before I shipped out, we decided to get married. So we went to the courthouse in Redwood City, California, south of San Francisco and got our marriage license and got married on the spot. This kind of, my folks were happy for me in that regard. The rest of it, they just kind of sucked it in and prayed for me.

RV: How did your wife feel about you going?

EPM: We were very dumb and young, young and dumb and it was just something that I had to do. It was just something that she knew I was going to do when she met me. I told her that’s what I was going to do. So she lived with it. We hooked up in Honolulu after about eight months for R&R.

RV: Let me ask you, how did you feel when you got your orders and you knew you were going over?

EPM: Excited. I was excited about it. I was looking forward to it, the adventure of it. I had no second thoughts. It never occurred to me to flee to Canada or anything like that. I had a cousin who did. Well, he fled to Mexico. To this day I have not seen him. He lives in San Antonio now. When he graduated with a double degree, engineering and architecture from the University of Chicago and he and an Oriental friend took a trip to Florida and they visited me in McDill Air Base. We spent an afternoon and an evening together. And we talked about him with his engineering background that they would make him a pilot and my understanding was that he was going to enlist and become an
officer. So I didn’t see him anymore. After I got to Vietnam, I heard from my mother that
the FBI was looking for my cousin. He had a Guatemalan girlfriend from the university
and rather than enlist or be drafted, they fled to Mexico City where he took a job with, I
believe it was IBM. In time, he was assigned to Vancouver, Canada but he could not live
in the United States. It wasn’t until, I have very disrespectful thoughts about Nixon and
Ford. When Ford pardoned, and I’m going to control my words. When Ford pardoned
Nixon that was followed by the pardon for all the draft dodgers. It really burned my gut.

RV: And you had a cousin, a family member who had done this.
EPM: He had lived with us in Monterey at one time. We were about the same age.
We used to be very close but I have never seen him the rest of my life, don’t really want
to.

RV: You’ve not spoken with him since.
EPM: Not even his father.
RV: Now, is that by choice, on purpose?
EPM: On purpose. Maybe I’ll change before I die, but my cousin Alfonso exists
but I don’t really care for him. Anyhow, eventually, he has made a very nice life for
himself in the United States now that he was pardoned with his education. Like I said, he
lives in San Antonio, but he doesn’t exist to me.

RV: So, going to Vietnam, you felt like, ‘It’s my duty, it’s my job,’ excitement.
EPM: Yeah.
RV: Overall, the big picture, the government, did you understand why the United
States was there at this point?
EPM: Not yet. I was just beginning to become aware. I was just becoming aware
of the politics of the war. Up until that point, it had been patriotism, ignorance on my
part. But when you start seeing the body bags and start smelling the odor as they’re being
unloaded from the field, from the helicopters onto the ambulances to take them to the
mortuary.

RV: You’re talking about over in Da Nang.
EPM: Yeah. You kind of, you go into a different level of reasoning. You ask
yourself questions. You arrive at conclusions. I read the newspaper over there, the Stars
and Stripes. I talked to people. I talked to civilians who were working for the military,
older people, especially the morticians. I took a part time job, shortly after I got to Da Nang. This sergeant Duran was a Hispanic, didn’t speak Spanish but he was a Hispanic from New Mexico. He was about ready to rotate right around Christmas time. I got there December the 7th and I met him and I had a few beers with him at the club. Then he says, ‘Hey, have you ever had experience tending bar?’ I said, ‘Well, I have a lot of experience at the bar.’ I had a bartender’s book. He says, ‘Well, I’m going to quit my job, my part time job at the officer’s club as a bartender and they’re going to look for a replacement. Do you want to interview?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’

RV: This was right upon arrival at Da Nang?
EPM: Shortly after I arrived, yeah. So I went to the officer’s club and they interviewed me and they hired me just before the Christmas party, the Christmas/ New Year’s parties that they were hosting. So I became a bartender.

RV: And this is what you do with this part time after you finished your flight duties.
EPM: Exactly. When I got off duty in the morning at my military job, I would rush over to the barracks, put on a pair of slacks and a white shirt and my nametag and I’d catch a ride to the main base. I lived in the annex where the lower enlisted men lived. The higher enlisted men and the officers lived in the main compound. Then I would go over to the club and the club would already have customers there, pilots that had been flying during the night. They would go drink afterwards and they would stop serving them between 6:00 and 8:00 for inventory and clean up. But if you were already there, you were drinking whiskey and water, you would order three or four to see you through that two hour period so that when I walked in again at 8:00, then I would start serving them fresh drinks. So, some of those men I had seen during the night when they were coming back and I had debriefed them. So, that’s what I would do until about 1:00 and I would get a meal there with my work. I ate very well and I made very good tips. It was a fun job.

RV: It sounds like it. Tell me about the flight over to Vietnam. What was the morale like, the mood on the plane?
EPM: It was very uncomfortable. We were so crowded.
RV: Is this a civilian airline.
EPM: It was all civilian [aircraft?] under contract with the military. They had a different seating arrangement so that they could crowd more of us. You were like a sardine, literally like a sardine. You know, it’s a 22 hour flight seems like. I flew out of Norton Air Base in California, southern California, my bride from a few days ago, she stayed in South City, South San Francisco where we had an apartment for her and she worked in the city. And I flew from SFO to San Bernadino, the airport, San Berdoo as they called it. Then I took a taxi along with a lot of GIs to the air base and we shipped out from Norton. We went up north to Alaska and it was a very disorienting flight. It seems like we went through two different sunrises. I don’t know just how it happened but we went up north and then we went to Japan and Japan to Okinawa and Okinawa into Vietnam. It was just a disorienting flight.

RV: What were your first impressions of Vietnam when you landed?

EPM: I was glad to be on the ground.

RV: Did you land at Da Nang?

EPM: At Da Nang, yeah. That was the embarkation point.

RV: So you're glad to be on the ground.

EPM: Absolutely. So we reported to the squadron. They came over and picked us up, sent us to the barracks, assigned us a bunk. They got a locator card on us and introduced us to our chief, section chief, the other GIs in our section. Then I guess the second day we had an orientation at the base theatre. I remember very distinctly it was an Army captain liaison attached to the air base who briefed us and gave us this very glowing report on how Da Nang would not be hit by rockets anymore from Happy Valley because we had listening devices. We had artillery shots that ran during the night into Happy Valley. We had patrols that crisscrossed it. It was all defoliated and there was just no way that the Viet Cong could hit us from there. Well, sure enough, I guess it was, we had a truce for Christmas and then about three days later we got this. It’s a frightening time. No matter how many times you go through it, incoming, because it all has a very distinct thunder and it’s frightening.

RV: Was that the first time that you had experienced the combat, the [?]?

EPM: Absolutely, yes.

RV: Tell me about that. What happened?
EPM: Well, this evening, I was off; this particular evening when they hit us out in
the barracks. I just rolled out. I had a lower bunk. The barracks were, we had revetments
about four foot high, boxes filled with dirt, plywood boxes and they were four feet high.
The rest of the barracks up to the top to the first level, we had wire, screened wire and
slats at an angle. So you had a lot of ventilation. We had cubicles open on one end that
the lockers would form the walls. My lockers faced this way (indicating with hands), I
had a space about that wide between my locker and my bunk and I had a guy upstairs that
slept above me.

RV: Your hands are about four feet across.
EPM: About four feet across. Yeah, that was the space. I have pictures of that that
I flew. I’ll show you some of those. I’ll give the archive some.
RV: Okay, thank you.
EPM: I had my flak jacket and my flak helmet, my hard hat underneath my bunk
and so when we got hit that night, I just rolled under the bed and I threw the flak jacket
over my body, my upper torso and I put the helmet over my head and I prayed. It was
over very quickly. They only got like three rockets in that night. Then shortly after the
New Year, for our new year we also had a truce and it was observed. Shortly after our
new year, there was a lot of intelligence that there was a big thing coming so we were
told that our side was going to set off some dummy explosions to lure the Viet Cong into
attacking because as far as out intelligence knew, when the rockets hit the air base, then
the Viet Cong would attack. By luring them we would be expecting them when the
rockets, the pseudo rockets went off. So we were on an alert situation, but we knew it was
a fake thing. Evidently it worked. They lured some Viet Cong from the perimeter to come
and attack the air base but we were not really aware of it where we were. So things go on
and then the TET New Year comes up and again there was going to be a truce. Me and
some other guys went to the movies at the base theater. We used to see a lot of movies
with James Coburn, ‘I Spy’, movies with pretty girls. That’s what it was. All of us went
to the movies to see the pretty girls. The round eyes as we used to call them by then
already. Well, we came out of the movie house probably about 4:30, 5:00 in the
afternoon. We hear the distinct roar of phantoms taking off full after burner. There’s a
tremendous roar. There’s a 35-40 foot flume of fire that comes out of the engines and
they take off loaded with ordnance and fuel. They had external fuel tanks as well. And we thought, ‘What the hell’s going on?’ This is a truce. Well, it didn’t take us but about a minute to find out that the truce had been called off because intelligence had found out that they were going to attack. So I went back to the barracks and I had a few beers and went back to the barracks and slept a while before I went to work at midnight. I got to work and I debriefed some pilots. We debriefed a crew.

RV: So your rotation was to work going at midnight?

EPM: Yeah. So I show up at midnight and we debriefed a crew and they're standing around outside waiting for their metro van to come and pick them up and take them to intelligence debriefing that was next for them. So one of the aircraft come in sick and I called. We had these field telephones that we cranked.

RV: What do you mean sick?

EPM: It had problems. It had some malfunctions. So the policy was that I would notify the shop dispatcher and tell him what the prognosis on it was based on the history that we had on that aircraft. So I cranked up the field telephone. The shop was about two miles away from us up the flight line. The landing fields overlapped. They were about two miles long and they overlapped for about half a mile in the center but they ran parallel to each other basically. So I called the base, the other end of it. Somebody answered and yelled, ‘We’re under attack. Call us later.’ Well, we didn’t hear anything on our end of it. We had sirens and we had blue lights that flashed because of the intensity of the noise around the aircraft. We had revetments for them about 15 feet high, six-foot thick corrugated steal and it was all full of dirt to isolate the aircraft from each other. So I told Jerry, our supervisor, he was an E-6. I said, ‘Hey, Jerry. I called the shop and they said they're under attack out there.’ So Jerry and I stepped outside towards where we had been building a bunker to protect us. We were in a very hot area, the refueling pits and then they had an area on the other side of this big revetment where they parked C, not 130s. The smaller version of the C-130, I forget the name of it now. Not the C-19.

RV: 123?

EPM: 123s. They had those parked on the other side loaded with ammunition and ordnance to be taken out to the different locations early in the morning.
RV: So you're a prime target.

EPM: We were a prime target, absolutely. The aircraft, they were parked, the row of revetments for the aircraft began about 25 yards away.

RV: Now, were you housed in a building there?

EPM: We were in a building. We had sandbags up to halfway height. Then in the back of it we started building a bunker. I'll show you pictures of that. We had a detonator shield on top of it. This metal that they used to make temporary landing strips, we had some of that and we had it supported on timbers, big heavy timbers and there was a space between that with a layer of sandbags and then the roof of our revetment so that if we took a direct hit, hopefully the detonator shield would take the blow, detonate the rocket and it would collapse onto the other roof were we were underneath it. Well, we haven’t finished it yet. We were working very hard and it was only the graveyard shift. The other two shifts didn’t give a damn about that revetment because they wouldn’t have been there. It wasn’t going to save them.

RV: And they didn’t think they'd get attacked during the day so they didn’t care.

EPM: That’s right.

RV: So it was in our interest to work on it and they even brought us a big light, one of those light [big lights?] and we would (work) between the aircraft debriefings, we would work out there. Well, we go out to work, stat, Jerry and me.

RV: How many people were on your team?

EPM: There were about five or six of us. It varied because somebody would take a night off once in a while. Now, the pilots were on the other end of the building. The building was about 12 by 18 and the pilots were on the other end right by the aircraft waiting for their transportation and so all of the sudden we’re outside trying to listen to see if we hear what’s going on and we turn around to go back inside and there’s a big flash in front of us. Through the building you could see it, around the building you could see it where the first three rockets came in. They walked them into the different aircraft. The fighters that were in the revetments, they (hit) one, two, three. They were incredible artillerymen with very primitive equipment.

RV: They had sited it and they were…
EPM: The French surveyed the land and they had these markers every so many square kilometers so if you knew present position for the spot. And what I understand is they had bamboo tripods that they would rest their rockets on and they had a very primitive alignment for azimuth and elevation. Azimuth is this way (indicating with hands). Elevation is this way. And they would make corrections for winds and so forth and then with discarded batteries, flashlight batteries, that’s what they used as igniters. Evidently, they had timers so they could get away and then the rockets would be launched after they had left the area because they were going to get wiped out by the C-what did we call them?

RV: Puff the Magic Dragon.

EPM: Puff the Magic Dragon. I have pictures of that. Those were always in the air at night.

RV: The gunships.

EPM: So anyhow, they hit the aircraft and Jerry and I were outside. We just fell flat and the pilots, there were four, there were eight pilots I believe. They ran through the building and our colleagues also, the exited the building. They ran over me and Jerry in getting to the bunker before we did. Jerry and I crawled in afterwards on our bellies. We are all scared to death. They hit a refueling truck not very far, maybe 75, 50 yards away, but it caught fire and it scared us to death.

RV: What are you saying down there in the bunker? What are you thinking?

EPM: I was praying.

RV: Out loud or to yourself?

EPM: To myself.

RV: What about the other men?

EPM: I imagine they were doing the same. I was wondering how thick is the concrete. Well, you know concrete in those areas is like 18 inches high. They’re reinforced. No way you’re going to cut a hole through that but it occurred to me that I probably should. Well, we had, somebody had an FM radio and they tuned it to this frequency where the base commander communicated with us. And after what seemed like an eternity, he came on and told us it was clear. By then, the night had turned into daylight because across the flight line from us, the Marines had, the 3rd Marine Wing, Air
Wing, they also had fighters, phantoms the same as we did. They also had a flare dump for flares. We didn’t know it but they hit it. We thought it was the bomb dump that the Marines had but it was a flare dump and so the flares started going off. And for about two hours after the attack, it was daylight from the flares going up and lighting up the sky.

RV: How long did that attack last?

EPM: Probably no more than 20 minutes but it seemed a lot longer than that.

RV: When the all clear was given, what did you guys do?

EPM: We go back to work and there was some very heroic deeds that some of the GIs did. For instance, I have pictures of them. They’re not very clear because they were taken before the sun came up on [?].

RV: So you carried your camera with you.

EPM: Yeah. A lot of us did. They had these carts that they carried the bombs in to get underneath the aircraft. They would bring them to the aircraft and then they had a special vehicle that would pick them up and cradle them underneath the wings. Well, one of these carts had about four or five 500s. And this aircraft caught fire and the bombs had the paint singed off of them before some very heroic GIs pushed the carts away from the immediate fire. Otherwise, I might not be here to tell you about it because we were so close to it.

RV: It was 2,000 pounds.

EPM: Well, they were 500s.

RV: How many were there?

EPM: Probably four or five. You’re talking as far as the number (amount) of pounds the ordnance give.

RV: Yeah, 2,500 pounds of ordnance. Was that the bravest thing that you witnessed in Vietnam?

EPM: Probably. Yeah. So in any case, at the end of our shift, I went back to the barracks and the base was shut down. The Vietnamese nationals that used to come in to work in the PX, work in the chow line, worked cleaning the barracks for us and pressed our uniforms and shined our shoes. They cleaned the latrines. We used to pay them for that. Well, they shut them down for several days. The officer’s club didn’t open that day so I didn’t work. And myself and a couple of other guys went taking pictures as the sun
came up. The photographer that has this declassified official Air Force pictures that I showed you once before, he was on duty taking pictures and he snapped me up in a couple of them and I’m in those as well.

RV: How many planes were destroyed in your area there?

EPM: I never really found out the number but I know that we had three squadrons of 16 each, so we had a total of 48 aircraft. That day, we were probably flying fewer than 20. The other ones had been damaged in one way or another destroyed. The ones that were flying, I mean, they would land and right away there was a swarm of activity on each one of them refueling them, reloading them and getting them ready to go back and provide tactical support to the people in other areas where there was a very intense ground battle going on.

RV: Could you hear it?

EPM: No, we could hear people right in our own area outside. There was snipers, there were attempts to penetrate the air base. The closest I came to dying in Vietnam was that day. It was probably about 10:00 or so and I was going back to my barracks and I was in front of the mess hall, this metal building. My barracks was across the street and in between the barracks, you could see Vietnam. There was a field with serpentine wire. There was a fence. There were Marines that had had two injuries already that were assigned. Rather than take a chance on having to rotate them back if they were injured a third time, they would assign them to very boring duty maintaining surveillance on the perimeter of the air base and they lived in these dirt towers and they had these revetments, one man revetments where they could hide and fire back. Well, on the other side of that, maybe a couple of hundred yards, maybe more, there was a tree line and there were huts and shacks and Vietnamese people living there and it was from that area that a sniper shot at me. I was about to walk across the street to my barracks and he had me this way, the azimuth, but he didn’t have me on elevation. There were two shots that hit up above my head on the wall, maybe about 16, 14 inches above me. I shit.

RV: Did you really?

EPM: I hit the ground. I was trembling. I was breathing very heavy. I crawled to a bunker nearby.

RV: You knew what had happened.
EPM: Yeah. It didn’t take long to dawn on me what it was. But I went back and I looked at the bullet holes and it was my lucky day he missed me. I eventually made it out to the barracks and I changed my clothes. I started drinking. I had beer in my refrigerator. I had my own refrigerator. And I drank a few beers and calmed myself down.

RV: Did you report the incident?

EPM: No. I mean, it was just something that happened, you know.

RV: Daily life on the air base.

EPM: Yeah. But that was during the TET Offensive, the morning of the TET Offensive.

RV: That was the TET Offensive. That’s the morning of the TET Offensive.

EPM: Yeah. Later on that morning we had the A-1 Es, World War II vintage aircraft. They were starting their bomb dives over our barracks to go over and drop ordnance on that tree line.

RV: So that was quite loud right over. You're a month into Vietnam. Did you think, ‘Oh, my God. This is what my tour is going to be like’?

EPM: I didn’t even think about it. I didn’t have time to think about things like that.

RV: After that day, the next day.

EPM: Hey, I sneaked into the chapel that afternoon. There was a chapel nearby and I went in there. And I was going through a period of being an Agnostic.

RV: Really?

EPM: Yeah. I was growing up and going through different beliefs. I did sneak into the chapel and pray and thanked God.

RV: Did that change your outlook of it?

EPM: Not really. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve rationalized a lot of things about religion, organized religion and I reject organize religion. I was beginning to back then. But now I have formulated my thoughts a lot stronger and I believe in a supreme being but I don’t believe in organized religions.

RV: The next few days after this when you were almost killed, how did you deal with that psychologically?
EPM: Just put it behind you. Just put it behind you and we were drinking so much beer. Anytime that we could, we’d go out and do our duty and do our job, sober up and get over the hangover, whatever and do it again afterwards. Beer was so cheap.

RV: Tell me about the alcohol use.

EPM: There was a lot of it. There were also people doing drugs. Marijuana was by far the most common one. I heard of people doing opium. I never saw it. Not that I knew what symptoms to look for. I knew about LSD. There were some guys in the barracks who were from the west coast. They were listening to The Doors, Frank Zappa, and to me this was all very foreign music. I had not learned to appreciate it yet as I did later on. When I went over there, I had lived in Lubbock and in the New Orleans area in the Tampa area and by no means was that the west coast in terms of the turmoil that was happening out there on the west coast, I imagine, both of them. I was very naïve. I was from a small town.

RV: So you witnessed the drug use. The marijuana use was there and alcohol.

EPM: Alcohol all the time

RV: Did you think it became a problem or was it a way to relieve stress?

EPM: No. It was a macho thing being able to drink and hold your liquor. It started with the pilots. The pilots took a great deal of pride in being able to drink nothing but hard liquor and not show it, maintain control of their intellect and their faculties and keep Downing them. I saw that because I served them.

RV: And how about back in your barracks, same kind of thing?

EPM: Similar attitude. The guys were macho. Most of us drank at the club. There were some of us that had refrigerators. We put a lock, a wrench (a chain) to secure our beer or whatever our contents were because people would pilfer it. But, yeah I had always a couple of case of cold beer in my refrigerator, a couple of bottles of liquor in my locker. We were allowed, the Air Force had no restrictions on that as the Navy did. In fact, the reason that I wound up with all this meat that I mentioned earlier for barbeques and for tacos- the deep-water pier was near Monkey Mountain on the waterfront. The Navy would have these large ships that would come in with produce and meats and vegetables and they would unload them at deepwater pier and everyday, every afternoon, there would be a big trailer, an 18 wheeler that would be loaded that they had Navy
drivers and an NCO in charge of it. They would drive it over to Da Nang. They’d park it right in the area where we worked and the Navy people stayed with it until in the morning when they signed it over to the Air Force to be loaded onto 123s and taken in country. Well, E-6s and below could not have liquor in the Navy, on land, not necessarily on the aircraft carrier, on land. So it was very easy for me to swap a couple of $.95 bottles of vodka for a 55 pounds of steaks. And I did that. Whenever our squadron had a party, I was the guy that procured the meats. Different guys would procure different things. We did a lot of pilfering. We were a 24-hour a day operation. Others were not. Our squadron commanders jeep needed a battery. Well, there were other jeeps parked near it at night and we were on duty and you know what, somebody’s jeep wouldn’t start in the morning but our commander’s would.

RV: So you guys were resourceful.
EPM: Very much.

RV: What would you do? Would you literally just get a jeep and drive over to the docks or to the area?
EPM: No, right there at night. In between debriefings I would go over and bullshit with the Navy guys and inevitably we’d talk about alcohol and I’d say, ‘You know, I’ve got a couple of bottles. Want to swap?’ ‘Yeah.’ They didn’t care who wasn’t fed properly inland. They got their booze and we got meat.

RV: Did you eat well then while you were there that year?
EPM: Yes, I did. I ate very well.

RV: Okay. Tell me what else you guys would do for entertainment. You told me about the drinking. You told me about going to the movies. What else would you do?
EPM: China Beach was nearby. We would go there. We would sneak into town and go to the massage parlor.

RV: Tell me about that. Was that easy to get to, get access to?
EPM: Yeah. The town was off limits to us but nobody checked.

RV: Why couldn’t you go into Da Nang?
EPM: They didn’t want us to be in town. I don’t know why that they didn’t want us. We had military personnel all over Da Nang. The Navy had the Pink Elephant I think they called it. It was some sort of command headquarters for the Navy near the estuary.
There were hotels that were rented for billeting Navy officers. There was a big Navy compound at the other end of Da Nang with military personnel. It was easy. You just walk out the gate. Our PX was outside the gate. So you just go the PX and then keep going, get lost in the crowd, hitch a ride. I was in town one day near the market place, one of the market places and a crew from one of the news services was filming and I didn’t want them to see me so I kind of turned away when they came by filming because I didn’t want to get in trouble. We’d then go to the Da Nang Hotel where they had a massage parlor and steam bath and I would take a steam bath and afterwards I would have mamason rub me and do fellatio on me for money.

RV: How much would that cost?
EPM: Probably about four or five dollars.
RV: For the whole thing?
EPM: Yeah. In the beginning, within the first two months or so I went to the hotel and I got a prostitute and I was very dumb. I didn’t use a condom. About three days later I suffered the consequences. So I went to the clinic and took a sample and three days in a row they gave me penicillin shots and I got over it. It was gonorrhea. The NCO in charge, the NCO orderly, chief orderly wanted to hang me by getting me to admit that I had been in town unauthorized and he wanted to know where did I catch it. Well, I told him that I caught it in one of the bunkers in the lower enlisted men’s club from one of the girls who worked in the club. And he said, ‘What was her name?’ Well all the girls had names like Lucy, Nancy, Mary, Susie.

RV: These are Vietnamese girls.
EPM: Yeah. So I said, ‘Well, her name was Susie.’
RV: He bought it.
EPM: He could not nail me on it. He could not nail me on it.
RV: The doctor on the other hand, he was really cool. He was a laid back doctor. I guess he had been drafted into it. I don’t know. He had a real cool attitude. And he says, ‘Sarge, I know you from someplace.’ I said, ‘Yes, sir. I’m the bartender that serves you your drinks at the officer’s club.’ He said, ‘Oh, yeah.’ He says, ‘Well, sarge, when you serve my drink, you be sure and wash your hands real well.’ I said, ‘Yes, sir.’

RV: And that was it?
EPM: That was it.

RV: Was prostitution common in your unit?

EPM: Very much, oh, yes, yes. I mean, think about it, a war zone. In the Air Force, we were like the more sophisticated of the troops. Over at China Beach, there was a serpentine wire that separated our beach from a Vietnamese beach. And there were some scraggly pine trees that grew higher up above the water line. And what the Vietnamese ladies would do, I guess the GIs, the Marines, this is an R&R center for the Marines. They would go there and rent a cot, a bunk, and they could buy beer. They had a little PX there for them. And the enterprising Vietnamese ladies would take sheets that the GIs would bring them from the barracks and tie them like a little barrier about three or four high from the pine trees that formed a little quadrangle and this was their house. And you would see the Marines, they wouldn’t even take their boots off or their pants off all the way. You’d see their feet sticking out from underneath the sheets. Then they would throw the condoms away and you would see small Vietnamese boys, they would pick up the condoms and take them to the ocean and rinse them in seawater and roll them up again and insert them in the little containers and try to resell them.

RV: Did people buy them?

EPM: I imagine so. I imagine they did. I don’t know. The Marines were crazy. I don’t blame them. They had a very tough job, a lot tougher than ours. And when they came back to town, they enjoyed themselves as much as possible because they had no assurance of what it was going to be like tomorrow.

RV: Where did you get condoms? Where could you get them?

EPM: The PX. They sold them. That’s one of the high consumption items along with, incredible as it sounds, pantyhose.

RV: Why pantyhose?

EPM: Because the Vietnamese ladies would do favors for you for pantyhose or hairspray.

RV: Really? What kind of favors?

EPM: Sexual.

RV: You’d just give them pantyhose and they’d take care of things.

EPM: Yes, or hairspray.
RV: On base or off?
EPM: Both. Even though I had just married, I was not faithful. There was a young lady that worked with me at the officer’s club. Her name was Ai and she was very attractive. She was the person in charge of package sales, booze to go. Well, we became friends and she was my source. She wouldn’t even punch my ration card. I would buy liquor that then I would trade to the Navy or keep it for myself. So I had an abundance of liquor because of her connection. I finally got busted. It was a minor bust. I was going to visit her. She lived in the, she was related to a Vietnamese Army NCO and they had a camp right in the same area as ours. And so one evening I was going to go eat supper with her and I had a six-pack of Coca-Cola in a paper sack and the MPs- this was off limits to us. They had a jeep somewhere in the distance nearby kind of hidden, keeping an eye on the gate to this compound and as I entered, I was inside the compound, they drove up and busted me and they took my Coca-Cola away and told me to stay away from there. So I did that night.

RV: It didn’t stop you.
EPM: I was more careful after that.
RV: Would you go at night more than you would during the day?
EPM: In the evenings or my night off and she was off also.
RV: Okay. What other kind of entertainment did you have? Did you have USO shows?
EPM: Yes, they did. They also had the library. The library had a recording studio where they had tapes, reel to reel tapes of music. You could go in there and transcribe, record your own from their masters. You could check out books. You could read magazines. There was also a very enterprising GI, I don’t know who started it but they called it the skeeter flicks. The main theater was at the main base, main compound about two miles away, but somebody procured a projector and movies and they set up a temporary screen. Nearby from our camp there were some ruins from when the French had occupied the base. And right in the middle of those ruins, concrete ruins and bunkers and revetments and so forth, they set up a screen and they would show outdoor movies there at night free.

RV: What kind of movies?
EPM: Current ones, whatever they were showing at the base theater. I guess they would borrow those. I don’t know if it was the USO that was doing it or who it was that was doing it, but they were showing outdoor movies near our compound and there was this Hispanic guy, Oscar Trevino. He bought a popcorn popper. And he would sit there in the afternoon in the barracks making popcorn before the movies began and then he’d package it and sell it. Well, the NCO club found out about it and they put him out of business and they took over the business themselves.

RV: Were the movies free?

EPM: Yeah. So that was about it I guess. Shopping was another thing that we did. We would hear that there were refrigerators that came into the Marines side PX. There was a Navy PX near China Beach also and we had our Air Force base PX. We would do that. Something I would do, when I had some time off, rather than just go the beach, I would hitch rides with Army trucks and go as far as I could where it was safe and take pictures. I got caught one time at a prisoner of war camp. This was up towards Marble Mountain. Marble Mountain was pretty hot just a few miles beyond this one point, you could hear gunfire in the daytime. There were a bunch of military camps, storage areas, open air somewhat along the highway. You would go up across the estuary, the river, on this bridge that we built that was protected by grunts, Marines stationed on a catwalk on the up river side and they had shotguns. And any debris floating down the river, they would blast it out of the water. It was kind of scary if you're not ready for it. This one day, traffic backed up and I’m in the back of a big Army truck and I’m right it the middle of the bridge and I guess there was some debris coming and they just start blasting away. I just about jumped into the water from the truck before I realized it was our side blasting shit out of the water. On this one instance that I was telling you about with the POWs, one of the last camps up towards Marble Mountain was a prisoner of war camp for Vietnamese. Well, that was about as far as I could go because beyond that it was unsafe. I was in civilian clothes. I had my camera with me and so I get out of the Army truck.

RV: Did you travel alone?

EPM: Yeah. Some of the time- once the company officers warned me that it was unsafe where I was. I was very adventurous that way. Anyhow, this one time, I’m on the, (back of the) truck and they stopped and they let me out and I thanked them and then I
go across the street to thumb a ride back the other way and I realized I was in front of a
POW camp but I didn’t take any pictures of it. Well, it’s illegal to take pictures of them.
The guards, Vietnamese guards, they saw me and they assumed that I had taken pictures
and so they talked to me and they pointed with a rifle to go inside. Well, they’d lead me
through this serpentine path. I guess maybe it was mined on the side, I don’t know. But
they led me up to the commandant’s office and he wanted my film. First of all, they
asked me in French if I spoke French. Well, the only French I could say was, ‘No, I don’t
speak French.’ That was one of the very few phrases in French that I knew. So I told him
that.

RV: These are South Vietnamese.
EPM: Yes. They kept pointing to my camera. Well, I wouldn’t cooperate. No, I
kept saying no. Well, they called an Army liaison officer, captain of some sort or another
and he drove up in a jeep after a short while and he says, ‘Well, Sarge, they want your
film.’ I said, ‘Sir, I didn’t take any pictures of anything.’ ‘Sarge, they want your film.’ I
kept holding my own. Finally he says, ‘Do you want to go out of here or do you want to
stay here.’ So they can have my film. So I opened up the camera and gave them a roll of
film. They kept it and they let me out.

RV: This is almost when you were in Mississippi you would take the bus rides out
to these other towns and explore. This is almost the same thing.
EPM: Same thing, yeah.
RV: And you would do this in a war zone. So you felt relatively safe going.
EPM: I went into areas where I felt it was safe.
RV: What would you take pictures of?
EPM: Water buffalo, orphanages, just the sky, the mountains, any aircraft flying,
anything that interested me.
RV: What did you think of Vietnam as a country?
EPM: I think more of it now than I did then. I thought their Army was very
lacking in discipline. I was not impressed by their soldiers.
RV: How much contact did you have with the ARVN?
EPM: We played soccer against them. They used to beat us. They were very good at soccer, very small and wiry people. That was the best impression I had of them. Overall, I didn’t think a whole lot of them.

RV: Why?

EPM: They were not disciplined like we were. They didn’t look sharp. They didn’t dress like we did. They wore the same uniforms but they looked sloppy. They didn’t walk with a crisp, proud stride. They were like laid back. I felt a lot of sympathy.

There was a hospital nearby that we used to go by when we went to the Air Force PX. It had all these Vietnamese soldiers with limbs missing on wheel chairs, on crutches, just way, way too many of them for that hospital. It was a small hospital. The guys would hang out on the balconies outside. It was French architectural style building with arches and so forth and walkways. This would be crowded with disabled, crippled Vietnamese soldiers. It’s a sad thing. I was going to tell you, after I went back from R&R, I had about four months left and I had become friends with the civilians that drank their lunch at the officer’s club in the morning, about 11:00, 11:30 they would come in. They drank a lot.

Well, I got friendly with them.

RV: Vietnamese civilians?

EPM: No, American civilians. I got friendly with them and one in particular, I found out what they did. The Army had a career field, an MOS I think they call them. They call them AFACs in the Air Force for the embalmers and morticians. But they found out that it was too hard on young American males to be embalming young American bodies like themselves. The emotional impact was so tremendous that the Army decided to hire civilians and fly them over there on contract and pay them well to do that job. This is what this gentleman did. Well, I went to their bungalow in town one evening and partied with them and I was always interested in the type of work that they did. And finally one of them says, ‘Well, hey, you can pay a visit to the mortuary if you want to.’ Well, one day I didn’t have anything to do and I went over there after the noon hour 1:00 I guess when I got off at my bartending job. Before I walk in, there’s a creek behind the mortuary and you could see red water emptying into the creek from a pipe. You go inside and they had a saying there something about removing your hat in honor of the bodies there and so I did. Then, my friend showed me to this one area where they
have concrete slabs about waist high working height and they had a ledge about two
inches high on the perimeter of it and they had a drain and there was water and they had
bodies on each one of these slabs. On the corner of the room there were piles of yellow
hair and kinky hair and brown hair where they’d shave them to prepare them, put them
together. There were bodies with just whole sections of them missing, heads with nothing
but maybe just one side of a face. It was a very painful experience. For several nights I
could not go to sleep unless I drank myself to sleep. That was perhaps the most tormented
thing that I endured in Vietnam, going to the mortuary. That in turn has shifted my focus
against wars.

RV: That one visit.
EPM: Si. That one incident. That one visit to the mortuary turned me. I know that
wars are necessary sometimes but I don’t think that our politicians do enough to avoid
them.

RV: Did you feel that way or the few days after you walked out of there?
EPM: It probably took me some time to come together with those thoughts. After
I came back, I changed my attitude about Vietnam, about the war, about our military
involvement, about the politics behind it. It was not the soldier’s fault that we lost it. It
was not our fault at all. I guess it has to be that way that the politician have to become
involved. They are the ones that make the policy that declare the war.

RV: Right. They’re in charge of the military.
EPM: I don’t know. It just, like we used to say, it torqued me over to see the
things I saw being done because of political reasons.

RV: So in the mortuary you saw the bodies. Was there any explanation of what
had happened to them? Were they dressing them up for shipment?
EPM: Yeah. They had these refrigerated trailers, 18-wheelers, the ones that were
18-wheelers full. They had them outside and they had bodies all in them just waiting to
be processed. There were two mortuaries. There was the Da Nang mortuary and the one
at Saigon. We would, after I came back to the States, I was assigned to work on cargo
aircraft at Travis Air Base in California and there would be jets full of metal caskets
stacked three or four high on pallets and strapped down to the aircraft floor, C-141s,
maybe carrying 60, 80 bodies as cargo. It was a frightening thing when we would go out.
I worked the flight line at Travis Air Base, the graveyard shift, again. And we would go into these aircraft that were in transit. They would stop for refueling. They were going to Dover, Delaware and there was another mortuary out there that would disperse the bodies. We would walk into an aircraft full of bodies and it was an eerie feeling and having seen what I had seen over there I kind of imagined what it was like and some of those caskets, I understand, had instructions that they were not to be viewed by next of kin unless they were just really insistent.

RV: Was that your main experience with death in Vietnam?

EPM: Yeah. I had friends that I became acquainted with pilots and some of them would be shot down. We didn’t know if they were POWs or if they’d gotten killed. But that was sad. You gave it some thought. There was one pilot, I forget his name, he was a little guy, very pugnacious. I debriefed him one evening, one night, and later on when I went to the club, he had lost his wingman that night. So he tied one on that morning and he would pick up chairs and just toss them around at the club. That’s how pissed off he was. It’s very hard. It was very hard. Occasionally there would be, I worked my way up to becoming party bartender and the squadrons the flying squadrons would have a commanders called every month, a banquet where they would serve on china and crystal and silver. The Chaplain taught me how to pour (toasts) the accords and cordials after dinner because I didn’t know how. So, I would serve that as well. They would do a toast at the end of their ceremony. They would all stand up and take up the liquor in the glass and then they would toss it over their shoulder in remembrance of those who are no longer with them.

RV: How did you deal with the death, witnessing the pilots not coming back, the mortuary?

EPM: You just, the mortuary was different from the attitude I had towards the pilots. We didn’t see the pilots dying. We just knew that they had been shot down. So that kind of depersonalizes it somewhat. You miss it, you remember though. You remember things that they said or things that you did with them. I went whoring around one night with two pilots in town. We spent the night in Da Nang at the hotel. You remember things like that. The guys I did that with, as far as I know they came back. One of them was a graduate of Cal Poly and the other was an Academy graduate. There were some
American girls entertaining and they were having a party for them at this hotel and I told
them about it and they said, ‘Hey, lets go.’ So they checked out their side arms and a van
and it was about midnight or so, they had roadblocks at different intersections in Da Nang
and they saluted us and we went on to the party. So you remember things that you do
with people like that. Like I said, those two guys came back as far as I know. Then there
were others that didn’t. You just remember them. Seeing the dead bodies in the mortuary
was a lot different from that.

RV: What’s your impression, general impressions of the enemy?
EPM: I had a lot of respect for the North Vietnamese. I had a lot of respect for the
Viet Cong. (They) were a lot more dedicated fighters than were our allies.

RV: The South Vietnamese.
EPM: The South Vietnamese Army was not very impressive. The enemy was.

RV: What impressed you about them?
EPM: Their artillerymen, their ability to hit aircraft. I mean, they could walk the
rockets into the revetments. The way that they were so determined to get material to the
south. That has to impress you. If you see the countryside and you know anything about
logistics, I mean, just think about it, keeping armies supplied. And not only supplied but
inflicting heavy losses on us. That has to impress you.

RV: Did you feel this then or has this been since?
EPM: No, I developed that feeling then. I started developing it then. We were up
against some pretty tough fighters.

RV: Personally, you never went out and you were never in combat, but you were
shot at and you experienced the rocket attacks. Was that personal enough for you?
EPM: I’m glad that I never went out in the field. We had a connex next to the
barracks where we had M-16s. The commander, the executive officer, and the first
sergeant, they had keys. Occasionally he would get a detail of us and we’d go over there
and pull them out and clean them, oil them, but those were like in case the base itself was
ever attacked and they penetrated, we would be the last line of defense so we could
evacuate the aircraft. The aircraft was the main thing that we wanted to protect. It never
came down to us having to use them. We did go to the firing range, but this was a
controlled thing. They took us on a bus over towards Monkey Mountain to shoot the
weapons, but that was it.

RV: Were you armed? Did you have to walk around with a sidearm?

EPM: No. I was in a military camp, an American Air Force military camp and it
was safe. I was going to tell you something else. Oh, there were just so many different
incidents that happened. We had a guy, he was a Jewish guy, Hammerstein or something
like that. We knew him in the State before we shipped out but he never arrived. We never
saw him. Then we found out that arriving in country, he thought that he would get sent
back to the States if he declared that he had marijuana on him. Well, he declared it and
they sent him down to LBJ, Long Binh jail for a few months. When he came back, he had
no stripes on his sleeves and he did serve his year in Vietnam plus extra time to make up
for the jail time, which was stupid.

RV: What did you think about that year long tour? Do you think the United States
government employed the right policy or should it have been like World War II where
you just served the duration of the war?

EPM: I think it was sort of a good thing to just rotate us. It would have made us a
bunch of criminals more than what we were, especially in the Army and the Marine
Corps.

RV: What do you mean?

EPM: You know, like My Lai and other atrocities that were committed. The guys
would become animals in time if left too long. We didn’t experience so much of that in
the Air Force but- okay, an incident. One night, there’s this M-16 that goes off right in
the barracks area. We thought the Vietnamese had penetrated. Well, it turns out there was
an Army deserter who had a friend in the Air Force. He deserted from his unit. He had his
weapon with him and he was staying in the barracks, two barracks down. Well, he got
drunk and got pissed off and he killed somebody, an American. We didn’t know it, but he
had been out in the sticks too long I suspect because he flipped out. We didn’t have any
fraggings in the Air Force. We read about them, we heard about them. That was in the
combat units, the grunts. Those were the ones that did that.

RV: How about tension between draftees and enlisted?
EPM: In the Air Force we were all volunteers. The tension that was prevalent was racial. The black movement in America was at its height. ‘Black is Beautiful’ and blacks were beginning to feel the effects of the Civil Rights movement as it was peaking. And they were very nationalistic among themselves. They would do their jobs, but they would not affiliate with us after duty. The blacks would just stay by themselves. They would drink with themselves. They would sit together at whatever they did. If it was their off time to sit between barracks at picnic tables and drink their beer and associate with themselves and listen to their music. There were not very many Hispanics so I just fit in with the whites. The Hispanics were not like that. We just affiliated with whoever we worked with. But the blacks would not affiliate with us.

RV: Off duty.

EPM: Yeah.

RV: But while they’re on duty?

EPM: They had to, they did their jobs.

RV: Did you ever witness any incidents because of that?

EPM: The nearest thing I saw, we had a riot at the enlisted men’s club one night. This group of American girls, the She Five from Wisconsin somewhere, they were foxy, live round eyes, you know, performing. They’d been in country maybe two months or so and they were about ready to come back and one night they played the NCO club, the lower NCO club at Da Nang. And the prettiest of the girls walked up to the stage holding hands with a black man and it created a riot. The Air Police came over and cleared the club because the fights that happened because of that.

RV: I imagine as the bartender you got to witness quite a bit.

EPM: The funniest thing I saw, this is against the base commander, Colonel Adleman. He was a real strict person. I was on duty New Year’s Eve at the club and the pilots decided to go- down the street they had the Senior NCO club. So they go over there. They send somebody, and say, ‘Hey, Sarge,’ the super sergeants, ‘Come on over and have a drink with us, its New Year’s Eve.’ So all of the sudden there’s a whole bunch of NCOs at the officer’s club drinking with the officers. The colonel heard about it and he came up there and he eventually shut the club down. It took him a while. But they used to do this chant, especially the younger pilots, the lieutenants and the captains, ‘Him, him,
fuck, him.’ And they did that to the colonel. They were all drunk. It was New Year’s Eve. And so he said, ‘I’m going to shut it down.’ He was about ready to call on his walkie-talkie, his radio. Somebody grabbed the radio out of his hand and the radio got tossed on the roof of the officer’s club.

RV: But he did get it shut down eventually.

EPM: He shut it down eventually. He was not going to have any enlisted men drinking in his officer’s club.

RV: Just a few more questions. What was the most humorous thing that you witnessed that year?

EPM: Probably that one right there. We had other, we created a fictitious person, Ed Goss, just a fictitious person.

RV: Ed Goss?

EPM: Ed Goss. Whenever any of us got in trouble, got in a fight at the NCO club, the lower NCO club, people would ask, ‘Who was it?’ ‘This airman Ed Goss, Sergeant Ed Goss.’ ‘What squadron is he with?’

RV: Did it work?

EPM: Yeah. Ed Goss was always in trouble but nobody knew who he was.

RV: That’s funny. What role did music play in your year there?

EPM: Well, We’ve Got to Get Out of This Place was the number one song regardless of who played it. We had a lot of Filipino entertainers, musicians that would do, they would do like cover songs, American contemporary music. And that one would make the guys stand on the tables and whoop and holler, ‘We’ve got to get out of this….’ well, we would alter the words, ‘We’ve got to get out of this place,’ became, ‘We’ve got to get out of this fucking place if it’s the last thing we ever do.’

RV: What other songs take you back to Vietnam?

EPM: That’s the main one. I guess if I hear one I will know it but I cannot remember one just by name. If I hear it, it will come back.

RV: How much were you in contact with home, with your parents and with your wife?

EPM: I wrote them almost daily, just a form letter, just to let them know that I was alive. Postage was free. So I would just put a date on a sheet of paper up at the top
and ‘It’s hot over here. I got the package you sent me. Just another day. I’m alive and well,’ and things like that. I tried to be encouraging.

RV: Were you able to follow what was happening in the United States?
EPM: Absolutely. We knew about Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King.
RV: How did that strike you when Kennedy was killed and when Kennedy was

[?]
EPM: We were so removed from it all over that that yeah, you know, it went in and it kind of hurt, but you just kind of push it out of your mind. It was not until after I came back that I really gave it thought that I analyzed what had happened and did some reading as to why and how and so forth.

RV: You mentioned *Stars and Stripes*. Did you read that everyday?
EPM: Everyday and I’d do the crossword puzzle.
RV: Were you ever able to make any MARs phone calls?
EPM: Yes, yes. It was so interesting because I would get a patch from somebody in the U.S. that had called my folks. Well, you have to say, ‘over’, at the end of a transmission. So I would tell my folks, now, we are going to talk in Spanish, but when you finish telling me what you say, you have to say the word over.’

RV: In English.
EPM: In English, yes. So we did that.
RV: It worked. And the HAM operator, they could tell what was going on?
EPM: Yeah.
RV: Okay. What about pets? Did your unit have any pets?
EPM: We had a cat. In fact, I have a picture of it, a little kitten. The 1st Sergeant didn’t like it and he tossed it from the balcony of the second floor one time and the cat was safe, shocked a little bit. I adopted him and I fed him.
RV: What was his name, do you remember?
EPM: I don’t think I even gave him a name. He was a white cat. I have pictures of him.
RV: Whatever came of him?
EPM: I guess it stayed in country when I left. I don’t know. Maybe the rats ate him. They had some pretty good-sized rats.
RV: Tell me about the wild animals beginning with the rats.
EPM: Well, I saw the carcass of one. He got run over by a big truck. It was going
to the mess hall.
RV: It was on its way to the mess hall.
EPM: It was on its way to the mess hall and it got run over by a truck and you
could see the rows of razor like teeth, the carcass on the ground.
RV: How big were the rats?
EPM: Bigger than cats here, bigger than well-fed cats.
RV: Would they come in your barracks?
EPM: No. I don’t know where they stayed but they would go to the, I guess they
must have had an area near the mess hall where they put the garbage and stuff and that’s
where they would go.
RV: Any other wild animals, snakes, any problems with those?
EPM: Ants, lots of ants. Snakes I never saw. Water buffalo I would see in the
fields. That was about it. The rats was the main thing I saw.
RV: Why don’t we go ahead and take a break for today?
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Pete Perez-Montalvo. Today is August 5, 2003. It’s about 9:20 am Central Standard Time and we are again in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Pete, why don’t we pick up where we left off? I wanted to ask you about your actual work on the airplanes and what you saw, what kind of damage you saw most frequently and what your typical maintenance routine was with the aircraft.

Pete Perez-Montalvo: Well, occasionally we would get some aircraft that would come in with battle damage which consisted of holes in the fuselage, holes in the vertical assembly. I forget what they call it now, the fuselage for the wings. Generally, that happened rarely. It did happen but not something that we saw everyday. Generally, if an aircraft was hit, it went down. And those that were not hit, they all came back pretty much unscathed.

RV: Were these surface to air missiles?

EPM: Yes, yes. What the pilots used to say was they looked like a telephone pole coming at them. So I imagine they were pretty large.

RV: So what other kind of damage besides surface to air? Did you see any .50cal.?

EPM: I think we probably flew too fast or too high for them, the ground artillery. It was rockets that did the damage.

RV: So when you saw the holes the wing, occasionally you saw them?
EPM: Yeah.

RV: How could the aircraft survive a hole in the wing?

EPM: Well, if it doesn’t damage one of the hydraulic lines, electrical controls or mechanical controls, there is some space in the aircraft where that can happen and not bring it down. They’ll experience a malfunction of some sort. But most systems have back ups. So they could still fly them.

RV: What other kind of repairs would you do the aircraft? What was your typical way to approach it?

EPM: In my career field, my AFSC, we kept track of the final coordinates on mission. Our computers, we would insert ground coordinates, local present position coordinates, then maybe two or three targets, the main target and then alternative targets, target one, target two, target three and so forth. And those coordinates would be in the memory of the computer. If the pilot went to one site and it was weathered in or for some reason or another it was not practical to drop the ordnance, they would select a second target number two and the computer would update whatever data was needed for him to fly to that new destination, we'd send it to him on the display. So, we kept track of the final coordinates because that gave us an indication of how accurate the system was. One of the things that we did was to tweak. We had actual knobs where we would bias the equipment to make it more accurate. Now, this did not require any bringing in of the equipment or anything. Occasionally if an aircraft pulled several Gs, or too many Gs and tried to evade a surface to air missile, the gyros would tumble. A gyro is supposed to maintain its orientation once it reaches speed. But because of the force of the Gs, occasionally they would tumble. So we might have to pull them in and send those to be calibrated again. We would swap gyros. We would not calibrate. That was done probably in the factory or the depot I don't know where that was done. We would ship those parts. They were not bigger than an orange, a good-sized orange, not quite as large as a grapefruit. Those would, that was one of the maintenance problems that we encountered. Others would be, just and electrical malfunctioning where we would swap, we would isolate a gray box, a black box and we knew from our troubleshooting tree what the problem was and we would pull that particular unit out, put in a replacement, run up the system and it would work and just go ahead and sign off on the forms.
RV: What was your troubleshooting tree?

EPM: Well, it's a manufacturer and Air Force designed sequence that if this happens, well, it could be this. If this other thing happens, it could be that. You have different options that you follow through in your analysis of the system. You could read it out of a book and that's what we used to do the first times that we started doing it. After a while it becomes a routine and you just do it from memory although it was not a recommended procedure. We always had our technical orders, our TOs and some of us would make copies of them to carry them with us just in case a quality control inspector would hit us about not having the actual manual as we're doing the procedure. As you can imagine, the manuals were quite large, thick in blue binders, heavy, cumbersome. They're not the kind of a thing that you want to take to every troubleshooting problem on an aircraft where it's cramped already in the cockpit. So we would make copies of the procedure and put it in plastic bags kind of like to protect them. And then we would have those with us and that covered us if the quality control people came around and wanted to know why we didn't have the technical order open.

RV: So quality control people would actually wander around the flight line.

EPM: Yeah.

RV: Were these officers or were these other men?

EPM: Sometimes they were NCOs.

RV: What would they do, watch over your shoulder?

EPM: Yeah. They would write you up if you didn't have the technical order open.

RV: You could spot them coming, I'm sure.

EPM: Yeah, but if you didn't have a manual with you, spotting it doesn't matter.

RV: Right, because you can't run away and get it and run back by the time they get there.

EPM: Yeah. So we had copies of that material that we carried in our little toolboxes.

RV: Tell me about the equipment you carried with you when you actually did maintenance.

EPM: Well, we had, we actually had very little equipment that we used on the flight line. We troubleshooted from experience. If this is wrong, this is what's going to
happen. Later on, on different aircraft, we did have a signal simulator that we would place underneath a RA dome. This was on the cargo aircraft. This is when I came back to the States where it’s different equipment, same AFSC, but different equipment. But on the Phantoms, we didn't take any equipment out there, big equipment. We just took hand tools that we could use to make, to remove and replace basically.

RV: Okay, would you then, if you saw more major damage, obviously the craft would have to be brought back in and repaired inside the hangar.

EPM: Yeah. That would be the procedure.

RV: And would you all work on that at all?

EPM: No. Generally that would involve other people to move that type of structural or surface. I don't know what they called it but that was not us.

RV: About what percentage would you say of aircraft that came back were damaged for your specific maintenance, troubleshooting, the electronics and everything else?

EPM: Oh, probably 15 to 20% of the aircraft would come in damaged or with problems.

RV: What was the morale of the men working everyday?

EPM: You know, we didn't really have any problems with that. Nobody was bitching about it. We would sing songs like, *We've Got to Get Out of This Place* or I can't wait to get back to the land of the big PX or get back to see the round eyes, what we referred to as the American girls. But in terms of morale, it was pretty high. It was okay. You're always going to have something to complain about and gripe about in the military. You're always going to have something. It was not like a problem that somebody had to deal with on a daily basis. We'd get lonely. We'd get, you knew when somebody got a Dear John letter from home and you'd see it in their faces or some guys would break down and cry and get drunk. I guess that's how we vented. We got drunk a lot.

RV: What about the competence of the men working around you, your coworkers?

EPM: All of (them) had been trained. There was maybe one or two guys that we knew were just not complete Aces at what they were doing, but most of us took a great deal of pride and we were very professional about what we did. Hung over or not, we just
did what we had to do. Like I said, there might have been one or two guys. Generally, if they were not very competent, someone would notice it and they would find other work for them to do. If they’re not real sharp on the flight line, keep them in the shop and let them do maintenance on the boxes, run tests on the boxes. We had mock ups in the shop where we would troubleshoot with equipment that’s been designed specifically for that.

RV: Did you have a supervisor that was out there, a superior officer that was around?

EPM: No. We had an E-8 who ran the section. He would be the NCOIC, noncommissioned officer in charge. Then he would have maybe a couple of master sergeants that would be his assistants. Maybe one of them might be the swing shift supervisor and the other one might be the day shift supervisor that actually did the dispatching and controlled the work. And then we had staff sergeants and so forth below those. Occasionally the graveyard shift supervisor would be a staff sergeant, an E-5. The workload would lighten up at certain hours and that's when you lightened up on your manning. Daytime obviously required a lot more because there were a lot of staff meetings and a lot of things that go on behind the scenes when you're managing a squadron. So people would have to attend those things. So we had more people on the day shift obviously than the swings on the graveyard.

RV: When was your busiest time?

EPM: Probably in the middle of the afternoon. We flew night missions but most of the battles were done in the daytime when the Marines needed tactical front line support, that's when we flew the devil out of those aircraft.

RV: How soon would you get to the aircraft once it had completed its mission to start troubleshooting?

EPM: Well, in my situation because I was working in maintenance debriefing, I would say as soon as I spoke with the guy in the back, the radar operator as he was called sometimes. We would know when we talked to them that we had a problem. Then I would, as soon as they left, I would make my notations on the log that we kept on each aircraft by tail number and then I would call the shop and tell them that certain aircraft had come in sick and what the history of it was and what I might suspect might be wrong with it. Then, maybe an hour later, half an hour later, probably less than that, after they
refueled the aircraft right there outside of our little shack, then they would put a tow
vehicle on the front of it and back it out and take it over to one of the revetment spaces
and back it into that revetment space and unhitch it and that's when all the maintenance
would begin. The technicians would be waiting for it sometimes. There would be two or
three metro trucks parked nearby with different technicians getting ready to jump on it as
soon as they refueled it and put it back in its spot.

RV: We talked about this the first time, during our first session, but I want to
come back to it. Tell me about the relationship you had with the pilots. How much
communication did you have with them?

EPM: We had a very good line of communication. In some instances, we were on
a first name basis, especially with lieutenants and captains. Majors tended to be a
little bit more assertive and I guess more by the book type of individuals. The younger
the guys were the more (we) had in common with (them). I mean, yeah, we would salute
them if the occasion called for it but on the flight line, no one saluted. No one salutes on
the flight line.

RV: Why?

EPM: I don't know. You're too busy doing mechanical stuff to every time you see
somebody, snap to it. It was just not a practical thing to do. The respect was always there
but you just don't make a production of it out there like you would in a parade situation
or an inspection [? an operations inspection?], or something of that sort.

RV: Were there any officers around that you personally had problems with or that
any of your men in your crew had problems with that you would try to avoid?

EPM: No, actually nothing like that. We had a very good relationship with the
pilots. Often, when two or three of them would complete their 100 missions, they
were eligible to rotate back to the States. If they did it in six months, that's the war for
them.

So, they would, two or three of them might pitch in 50 bucks each and buy beer for the
maintenance groups. They'd bring a pallet of beer over to where we were.

RV: When I've interviewed pilots, they've talked about how much respect, almost
to a man, they'd say how much respect they had for their maintenance crews.

EPM: Very much. Their lives depended on the equipment that we provided them
to fly with. So, they appreciated us.

RV: Did you all feel that during the time?

EPM: Absolutely. That guy flying out there, you were rooting for him. You want him to have a good aircraft; you want him to come back.

RV: How many pilots didn't come back during your term there?

EPM: It's hard to say. Each squadron probably had maybe for a safe, 18 aircraft I think is what it was per squadron. For every 18 aircraft, there might be two crews. So that would be four pilots that could fly it. So we figured we do the numbers from that, so how many pilots there were per squadron, and then we had three squadrons in the wing. I don't know. I never got into the numbers as to how many there were of them but I can imagine at least two crews per aircraft.

RV: What would happen when pilots wouldn't come back? What you all do?

How would you feel?

EPM: Oh, you felt bad. You felt bad. You didn't talk much about it but you knew that you felt something. The pilots, they were the ones and I know this because of my spare time job that I provided them with drinks in my spare time at the officer's club. I remember seeing some of the guys just really tie one on and become belligerent, destructive. They would tear chairs up, smash chairs on the floor because they were so pissed off because their buddy hadn't made it. The wingman hadn't made it. Obviously the flyboys lead-a tighter among themselves than they did with the maintenance people.

RV: Let me ask you a question. We looked at some pictures before we started this session and I saw a picture of some of the Vietnamese civilians who would come in and clean your hooch. Tell me about your relationship with the Vietnamese civilians.

EPM: Well, my personal experience was very friendly, one of friendship. I would have hot sauce and peppers that my mother would send me and the Vietnamese enjoyed eating pungent foods. So I would share some of my hot sauce with some of those people once in a while. If I were eating in my cubicle and the mamason came by, stopped by to say hello or whatever, you know, well, I would share what I had. They enjoyed the pungent foods that I had. I had a friend that I think I told you about already in the previous interview. She was a young lady that was the daughter or sister [of a Vietnamese NCO]. She was related to one of the Vietnamese NCOs and they lived in their own
compound. I had a good relationship with her. The Vietnamese girls that worked in the clubs, they were there for the tips obviously, you know, the money, whatever, the excitement being very pretty among so many lonely men. And they made good tips. They dressed very nicely, whether it was their native costume, which they looked even cuter then than when they went Western. But we were all glad that those young ladies were there; provide visual delight.

RV: When you think about Vietnam the country itself and overall, back then, did you think about or get a feeling for the mood of the civilian population and the war and Americans being there and that whole picture?

EPM: My feeling was that as much as they needed to have us there to try to protect them and do whatever it was we were doing to them, there was some resentment. We were still invaders. We were outsiders no matter how nice we tried to be. Just about, I would say, a great percentage of the people there knew someone or knew of someone that had suffered some injustice because of our military mind, whether it was an accidental bombing or whatever atrocity might be committed. The word got out among them and you know, there's a tendency I think, no matter what country one is from under those circumstances, there will be civilian resentment to our presence in their midst.

RV: How do you think the United States can deal with that? What's the solution to that or is there a solution to that because we're there trying to help the South Vietnamese, yet there's that resentment you spoke of and if you look at the current situation in Iraq, we're there to try to help them or rebuild their country and yet there's resentment among the civilian population. Is there a solution? Did you see anything back then that you would have done differently or the United States could have done differently?

EPM: Stayed out of the country (laughing). You know, there is no solution to that one. We're going to have interests everywhere. We have economic and social or- we have interests everywhere in the world and if a situation becomes unstable or if we want to change the situation, we have the power to do so. Nobody can challenge us on that except ourselves. If we practice restraint, if we do wise decisions, if everybody jumps on the bandwagon and decides, ‘Well, the president said there's weapons of mass destruction. Let's go attack.’ We need to have voices that say, ‘Wait a minute.’ Among
the senators, in the administration you're not going to find dissent. Everybody in the
administration will go along with what the boss wants. But from the senators, from the
congressmen, from people like Bill Graham that pretend to be the conscience of the
country, you know, religious moral leaders, even they are tainted at one time or another,
you know and have scandals of their own. But we do have people of stature, if they spoke
out and we had more debate, it's a real tough question and its something that I thought
about ever since you gave me the questionnaire. There was a question phrased somewhat
like that. And I made a reference in the previous interview of how the civilians messed
things up and made decisions that were in error. Well, in retrospect, it's really better to
have the civilians making decisions in the military. The military mind can be very narrow
and focused and self-serving. So, while I bitch at the soldiers not being able to win the
war because the politicians were running the show, that's the way the system is supposed
to work.

RV: Civilian control of the military, oversight.
EPM: The alternative is not very pretty. You would have a junta running the
country.

RV: And we've seen what that does around the world when that happens. Let's
break for a second while I change this disk. Okay, continuing now. Did you take any
R&Rs?
EPM: I did. I took one R&R. I met my first ex-wife in Hawaii. I had been in
country almost eight months I guess, about eight months. She was living it the San
Francisco area and we flew to Hawaii.

RV: How was that?
EPM: it was a very stressful time to tell you the truth. Gosh, to have been in the
jungle, isolated, during that time, just a very exciting place, lots of different people from
different parts of the country meeting there. I wasn't used to the West Coast and its
definitely West Coast in its style. We were with another couple maybe 3:00 in the
morning or so. We were in an all night eatery. And its very crowded, there's a lot of
people still there. And this Oriental looking gentleman sat at our booth and tried to sell us
acid. I'd heard of LSD. This was 1968. It was not really, I don't know. I had not been
exposed to it like people on the West Coast or in Hawaii had. I thought that was strange.
Whatever drugs we wanted we could have bought. Just coming out they would hustle you like that. That, and then the fact that I hadn’t seen my ex-wife in a long time. We fought over stupid stuff about things. I was not used to being around civilians I remember we were going to a Mexican restaurant because that’s the first thing I wanted to do was go eat some Mexican food. We found out where one was and we were walking holding hands down the sidewalk and I hear an ambulance, a siren and I grabbed her by the hand and I started running with her just like I would have in the war zone if you heard a siren as you were under attack. I don’t know. I’m glad I took that break. In retrospect, I probably would have enjoyed it more had I been a single man and gone off to some place exotic like Phenom Penh or Bangkok. But that’s all under the bridge.

RV: When you came back, did you feel rested? How did you feel when you came back? Were you looking forward to coming back or did you really resent coming back?

EPM: To Hawaii or to the States?

RV: No, back to Vietnam after your R&R.

EPM: I was just glad that another week had gone by and I was that much closer to coming back. Shortly after that is when I paid my visit to the mortuary that I spoke about earlier where I had this very, it was a very bad experience, the fear factor.

RV: Let’s talk about when you left Vietnam. How did you feel as you were getting short?

EPM: Oh man. It’s a scary thing. When I first got there, one of those guys in the pictures, Rarica, he’s of Armenian descent and he was very artistic in some ways and he was sitting in the barracks with a tape recorder, playing with a tape recorder, he and another friend and they were simulating the sounds of incoming. And, a couple of guys in another cubicle down away from him started to whip him. They were short timers, the other guys and they really didn’t want to hear the sound of incoming and that simulated sound that the guys were making and almost got into a fist fight over that. The shorter you got, the more on edge you became. I can imagine what it would be like for grunts out in the field where they’re actually shooting at you on a daily basis or can be. I imagined there were even worse. For us it wasn’t so bad because we were on a base, but it was the old, you just drank a lot. The night before you make bird, as we used to say, we got
drunk. You board the aircraft and you’re hung over still, half crocked. Sober up on the
flight back.

RV: Was this a civilian plane you flew back on?
EPM: Yeah.

RV: Where did you take off from?
EPM: When I went over, I took off from Norton Field in San Bernardino. And we
flew up to Alaska and then Japan and Okinawa and then Vietnam. Coming back it was
the same thing. We came back the same way.

RV: How did it feel when you took off, when you cleared?
EPM: Oh Lord! Thank God!

RV: What was the mood on the plane?
EPM: Pretty much that. It was very crowded on those aircraft. God almighty, we
were really, really like sardines.

RV: I guess that didn’t matter so much though.
EPM: NO, you just grinned and endured, put up with it.

RV: Did you bring anything back with you?
EPM: Yeah, I had some Vietnamese dolls. I had some little knickknacks. Most of
the stuff I sent via cargo. You could send back stuff. Oh, like my tape recorder. I had a
state of the art AKAI 1800 SD. So I shipped that. Well, the china, I also had that shipped.
I bought chinga over there, crystal. I bought a clock, one of those fancy looking wall
mounted clocks. The doll like I said and other little cheap knickknacks from stands and
you sneaked out to the market.

RV: Do you still have any of that stuff?
EPM: Some of it is probably in my ex-wife’s garage in California. When I
separated I didn’t take very much with me.

RV: Tell me what it was like coming back into the United States.
EPM: Well it was very strange. I remember landing in San Bernardion, then after
we processed out, about four or five of us rented a limousine taxi to run us to LAX.

RV: Were you in uniform or not?
EPM: Yeah. At LAX we caught, it was an evening flight. It was already dark in December, early December. I caught an airplane for San Francisco and my ex-wife and her father and her mother and her sister were there waiting for me.

RV: What was that like when you saw them, that reception?

EPM: It was very friendly. They were all very friendly and glad to have me back. They were very gracious people. It was good to see my wife. It was. I just felt out of place. I didn't know how to, everything was so strange. Everything seemed so strange.

Her father loaned us a car and we rented a motel somewhere near the airport down the peninsula, San Mateo maybe, south of San Francisco. And we stayed there two nights and then we reunited with her family. I don't know. It was just getting used to being back, getting used to the music that was popular that was being played on the radio. I don't know. I was just ready to go back to work. I had a lot of leave time too but I didn't take all of it. Within the week after we got back, I was going to be stationed nearby to begin with, 45, 50 miles away. So, again, we borrowed her father's car and we drove out to the airbase and I went in and met the squadron commander and he introduced me to my new section chief, Sergeant Ratliff. And I went right to work pretty quick because I needed that.

RV: It helped you transition.

EPM: Yeah. And being around military personnel that had experienced similar things made it a lot easier.

RV: Did you all talk about your experiences in Vietnam?

EPM: Yeah. We did. We had a, you know, I hate to say it, but those of us who had been over there, we had a different attitude from those that hadn't been over there.

RV: What was it?

EPM: We had a chip on our shoulders; I guess you could say. We were like better. That's how we saw ourselves. Veterans, we'd seen it and done it, you know. It wasn't popular to say it like this now, been there, done that. That was the attitude that we had back then. We were very clannish with each other. We would eat lunch together. After work, we would go drink together, not with the guys that hadn't been over there; always with the guys that were returnees. We drank a lot, cheap beer on base. It got you drunk just the same. It was watered down beer but if you drink enough of it, you felt it. It was
hard on my wife to put up with me. An absence of a year when you're that young really is
a very significant portion of your life. We had grown in different ways. She had stayed in
the fast city of San Francisco working in a bank. I had been in the jungle so to speak,
isolated, away from civilization, away from the fast paced life that goes on in big cities.
We didn't last very long. We fought a lot. We fought a lot. She was as hard headed I was.
We separated probably within a year after coming back.

RV: Would you say that your Vietnam experience had a direct effect?

EPM: Absolutely, yeah. It took me several years to get to find myself again. After
I was by myself, I enrolled in a community college, Solano Community College, I think
in Solano County. And I started taking some psychology classes just so that I could have
a better understanding of myself and my thinking and it helped. I started hanging around
in Berkley. This is 1969. It was a good place to (be), when we separated, go meet girls.
There was some pseudo, well I don’t know if they were pseudo, there were probably
graduate students in psychology at the University but they were making money on the
side on weekend by holding these gestalts. That’s what they called them, gestalt groups
where you paid $5 a person and meet other people, young men and young women and sit
around on the floor in a circle and there was a facilitator and we would talk about
ourselves and people would ask you question and then there would be a brief intermission
where you could go outside and smoke grass and drink wine. And you’d come back 15,
20 minutes later and by the end, a lot of the young people had paired off with somebody
else that they were going to probably spend the night with.

RV: You took part in these?

EPM: Yeah.

RV: Were they helpful to you?

EPM: They were helpful for meeting girls. No, the psychology classes at school;
those were ore helpful. That’s where I got into the Academic things, personality and
behavior and so fourth. Yeah, that was helpful. But the gestalts, so called gestalts, they
were good for my morale. Not very good for my morals.

RV: Right. Did you talk about your Vietnam experience with anybody that much,
I guess on the civilian side?
EPM: Oh, on the civilian side, no. That was something that it was just not a cool thing to talk about. You kind of wanted to, as soon as I’d been out of the service, I wanted to let my hair grow, get facial hair, more of it and let my hair grow.

RV: Did you?

EPM: Yeah. I already had this; my mustache was already there. And I grew a beard and I grew my hair long and the beard was very uncomfortable so I started shaving and I wound up with something like what you might have, a Vandyke or a goatee. Then I didn't like my appearance so I went ahead and cut it off.

RV: What about the military?

EPM: I had just transitioned out.

RV: Okay, just gotten out. Tell me about your experience with the antiwar movement. What were your thoughts then and then what happened when you came back.

EPM: Before I went to Vietnam, I was very adamant about serving. After I saw and experienced the war and its injustices, I became sympathetic to the antiwar movement. I became antiestablishment. I became (weary) of the military industrial complex that still runs the country. I became sympathetic to antiwar protests. I attended some marches in San Francisco. I attended a march against Richard Nixon at some hotel where he was speaking. That was about the extent of my antiwar involvement. I was sympathetic but I only participated two times that I can remember, maybe three. There were antiwar issues. Now, my girlfriend and I, once we settled in together, we did take part. These were other areas. She was an Anglo lady. She was very sympathetic to the causes, the civil rights movement that was in full swing at that time in the country. And we would attend rallies either in Sacramento or San Francisco for minority education programs. That was what we did. We were, I guess, primarily pro education, making it available.

RV: Do you think the antiwar movement made a difference in the outcome of the Vietnam War?

EPM: Yes it did.

RV: How so?

EPM: Well, it created a great chasm between the powers that ran the country and the people. Whether they politicians want to admit it or not, they do react to the
polls of the country, the polls. When people are willing to die on the streets or on the
campuses because of the injustice of the war, the people that were fighting it for us. The
country was greatly divided and they had to react. President Johnson chose not to run, if
you'll remember. President Nixon had to, against his wishes, had to negotiate because the
country was very adamant. Half the population or more were antiwar. And, you know,
you start sending 50,000 body bags back to the States, that is making a very loud
statement that no matter how hardened and criminal a politician you might be, you're
going to respond to what's happening, those body bags, aluminum boxes. The antiwar
movement certainly influenced the outcome of it.

RV: What was your opinion of President Nixon?
EPM: I don't like him. I don't like him at all. I didn't like him when he ran and I
didn't like him when he was president and I didn't like him at the end. I'm sorry that he
was not locked up in a prison. I wish he would have been locked up in prison.

RV: What about Johnson?
EPM: I liked him a little bit better. The Civil Rights Act was passed during his
administration and it took a Southern Democrat to get it pushed. The northern liberals
would not have been able to get it done. They never do. The country was greatly divided
along racial lines at the time. My gosh, I don't know how old you were then, but it was
tough. Berkeley was a battle scene. San Francisco State was a battle scene. Portions of
both cities were under martial law. Helicopters were dropping tear gas. There was
People's Park, the riots at People's Park in Berkeley. Again, people were killed there. The
country was in very great turmoil and young people were willing to die for what they
believed in.

RV: Were you?
EPM: No. I had already been exposed to that in Vietnam and even though I might
disagree with the policies of the government, I was not that radical. I was not going to go
out and get beaten up by the police. I did attend demonstrations. I knew when it was safe
and when it was going to get out of hand. I never went to one that got out of hand. I never
went to something that got out of hand.

RV: How much did you keep up with the continuing war effort in Southeast Asia?
EPM: Well, I've always been in; I've always read daily newspapers. At that time I think I was subscribing to Newsweek or U.S. News and World Report, I forget. One of those. So I was pretty much well informed of what was happening.

RV: What did you think of the continuing policy, what we were doing there?
EPM: I thought we needed to get out of there. I thought we needed to get out of there and I'm sorry that it took so long for the administration to figure out a way to get us out and kill so many people on both sides. Rich American industrialists, they're the ones that reaped the benefits of those dead young men that came back as cargo.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamization process of turning the war over to the South Vietnamese to fight it? Did you think they were capable based on what you saw?
EPM: No, heck no. Without us they wouldn't have. Heck no, they couldn't have lasted more than a month without our presence there. We were the thing that propped them up and supported them. We babied them. We gave them ammunition and money and credibility.

RV: How did you feel when the United States left Vietnam in early 1973?
EPM: I went into a funk for a couple of days. I was just really, my feeling were, ’Shit, that whole year that I spent over there, it was for nothing.' All the things I did there, the sacrifice we made, we all did for nothing. It was just like I wasted one year of my life that I spent over there.

RV: How long did it take you to get out of that and to see it in that context?
EPM: Well, you know, you're busy. You go to work and you distract yourself and life goes on and you want to forget it and get it behind you and that's what I did.

RV: How did you feel in April 1975 when South Vietnam fell?
EPM: About the same. The chaos that followed and all the pain, the people, the people trying to escape. It was an inevitable thing. We never should have prolonged it. We never should have gone in after Dien Bien Phu and gotten sucked into that. When the French got their asses kicked, we should have just stayed out. The CIA, I guess it was the CIA already. They went right on in and (snaps fingers). Well, shit, we financed a war for the French. We financed the Indo China war.

RV: Why do you think we made that kind of mistake in your opinion?
EPM: Well, there's probably oil in the Gulf of Tonkin off the China Beach.

RV: You refer to the military industrial complex as being very powerful at the time in running the country. It had a hand in the war, in your opinion?

EPM: Yeah. Absolutely. That part of the American economy stood to gain the most. They didn't care who died for it.

RV: So Eisenhower was right in his farewell speech to watch the military industrial complex.

EPM: Yes, he was the one that issued the first warning and its come to pass.

RV: What kind of lessons did the United States learn in Vietnam or from its experience?

EPM: You would think that we learned something that would keep us out of places like that but history has shown that we haven't. We've gotten involved in every little skirmish in the world. We've created skirmishes. We create wars just to placate the egos of Chief Executive Grenada. That excursion was just because Regan needed something I guess to look good for the press. After I think, I forget what the details were. We had suffered some; I think they bombed barracks or something in Beirut. I forget the details now. And there was Nicaragua, Costa Rica, on and on. We get supposedly the brightest, the best and the brightest of the minds of the young men and women that come out of college with PhDs like that guy Abrams. I forget his first name, what a rogue. I forget his first name.

RV: Are you talking about General Creighton Abrams?

EPM: No, not the General. There was a civilian in the Department of Defense; I think, maybe it was state. He was one of the younger secretaries and he was an arrogant SOB. He was the one that was in charge of our involvement in Nicaragua. I forget. I can't remember his first name but his last name was Abrams. And, I'm sure the man had all sorts of exceptional credentials, but he was a jackass. I don't know who he was hurting. He wasn't making the right decisions. And he's not the only one. There have been many others that become entrenched in the power system, power of greed there. Now, we have Cheney, Ashcroft. I guess those are the two biggest evil men. They don't learn. They're making the same mistakes.

RV: What can the United States learn looking back at Vietnam?
EPM: Don't get sucked into a situation like we did there. Just because the person in power of that department or that division of that department that deals with that region of the world, he might make initial mistakes, but he should recognize his own mistakes and not keep covering up his mistakes by insisting on making a policy work that he has already a good indication that its not what's best. It's a real tough thing. Being on the outside, I can see things much differently from what the people that are making the decisions. I don't have the interests. I don't have anybody lobbying me to take an action to pursue an action that will get the country mired in situation such as we are now in Iraq, mostly. We're still there.

RV: Do you see similarities between our involvements in Iraq with those in Vietnam.

EPM: Well, yeah. The Gulf of Tonkin was a fabricated event. The weapons of mass destruction and the uranium are fabricated events. The aluminum pipes that would be purchased was our fabricated things that we're still being victimized by.

RV: Lets take a break for a moment. Pete, tell me personally looking at your tour over there, your one year, is there anything that you would change, do differently if you could looking back?

EPM: I would have drank less. I would have read more. Aside from that, no. I'm glad I went. I'm glad I went to Vietnam. I'm glad I had that experience. I'm a heck of a lot better man, much better informed with a much better perspective on life and events around me that I would have been had I not gone there and spent that year. I have a deeper understanding of many things than people who never went there. I have many friends who are PhDs that teach here. I drink beer with them. We brew our beer together and we socialize and hang out. Where they have an immense amount of academic knowledge over mine, when it comes to judgment things, I have found that I'm probably as good or better at making life's decisions than they are. I think part of that is my experiences in Vietnam.

RV: What things, when you look back at that one-year in Vietnam, would you say really have most affected your life? What was significant?

EPM: Well, the absence from the country was one thing that really made an impact.
RV. The absence from the United States?
EPM: Yeah. The isolation made a difference, the impact.
RV: How so?
EPM: You have to experience it to really be able to understand it. You learn to
look inside yourself when you're away. You get to see, when you're not distracted by
women because we tend to be very distracted by, I at least, by women. There were no
distractions there. T.V. consisted of reruns of Star Trek. You're just out of the mainstream
when you're that remote. You don't get the news as it's happening immediately. It's, the
world was changing and we were not really a part of those changes. We were not
experiencing them. So there's a big blank space for that period of time that you kind of
have to come back and make up whether you read about it our you talk about it. That
influenced me. My trip to the mortuary influenced me for the rest of my life. The TET
Offensive and the sniper influenced me for the rest of my life. Catching gonorrhea
influenced me for the rest of my life and its not like I have health effects from it but its
something that made me more cautious in the future.

RV: How did you think the media portrayed the Vietnam War, when you were
there, I guess, what you could tell and then reflecting back upon it today?
EPM: Well, this is I think, the first war that was televised on the daily news. I
think they were fairly accurate in depicting what they showed, what was happening. I
think that galvanized a lot of feelings in America that we were wrong. It helped turn
attention, focus attention on the war and create an antiwar sentiment.

RV: So do you think the media had a particular bias then, antiwar bias?
EPM: I don't know that it was a particular bias, but it came across. The reporters
were not necessarily biased in what they were showing. The audience made its own
conclusions on what they saw. That's where you might say that a bias developed. I think
probably they were pretty objective in depicting events and not editorializing them or
opinionating them. But the people who saw those images drew conclusions that
galvanized them either against or for the movement.

RV: Was the media useful?
EPM: Was the media useful? Yeah. Yes, it was kind of part of the checks and
balances that we needed.
RV: Today, do you feel the same way?
EPM: Yeah. I couldn't help but laugh when the generals were firing what's his name, Geraldo Rivera. There was another newscaster that was similarly...
RV: Peter Arnett.
EPM: Yeah. Ostracized. Censorship is very alive and well and probably necessary as much as I hate it. But in some circumstances its justifiable.
RV: Tell me what you think about the movies that have come out on Vietnam. Do you go see them and if you do, what do you think?
EPM: I have. It took me a long time. Yeah. *Apocalypse Now* that was over the top. It was nothing like what I experienced and I was in the north. The action in that particular movie takes place in the Delta. So I was not at all familiar with any of what went on and it was somewhat bizarre. I'm not sure that I was accurate in terms of the characters or the actions that happened. I've seen other; one of them came out last year. *We Were Soldiers Once*. I think that was the name of it. I enjoyed that one. I forgot which other one’s I’ve seen. *Full Metal Jacket*, I saw that. Again, I’m not familiar with the Marine Corps. I was not in that situation. My perspective on the war is from a maintenance person in the Air Force. I slept in a bunk. I had a refrigerator full of beer next to my bed. I had a mess hall where I could go and get warm food. I could get a laid periodically. I had plenty of alcohol, entertainment, and movies. We had a lot of movies. So I had a relatively east time compared to other men. So my perspective is going to be different from that depicted in most of the movies that have come out. They take a certain angle. They have to. But those were not my experiences.
RV: What about books? Have you read any good books on Vietnam?
EPM: Yes, I have. I don’t remember the titles. I’ve read several. Again they give me an insight into those aspects of the war that I was not familiar with, you know. I was not familiar with infantry tactics, artillery tactics or the way that they lived and the way that they acted. The Navy people were altogether different. They wore flat tops generally. Their mission was very similar to ours but altogether different in the way it developed. I was just really happy to be or terra firma where I had bunkers and where I could hide. My take on events was a lot of different from other services.
RV: What would you tell young people about the Vietnam War? I you walked into a college classroom what would you tell them?

EPM: It was a mistake for us to become involved. We had very bright minds in command but their biases were such that they led us the wrong way. Stay informed, develop opinion, challenge yourself to learn more, to understand the whys and how come of things. Do not believe what your elders tell you. I guess we go back to questioning on authority within reason. Do not be gullible. Read more about the war, the background, not necessarily the events that made up the daily news but the whole thing, the reasons why we're there, how we wound up there, how we pulled ourselves out, the consequences of what happened, the number of casualties, the damage, the divisiveness in the country. Some good did come out of all that. The country is better off for having been divided like it was. It was a painful experience for the country to deal with that. The social unrest, the racial unrest, you know, they kind of overlapped. The antiwar movement overlapped very much with the civil rights. And they're very intricately tied together. If it were not for the war effort and the antiwar sentiments that developed, the civil rights movement might not have happened when it did. We might have stayed with Jim Crow a little bit longer than what we did. I think it accelerated events; social changes in the country came about.

RV: The war did and the divisiveness?

EPM: Yeah.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?

EPM: I would like to go back and visit.

RV: Would you?

EPM: Absolutely.

RV: What would you do?

EPM: Well, I would go back and walk around Da Nang, visit the marketplace, go to China Beach, hang out on the restaurants on the river front, what do they call that, the estuary. They had some really fine terraces where you sit outdoors in a very colonial setting, very pretty setting, big boulevard, tall trees and then the waterfront is right on the other side, you know. I'd go visit there and buy me a bottle of wine and maybe a duck. I did that for my birthday over there. I had a duck and a bottle of wine and went to a
massage parlor. I would do that. I would travel the countryside. I'd like to go out to Hue, Phu Bai. I'd like to visit in Hue, I guess it was where they had these palaces that it took thousands of men hundreds of years to build them. When we got done in two days of bombing, it was nothing but rubble. I'd like to visit that and see what they've done with it. I would even like to go to Hanoi and visit the old Hanoi Hilton, Saigon. I'd like to go out to Saigon.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?

EPM: No, when I got divorced in California, I hung out with a Cambodian lady for a while, but they're not Vietnamese, obviously. I don't know any Vietnamese. I don't remember any Vietnamese friends in my lifetime. I know a doctor, Dr. Vu at the VA. He's Vietnamese.

RV: Well, that's a great lead in to my next question. Do you think the government has taken care of Vietnam veterans?

EPM: Yes, they take care of our health. Even though I've had medical care through the state, through the state employee's medical program, I continue going to the VA for my medical care. They keep track of it for me. They notify me when appointments are for this and that. And I buy my medications from them because they're a hell of a lot cheaper. I pay $7 for a month's supply of whatever it is I'm taking. That's big savings. The VA has taken care of me, my health. The first property I bought in California had a VA guaranteed loan. I attended college under the GI Bill when I came back. I wish I'd gotten an advanced degree but that's in retrospect.

RV: What about any incidents of posttraumatic stress disorder?

EPM: I used to have bad dreams about Vietnam for a while. I remember a couple of times waking up very frightened. I think I'd been screaming or talking in my sleep.

RV: Do you remember what you were frightened about?

EPM: Airplanes bombing us in Da Nang. I used to have this very vivid dream of seeing enemy aircraft flying over the base dropping bombs on us from up high. I know it wouldn't happen because we had, we were pretty well defended. We had aircraft on alert at all times at the end of the runway to take off and intercept because we were so close to the north. Those folks, I don't think they ever even considered flying in to attack us. Not from the air. They would attack us from the ground but not from the air. We controlled
the air, the sky. So it was not a realistic dream at all but it was one that I had that scared me.

RV: How long did it take for that to stop occurring?
EPM: Probably a couple of years or so, maybe three. Then it stopped. It hasn’t recurred.

RV: Anything else?
EPM: No. That was about it. Like I said, once I started hanging with my Vietnam buddies after I came back and we'd talk about all the shit that would happen to us and get drunk and stagger home. That kind of was the therapy that we had. We didn't have a debriefing or a psychological preparation or whatever they call it when people come back from a stressful situation like I think we do now where they kind of, you hang out with psychologists for a couple of days or so and talk about it or counselors. We didn't have that. So we just did the next best thing I guess and we hung out together and we drank beer and that was our therapy.

RV: Have you ever been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.?
EPM: I've been to the traveling memorial here.
RV: Can you talk about your experiences there?
EPM: Well, you feel very sad. You see the names. You try to remember some of the people that you knew that didn't come back and you look for their names. You kind of, I kind of get introspective and think, I see all those names and God damn, that's a hell of a price to pay for the ego of politicians that got us there. They were too hard headed to say, ‘Well, maybe this is wrong.’ Kennedy was on that track and they assassinated him. I wish he'd stayed alive. We would not have gotten involved to that degree. I think he was more willing to say, ‘Okay, let’s take a few steps backward and think about it.’ Not so with Johnson and Nixon.

RV: What do you think are the biggest myths or misconceptions about the Vietnam veteran?
EPM: Well, as we say now that they go postal. There were incidents of that. I don't know that Vietnam had that much to do with it. I think some people are kind of predestined to do crazy things because of medications they take or don't take, because of their mental imbalance, the way that they grew up maybe, their inability to handle
stressful situations. They go postal. And Vietnam veterans used to do that early on.
Rambo and the myths he created are not really accurate. I don't think they could
accurately be a Vietnam Veteran. But, once a movie like that comes out with its sequels
that becomes imprinted in a lot of impressionable minds as the way that the Vietnam
crazies were.

RV: Sir, is there anything else that you want to talk about that we have not
covered in our two sessions?
EPM: Probably, I can't think of anything in particular. You've done a pretty good
job getting the information out of me. I've enjoyed it. I enjoy talking about it. I was on a
real high for a few days after the first session where I was talking about Vietnam to my
friends hanging out over a beer in the afternoon, reminiscing. I'm glad that the University
is doing something like this and it's very convenient for me to come and take part in it.

RV: Well, we appreciate your time and your willingness to talk with us. We now
conclude the Oral History interview with Mr. Eliseo Perez-Montalvo. Thank you very
much, sir.