Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Michael Morea. It is the 7th of December, year 2000 at 1:30 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library. Mr. Morea is in Palm Harbor, Florida. All right sir, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Michael Morea: I was born in the Bronx, New York City on the 22nd of March, 1940 which makes me sixty years of age. I was born into a fairly typical Bronx family, middle-class, maybe just a tad below middle class in terms of financial situation. My dad was an engineer for the U.S. Navy, worked at the Brooklyn Navy yard for most of his life, started off as a draftsmen and ended up as a department supervisor. My mom was a homemaker, never worked outside the house, at least not while I can recall. I had a younger brother named Charles or Chuck, he’s about two years younger than I am, and a younger sister, Dorothy, who is about four years younger than I am, both still living. My childhood, we were a Catholic family, fairly active practicing Catholics and so my early childhood revolved around things going on in the neighborhood, in the street, in the vacant lots that we played in. The school that I went to, which was the parochial school, the church school for my parish so I spent the first, from the age of five or six, until thirteen or so, primarily as a student in Blessed Sacrament Grammar School, which was associated with my church, as I said. Again a fairly typical childhood, had a very good
time, when I wasn’t studying. I was a pretty good student, actually one of the better
students in my class. But I had a good time on weekends and what not, just playing as
kids do, either in make-up games or playing semi-organized sports. We didn’t have
much in the way of serious organized sports, we just made up our own games and played
in school yards and vacant lots and in the street.

SM: Well I was curious, another gentleman that I’ve talked to recently, talking
about going, as he put it, he called in alley exploring, did you ever do anything like that?

MM: No, didn’t have, we had alleys, which was just the space between two
apartment building, but there wasn’t much in them so we didn’t explore much. Most of
our exploring if you will, was in the vacant lots of which there were many in the
neighborhood. They were a lot more interesting because they were wild, they had rocks
and puddles and trees and swamps and places you could hide and make up games. So
most of the time, we were in the vacant lots or just out in the street playing the classic
New York City games, stickball and punch ball and stoop ball, all of which are described
in other places, but that was it. One things that comes to mind is there were seasons it
seemed like for everything. It seemed like on a certain day in the spring, everybody
would put away a certain toy, whatever it was, and the new one would come out. So the
bicycles might go away for a while and the skates would come out and then it seemed
almost on signal that two months later, or a month and a half later, the skates would go
away and the ball gloves would come out. And there seemed to be a pattern that we
followed without really realizing it. Play was a large part of our life when we weren’t in
school or at home doing our homework, or what have you, particularly on weekends, I
guess or in the summer when they days were longer and we were out of school and back
in those days kids were out of school for a longer period in the summer than they are
today, I think. We had pretty much three full months, which they don’t get any more.

SM: Now I noticed on one of the questionnaires you filled out, your paternal
grandparents came from the United States from Italy.

MM: Yes, that’s true.

SM: Did you have much contact with them as you were growing up?

MM: Yes, the family, my dad had one, two, three brothers and a sister, all of
more or less the same age and they all lived reasonably nearby say in the early days,
within thirty minute subway ride and probably [never] more than an hour from some
central point and that central point, especially when I was very young was frequently my
grandparents place. Which was just a tiny little tenement apartment on Lincoln Avenue
in the Bronx, but it was packed with people when we all got together, and that was fairly
frequent for dinner and what not. Probably once a month or so, and it was just packed
but nobody ever seemed to get in anybody's way and the kids did their thing while the
adults did theirs and all I can remember of it, or what I generally remember of it is we all
had a very good time, nobody ever got mad at anybody and it was just a lot of fun, so I
did have, to answer your question, yes, I did have contact with them. My grandmother,
paternal grandmother was very typical Italian immigrant housewife, spoke almost no
English, spent most of her life it seemed in the kitchen. My grandfather of course went
out and earned a living, he did several things but primarily he worked for a piano
manufacturing company, Singer pianos. And of course he learned English so he was
easier to communicate with, unfortunately never knew his real story and it’s too late to
find it now. But looking back, it seemed to be a well-educated man, loved the opera, big
old standard radio that everybody had, console radio on Sunday afternoons the operas
were always on and that was a big interest to him. I remember him, he lived long enough
to see me graduate from college and get commissioned and of course I was the first in the
family to go to college, so that was a big thing for him and I do remember him, up to
those years, unfortunately never sat down and had a real long talk with him, sort of like
this, and found out who he really was and what he’d really done and why he immigrated
and all those sorts of things.

SM: You read my mind, that’s what I was going to talk to you about. Okay, so
you’re not certain about the circumstances surrounding why he immigrated?

MM: No, except that an awful lot of Italians were, he came from the Southeast
part of Italy, near Bari, just hordes of Italians were immigrating. I’ve seen a few movies
about that time period in Italy, things were very bad economically and that’s still today,
as Italy goes, a poor part of Italy. So I imagine it was economic, there may have been
some political overtones as well because there was still a king back then in Italy. One of
the few countries in Europe that had a really powerful king still, but I don’t know. I wish
I did, I wish I knew what the reasons were.
SM: Just out of curiosity, do you know about any of the hardships or difficulties he had when he got to the United States?

MM: No, I never got the impression that things were too difficult. He moved to an Italian neighborhood, had friends and acquaintances and probably a few cousins who had preceded him. They sort of took care of the new guy and I think he found work quickly, the economic circumstances were never great, but they lived well. I think the apartment probably was six hundred square feet if it was that big, it was not big at all and on about the third or fourth floor of a building, a typical tenement building. But I don’t think we ever knew we were poor, we didn’t suffer from it anyway, because everybody we knew was in the same boat. No, I don’t think there was any serious hardship for either of them, I think they got here and hit the ground running and things got progressively better. Their children got good jobs, although never finished college any of them, and raised good families, and their grandchildren mostly did go to college so it was a good progression and I think they were very satisfied.

SM: When you left high school, did you know immediately that you would be going straight into college?

MM: Yes, from grade school I went, as I said I was pretty good with the books, and I was selected, there’s a process in New York City. There’s a Jesuit high school called Regis High School, it’s on 84th street I think, near Central Park and that school run by the Jesuits used to pick to two top academic kids from basically every grade school in the city of New York and would collect them together in this one high school tuition free. And the education was very, very good, of course the academic standards were extremely high. I went there for three years and at the end of my junior year, the principal called me in, and basically said, ‘Mike, you’re not making it here, nice try but you’re just not handling, particularly Latin’, third year Latin killed me. So he politely suggested that I go somewhere else and I did, I finished my fourth high school year at Cardinal Hayes, which was the Catholic high school in the Bronx where everybody went if they went to Catholic high school. So I graduated from Cardinal Hayes, in what ’57, so I was still fairly young, but by then I was still pretty good academically and it was pretty clear that I was going to at least have a shot at college, which I did. I was only just eighteen I guess, that summer before I started college and really didn’t have a clue as to what I wanted to
do, which is typical for a kid that age so I started in Engineering school at New York
University, which is what they call the uptown, what they call the uptown campus in the
Bronx, intending to go into Aeronautical Engineering, and that’s kind of a funny story.
After a year there, I went to the dean this time, Dean Cunningham, I’ll never forget it and
I told him I was going to quit. I said I just couldn’t take it and he asked my why and he
says, ‘You’re not burning the buildings down, but you’re not flunking out either’, he
says, ‘You’re doing okay’ and he says, ‘Why do you want to quit?’ And I told him, I
said, ‘I just can’t stand it’, what I couldn’t deal with is that everything was graded on a
curve and so if you walked into a Physics class and took an exam and the mean grade was
a 20, you got a C but to my mind I only knew 20% of what I was supposed to and I just
couldn’t deal with that. So I told him that and he said, ‘Okay, I understand, anything I
can do for you?’ And I said, ‘If you’d just call the dean down at the Business school,’
which was downtown in Greenwich village, ‘I’d sure like to go there starting next
semester’, and so he did and I did and I graduated. I know I’m jumping around a bit, but
I graduated four [three] years later, which was difficult because I had to make a up a lot
of credits in the Business school, you know credits that I had taken in the Engineering
school in the first year, didn’t really play into the curriculum in the business school, so I
had to really double up, I think there were times I was taking twenty-one credits. As a
matter of fact, several semesters probably, which today people don’t believe, but it’s true.
Twenty-one credit hours to get caught up and still graduate in four years, which I did.
But probably the most significant thing is that, yes, this is another funny story, while I
was still at the uptown campus, just again a green kid wandering around in a daze. They
were passing out the class but with the class cards and of course if you were going in a
certain path, you had to take this and you had to take that and you had to take this, and
you had a choice between one of two things. One of those choices, there was a girl
student working to make a few dollars at the end of the table where they were passing out
these class cards and when you got to the end, she said to me do you want PT or ROTC,
and I said to myself, I know what PT is, that’s running across the campus sweaty after a
shower and athlete’s foot and trying to get from one class to the other. I said I don’t
really need to do that, what’s this ROTC, and she said well, it’s some sort of a military
training thing and that’s all she knew and I said, that sounds good, give me the card. So
that, believe it or not, is the extent of the thought that went into my thirty-year military
career, because that’s where it began, it’s an honest to God true story. I took the card and
she said go over there, there was a little hill, there was a building on the other side of the
hill, there’s a tailor over there, tailor shop, you go in there, and they give you uniforms.
Then you show up at your class as the card indicated and you’ll be on your way. So that’s
how it all began and of course, when I transferred downtown I just stayed in ROTC,
because I was enjoying it. It had a lot to offer, it was interesting, something I hadn’t done
and free airplane rides and things like that on occasion with the instructors. So slowly
but surely it grew on me I guess, to the point where, oh I guess by junior year it was a
definite career option. I was qualified to be a pilot, physically and mentally and that
looked like a good thing to do, looked like a fun thing to do and so basically evolved into
it. At graduation it was graduate and be commissioned and still qualified so I had orders
to wait through the summer, which would have been the summer of ’61 and then report to
pilot training in October of ’61 which I did. I know I leaped through that pretty rapidly,
but that is kind of a comical story because it’s absolutely true.

SM: Now did you have any regrets in the end in terms of your switch to
business?
MM: No, it was, at that point, to be perfectly honest, it was just a way of getting
a degree for me. I don’t really think that I had any great desire. Let’s pretend for example
that the military thing had fallen through, let’s say I had something physically or what not
had gone wrong toward the end and I didn’t get pilot training. I don’t know if under
those circumstances if I’d still gone in the military. I think not, so at that point I would
have had to use my degree, which was an accounting degree, and just go into the
accounting world in New York City. I would have done it, I probably would’ve been as
happy as the next guy doing it, but it certainly wasn’t anything I had a burning desire to
do, particularly after becoming acquainted with the military thing. The idea of a coat and
tie and riding the subway for twenty, thirty years every day to the same office, or same
general area didn’t hold a lot of attraction to me. So I got the degree because you needed
a degree to be an officer, it was a good degree but never really used it until much, much
later in my life, after I retired, thirty some odd years later.
SM: How far into ROTC did you realize that that was the point where you were going to make military a career?

MM: Oh probably about the beginning of junior year. I would say it started to look, first of all, you could begin to see the end. You knew you had two years of college left and at that point you start to take physicals and exams and the indicators were all saying, hey you can do this. Of course you start to get encouragement from the staff as well, and so it all sort of comes together, or at least in my case it did.

SM: Now, when you were going through ROTC, what kind of instruction did you receive in terms of military history, what did they talk about in terms of well, wars in particular, did they talk about the Korean War or 2nd World War, which did they emphasize more, that kind of stuff?

MM: That's a good question. I don't think we studied, there's no way to know any more, but my recollection is that we didn’t literally study wars as wars. I think we studied some political science with a bias toward war in general and by that I mean political science going way back to the beginning, maybe some Roman philosophy and Chinese philosophy of politics as it effects war and war as it effect politics. So I think it was a broader look at the subject than to just study a war. I don’t think we talked about war much at all. The faculty, the ROTC faculty were veterans of the Second World War in at least one case, there was a Colonel named Desper, D-E-S-P-E-R, Dale, I believe was his first name, who was a World War II vet of course World War II wasn’t that far distant back then. And another one or two of the other professors of Air Science, the younger guys, maybe captains might have had some Korean service but it wasn’t something that was talked about, specific wars weren’t, at least not in my recollection. We studied military organization, we studied military protocols and what’s the word I’m groping for here, tradition, military traditions and things of that sort but not specific wars, as I recall.

SM: Did you, as a young man growing up, and as a boy growing up, were you at all interested in that type of stuff?

MM: Not intensely, but that’s an interesting question too. In later life I’ve asked myself that question, was there something else in my upbringing that may have pointed me in that direction unconsciously. And there may have been one or two things, I’ll tell you what they are and they again are kind of amusing. I was given a book on my ninth
birthday, by I think one of my uncles and you’d have to understand that’s 1949. So the
Second World War is only over a couple of years and there were a whole series of books
coming out for boys back in those days, kind of action, adventure books and one of them
was about a Naval aviator out in the Pacific, Red Randall at Midway is the name of the
book. I remember that book just fascinated me and I probably read it a dozen times, to
the point where actually just recently I got on the Internet, there’s a site called Alibris, A-
L-I-B-R-I-S, which I think in Latin means from the library of or some such thing. They
sell old books and I was actually able to find and buy an almost mint copy of the old
book and I have it at my desk. It’s amazing. There may have been something there,
here’s another one, [my folks], when I was real little, maybe five or six, I remember as a
present I got one of these toys. It’s a big toy, it’s a riding toy that you may not even be
familiar with but usually they come in the form of trains or fire engines or what not and
the little kid sits in it and pedals it and makes it go down the street. Well, mine was an
airplane and it had little stubby wings and the propeller went around when you pedaled it
had a couple of little guns up on the front. And I remember enjoying that thing to the
point again where I got on the Internet to see if I could find one, and I actually found one
in antique shop in the state of Washington. Some crazy named town like Washomish or
some such thing, but believe it or not mint condition, but ten thousand dollars. It’s
probably the only one left in the world, but I got some pictures of it at least off the
internet, so who know what influences you. LaGuardia Airport wasn’t that far from
where I lived and when I was a teenager we used to drive out there, myself and my
friends and watch the airplanes take off and land. But nothing intense, there was no
aviation background in the family, or anything of the sort, so there may have been one or
two little things, but hard to say, I won’t say yes, I won’t say no.

SM: Now did you have relatives that served in the military during the Second
World War?

MM: The only one was one of my dad’s younger brother, my uncle Jerry, or
Jerome was his real name, but actually Geralimo in Italian, and then Jerome and Jerry.
But yes, he was in the Navy during the war and was a clerk because that was the kind of
work he had done in civilian life, just getting started really, but he worked in an
advertising agency and so he was a clerk type, typist and what not and at least for part of
his service I know was on the Battleship Missouri. May have been after the war actually
that he was on the Missouri and I’ve seen some pictures of him in Paris so I know he got
around a little bit. But no action to speak of, that he ever talked about anyway, but he
was the only one. The rest of them, of course my dad was at the Navy yard, so he was
considered essential in that job and one of my other uncles was a machinist I think at an
aircraft plant out on Long Island and what have you.

   SM: Another essential?
   MM: Yes, I think so.

   SM: Now, while we’re on the subject of family members in the military, did your
   brother ever go in the military as well?
   MM: My brother served a couple of years, just Army, he enlisted and served,
what time frame would that have been, that’s a good question, it’s a long time ago. It
was pre-Vietnam, I’m guessing that he was in the service during my early service days as
well, so maybe ’59, ’60, ’61 somewhere in there, but I really don’t remember. He was
young, I mean he was just a kid out of high school and he did two years and got out.

   SM: So your junior year in ROTC you’re at that point, or your junior year in
college, excuse me, you’re at the point you can choose, you’ve gone two years and you
don’t have to continue and you . . .?
   MM: I chose to continue because I could start to see that at least it was interesting
and I was involved. In fact at the end I was the cadet commander of the detachment, in
my senior year. And in fact was the, what would you say, I guess what would you say, I
guess the reviewing cadet at the graduation parade which was up at, they combined the
two campuses for the ROTC graduation. So the graduation was up at the uptown
campus, the Engineering school campus and I was the senior guy there, senior cadet
actually. Which helped me get, I was actually distinguished graduate as well from the
ROTC program, which was useful because it accelerated the transition from a reserve
officer to regular officer once I went on active duty. And that turned out to be useful for
promotions and other things years later, because back in those days there was a real
distinction between a reserve officer who was sort of looked on as a, not fully committed
kind of a guy, I don’t think that was fair, but that’s they way it was, and a guy who they
could more easily just send back home if requirements diminished. But once you were a
regular you were kind of fully onboard, so I got my regular commissions fairly quickly, partly as a result of that distinguished graduate thing. It’s funny in an interview like this, the things that spring to mind that you haven’t thought about in ages.

SM: Now, at that point when you graduated from college, which was?

MM: June 7, of ’61 if I’m not mistaken.

SM: Some interesting international events have taken place and as a college student you hopefully, maybe were aware of these things. The fall of China, that was of course earlier, before you were in college, but the lead-up to the Communist threat, the lead-up to the Cold War and the major events in the ‘50s like the launch of Sputnik, were these things that you were cognizant of?

MM: Yes, cognizant of all of those, a little bit, you know how college students generally are, they were sort of vague, distant things that adults dealt with and I don’t think we really saw ourselves as adults quite yet, we were more interested in girls and beer and graduating to be perfectly honest. Yes, we were aware of them, and again back to a previous question you asked, another thing that we did study pretty intensely in the ROTC program was the various political systems and of course, Communism was much more of a, what shall I say, an accepted threat generally in the population than it was later on. So we did study it pretty intensely to the point, well almost to the point I think we were probably propagandized, but I think we knew it and said that’s fine.

SM: Interesting, you as cadets as students would talk about, this is kind of extreme or how did that come out?

MM: Let’s see, well extreme no, I mean I don’t even know if we used the phrase then, but the current phrase would be Mickey Mouse, come one guys, you know I’m older than that, you don’t have to spoon feed this stuff to me. I suspect that there were times where we felt that way, but you put up with it, it’s easier to put up with it than argue. The one thing that I do recall, again, you sort of stimulated my thinking was of course the civil rights thing was starting to be big and particularly on the college campuses and NYU was no exception. Some of the more radical groups and all the groups were represented on the campus, NAACP and what not. But the ones that I remember as being the more radical Core was one Congress of or on, I’m not sure which, racial equality and some of those were fairly radical and vocal. We, as I think frequently
happens rather than create harmony or anything, I think the radicalism of those [just
drove wedges] between people who ordinarily wouldn’t have had wedges. But some of
the black kids, and there were a few back even in those days in the ROTC program, not
the numbers that you would get today, because there weren’t that many black kids in
universities back then. But I would say to be honest that whereas prior to the appearance
of those organizations on the campus, a black guy would just be another guy, once those
organizations got there and started espousing their own philosophies, it was like okay,
that’s your philosophy and if you want to go that way it’s been nice knowing you. It
really did, I think drive some wedges, at least between some people.

SM: So in your experience the more radical groups tended to polarize?

MM: Oh, yes no question about it, in my mind anyway. They certainly weren’t
and I think that’s probably still true today, they’re not conciliators, they tend to polarize
things.

SM: Now I’m curious, what was the size of your Corps of Cadets?

MM: You know, I don’t remember. I can give you roughly, it started big because
of the fact that everybody had to either do the PT or the ROTC. So I would say, the
freshman group downtown, which I have a better recollection of, numbered in the
hundreds certainly, but when we graduated, my best recollection is the senior class was
two numbers are in my head, eleven or thirteen, it was somewhere in that neighborhood.
So of that several hundred who came in the door so to speak, as freshmen, we only
commissioned, say ten or eleven guys. So it shrunk considerably as you suggested at that
mandatory to non-mandatory point between sophomore and junior year and then it shrunk
some more, just by attrition physicals and things like that, as you marched towards the
actual commissioning date. But several hundred anyway, and I think when we put the
whole thing together for graduation up at the Washington Heights which was the uptown
campus, oh, I’m just trying to picture it, but it was five hundred people, maybe more than
that, altogether I’m trying to picture the graduation parade and it was a large number of
people.

SM: Now just as you were getting close to graduation, Kennedy was elected
president and took office, did that have an effect on you?
MM: No, none whatever that I can recall. Again, we were pretty much, politics wasn’t a big thing on the campus, even though we were in a major city and in fact in Greenwich Village and a lot of times after hours, after class or on a Friday night or what not, we’d wind up down in the village in one of the more famous old places where there was a lot of, relatively speaking at least, a lot of radical thought and that sort of thing. But again I think we tended, folk music was becoming a big issue, not an issue, but a factor back in those days, and I think we were more interested in the atmosphere than in the substance. We’d rather go to a place where maybe a young Joan Baez was singing and nobody had ever heard of her, but there she was, or Woody Guthrie or you know, some of those folks or go to a night club and listen to a comedian like Woody Allen who was a nobody, an unknown back in those days and have a few beers than really take anything seriously. On that note, I think when the civil rights thing started to really get active, I think it was a little bit, actually maybe a shock to us, that these people were serious, where we were just sort of having a good time, the attitude was almost like hey, lighten up, relax and enjoy life, what are you getting all excited about, of course we didn't understand their point of view. I guess I’m painting a not too pleasant picture of what we were, I guess we were just kind of scatterbrained college kids having a good time, but that’s probably pretty accurate.

SM: Just out of curiosity, you mentioned some folk singers and stuff; did you ever see or hear of Phil Ochs?

MM: O-C-H-S?

SM: Right.

MM: Yes, the name rings a bell, I’m not sure I could put him in context though.

SM: Well, the message of a lot of the folk songs and stuff, was kind of contrary to the military, did that not?

MM: Well, not in the college days because the Vietnam War wasn’t on yet, It was just beginning, there was, you’re right, there was beginning, it was more of the anti-Nuclear back in those days, Vietnam was not an issue but you’re right.

SM: Yes, not anti-Vietnam, but anti-military, anti-war.

MM: Anti-war for sure, and on campus there were probably, and again, being a New York City school, fairly liberal and we shared the campus with the Liberal Arts
school as well. There were probably some people that looked at us like we were a little
strange, but if they did, they were in a world different than ours, and it was just sort of a
live and let live thing, it wasn’t antagonistic. We didn’t hang around with them anyway, so it was kind of irrelevant as to what they thought. It was in the early stages back in those days, it was still almost friendly and pleasant. The music wasn’t really strident, except for the Core Congress, etc. They got pretty strident pretty early and again that was more of a shock to us than anything else, the other thing, in the other cases it was sort of a live and let live kind of an attitude. And we’d go down and listen to the anti-Nuclear and anti-war folk singers and enjoy them as much as anything else. It wasn’t a bother; it wasn’t a conflict kind of thing. Am I making any sense?

SM: Absolutely.

MM: Okay, good I wasn’t sure.

SM: So as you neared graduation, you knew you were going to be going active duty, what did your family think of that?

MM: You ask some good questions. Okay, well see my dad wasn’t crazy about it. My mom was, she's just a housewife, whatever happened, happened. She wasn't gonna have a very strong opinion, one way or the other, if she did she never expressed it. But my dad of course, was becoming, well by that time he was probably a middle kind of a guy, maybe a GS-9 or 10 or so at that point, again in the Engineering department there at the Navy yard. And in the context of his job, he had more than once gone out on aircraft carriers on shakedown cruises, where they would, he was in refrigeration and air conditioning engineering. So after they’d put the system in, you’d always have to go out on the ship, on a real cruise and turn the thing on and find out what you forgot and what you did wrong, and where you put things in the wrong place and all that sort of thing and make modifications, so in the context of doing that he’d had several cruises on carriers and had watched a lot of Navy pilots whacking their airplanes into various parts of the aircraft carrier. So his impression I guess of military flying was that, and he was nervous, I’m sure, maybe even more than nervous. Maybe even a little bit frightened about it, and I would say he probably let me know that, but not in a way where I was going to feel guilty or anything. It was just, he was worried and I knew it and I was going to go do it, and he knew it and so it was an accommodation that never turned into a problem. But he
was worried, yes and in pilot training, he and my mom I think came down to Alabama
more than once just to visit and watching his little baby kid with all this gear on,
strapping into this monster machine and actually flying around in it. I don’t think he ever
really believed any of it was happening and we’ll jump ahead. But to finish the thought
you know when I went to Vietnam, that was a big scare, but we got through it, it never
became a problem for the family, it’s just I knew they were worried and that was it.

SM: So, why don’t you go ahead and describe your entry into the active Air
Force.

MM: Okay, the last summer after graduation, of course I had basically nothing to
do and I went to work at a beach club in the Bronx that I had actually worked at every
summer, I think from my thirteenth year. So I’d worked there eight summers, as a
lifeguard primarily but I’d done some other things too, I’d helped manage the cafeteria
for a while. Helped with the electrician and various things, mainly I was a lifeguard and I
did that my last summer, and then came the date. Now, the orders came and said report
to Craig Air Force Base in Selma, Alabama on, I think the 3rd of October of ’61, which I
did. I jumped on an airplane out of New York as I recall, I think it was a Constellation,
one of those three-piece tail airplanes that you see in History books now. And flew down
to Atlanta which was a little tiny, relatively at least, a little nothing town back in those
days and then caught a connecting flight to Montgomery, Alabama. And then I think I
took a bus from Montgomery to Selma, matter of fact, I know I did, and got to Selma in
the middle of the night, and culture shock, it wasn’t the last time but it was the first time
to get off a bus at, not that late at night, maybe nine-thirty at night in Selma, Alabama.
And literally the streets were rolled up, standing there looking around, it looked like a
deserted town, but I found somebody who helped me get to the base, which if I recall was
maybe five miles outside of Selma. So, basically I made my way down there, just a
twenty-one year old kid out on his way to see the world and got to the base, and standard
procedure, checked in and was assigned a room and as I recall, it’s probably a little bit
vague in my mind, but as I recall now, it’s coming back. I got there and was assigned a
room in a long, one of these old style long barracks building where the bachelor officers
were, my class was in one building, the bachelors in my class were in one, most of the
guys were bachelors but there were several married. I was given a room, and as I recall
now there were guys who had gotten there a day or two ahead of me, just kind of wandering around and we sort of introduced ourselves and dropped our bags and figured out who we were and where we came from and talked about what we thought the future was going to hold and that sort of thing. But within, go to be just a day or two I think, we got right into the program, they didn’t waste a lot of time with just sitting around. We got right into academics and flying, best I recall, almost immediately, maybe a week or two of academics before we started flying, but it wasn’t much and we were off to the races there in pilot training. And that’s every situation you get into has a set of stories associated, people and stories, most of them funny. Fortunately I’ve always said the human mind seems to forget the bad ones and remember the good ones, or the funny ones at least, but pilot training to me was, it was days of hard work. The academics were never a problem for me, some guys had real fits with the academics, and everybody is a college graduate, which I guess surprised me a little. For me the academics were a breeze, well back up a step. The program then I think was generally laid out in three paths. They had what they called academics, they had what they called leadership or officership and then they had the flying, the academics were easy as I said, the leadership/officership, I was junior so it really hardly had an effect on me, the more senior guys, there were a couple of captains who had been in the service for some years, and had applied and gotten accepted for pilot training, so they were the class leaders. They had more of a set of responsibilities and had some problems to deal with from time to time. They were kind of the go-between, between most of the students and the faculty, because they were officers with some experience and in the class. So they sort of acted as a buffer, and they did, they had some serious functions to perform, but for the ordinary guy you just basically kept your nose clean and the officership part of the program wasn’t difficult either. Then you get to the flying and of course everybody has their own skills, I would say I was not the most skilled pilot who ever came down the pike. They talk about guys with golden hands and I was not one of them. I did fine, how would you describe it, I was, I’m trying to think of an analogy like if I were a painter I certainly wasn’t a Van Gogh but I could do a decent painting, I guess. I got along, I didn't make any mistakes, I did things right, I didn’t have any flair for it and that reflected in where I finished up in the pile, somewhere about in the middle. I wasn’t a bad pilot; I wasn’t going to be a
fighter pilot either. Only a few guys washed out of the class as I recall from the
beginning batch, most of them I think, S.I.E. which is a term you’re probably familiar
with, self-initiated elimination. Just means, the guy quit, I don’t think the program
actually took too many guys aside and said you’re just not making it. It was fun, every
day was a little different and usually split up into at least three parts, we’d have
academics in the morning and then fly in the afternoon or vice versa and there was a
pretty active athletic program, intramural athletic program, between the various classes
that were in various stages of progression there at Craig. And I don’t remember how
many, but I think they probably brought a new class in every two months, it may have
been every month, you may have had, actually on the base as many as, I don’t think it
would have been twelve, but maybe ten classes working their way through from the very
beginning to the end. It may have been eight, I honestly don’t remember, but we had a
very active intramural program and just a very active physical fitness and physical
training program, so between those three, your typical work day, plus studying in the
evening, at least a little, your day was full, you got up early, you went to bed, not very
late because you had to get up early again and it was a full day. On the weekends on the
other hand, it got crazy, we were just young and fearless and flying airplanes and so we
did crazy things on the weekends and Selma, like any other town, provided anything you
wanted. A lot of drinking, probably drank a lot more than we should have, and driving
with a lot more beer in us than we should have, but we survived it, there were clubs
around where you could go and get a decent meal. Some of the guys dated locally, some
didn’t, one or two guys even married locally, before the program was over. In my case
casually, I actually, funny again, there’s another thing pops into your head, I dated a
couple of girls in town, nice girls, very casually. If there was a party at the club and I
needed a date, I’d call one of them up, that kind of a thing. There was, I think the name
was Torrenson, that’s at least decent pronunciation, Colonel Torrenson was a commander
on the base. I don’t recall his exact function, he may have been the base commander, he
may have been the flying wing commander, I honestly don’t remember, but he had a cute
daughter who was just a little younger than me. They were Catholics and I guess I met
her at church or something and she was real cute and nice kid, so we dated a little bit,
nothing serious, but we were busy enough with flying and all of that, where that wasn’t a
big issue for most people, but one way or other on the weekends we managed to have a
good time and unwind a bit and then get ready for Monday morning again.

SM: Now how many men were in your class?

MM: I’m going to have to say something just over fifty; I wouldn’t give you an
exact number, around fifty. I think we probably started with fifty-two or fifty-three and
ended up with something in the mid-40s, forty-four, forty-five, when it was all over, had
several Germans in our class, seven of them I believe. All probably ahead of us in that,
before the German government sent them over to get the American pilot training, they
had all been run through a program in Germany of glider flying, and so they at least had
quite a bit of experience flying gliders solo. They were pretty bright guys, they hit the
ground running, they had no problems which brings me to another thing. Back in ROTC,
another thing, jumping backwards, there was a program called FIP, which you got into in
your junior year, flight indoctrination program I think is what it stood for. Basically what
it was, was the government paid the juniors who were qualified to go forward to pilot
training to go to a local airport, a local flying service and get a private pilot’s license and
the idea of course, was to, at a relatively low cost compared to pilot training, to see if you
really had the interest and/or the ability so, I wound up, as did the other guys who were
qualified at Teterboro airport, which was in New Jersey, but not very far away, not far
from Newark airport. A place called Safair, I think, Flying Service, and was able to get a
private pilot’s license flying Piper Cubs over there in my junior. I think it went on over
into senior year as I best recall, so even we, when we went to pilot training had some
flying experience, including solo and some cross country flying in at least a light
airplane. We weren’t totally green.

SM: So when you did get to military flight school, what was the most difficult
thing for you?

MM: I don’t recall anything difficult. The most difficult thing was certainly, well
you know what the hardest thing for me was, and probably always was, because I don’t
have a mind for it, was memorizing procedures. Even later when I was flying transports
and what not, I had the devil of a time, really getting emergency procedures, particularly
what you’re supposed to know just literally, almost by instinct. Getting them down and
years and years in the same airplane, I just never was very good at that, so that is one
little thing certainly, but that was about it. Again, in the various flying skills I wasn’t the
best in the class, but I don’t really feel like I had difficulty in any of them, you know
formation flying, I wasn’t the best formation pilot in the class, but I could fly formation
and things like that, but memorizing procedures was never good for me.

SM: What about the celestial navigation training, did you receive that there, or
was that later?

MM: None, well wait a minute, I shouldn’t say that so quickly. I think we
probably in our navigation training had an introduction to celestial to the point where I
think one night we actually did go outdoors with some equipment and do some sighting
and some computation. But it was a cursory look, almost as fast as you did it, you said
well, that’s interesting if I ever have to do it, I’ll study up on it, but it was almost in one
ear and out the other, I would say, because we knew we weren’t going to have to do it.

SM: What about as a back up though, an emergency back up?

MM: Well, most of the airplanes weren’t equipped for it and any airplane that
was, like the transports that I flew had usually two navigators on board and that’s what
they did. I used to do it, now that I think about it, when I became an aircraft commander
in the C-133 which is down the road here a ways, but I would take a shot every once in a
while, just for the heck of it, but it was not a serious pursuit, never was.

SM: So in flight training, how competitive was it, as far as for the pilots?

MM: That’s another good question that I hadn’t thought about. It was, that’s a
better question, even than I thought. It was very competitive, because there were certain
personalities being what they are, there were some guys who came into that class,
particularly the guys who had more real Air Force background, really intending to
compete actively for the best job. Guys like me, I think sort of just wandered in the door
and were a little bit clueless for a while, that there even was a competition in progress.
You figured it out after a while, and some guys were [more and] less competitive, I’m not
a particularly competitive guy to be perfectly honest, I just try and do the job and let the
chips fall where they may. But the thrust of your question is a very good one, because
there were some guys there that very definitely came to pick up all the marbles and of
course the way that was done, was at the end, when we graduated a bag of assignments
came down and it was a big hoopdy-do process, very exciting. I think they made it
exciting intentionally, where we had a meeting one morning and the commander said, okay, guys here it is. Here’s what Air Force has sent us in the way of assignments and of course the big question was how many fighters, because the guys who were real competitive and the best pilots wanted to get into fighters. I really had no desire to do that, it wasn’t like I wouldn’t have taken one, but I had no great desire to be in a fighter, but some guys did and the question was, are there one, are there three, are the five of the thirty—some odd, not counting the Germans assignments. And then how many of the real bum ones, which of course were helicopters, nobody wanted to fly a helicopter, so the last guy in the class, of course that’s in ’61, today it might be different for various reasons, but there’s a future in flying helicopters on the outside among other things, but the last guy in the class invariably got the helicopter. So the last guy meaning low score, when they put all three the academic, the flying and the officership together, I mean that was the helicopter. So there was how many helicopters and how many fighters was the first question and then in between there were various things that were viewed by different people in different lights, transports, B-52s, nobody wanted to go to SAC because SAC had a terrible reputation of just beating people up, physically and mentally, well not physically, well somewhat physically because of the alerts and the long missions, but more psychologically because of the constant alerts and things like that. So nobody really wanted to go to SAC in a B-52 or anything of that sort, a B-47 which I think were still around then. So, the competition was very fierce among the top four, five or six guys in the class, because they didn’t know how many fighters there were going to be in the bag. As it turned out I got the transport, I wanted, well I won’t say I wanted, that sounds very intense, I would have preferred a transport in the northeast because it was near home. You know at McGuire Air Force Base would have been my ideal, as it turned out there was one, I think I recall, a C-118 and a guy who was ahead of me in the pecking order took it and I wound up taking the transport at Travis Air Force base in California, figuring well California sounds pretty good, never been there and so I picked that when my turn came. I was about in the middle of the class as I recall, I think I was number nineteen, that’s just a guess, so I got to pick, it looked like a pretty good deal, it was a transport which is what I really was preferring to fly and California sounded good, so I
was pretty happy with what I picked, when I picked it and of course, subsequently, it
turned out okay.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and tell?
MM: Well there are millions of them, but this one story for example, we were
flying around the traffic pattern, just doing takeoffs and landings and there were some
Iranian students also, not in our class but in another class and there were several of them
in the traffic pattern. And one of them, his canopy came unlocked on his airplane and he
called the control, it wasn’t really the tower, the tower didn’t control us, there was a
separate control for the students, called and said what do I do, and the controller on the
ground said, land as soon as possible. This guy, well the long and the short of it is, we’re
sitting there, we’re all hearing this because we are all on the same frequency and after a
while the guy doesn’t appear of final approach and he’s not landing and so the tower guy
calls him once or twice, no answer and then he’s calling all of us and saying, has anybody
seen him, did anybody spot him and we’re all saying, no we don’t see him out here
anywhere and finally, one guy pipes up and says, ‘uh-oh, I think I found him’. And the
tower says, well where he is, and he says, ‘he’s down below me’, and the guys says,
thinking a couple hundred feet or five hundred feet, ‘how far below’? Well, he’s on the
ground and what the guy had done, literally is pull the power back on the airplane, landed
it straight ahead in the field.

SM: Well, that’s what he was told to do.
MM: But again, if you gave me a couple of beers and we had all night, there are,
as you well know, you’ve done this, there are hundreds of these stories and they’re all,
almost all true, but I think you’re right, probably a good place to stop.

SM: Let me go ahead, end this officially real quick, this will end the first
interview.
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Mike Morea. This is the 12th of December, year 2000 at approximately 8:45 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Morea is in Palm Harbor, Florida. All right sir, would you please begin today’s discussion with, go ahead and talk about your transition from pilot training to your first duty assignment which was to be a C-133 pilot in Travis Air Force Base.

Mike Morea: Left Craig Air Force base in October of 1962 upon graduation and after having as I discussed in the last interview, after having selected a C-133B transport airplane at Travis Air Force Base in California as my assignment and en route to Travis, driving by myself, stopped off at Stead Air Force Base near Reno, Nevada for the Air Force Survival school, which was located there. And as I recall that was about a three week process, a lot of academics, various aspects of survival in various environments, medical, how to live off the land, navigation in the woods, those kinds of things, very interesting school, very enjoyable, also went through a mock prisoner of war camp while we were there, I think that was about a three day affair, again extremely realistic, just short of physical beating. A lot of verbal abuse, a lot of difficult physical conditions, cold, wet, gloomy, some introduction to, I won’t say torture techniques, that would be too strong, but torment techniques, being stuck in little boxes for hours on end and things like that, excellent, excellent training. The prisoner of war experience culminated in a staged escape, where we all escaped into the mountains and then had to make again, as I recall, a
three or four day trek from the prisoner-of-war camp to a place that we had been
designated to rendezvous, and so I spent four days in the mountains, making my way
across the Sierras and thoroughly enjoyed that because I had always enjoyed the outdoors
and the mountains and it was a, for some people a grim experience. It was just like a
little mini vacation for me, wandering in the hills, until we finally got to the rendezvous
point and that was the end of the school. The only other significant thing about that
school was that is happened to be occurring at the same time as the Cuban Missile Crisis
and we were so isolated at the school, and so intensely involved in our training that we
literally missed the whole thing. We got there before it started, graduated after it ended
and really had, to the best of my knowledge, weren’t even aware it was happening, which
is really something kind of strange when you look back on it, but true. In any case, went
from Stead, just a short drive, few hours to my first assignment at Travis Air Force Base
and went through the normal checking in and report procedures. I was assigned a BOQ
room, again in a barracks very similar to the one that we had at pilot training, a long, thin
building typically, with a whole bunch of doors, and was assigned an apartment with a
roommate. A fellow by the name of Carter Neil, went by Chris, he was a navigator in
another squadron at Travis, a C-124 squadron and strangely enough I met Chris not too
many weeks ago now at a Forward Air Controller reunion at Fort Walton Beach, so we
had a good time together but, that’s way down the line for this story. In any case,
reported to the C-133 squadron and began my training there. There was no transport
training school in the Air Force at the time, you went from pilot training, which was
basically fighter jets to your unit and then you were trained at the unit so my first
experience in a four-engine transport was when I first climbed into one and strapped it on
and started listening to the instructor. But adapted to it reasonably well in fairly short
order and started my career, many, many years in that aircraft, starting out at the bottom
level, which was as a second pilot. The levels being, starting at the top: flight examiner,
instructor pilot, aircraft commander, 1st pilot, and 2nd pilot, so the 2nd pilot was the green
bean, the new guy and all it meant was that there were certain restrictions on what you
could and you couldn’t do. When you could take off and land the airplane, under whose
supervision and things of that sort, but it was a way of working your way into the airplane
and developing skills and experience. So for my first four years at Travis, I did just that.
Most of our missions, from ’62 to ’66 were out into the Pacific from Travis, a typical
mission, Honolulu Wake Island, Guam, Clark Air Base in the Philippines, perhaps into
Thailand, perhaps into Vietnam, well not so much later days, I think my first trip to
Vietnam was actually in early ’63 when the situation was very different than it became
later. Then coming out of Southeast Asia we would have gone normally up to Kadena
Air base in Okinawa or Tachikawa Air Base in Japan and then on home via Midway
Island and into Travis again, a trip that theoretically should have taken six or seven days,
but because of the mechanical inadequacies of the C-133, frequently took two weeks or
more. Again I was a bachelor, didn’t care, matter of fact, just as soon have been out in
the Pacific flying and seeing the sights as being back in California. Let’s see somewhere,
in about 1964, there was a situation where the airlines were beginning to transition very
rapidly from propeller driven airplanes to jet, particularly the Boeing 707 and for that
reason, they were looking for transport pilots four-engine qualified pilots. Many, many,
many of the guys in my squadron, which by the way was the 84th Air Transport
Squadron, ATS, were completing their first four year commitment from pilot training and
were getting out of the service to take those opportunities with the airlines. I was
approaching my four years, wasn’t quite there yet, and in any case really had decided that
I didn’t want to fly New York and Kansas City for the rest of my life and would prefer an
Air Force career, so I wasn’t really interested in getting out. The point of making that
point is that I was approached by my squadron operations officer to go to Squadron
Officer’s school which is the first of three formal Air Force schools that are conducted to
sort of, oh we called it re-bluing. Just get you up to speed on the latest philosophies and
processes and programs in the Air Force, and just professional development kind of a
school. I was not eligible, I was too junior even to go to that first school, but no one else
in the squadron was taking the slot that came down for the school because they were all
planning on getting out. So I was asked if I would like to go and I said yes and actually
went on a waiver because I was again, too junior. Great school, at Maxwell Air Force
Base in Alabama, run on a seminar basis so I think about a dozen guys in each seminar
got to be very close, again, lots of athletics, lots of parties, lots of good academics,
speaking skills, reading and writing skills, planning exercises, leadership development
exercises, little scenarios that they threw at us to see how we reacted. Just a great school
and the long and the short of it is that when I graduated from that school, I think about
three months later, it’s much, much shorter now. I think, but back then it was about a
three month TDY, I was pretty well fired up and the Vietnam War was starting to
accelerate a little bit at least, and so the long and the short of that is when I got home to
Travis, not too long afterwards I volunteered to go to Vietnam. This would have been I
guess, best I remember mid-65, I suppose, maybe even Spring of ’65 I guess I should
have a better handle on that date, but I don’t right off the top of my head, somewhere in
Spring of ’65. I think and it wasn’t too long after that, that an assignment came down,
you know, assigning me to Vietnam, let’s say late summer perhaps of ’65. The
assignment orders, said that I was going to be flying an airplane called an O-1, and kind
of amusing story, I thought to myself, gee, that’s interesting, never heard of an O-1 of
course. And so I thought wow I had volunteered for C-123s, transports, figuring my
skills would translate most directly there, and I thought that there was actually a typo in
the message and I had been assigned to A-1s, which are old Douglas fighter-bombers
from the Second World War era, but which were being used to good effect in Vietnam,
but I found out that no, there really was an O-1 and that’s what I was going to fly. So in
the course of time, transitioning from the receipt of orders to the report date, finally left
Travis late in ’65 and reported to Hurlburt Field near Fort Walton Beach in Florida for
training in the O-1. A little more than the airplane, actually training in the O-1 training in
counterinsurgency warfare, the COIN school was there, counterinsurgency school was
there, training in close air support procedures, so the whole package of what we were
going to have to anticipate in Vietnam was being presented to us there at Hurlburt.

SM: Before we get too deeply into the training you receive at Travis, I wanted to
ask you a couple of questions about the training earlier. Now, the survival training you
received prior to going to Travis, at the time did you find it to be effective?

MM: Yes, it was tremendous, as I said extremely realistic, of course it had, just
as a matter of interest, even though I was going to Vietnam, it had a SAC focus to it, it
was primarily designed for SAC bomber crews in anticipation, as we know today and of
course I think back then it was probably a big secret. But a lot of their missions were one
way, they were going to go into Russia, they were going to drop something and they were
going to bail out or crash land, or they were going to get shot down in one place or an
other, so the focus really was on a SAC kind of a survival thing. Being shot down in
European style terrain, having to deal with Western European kinds of people, maybe
winding up in a Russian or Eastern European prisoner of war camp and that sort of thing,
but to answer your question directly yes, I thought they did a terrific job there, the
instructors were top notch, the philosophy that they taught under was great, interesting
story, the commandant whose name is probably in the history books somewhere, I don’t
remember, was an Air Force Colonel who had actually been shot down in Korea and had
crawled out of North Vietnam [Korea] to South Vietnam [Korea] [I said Vietnam, but
Korea is obviously correct], some hundred and fifty, two hundred miles, an amazing trek,
had lost both his feet to frostbite, and he walked if you didn't know it then you’d never
notice. But he walked without any cane or anything on two wooden feet that he sort of
swung on hinges, the only way you could tell I she had an odd gait because he had to
swing the foot back and forth every time he took a step. But just an amazing guy and a
lot of the instructors were similar. A lot of the enlisted men were like mountain men
guys from West Virginia and Tennessee and what not, that really knew the outdoors and
what not, but everything considered, unarmed combat, we had the Air Force karate
champion was assigned there, I remember a young black fellow, very pleasant guy but a
really good instructor and his staff were the unarmed combat instructors, so everything
was just first rate, well then and even to this day my recollection is that it was just a
terrific school.

SM: And how about the training you received just prior to getting your orders in
terms of the staff training that you received with the school.

MM: SOS, very good, a lot of fun, as I said, it was seminar so we got to be very
tight with one another, a lot of the guys were married and the wives were there. So it
seemed like there was a party every night, somewhere after class, athletics were very big,
we played a couple of Air Force invented games, one was called flickerball. It was kind
of a soccer, basketball combination, which I don’t know it they still play it or not, and
soccer, basketball, football, all three rules mixed together in the field game. We played a
lot of regular soccer, a lot of softball, there was a program called something Ten, I can’t
think of the name of it [It was 10 BX], it was kind of an obstacle course, a really
complicated obstacle course brain game thing. You show up somewhere with a ladder
and a coil of rope and then your task would be to accomplish something, get across a stream which appeared to be impossible with those two tools, but we put our heads together and figured out how to do it, and I guess that brings the point up, that a lot of it was teaching cooperation, working together. But again, first class seminar leaders, a great curriculum, tremendous guest speaker program. All top notch people, you want to talk personnel, if we were studying the personnel system we got the chief of Air Force personnel would fly down and give us a two hour blurb and two hours of questions and answers in what we called the big blue bedroom, which was a big blue auditorium. But terrific and again it fired me up enough to where when I got home I volunteered to go Vietnam so I guess they did their job pretty well.

SM: And the, again the training you received about three and half, four years, previously, survival training that is, did you find again the emphasis seemed to be SAC or was it TAC or good units?

MM: It was SAC, but again I never had to use it so I was never able to make a field evaluation of my training, but my impression was certainly that it certainly would have, both in terms of real knowledge and in terms of survival attitudes would have certainly been useful had I had to use it, yes.

SM: And the Squadron Officer School was again, a SAC emphasis?

MM: No, much more, no the whole Air Force, no we’d have SAC week and then we’d have TAC week and then we’d have air training command week were we studied each of those. It was a broad brush of the whole Air Force.

SM: Well, when you received your orders, to go to Vietnam, what did you think, were you happy?

MM: Yes, I certainly was, I was curious at the same time as to what the O-1 training and the job was going to be like, but I wanted to go and I think the fact that I was going into an airplane other than a transport probably was exciting to me, because I knew that the transport job, relatively, was going to be benign. Although some of the 123 guys flying Ranch Hand and the aerial defoliation missions and flying support missions later into places like An Khe certainly wouldn’t have said it was benign. But generally, particularly in those days it was going to the larger air fields and simply hauling people and cargo, so it looked like it was going to be a more exciting job, which again, for a
twenty-five year old young guy, was fine. I had no apprehension or anything, just really
wanted to go see what it was.

SM: What did your family think?

MM: Well, we discussed that a little bit the last time. Obviously, apprehensive,
my dad particularly having been associated with the Navy and seeing directly some
operational stuff on aircraft carriers was very concerned. He had also, again as I
mentioned last time, worked at the Navy Yard in Brooklyn there during the Second
World War and of course the stories coming back form the war and films and all of that
sort of thing weren’t that far away in his mind. So he was quite concerned and my mom
too, but I was going to do it and this may not be the time, it may be a little premature, but
as long as we’re on it, I actually downplayed the whole thing considerably in letters home
and all of that sort of thing, you don’t have to tell them everything.

SM: Absolutely and that’s certainly something that’s consistent with a lot of
veterans. Now, you said you weren’t sure at first when you received your orders, they
said that you were going to be flying an O-1, you thought maybe it was a typo or
something, what went through your mind when you finally learned that yes, this was the
aircraft was what it was, a single engine.

MM: No problem, it sounded very interesting, I was getting out of airlift into
tactical operations and both from a purely interest point of view and from a career point
of view where diversity has always been considered positive, it looked like a good idea to
me so I was quite pleased.

SM: You weren’t at all concerned, that here you’re going from a nice, good-sized
aircraft, multi-engine to a single prop, slow low flyer?

MM: No, again remember I had also said that during college they had run us
through that FIP program and I had a private pilot’s license, actually. Matter of fact by
then it was probably upgraded to commercial, in small airplanes and occasionally had
been flying small airplanes right out of the Aero club there at Travis. So I was very
comfortable in a light airplane, and even a, what we call a tail dragger, the older style
with a tail wheel, which are a little more difficult to control on the ground, but that was
all I had flown so I was perfectly happy with that, and got happier as I went through the
training at Hurlburt because it was really exciting.
SM: Why don’t we talk about that, what were the most important things that you thought they covered at Hurlbert when you went through the counterinsurgency and the flying training?

MM: Well, the counterinsurgency thing, probably the least interesting because I think I’d probably had enough of it by then, one place and another was sort of the political underpinnings of counterinsurgency and guerilla warfare and all of that. I’d had a lot of that at Squadron Officer’s School and I was getting pretty tired of the guerilla war philosophy and all of that. Not that it wasn’t valid, but just I’d heard it all but the procedural things that they taught, the methods used by fighter pilots, their limitations, their capabilities, the limitations and capabilities of the varieties of ordnance that we were going to use, all extremely important because I was basically clueless about those kinds of things. So that was very important that we be taught that a fighter can’t necessarily drop a bomb from a certain altitude at a certain glide angle, they have parameters that they have to meet. I guess I sort of knew that, but it was certainly hammered home at the school.

SM: Just a real quick question, did you find that the fighter capabilities and the bomber capabilities were more restrictive than you initially thought, or less restrictive?

MM: More, I thought, I guess naively by that time, that fighters almost could do anything and it just isn’t the case. It’s not close actually, both in terms of weather and speeds and angles and time that they need to get set up to do various things and fuel considerations, all kinds of things that had never really entered my head because they didn’t have to, now certainly did because I had to be sensitive to all of those things if I was going to employ them correctly, so the school was very good in that regard. We did get a couple of rides, believe it or not, in A-1s, again because they were also training there and my first ride in a, I guess a real fighter with real guns and real bombs was in those couple of rides we took in the A-1s, again to get a feel for what it was really like for those guys to have to deliver ordnance so that was both fun and instructive at the same time. I guess we got three or four rides each, with A-1s out on the gunnery range, there at Hurlburt, but that and some very, very basic engineering and checklist kind of training, regarding the O-1 were the essence of our ground training, I mean the O-1 was so simple to fly, that basically just had a few hours for most of us and we were there.
SM: Could you elaborate on what you mean by engineering training?

MM: Just how the airplane operates, what kind of engines it’s got, where the fuel pump is, and where the oil pan is and that sort of thing, how to change spark plugs if you have to, very basic stuff on that airplane obviously. But the flying side, if you want to hop to that was again, in a way simple and in a way not. Basically we flew for a few hours, most of us with an instructor just to get them comfortable that we could handle the airplane and then generally our training after that was solo in and around the Eglin-Hurlburt complex where there are any number of auxiliary air fields that you can go practice landings and takeoffs at, and ranges where you could practice shooting rockets and throwing smoke grenades which were our two primary marking tools. Fly as low as you wanted to, which was kind of fun. They had, as I think I mentioned in that written that I sent to you, they had set up on the ranges various things that you were expected to go out and try and find, trucks hidden under trees and little buildings and foxhole complexes and what not, just to train your eye I think to start looking for those kinds of things because that was a big part of the job once you got to Vietnam.

SM: And this was part of your VR training?

MM: VR training, exactly, visual reconnaissance, VR training. It’s funny, I noticed on one of my flights for example, I was looking at my Form-5, which you know is a [Air Force] flying record, the actual records of all you’re flying missions and time and all of that sort of thing. And I was looking at Hurlburt and one day, I think in a six hour flying day, I logged forty-six landings, believe it or not, so we were really practicing pretty hard, the takeoffs and landings to get our skills down and it was good that we did, because over there the conditions were quite primitive in some places and you really had to know what the heck you were doing with the airplane and what it would and wouldn’t do.

SM: And just to make sure, you also received training at this point, in firing the FFAR?

MM: Right, a little bit of training, which again was pretty rudimentary, you very quickly, people used different techniques, there was no gun sight on the airplane, a little grease pencil X on the windshield was as good a sight as any, although actually depending on speed and angle. The X wasn’t always in the right place, what you really
learned after a while was that if the target wasn’t moving on your wind screen, in other
words it wasn’t going left, right up or down, then you were basically going right at it and
if you were going right at it, and you fired your rockets it would usually hit quite close.
Within, hard to say, but say within twenty yards or so when there would have been a
decent shot at the most conditions, so we learned that very rapidly and then it was just a
matter of practice until you got very comfortable with it and could do it very quickly, in
other words snap the airplane from one heading to another. Maybe change altitude very
rapidly, but still control the airplane so you are on target and the rocket went were it was
supposed to. Harder probably was actually learning to throw the smoke grenades, which
we literally just held out the window and pulled the pin on and then dropped, but to try
and control the smoke grenades, nominally at least fifteen hundred feet and have it fall
very close to a target on the ground, took a little more learning. So we probably actually
spent more time trying to get that down, then actually firing the rockets, which again, sort
of came easy after a while.

SM: How about Skippy bombs?

MM: Meaning what?

SM: The Skippy Jars, did you cover them up?

MM: Well, they didn’t encourage that at the school, that was a trick we learned in
Vietnam, no that was not taught there. Skippy jars was a very dangerous thing,
depending on how you did it. It was dangerous in any case but if you actually pulled the
pin and put the grenade in a jar and then put the lid on, and carried those in your airplane,
if you ever took a bullet that broke the Skippy jar you had, depending on the fuse, three to
five seconds to say your prayers and then it was going to explode in the cockpit. If you
did it the smarter way, not necessarily smart, but smarter, you held the jar outside the
airplane, like a smoke grenade, then pulled the pin, then screwed the lid on and then
dropped it without ever bringing it inboard of the airplane, once the pin was out. It
worked, it could be somewhat effective, but the effective burst range of a hand grenade,
twenty-five yards or so. So again you had to get awful close to do some damage with it. I
don’t recall that I ever did it, to be honest with you. I had other weapons, which I used,
over there, which I found more effective than Skippy jars.
SM: Just out of curiosity, did you ever hear of anybody having an accident like that you described?

MM: No, not literally, it probably happened but I don’t have a story where I could actually say I actually heard of somebody who either kicked one over or stepped on it or had a bullet break it. Someone probably in the course of time did, but not any direct knowledge.

SM: Was there anything else that was covered, that you found helpful when you got to Southeast Asia?

MM: The only thing I think, and it’s important is that they loosened up on the rules quite a bit, basically they said, look you guys are going into a combat environment, it’s time to forget Air Force regulation 60-16, which is the basic flying regulation for the whole Air Force. Basic philosophy on flying and flying safety and so they said, look, you want to fly at fifty feet, fly at fifty feet, you want to fly the airplane slow, fly it slow. You want to go down to Fort Walton Beach and land it on the beach, go ahead. You may have to do that someday and better you try it here than when you have to, so we did. I made several landings on, not at the public beaches, but there’s a lot of beach along the outer barrier islands in that area, say between Pensacola and probably Panama City. And a lot of it is actually, well is inaccessible to the public because there were Air Force installations out there, mainly radar either looking at Cuba or watching the fighter training area which was out over the water and kind of scoring and keeping track of things in the big training area, the jet fighter training area, out over the Gulf, so you could pick a piece of beach and fly down it, just above it and kind of assess the hardness of the sand. If you tried this you’ve got to land close to the water because the sand is harder there, because it’s been wet and, get the airplane real slow and see what you can do with it, and those kinds of things, were I guess, I won’t say officially encouraged. But people certainly said, you need to get the feel for the airplane, you need to see what your own limitations are and here’s the place to do it, those kinds of thoughts, and so we did. Out in the range where there was nobody around you could try landings on little short dirt airfields, just see how low you could get the airplane and how slow before you stalled it, and what kind of a landing roll you could achieve. How short a landing roll you might
achieve, if you really push the airplane a little bit and we found out things that came in
very handy later, at least I did.

SM: Were there any incidents where damage to aircraft?

MM: No, not in my class, not that I can recall. A lot of guys who hadn’t flown
tail dragger airplanes before were ground looping them, are you familiar with a ground
loop, do you know what it is?

SM: Yes, sir.

MM: Guys would ground loop in the airplanes with pretty good regularity until
they got the hang of it and usually the worst you did with a bad ground loop is you might
drag a wing tip and scratch it up a little bit, more embarrassing than anything else.

SM: Was that a washout offense?

MM: No, they weren’t washing anybody out at that stage, I mean you had pilots
with four to five, six years under their belt, more in some cases, going through this
training and it was just a matter of okay, you’ve never flown one of these, you’ve got to
learn to really keep the rudders wiggling to keep the airplane straight and once you learn
that, you’re okay.

SM: I guess, when you left Hurlburt to go to Vietnam, did you feel like you were
prepared?

MM: Yes, you’re not sure because you know you’re going into combat, you
know you’re going to war. You knew you were going to one that was of a different style
than we had really ever fought before and that it was accelerating in intensity fairly
rapidly by say, early ’66, which is when I got there. So healthy apprehension I would
say, I wasn’t afraid but I was certainly, you might say keyed up, would be a better phrase,
really anxious to see what it was like and aware at least that this was a no fooling around
thing, that you were going to have to pay attention and not make any mistakes because
any mistakes you made that were unnecessary were just going to increase the odds in the
wrong direction, so I think healthy, healthy respect for the situation I think.

SM: When you got there, after you started your operational flying, was there
anything that you came to wish they had covered better at Hurlburt?

MM: Let me think about that a minute, I’ve never thought about that? Not really,
no I guess not. I guess it was very different, I guess what I’m trying to say, they could
not fully duplicate the situation, but they did the best they could. Particularly I guess the
thing that struck me was once you got there, and got to your assignment location the
feeling of being alone and on your own was intense, I mean you were it. There was no
instructor to turn to, no classmates, no Squadron Ops Officer who was older and more
experienced, no instructors, you could say, hey I’m not working this out too well, how
about you give me a ride and show me how to do it. You were alone and that I guess was
my real first impression and yet, how they could have prepared you for that, except for
maybe mentioning it, you’re going to feel this, you know, I don’t know how they could
have prepared you for that, but that was distinctly the feeling was wow, here I am, what I
brought with me in terms of training and just experience is what’s going to get me
through this because I’m on my own.

SM: So when you got there, I guess we should probably discuss the trip over?
MM: Trip over, yes, we can. I’m not sure I remember it.
SM: What happened when you finished your training and went over?
MM: Very quickly, after training I was there for Christmas of ’65, and I honestly
do not recall if I zipped up to New York to see my family one last time or not, I’m sure
that if I could I did, but I don’t remember. In any case, either from Hurlburt or from New
York I went back to Travis, by then let’s see, where was I, I had actually moved twice in
those four years. I left the base, which most guys did when they could because the living
conditions were better downtown in a nice apartment. I got me a roommate named Fred
Sanford who was a pilot in my squadron and Fred and I roomed together in an apartment
down in Fairfield which is the other town that’s adjacent to Travis, for quite a while.
Then Fred got married and I moved back to Vacaville with a couple of guys from the
squadron in a house, a real house that one of they guys had bought. He was just
financing it basically by having two or three other guys move in, but we were all pilots in
the same squadron. So I think I went, I know I did, I went back there and stayed there for
a few days I guess and sort of put my affairs in order. Again, as I indicated in my written
narrative, I was a pretty avid reader at the time, and I stuck a box of mostly spy novels,
Helen McInnes and Eric Ambler and James Bond and a million others in an enormous
box, actually a console television had come in it. I stuck them up in the attic and I think
they’re still there, I never did retrieve them. But I put my affairs in order for two or three
days and then basically caught my flight right out of Travis again, carrying the absolute
minimum, a couple of light bags of underwear and shaving kit, and a couple of uniforms,
not much else over there, a jet transport, Continental or Brannif or one of those who were
all operating contract airlift out of Travis by those days. Simply moving troops and
probably made a stop or two, Honolulu, [Guam] but absolutely a lost trip in my mind,
totally uneventful just got there in the course of time and that was that.

SM: You mentioned reading material earlier in your, I guess you enjoy spy
novels and things like that?

MM: I did then, my tastes have changed slightly since, I’m into now science
fiction good stuff and science fantasy, *The Hobbit*, things like that. And a good, what
they call a good English country house mystery, you know a good Agatha Christie
something like that, but I still read an enormous amount. I probably still read a book a
week or more and back in those days, I was probably reading two or three a week, so I’ve
read a lot of books in my time.

SM: As you were getting ready to go into Vietnam, did you expand your reading
into areas concerning Vietnam?

MM: No, I didn’t at all. I think I felt that the training had prepared me, between
again SOS and Hurlburt itself. I have to believe that I thought I knew everything there
was to know in the sense that everything that was out there had been presented to me at
some point in the recent past so I didn't do anything additional. Didn’t grab a language
book or anything like that and turned out I didn't need it. I think somewhere, now that
you mention it, either at Travis as we got on the airplane, probably that’s the case, they
gave us a little pamphlet type book, it was probably four inches by four inches or three by
five or something like that, maybe a quarter of an inch thick and it was a guide to
Vietnam. Basic, in fact the Air Force I think or the government, probably the Air Force
back in those days had a whole series of these if you were going overseas, you could get
one on Turkey or Germany or wherever you happened to be going, a little bit of the
history and customs and how to behave and I guess a very basic, pointy talky kind of a
thing in the back with language. I do remember that because the front cover of it had a
picture of a Vietnamese peasant women with a pointed straw hat working in a field, that
was what was on the cover. Funny the things you do remember, when you’re prompted
by questions, again you know I could talk any one of these phases I could probably talk
to you for three weeks on any one of them, depending on details and what not, just yes, I
do remember that little book, so I guess I read that on the airplane on the way over.
SM: Now, what did you think was going on in Vietnam when you left?
MM: When I left, what did I think was going on in Vietnam? I thought it was
basically a civil war, that there was a civil war in progress with aid on one side from the
North Vietnamese Communist government, and I think in ’66 that’s probably pretty close
to accurate. I wasn’t totally naïve because I had been flying in there in the 133 as I hinted
since ’63, very early ’63. I knew that the government that we were supporting was in
many ways corrupt, very typical of at least mainland Asian historical government
approaches. Which again in, my little notes, I said the peasants were just trying to bring
in a crop of rice and watching one side romp across their farm from South to North, and
the other side romp across their farm from North to South, trampling the rice and that had
probably historically been the lot of the Asian peasant. Whether it’s Chinese or Burmese
or Vietnamese or Cambodian since forever. The government was in the hands of a very
wealthy, elite, previously French supported ruling class, basically a, well not quite a
monarchy, I guess an oligarchy is closer. A feudal system, the province chiefs, not
province chiefs, the corps areas, I Corps, II Corps, III Corps and IV Corps were run by a
Corps commander who basically operated like a Chinese warlord. He owned that area
and as long as he made the appropriate physical and financial bows to the government in
Saigon he was allowed to do what he wanted pretty much in his area and within his area
he had province chiefs and they were the petty warlords, very medieval, feudal kind of
system, almost and I knew that. I don’t think it bothered me much, I thought that again in
’60, you have to understand the political philosophies, Korean War was just barely ten
years over, in fact was never over and still isn’t over, technically. The idea of the domino
principle and the Communism attempting to dominate the world step by step was very
real in our minds and we believed it. I think it’s true that that was the philosophy, they
just never were able to execute it, so I knew, or at least believed that I was going into a
situation where the effort was probably worth it. Even if the individuals that we were
going to save weren’t, at least at the top. The peasants are always peasants and they’re
always worth saving, but the best thing you can do for them is get away, or go away.
SM: Now, that’s what you thought before you left, did your opinion change over time?

MM: I actually think I got better, by the time I left I think my opinion was better all the way around. I had a better opinion of the Vietnamese who I had met at every level. I think it’s fair to say that after a couple of coups, the leadership that was in place when I left in Vietnam, was a better leadership than the one that was there when I got there. Probably not by great orders of magnitude but I think they were more interested in actually fighting a war then they were in lining their pockets, not entirely but let’s say more. The Vietnamese officers and enlisted men who I knew, were I found very dedicated soldiers and a lot better fighters than most people gave them credit for. In any case considering the fact that some of them had been at it for their entire life with the French, Japanese, us, God knows who else. So I had a much higher opinion of them, the Vietnamese people, the ordinary people I liked quite a bit, they were like most people, just decent people. The farmers that I ran into, and even people in Saigon that shot people and people in restaurants and bars and what not, were all decent people. So I think my opinion of the people certainly was higher than when I got there. My opinion of the war, at that point I think I thought we were winning and could win, but again that was February of ’67, before the big problems that came, starting with Tet of ’68 then running on into ’70 and beyond. I guess the truth of it now that you mention it and you think about it, I think most of us had a much lower opinion of our leadership at home than we did of the people in Vietnam. I think we thought our leadership were weak and wimpy and overly cautious and nervous and overly involved in the war fighting effort, people like McNamara and what not and even Lyndon Johnson. I don’t think we had then, nor do I today have much of an opinion of them, at least in regard to how the war was prosecuted.

SM: At the time, as you were getting ready to go over to Vietnam, a couple of important events domestically as well, with a lot of civil rights activism, and of course the assassination of President Kennedy, how did those events affect you?

MM: Assassination of Kennedy didn't affect me much at all, simply because I was so busy at the time, just trying to, a whole new life for me, he was assassinated somewhere in ’63 wasn’t it?
SM: Yes, sir.

MM: Yes, so October wasn’t it, I don’t know?

SM: November.

MM: Yes, so I was fairly new in the airplane, new in terms of making a real paycheck and running my own life I guess, and those sorts of things. So it obviously affected me like it affected anybody else, but not in any real sense, more emotionally than in any real sense and life goes on. The government continues and Johnson moves on so it didn’t have much of an effect, the civil rights thing, I think at that point was still fairly low key, the hippies down in San Francisco were more amusing than they were dangerous. It’s too strong is why I’m hesitating to say it, but the moral decadence that I think was to come in later years that began in the ‘60s wasn’t all that apparent at the time. I think now back on the movies of the ‘60s, they were kind of cute immoral. The mini skirts and the sort of innuendo kind of humor that was starting to occur in the movies and what not was still sort of amusing. It hadn’t picked up a true decadent sort of a nature to it, that I think started to occur as the war became less popular, maybe ’68, ’69, ’70. The hippie movement became more of an angry anti-war, anti-country movement, you had the Chicago convention riots, you had people like McGovern running for president, which started to polarize the country, not that it’s his fault. He thought the way he thought, but a real polarity in the country started to arise just slightly after my Vietnam time. I think you’re seeing it this morning as we speak, the country has since those days, let’s say if you look very broadly from the late ‘50s where we had our differences but we were one country to today where we have our differences and we really aren’t one country any more, we’re very polarized. I think that occurred through the ‘60s and Vietnam was certainly a strong element in, well encouraging isn’t quite the right word, but facilitating that polarization. It may have even been the focal element, I don’t know, historians will figure that out. Anyway, where were we? So, the answer is that I wasn’t much affected by any of that is what you were looking for and that’s the answer. I knew it was going, it didn’t look all that dangerous or virulent at the time, I had my own things to do, and it was not a problem, for me at least.
SM: Well what led you to, you made the statement about McNamara and
Johnson, would you describe a little bit more in detail, what you thought about their
policies from the Gulf of Tonkin in ’64, up to the time you were leaving for Vietnam?

MM: No, I can’t because my opinions of them really are based on post-Vietnam,
post my time. In other words when I was back flying the 133 and the war was still
continuing and I could see it going towards failure and of course I felt like I had
contributed and I knew guys who had contributed a lot more than I did, and these guys
were letting those contributions and efforts go down the drain. So while I was there I was
essentially content with the political situation, not sure I thought about it much because I
thought we were working in the right direction. We were building up, we were fighting,
we seemed to be intent on winning at least until Tet of ’68, by which time I’d been home
a year. Which is another story we’ll get to, because by then I was really in Korea for the
Pueblo crisis, but that comes later. So my time in Vietnam I didn’t have those feelings,
those feelings came much later, like the in ’70s I think when it was obvious that we were
not intending to win, that we were looking for a way out, honorable or otherwise and so
that’s when the negativism started to come in. That coupled with my opinion, which I
still hold that the political leadership got much too involved in the details of military
operations and that’s never good. They can certainly set the stage, and that’s their job
and set the tone, but they ought not to be, deciding whether you fire to the left of fire to
the right or what, and they were doing that and McNamara was a key architect of that
because he actually believed I think that you could run a war on business principles. And
you know that’s idiotic as history and even, he has admitted, unfortunately many, many
years too late, it was an idiotic idea.

SM: What did you think about some of the incremental policies, the incremental
bombing?

MM: Mistakes, clearly.

SM: But at the time?

MM: Yes, even at the time, but those again came after my time, but yes those are
part of those elements that began to raise a level of dismay, at least dismay and disgust
with me about the leadership as the subsequent years went on. Incrementalism just
doesn’t work in a war, you’ve got to make a leap and get the other guys attention because
if you go incremental, he’s just going to incrementally adapt, which is exactly what the
North Vietnamese particularly were able to do.

SM: We talked about the political leadership, why don’t we go ahead and shift to
the military leadership for a minute. I’m curious, this may be too far out of the
experience you had in Vietnam, but what about the policy that Westmoreland put into
place that is the policy or strategy of attrition, was that discussed amongst you and your
fellow pilots, did you agree with that at all?

MM: That really was just a military translation of the political philosophy that
was coming down from Washington, attrition equals incrementalism; it’s the same thing.
But no, we didn’t discuss it at that point we were too busy with what’s the target for
today and what’s the flight call sign and what kind of ordnance they got on them. That
was the level we were working at. Plus as I indicated to you, we were so isolated that
there really wasn’t too many people to talk with. We haven’t gotten to that yet, and it’s
all in the notes that I gave you, but my first assignment, best I recall and again it’s almost
eerie because it’s surreal and almost like it didn’t happen although I know it did. I know
there were a number of Americans at Duc Hoa, which was the first place I went and yet I
only remember one, that was my old roommate, Dave Pinsky. But I think Dave and I
were the only twos FACs there at the time so we were busy and there wasn’t a lot of time
for political discussion. The discussions tended to center more around home kind of
stuff, you might talk about sports, you might talk about your family, you might talk about
what you’re going to do when you go back, those kinds of things. We didn’t get into any
heavy political discussions over there. [Note: Dave says there were others: John
Postgate, Oscar Brooks, etc. I have no recall at all.]

SM: Well let’s go ahead and get to Vietnam then, for a little bit. What were your
first impressions when you arrived, that is when you’re getting off the plane and you
were on Vietnamese soil?

MM: Okay, now understand we landed at Tan Son Nhut which is the big airport
at Saigon and I had been there many time so the place was familiar to me, at least it
wasn’t a shock which I imagine it would have been to some people. It was not a shock to
me, but even saying that, the feeling that okay, I’m really here and I’m going to be here
for a year if I survive was, it was real. It was like all right, fooling around is over, this is
not a concept any more, this is reality. I’m here and I think we all felt that, getting off the airplane. It was hot, even in February and sticky which it always was and especially getting off an air-conditioned airplane, it just about whacks you when the door opened. My recollection of the process is vague, but I think accurate. I think we were simply guided across the ramp, a short distance, maybe a hundred yards to some buildings that were very close to the ramp area, reception area where we were greeted and processed fairly quickly. I think we were issued a sleeping bag and a few odds and ends, the first day and we were told where the Officers’ Club was and told what we had to do the next day. And we went to a building that basically looked, my mind says was like a hangar, big but with no walls and just full of cots, not cots, but bunk beds, and we basically just sort of hung around that first day because they didn't have anything for us. Found a bunk and dumped our stuff and wandered over to the Officer’s Club, had a few drinks and see if you could spot anybody you knew, kind of a thing. On the airplane going over I think there were at least one or two guys that were from my Hurlburt class and we sort of, clustered together, had a couple of drinks and dinner and wandered around Tan Son Nhut, sort of got the lay of the land. Then the next day was in-processing which was a little bit more regimented, shot records and we were issued some basic gear. I think some firearms we were issued at that point an M-16 and .38 revolved and some ammunition, a very small amount, twenty, thirty rounds of ammunition. Fatigues, we were issued fatigues and basically told you can roll up your 1505s which was the Class B uniform at the time, the tan uniform and keep them if you want, or throw them away. Most guys find they don’t use them while they are here and some basic personnel processing, next of kin kind of things. At some point we were told to select a code word that we were going to use if we were shot down or taken prisoner so that we could verify who we were. I remember mine was blue carbuncle, which was a title of one of Sherlock Holmes short stories. So if they wanted to really prove it was me, it was supposed to me and a safe that that then went into and the only people who knew that word until it became necessary to use it. Some transportation scheduling to get us to our units, very, very basic and again very vague in my mind as you can tell by the way I’m sort of mumbling, but we were there for I think two days, a day and a half, not much more and I got on a bus at the appointed time and was driven over to Bien Hoa Air Base which wasn’t very far. An
hour drive probably, maybe not even that much and that was my first look at, at least part
of the real Vietnam. That is to say a Vietnam outside of a military base which had
always been my experience in the past, even flying in previously or downtown Saigon
being a big city, not quite the same as the boondocks. So we got to see a little bit of the
countryside on the way over to Bien Hoa and that was somewhat of a surprise to me, but
not much either because again I’d been flying in Asia for four years and I knew what
poor Asia looked like, whether it was Taiwan or rural Japan or Thailand or whatever. I
knew what to expect, dirt roads and open sewers and houses made out of whatever and
people who looked like farmers and didn’t wear shoes and that sort of thing. So not a
great shock but interesting clearly, because this was going to be where we were going to
be for a year so I paid attention on the bus ride on over and then they dropped me at my
unit which was the 19th TASS, Tactical Air Support Squadron. And the 19th TASS, and I
never bothered getting myself too acquainted with the structure because it didn’t matter
to me, but now as an aside, as I think you know, I at least volunteered to do the 19th
TASS portion of this FAC book that we are going to try and write as a result of the
reunion that you were at. So I’m going to get more into what was the structure and who
was the leadership at different periods of time, but basically it was just a small building,
the 19th TASS administratively, and I guess to some degree operationally controlled all
the forward air controllers in the III Corps area. And I was going to be in the III Corps
area as it turned out, so that’s where they sent me and indoctrination there again was
quite brief. I think I only spent one night, maybe two there at Bien Hoa, again in a
transient barracks, very basic sort of a thing. Spent some time at the club at the bar, had
dinner, ran into interestingly, one of the guys I had lived with in Vacaville. Actually the
guy who owned the house that we lived in, Bob Hilvers, Bob was there flying the U-10
which is a kind of a semi-CIA kind of an airplane, a Pilatus. I think a Pilatus Porter made
in Sweden or somewhere Finland, Sweden I believe but he was flying, it was a
propaganda kind of an airplane. It had loudspeakers on it, it could drop leaflets, things of
that sort and he came limping down the street because he had taken a couple of pieces of
shrapnel during a mortar attack about three days before on Bien Hoa. So we talked for a
few minutes, he was going some place, had to be there, and I was going some place and
had to be there so we only talked a couple of minutes and I never saw him again as it
turned out. The indoctrination there at the 19th TASS was again, very basic, you know making sure you had what you needed, the right uniforms, fatigues, the right weapons, all the paperwork had been filled out correctly, you understood where you were going, what you were going to do, who the boss was and what their function was and that sort of thing. I don’t think they even gave me a check-flight, I don’t recall one, they had airplanes there, but I don’t even recall anybody saying, can you just show us if you can fly the airplane. I guess they assumed that and this was before the days of the in-country FAC school, which I’m sure you’ve heard about. Just before that so I did not go to that, wasn’t there. I think it probably came just months later, but I did not go to that, I just went straight, after we figured out that I wasn’t getting anything done at Bien Hoa that needed to be done. They said well, where you’re going is Doc Hoa, and I said that’s interesting, tell me where that is, they showed me on a map and one morning, either the second or third morning I’d been there, I don’t really remember, a helicopter, Army helicopter came by, picked me up and we went wakita wakita in the helicopter out to Duc Hoa, which was, from Bien Hoa about a half hour plane ride. Couldn’t have been any more than that, probably less, more or less straight west from the Saigon-Bien Hoa complex there, just a little old airfield. Somebody told me that the Japanese had actually built it during the Second World War, but that may or may not be true, in a little town, rice fields and mud and water buffalos, typical place with a very small compound where the U.S. advisors, both Army and the FACs lived for their year out there in company with the leadership of the local Vietnamese military unit, which is going to take some explaining. But before I do that, I think again in my written narrative I said when a helicopter landed on a little PSP, pierced steel, actually it was PAP, pierced aluminum planking I think, ramp that was there by the runway. The local FAC came out to meet me because he’d been told I was coming, and turned out to be my pilot training roommate Dave Pinsky, who by the way just for interest, Dave turned out to retire as a Brigadier General and I think he was the wing commander of the SR-71 wing at Beale Air Force base in California when he retired. And again I saw him at the FAC reunion so that was nice but back to the story. So Dave met me, said, ‘hi, nice to see you and this is the way you’re going to be for the next year’ and he walked me across the ramp to a new construction. They had just started to kind of try and build this place up a little bit, the
runway was being improved and there was some very nice, newly painted cement block
barracks, and office buildings and cement sidewalks and all of that sort of thing, nice
clean trash barrels outside. Actually quite spiffy for Vietnam, looked real nice and my
room was nice and clean, linoleum tiles kind of a floor. A very nice, fan going, may have
even been an air conditioner, but I don’t think so, nice little mess hall and what not. So,
that was the environment there, the mission basically was to be the forward air controller
for Hau Nghia, and that’s spelled H-A-U, second word, N-G-H-I-A, Hau Nghia province,
which was where Duc Hoa was located and we were to be the FACs for that province and
for the Vietnamese regiment as best I understand it, of the 25th Vietnamese division
which was also responsible for that province. The 25th Division, three regiments, being
also responsible for Tay Ninh province which was the province to the north and Long An
province which was the province to the south so that was how it was structured. We were
smack in the middle of the Vietnamese structure in other words. We were not working
for Americans, we were not associated with Americans, except a couple of American
advisors to that regiment who also lived at Duc Hoa. But our boss was the province chief
basically, or at least the man we were there to support and answered to, was the
Vietnamese province chief and the Vietnamese regimental commander there. So, that
day, we would go out and fly visual reconnaissance. The terrain was as flat as a board
and very swampy in Hau Nghia province. Almost no towns, most of it was free fire, if
not all of it was free fire zone, it was on the west side of a river, Vam Co Dong I believe
is what it was called, which means, there was a Vam Co Dong and a Van Co something,
and it just means the Vam Co river east and the Vam Co river west. Anyway, it was
basically and everything between that river and the Cambodian border which was the
other limit of Hau Nghia province, farther to the west was just a big open swamp free fire
zone with a couple of little towns. Most of them clustered along the river itself, so we
went out and did reconnaissance and more or less true, with some judgment occasionally,
anything that moved out there you shot at. And we tried to find VC, very few if any
NVA out there, just local Vietcong, either trying to move through the area or trying to
build something in the area or trying to mass some sort of a force that could harass a town
or an outpost of some sort, a village outpost or what have you. So our job was to
basically keep their heads down I guess, in plain and simple English that was it. Keep them nervous and eliminate as many of them as we could and so we did reconnaissance and when we found targets we would pre-plan air strikes through the direct air support center also at Bien Hoa. And if we found something moving that we hadn’t anticipated, why we’d try to get an immediate air strike, again communicating through our radios, either directly or through the radio at Duc Hoa to the direct air support center. The long and the short of it was I wasn’t there very long. I was there, I don’t really know, but I think about a month and a half and it’s all very weird to me, again I know I must have met people other than Pinsky, both Americans and Vietnamese and I can’t put a face or a name on one of them. So I may have been in some sort of emotional shock without really realizing it although I don’t feel like I was, but I sure don’t remember much about that place and what happened. There is that a pilot whose name I have recorded but I don’t have in my head, down at the southern province, Long An, city of Tan An, capital of province Long An, FAC down there of whom they were two, got shot one day. Took a bullet up through his seat, to be indelicate about it and was very badly wounded and was sent home and never came back--he didn’t die, but he was very badly wounded. So for whatever reason, pipeline or what not, I guess they thought they needed to send me down there. They meaning the 19th TASS and they were gouging to send somebody else to Duc Hoa, so I was told one day, jump in an airplane, Pinsky and I, and Dave’s going to take me down to Long An, Tan An and I was going to be the FAC down there for the rest of my career. So we did that and Dave went back to Duc Hoa and I didn’t see him again for endless years, but I was met there at another very primitive airstrip, it was really just a wide spot in the road about a thousand feet long with a PAP ramp where they had some fifty-five gallon fuel drums sandbagged. And we pumped our own fuel with a hand pump through a chamois cloth into the airplane, it was that primitive, but I was met by a guy named Pete Bernstein-- it’s comical in a way. Comical isn’t the right word, but both of these guys were Jewish by the way and back in those days there weren’t that many Jewish officers in the military or in the Air Force, but Dave was Jewish and so was Pete. I don’t know if that’s relevant, but it’s interesting --but Pete met me and we got to be good buddies for again, only about a month a half, two months. Pete was like Dave, very aggressive pilot, very good pilot, nice guy to know and we lived and flew together at the
town again of Tan An, the province of Long An, airfield I think was known as Long An as well. But I could be wrong about that and we lived in a slightly different situation, my memory of that is just a tad better than of Duc Hoa. Mission was essentially the same, visual reconnaissnace, keep their heads down, find them and kill them when you could, basically. But we lived in town and the town was quite a nice little town for Vietnam, little rural town but quite nice, a couple of decent little restaurants, very primitive, but decent, a river flowing through it, some bridges, a soccer field, quite a nice little place. We lived in a two-story, I think it was two-story it may have been three, house right on the soccer field and this house was given over to the U.S. military advisory detachment of which there were for some reason more people than there were at Duc Hoa, probably because the facility was there, so there was an Army Colonel in charge of the Army Advisory detachment to the province chief who lived in a palace a just down to the right, at one end of the soccer field. And a whole range of officers advising the province in various fields, logistics and intelligence and what not, there were captains and Lieutenants and Majors and what not, but just two FACs, just me and Pete. And we lived in the house I had a room with an Army guy and we lived there, I would say quite comfortably. We had the maids and the cook and we ran our own mess. Somebody went to Saigon once a month or every couple of weeks and hit the commissary and came back with all the essentials and we made our own meals, or had the cook make them, more or less identified what they would be. Had laundry service and the rooms were comfortable, played cards at night, watched movies, just talked, drank again as is usual probably more than we should have. Not to excess I would say because you had to fly every day, but you sat and had three for four drinks every night, certainly. Talked about this and that, but again not politics, talked about home and what are you going to do and how was your day and what’s going on in the province, those kinds of things. Again, the stories but a lot of the stories I remember are in that written document I gave you. Particularly for Vietnam I think I took more time to try and remember as much as I could about kind of the funny or not-so-funny stories, but in any case and maybe we can, go ahead.

SM: Well, I was just going to say, can I ask you a couple real quick questions, focus on a couple of issues. In your time at Duc Hoa, you mentioned that although it was a brief period, you had a lot of operational experience, lot of visual reconnaissance and
things like that. You also mentioned in the written document that you were able to call in
a number of different types of fire, artillery, air strike, and others, did you find, what type
of fire did you find more effective, did you not like to fire a particular type of fire?

MM: Okay, well I didn’t care, if I needed to do it, I just lived with whatever I had
available to me at the time, but to answer your question and it will come up again
probably, the least effective was artillery in most cases. The Vietnamese artillery and I
never controlled to the best of my knowledge U.S. artillery while I was at Duc Hoa, they
had a few guns, 105 Howitzers, located at various more or less secure places. But they
weren’t bedded in concrete like a gun really needs to be to be very accurate, after they
fired three or four times if they jump a foot, that foot of jumping back will equate to
several hundred yards on the other end, so they weren’t very accurate. They tried real
hard. They were competent people. They just weren’t working with the very best of
equipment and circumstances. As a matter of fact I made it a point to visit them, usually
a Vietnamese captain was in charge of a gun position, so that we, just face to face we
knew who we were and who we were talking to, sometimes that helps, and I can look at
the guns and see what their problems were in terms of how much time they took and what
problems they were fighting in trying to do what I was trying to get them to do. And that
was very useful, primitive maps that they were trying to use and ranging and distances.
They just didn’t have the skills or the training to be extremely accurate, they tried as best
they could. By extremely accurate I’m talking about hitting within ten, twenty yards,
with artillery which is doable, a lot of people don’t believe that but it is doable if you’ve
got the right people shooting with the right equipment, namely the U.S. Marine Corps but
that comes later in the story. So artillery was not good particularly if you were trying to
use high explosives against a target. Now if you used air bursts it was a little better
because if you could burst a shell at a couple hundred, three hundred, four hundred feet in
the air and get a spray pattern of shrapnel in that open swamp, you could do some
damage and I learned that and tried to use VT, vicinity timed fuses, whenever I could,
just for those kinds of reasons. Also a shell hitting in the mud, by the time it explodes
has lost a lots of its power, so artillery at Duc Hoa was not all that useful. Helicopters,
almost all flown by U.S. people when you could get them, provided the target was
reasonably soft, were extremely effective because back in those days they were all being
flown by eighteen year old warrant officers who were crazier than I was, and they would just do anything. And with rockets and machine guns, literally hovering over the target, ignoring potential danger was a very effective weapon provided you were talking troops in the open or lightly defended targets, things of that sort or a small wooden bridge that you needed to knock down with rockets. They were very, very good, aside from the fact that you had to sort of keep them from killing themselves at times, they were very, very effective. The airplanes ran a range because they were all different. The most accurate, far and away was the A-1 flown either by a Vietnamese or an American. The Vietnamese A-1 pilots had been flying for years and years and years and they were just unbelievably good. They knew their country, they knew the terrain, they knew the targets they knew their weapons, everything. They were just superb and they had tremendous endurance. It was a slow gasoline fueled airplane that could linger for hours under certain circumstances if you needed them to, and they carried a ton of ordnance, depending 110 pound white phosphorus bombs, which was a very effective bomb. As you’ve seen in the World War II [films] with the white phosphorus smoke trail, I think they could carry forty-eight of them, as I remember. It was an enormous number, so they were very effective, their only weakness is they had fifty caliber machine guns, rate of fire very slow and not as effective as a gun, as other guns were, but all in all, I would say that if I was in a fight, my preferred airplane was the A-1 without a doubt. And I didn’t care whether a Vietnamese was flying it or an American, I had no trouble controlling them, language wasn’t a problem. They were good and they could linger and they could drop one bomb at a time and they could see their target because they were slow, they were the best in my opinion. Right up behind them was the F-100 flown by Americans, usually out of Bien Hoa when we were talking Duc Hoa and Long An. I think more experienced [pilots], the airplane was designed for air-to-ground operations, it could deliver ordnance bombs, napalm, extremely accurately and the gun on that airplane was CBU’s as well, plus the bomb units. Extremely effective and the gun was very, very effective on that airplane, 20 millimeter cannon, very accurate at least in the hands of the pilots that I dealt with, that I flew with, or had fly for me however you want to look at it. So those were the two best, far and away and I would say that everything else came a poor second, whether it was F-5s, which were the Scoshie tigers, they were the training,
even today the current advanced pilot [training] trainer, quick little airplane, good little airplane, but very light load. F-4, in my opinion probably the worst airplane for the job, not really designed for close air support, not as accurate as the others with any of its ordnance, bombs, napalm, guns or anything else, never was crazy about the F-4. A-4, that’s one we ought to talk about, Navy, the A-4s that came off the carrier Dixie Station, out in the China Sea were very spotty. My impression was that frequently if you got a flight of four, you’d have three green bean pilots on it, who really just didn’t have the experience to deliver ordnance accurately. Usually there was one old man in the squadron and you could tell just by the voice and the control and the accuracy of his delivery, which one was which in any flight, even if he wasn’t calling himself lead, or what not. So the A-4 was a very capable airplane, similar to the F-100 in that it was designed for close air support in the Navy, but for the Marine Corps, but the pilots coming off Dixie station were not always in my estimation, they were just new. They just weren’t experienced so it was very spotty, plus they had some weird ordinance packages, a lot of times they’d come off the station with one two thousand pound bomb, which was not the kind of ordnance I needed. Although if I was trying to knock a building down in Berlin it might have been, but not trying to kill three guys running through a swamp so. Later in my career I also ran in to the Canberra, the B-57 used in a close air support role. Not bad, not bad at all, but that was later on when I was with the Vietnamese airborne division, but that in a nutshell really I think runs down at least the airplane types. Ordnance, napalm was very good, CBU, cluster bomb unit was excellent because there were a lot of tree lines in that area, not the hedgerows but very long and that’s where the VC typically dug their foxholes and hid out, twenty millimeter cannon was good for the same reason. Bombs were relatively ineffective again, because of the mud and because you had to deliver them very accurately if you’re trying to blow up a bunker that’s the size of a small dining room and you miss by fifty yards or even less probably you didn’t get it, so bombs were not the answer there in my opinion, so I take a breath, you ask questions.

SM: That was great. Let me ask you this though, did you ever find that the accuracy of some of those aircraft depended upon the pilot, that is whether he was an Air Force pilot, Navy pilot or Marine pilot?
MM: Not to where you could make a consistent case for that, no. The answer is yes, there were certainly times when you knew you had a guy flying the airplane who was better than the guy you had twenty minutes ago, same airplane, same load, better pilot. I mean you could see that, and that’s normal but not consistently, not to where you could say, except the Dixie Station. The young kids coming that appeared to me to be guys right out of Pensacola that were on their first probably operational assignment, that was my feeling anyway, never have confirmed it. Could be dead wrong, but those guys were consistently not up to it, other than that I never noticed anything in particular with airplanes.

SM: What about with regard to the F-4, the reason I ask is because of course Marine pilots would have been trained specifically for close air support missions, usually, versus and Air Force F-4 pilot or a Navy F-4 pilot, their role would have been, or their training may have been different so I’m curious, did you witness a difference there?

MM: I think I did, I think the F-4 probably did, for example, did a hell of a lot better when it went up to North Vietnam than it did trying to do close air support in South Vietnam. Navy and Marine F-4 pilots later in my career, when I was with the Airborne Division and up in the north. Yes I think they did better but I’ll tell you I just think the airplane inherently wasn’t built for close air support, and another problem was legs. When an airplane comes to you from somewhere and you’ve got a target that you want to work a piece at a time and the guys says I’m bingo fuel and you say okay, make one pass and dump everything you’ve got. This is not close air support as it should be practiced and many, many times that was the case with the F-4, it burned gas like crazy, particularly when it got down low, so it just was not the right airplane in my mind. The F-100 was decent, the A-4 was decent and again, the A-1 was just supreme, it was ideal.

SM: In terms of the fuel and other issues about loiter time, did you ever encounter other problems? For instance I recall an interview with somebody where they discussed the problem of sometimes the fast flyers would come in, the jets would come in and they had just re-fuelled, so they were so full on fuel they couldn’t really maneuver as well?

MM: No, didn’t that have that problem, you may have been talking with somebody who was FAC-ing up in the north, and I have no clue as to what their
environment was, except what I’ve seen in newsreels like anybody else. No, I never had 
that problem, I never had anybody who said I’ve got to burn some before I can start, no 
not that I can remember, no.

SM: This ends the interview with Michael Morea.
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Morea. It is the 4th of January the year 2001, at approximately 8:20 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Morea is in Palm Harbor, Florida. All right sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with a discussion of your time at Duc Hoa and Long An.

MM: Just to provide continuity. As I said after a day or two, as best I recall at Bien Hoa just getting oriented I was told that I was going to be assigned to a place called Duc Hoa, had no idea where it was. And that a helicopter would be available on the appropriate morning to take me out there, so that is what happened. I packed up what little gear I had, uniforms and I think a couple of weapons and flak jacket and few odds and ends and met the helicopter on the ramp at Bien Hoa and took a very short ride as it turned out, basically straight west to Duc Hoa air base. And landed on a small PSP or PAP, pierced steel planking or pierced aluminum planking, ramp probably fifty yards square if it was that. I was let off and the helicopter took off and disappeared and I was standing there alone and within seconds I saw another military guy. A guy dressed in fatigues walking toward me, and before he got to me I realized that it was my old roommate, Dave Pinsky, my old roommate from pilot training. So we had a surprise pleasant reunion there on the ramp, Dave was the only Forward Air Controller assigned there at the time, and I was to be his partner. So we quickly reacquainted ourselves with what had been going on for about, I guess four years or so, that we had been out of pilot
training and he got me settled in. [Note: As I mentioned previously, Dave assures me
this was not the case, but it’s all I remembered.] By settled in I mean this, well let me
describe Duc Hoa just a little bit, very primitive place. It can be found on the map, it’s as
I said just west of the Saigon, Bien Hoa area on the banks of a river, the name of which
escapes me. But again very easy to find on a map, a runway, maybe a thousand feet long,
maybe twelve hundred feet, dirt, the PAP ramp where we parked our airplane or two,
depending on what we had, also had a conex box on it where we kept our ordnance, our
rockets primarily and that was about it for the airfield. Immediately adjacent to the
airfield were a series of buildings, they were cement block, most of them and they were
almost brand new when I got there. Matter of fact within weeks of being finished, nice
looking buildings, freshly painted, tile floors, windows, fans in the ceiling, very, very
comfortable, even concrete sidewalks connecting them and connecting them to the
common latrine that we had and the common mess hall that we had there. We, meaning
myself and Dave and a few Army advisors who were there to advise the local
Vietnamese. I’m not sure if we covered this but lets cover it quickly. The military
structure was this way; Duc Hoa was the airfield that supported operations in Hau Nghia,
H-A-U N-G-H-I-A, province. Hau Nghia was the central province of the area of
operations of the 25th ARVN division, Tay Ninh province being the northern province
and Tay Ninh airfield having a similar function there with similar contingent of FACs
and advisors assigned. And then Long An airfield which was in Long An province,
which was south of Hau Nghia and again similarly arranged, a couple of FACs and some
Army advisors to advise the southern contingent of the 25th ARVN division, which
operated in that province. So my job basically was, as it turned out, was to do visual
reconnaissance in Hau Nghia province, try and find what the enemy, almost entirely Viet
Cong, no North Vietnamese at that time to speak of, what the Viet Cong were up to Hau
Nghia province. And to interdict and interrupt their operations as best we could. I’ll
describe Hau Nghia province just a little bit, very flat, flat as a board actually, almost all
swamp, rice paddies, some dyking to separate the paddies and provide some means of
transit through the swamp. The other means of transit would have been small boats,
sampans really, in the canals that also crisscrossed the area, so it was basically a rice
farming area or had been. However it had been long before I got there turned into what
was called a free fire zone, which means that, and this may not be politically accurate, but
as we understood it, which meant that basically no one lived there. No one could live
there and anything that moved in that area was considered a target, be it man or beast, so
in that sense it was an easy place to do reconnaissance and air operations in, easy to see
things if they were there, and easy to attack them once you saw them.

SM: And that was the case for the whole province?

MM: Best I recall, it was just, you’d have to look at a map, but basically that was
it. It ran all they way from the river to the Cambodian border, and even into Cambodia it
was still pretty much swamp. The only legal activity, so to speak, human activity in the
province was right along the river and it would have been on the east bank of the river
only, there was a Nuoc-Mam factory, a rather large one, Nuoc-Mam being a Vietnamese
condiment similar to soy sauce but more potent, saltier and more strong in flavor made
from fermented fish. So basically if you laid a fish in the sun long enough to rot, the
brown juice that drips out of it is Nuoc-Mam, or at least once you clean it up and put in a
bottle it is, not as bad as it sounds actually, but very strong stuff. Anyway there was a
factory for Nuoc-Mam along the river, north of us and very little else. So really our job
was to prevent infiltration from Cambodia into the built-up areas of Bien Hoa, Saigon
and what not and that’s what we did.

SM: One more thing about Hau Nghia it was, just to clarify, the whole province
though was considered by you as a Forward Air Controller as a free fire zone, so
anything moving in Hau Nghia was a target of opportunity?

MM: That's right and again I may be wrong on that but I don’t think I am, in any
case that represents my best recollection.

SM: Now the intelligence briefings you received concerning that province, did
They focus primarily on the presence of Vietcong units, NVA units, combinations?

MM: My recollection is it was nothing that formal, I don’t remember ever getting
an intelligence briefing, any where, either at Bien Hoa, I think I might have gotten a very
general sort of description of Vietnam in general and how the war was being conducted,
rules of engagement, don’t fly below fifteen hundred feet of course was the major rule
because that was considered the effective range of small arms fire. Basic rules of safety,
wear your helmet which as I think I’ve said already, we never did, or at least I never did
and things like that, but nothing in the way of detail. Everything that I recall that I got
about Hau Nghia province I got from Dave Pinsky who had been there before and knew
what was going on and he probably got it the same way from somebody who preceded
him. Again, filling in some blanks here, as I may have mentioned at some point, and I
don’t know if I’d mentioned this to you verbal, or if it’s in my written thing. So I’ll
mention it again briefly, I know, just because it had to be that way, that there were some
Army people there who were advising what I call the central regiment of the 25th ARVN
division, and probably the few artillery pieces that served the province, but I honest to
Pete do not remember meeting them. I have no recollection of faces or names or
anything of the sort, which goes to the comment that I’ve made before that in many,
many ways the entire experience of Vietnam, particularly the first two assignments which
were short is pretty surreal to me. Sort of came and went, maybe I was in a fog, I don’t
know, I don’t think I was day to day, but maybe in a functional long term sense I was and
I remember very, very little of my probably month and a half at Duc Hoa. A couple of
funny stories which are again funny now, they certainly weren’t funny then, but funny
stories that I’ve recorded in the written document. The one about the Army General from
the research and development command who brought the fleshette rockets out to us, and
asked them to test them and all that, but I won’t go into that verbally, it’s all in the
written document.

SM: Well, just for the sake of continuity within the interview, could you describe
them somewhat, so that there's a little bit and people can also refer to the written
document?

MM: Describe what?

SM: That particular incident.

MM: That incident goes this way, Dave and I were, just one day we probably got
a radio call said there’s going to be an Army Brigadier General visiting you today. He’s
coming out in a helicopter and so we were prepared for him. He came out, I remember
him being a little short squatty guy, almost round in my memory, again he couldn’t have
been or he wouldn’t have been on active duty, but that’s the way I remember him, very
short and very broad, Army Brigadier from research and development somewhere. He
brought with him in the helicopter, or actually I think a second helicopter followed him
the next day, brought with him a large supply of rockets that we had not seen before. They were the same as the ones we used, 2.75 in folding fin aircraft rocket, FFAR, but the warhead, rather than a smoke or explosive which we were used to, was a pink plastic nose cone. Inside of which were hundred, if not thousand of fleshettes, which are basically nails, I remember them being a inch and a half to two inches long with fins on them, so just like little darts and when you fired this rocket, at some point in its flight, the centrifugal force acted on the pink plastic cover, blew it off and the effect of the rocket was it fired forward this mass of fleshette rockets similar to what a shotgun would do. And made a pattern of, an impact pattern, depending on your altitude the size of it would vary, but my recollection, it wasn’t too big, might have been twenty yards across at normal altitudes, something like that, but the idea was that we were to test these. We were to fire them whenever opportunity arose at human targets on the ground and then if we were to kill a Vietcong we were supposed to get on the radio and call somebody, who I have no idea, and they were going to come out and recover the body and do an autopsy. It seemed a little bizarre but it was a weapon and that was what we were up to. So we took a pretty good supply of them and did use them on several occasions, tried to keep one on the airplane all the time in one tube and both Dave and I probably killed one or two VC at least, with them. Made the appropriate radio call but in fact to my recollection we never recovered, because again it was so swampy that frequently if you did kill an enemy soldier, they would just disappear in the mud and that was the end of that. So they were still there as best I know and when I left a month and a half later, and again, we had used them, they seemed to be rather effective, but again we never did recover a body and never saw the general again, and to my knowledge never had anybody at least ask me for any follow-up on it.

SM: Now just out of curiosity, as a forward air controller, what did you think of this attempt to adapt the O-1 which had such limited firepower ability to try to turn it into some form of a, was this for an absolute last resort you have to defend yourself weapon?

MM: No, no. Well, this was really a test and I think probably intended more to be used on Army helicopters ultimately and things of that sort but we were convenient. We were probably the closest airfield to the Saigon-Bien Hoa complex that was actually in an area where this sort of test could be easily accomplished because of the swampy
area and what not. At least that was thought initially, so they were only given to us really
to test, but to go back to your point we had already, we I think meaning all FACs had
long since decided that to the degree that we could, we were going to become fighter
aircraft. And there are, again in my notes, there are all kinds of ideas that people came up
with. Just briefly to summarize those I mean I’ve talked from the sublime to the
ridiculous. We used our smoke rockets as attack weapons if we had to, it was white
phosphorus, it is a dangerous weapon. We used high explosive rockets, we almost
always carried one or two of those. I have fired on many occasions, I think it was an M-
40, it might have been M-70, but I think it was an M-40 grenade launcher, shoulder-fired
weapon, like a shotgun that fired a forty millimeter grenade. I frequently used that from
the airplane, rather effective into tree lines, fired the M-16 on more than one occasion to
effect. People did throw hand grenades, I told you I never personally did that, I didn't
think that was smart, what else? We had a side mounted M-60 machine gun in one of the
O-1s there at Duc Hoa and there are pictures of it available in various publications that
are still on the market. So your standard Army crew served two-man I guess it was
considered a light machine gun, fired the 308 NATO round I suppose.

SM: It was an M-60.

MM: Yes, M-60 machine gun and it was mounted in the back seat of the airplane
as an experiment as well, and we used it on several occasions. I didn’t think it was too
useful for a couple of reasons and to the end, there were I told you I think in the notes,
that I had a CIA guy once who just wanted to go out and see what the area looked like,
Cambodia and what not who fired five rounds out of his Colt detective special at a couple
of VC, so we did it all. The M-60 machine gun as long as I mentioned it, the reason I
didn’t like it, it was a little awkward to operate from the front seat because you had to
kind of reach over into the back seat and move what I think is called the charging handle.
It really operates the bolt on the gun to get a round into it and get it set up to fire.
The worst thing was that most of the spent shells wound up in the airplane and they
presented a real danger of getting into places where they could foul control lines and so
probably more for that reason than anything else I certainly wasn’t crazy about the thing
and I think I only used it once or twice. But again I have two photographs of that
airplane configured that way.
SM: Now was the machine gun on the right side?

MM: Shot out of the left, whoops, oh boy, I’d have to look at the pictures, my first reaction was to say that it shot out of the right side, that wouldn’t make sense. The sight was on the left strut and all it was, was a little piece of aluminum and most pilots are more comfortable for various reasons making left turns than right, so I’ve got to believe it was set up out of the left window, but the photograph would confirm that.

SM: The reason I asked was because the charging handle if I recall correctly is on the right and it’s extremely hard to pull back, this is not an easy weapon to lock and load. So if it were on the right side of the aircraft that would make it even more cumbersome to try to get a charge in.

MM: It was difficult; it wasn’t the greatest idea we’d ever seen. All right so that takes us to another sort of pause point.

SM: Well, I’m just curious, getting back to the fleshette rockets; those were eventually employed with the OV-10 weren’t they?

MM: I have no idea, that was the end of my experience with them, completely so anything you know is more than I know on that subject.

SM: I was just curious. It seems like maybe in the context of a Forward Air Controller test environment I didn't know if maybe they were putting it on the O-1 to test it, to see if it would be effective for a better platform like the O-10.

MM: Well, I think yes but the OV-10 didn’t even exist at the time, so I think that better platform and particularly since this general is Army, would have been the helicopter.

SM: Well I will ask you to describe one more story based on your time at Duc Hoa and in your autobiography, the little memoir you sent me, you talk about the only hairy mission as you call it, when you were controlling the F-100s, why don’t you go ahead and discuss that.

MM: Okay, which one was that now?

SM: This was in direct support of Vietnamese.

MM: Is that where they started shooting the mortars, that story?

SM: Yes, they begin firing mortars in support as well, and you were of course at a rather low altitude.
MM: Yes, I was really low. Well, okay I, as best I recall, it was an afternoon, it was a beautiful day as I remember, blue sky and all of that sort of thing. And we had a small unit of the local troops, probably a company, as best I remember, out doing a sweep operation somewhere in the province, and I remember them maneuvering on the ground, everything looked pretty peaceful. I think I had done some pre-strikes just to soften up the area if there was anything there and they had moved into the area and I was just doing my circling overhead, keeping an eye on them and they did run into contact. It was not what I would call heavy contact, but the small Vietnamese units in the army, they weren’t well equipped, they weren’t necessarily well organized or led. Although sometimes they were, a small contact usually meant stop, they weren’t all that aggressive and I can’t say I blame them they’ve been at it for a long time with very little success. In any case it quickly turned into a standoff between the two opposing units. Another factor is when the friendlies knew they had air, and I can see it from their point of view, why go charge in there and get yourself killed, when you can just sit back, call in air and have the job done that way? In any case as I recall that’s what happened, it turned into a standoff. I called for some air and I think actually before the air got there, as best I remember I was trying to locate exactly where the enemy guys were and I had gotten down very, very low, literally treetop, palms were little, and so that denies I something I said earlier, there were I guess a few palm trees growing here and there, but certainly nothing like dense foliage. And they were palm trees, now that I remember. Flying right at the top of the palm trees, probably under them to be honest at some point, so I might have been twenty-five, thirty feet in the air at some point, which is good, if you’re going to get low, you might as well get very low because it’s very hard to hit something going a hundred miles an hour that’s thirty feet in the air, what you don’t want to be is in the intermediate altitudes, five, six hundred feet. That’s really the most dangerous place, but in any case I was zipping around trying to spot individual targets while the F-100s were on the way, if that’s what they were, again I don’t remember, if that’s what I said in the memoir, I guess it’s true but I don’t remember. Point of the story is that at some point, a friendly unit nearby started firing mortars in support of the friendly troops that were now, they weren’t really pinned down, they were just sort of taking a defensive position. And they started firing mortars fairly accurately unfortunately because they were hitting in the area where
the hostile guys were, which happened to be exactly where I was flying. So what is today again a humorous picture that sticks very firmly in my mind is flying over shining blue water, because it was very wet in the area, shallow, but very wet because of the blue sky and these beautiful palm trees and me just sort of lefting and righting and maneuvering around between and among them. And the next thing I knew, columns of water higher than I was exploding all around my airplane and so it was a surprise and a shock and the whole thing probably didn't last, fifteen seconds, probably not that much until I got out of the immediate area and got to circling around the general area and got on the radio and called somebody on the ground and said, find out whose shooting those and either turn them off, we have to coordinate here, either get them turned off or I'm not going back in if they’re going to continue to fire, whatever. And it only lasted a few seconds and nobody got hurt, but it indicates how people do get hurt, there are stories in the verbal history. You know bar room verbal history of guys getting mortar rounds and artillery rounds through their airplane on more than one occasion I think. In fact further down the road I’ll tell you a story where I was involved in one, indirectly. It wasn’t my airplane it was another guys and everything worked out okay there too, but that was later up at Quang Ngai, if I forget it you can remind me because I don’t think that’s in the memoir now that I think about it, there’s so many stories. But in any case, that was just one of those things where again, it teaches you, if you’re going to violate the rules, you better coordinate or sooner or later you will get hurt and it’s one of those lessons you learn, you learn them very quickly. As I said by the time I left Duc Hoa, which was only probably a month and a half after I arrived, I felt like I was very seasoned Forward Air Controller, I had probably controlled a hundred or more air strikes and had made a few mistakes in terms of the weather and fuel and approach to combat situations and a lot of other things and had learned from all of those, and I thought by then was in pretty good shape mentally to do the job. So that’s really all there is to that story, as best I recall.

SM: Well, when we first started talking you mentioned some of the, the only briefing you’d ever received regarded certain rules and things like that, don’t fly below fifteen hundred feet and certain rules that were obviously broken, that was one of them.

MM: Yes, you had to do what you had to do. If things were normal you tried to follow that rule, fifteen hundred feet but there were times where for one reason or
another, you couldn’t follow it. And I don’t think anybody followed it all the time, if they did they probably didn’t get a whole lot done. Rules in combat are a little different than rules somewhere else anyway, they’re rules of thumb I suppose, or at least that’s the way most of us looked at them, to be abided by whenever possible. But you know many, many years later I had an Army officer I worked for who had a saying that said, the reason they made you an officer was to break rules, anybody can read the rule book, so I guess there was some of that attitude there in all of us, and rightly so. Again, not wearing the helmet, I think very few guys at least back in the time frame, ’66, ’67 very few guys wore the helmet. The only thing it could protect you from was a head injury in a crash and I think we presumed that if we got to that point, we had other problems on our hands. And it really did restrict your head movement, because of its weight, your visibility, peripheral vision, because of the mass of helmet and most of all you couldn’t hear things. You couldn’t hear your engine as well which told you what the airplane was doing without even looking at the instruments, you couldn’t hear the wind which told you how fast you were going, you couldn’t hear ground fire. You couldn’t hear bombs bursting, all of those things were part of the environment that we flew in particularly in the O-1 which was such an open airplane that really made you one with the whole battle environment and putting on the helmet was just like putting your hands over your ears and my hand over one eye, at least in my opinion. It took away a lot of sensory input that you needed to do the job right, so very few of us wore out, I don’t even know where mine went, I didn’t even carry it with me most of the time.

SM: Was there any other equipment that you found effective in that way?

MM: Yes, the flak jacket was just the opposite, the flak jacket if you could get three of them, you got three of them, you sat on one, because the seat was just relatively thin metal and a bullet coming up through the bottom of the airplane would still be going like crazy when it got to you, so you sat on one flak jacket, doubled over basically. You hung one over the back seat, not the back seat literally, but the back of the front seat which would give you a lot more protection form anything coming in from the rear and then you wore one. I usually wore it loose, again just to be a little more free in the cockpit, that is not zipped up or buttoned up. I forget which it did, I think it zipped, but if you got into a more serious situation you would want to zip that up and you felt at that
point that you had armored yourself rather well, considering the airplane. Whereas we
were issued one, we managed pretty quickly usually to find two more and I think most
guys again, would have done that.

SM: What about other equipment that may have been debilitating in some
fashion, as far as for sensory input or perhaps physical restriction?

MM: Nothing I can think of, everything else was pretty comfortable. We flew in
comfortable clothing; the airplane was so simple to begin with. We carried an M-16,
usually I think we found some bungee cord arrangement, or we hung it. I believe there
was a, what was called a C-4 light, it was a little, like a flashlight mounted in the airplane,
had a white light on one end and red on the other for night, and common in almost every
airplane in those days. And it was positioned to the pilot’s level right just at the hinge of
the door and it was convenient to hang the strap of your M-16 over it as I recall, so most
guys would have had their M-16s sitting basically vertical off of their right knee and
again it didn’t get in the way. Well it was there if you went down, at least you something
to defend yourself with, but on occasion we did use it to attack ground targets. Hard to
tell how effective it was, you could tell if you hit somebody usually you didn't know if
you killed them or wounded them. I wasn’t going to go down and try and find out.

SM: While we are on the issue of equipment and weapons, were you ever at a
loss for anything that you wish you had had something, but you didn’t have it on hand?

MM: Not directly, only indirectly and it’s well worth discussing. When I…now
see that brings another, you ask some good questions, Steve because it triggers memories.
At some point either it had to be at Saigon because that’s where it was, I did get a
briefing in the TACC, the Tactical Air Control Center, which was the center that
controlled close air support for the entire country and the direct air support centers in the
IV Corps worked subordinate to the TACC. I did a get a TACC briefing, I guess before
going to Bien Hoa, that would have been that one day I spent in Saigon and the one thing
I do remember. Aside from the general this is Vietnam, this is the geography and this is
how we do business, which I pretty much knew already, was we got a briefing on
ordnance available and in those early days, say February of ’66, things were pretty bad in
terms of the ordnance that was most effective. I wouldn’t want to be quoted, but I guess I
will be, but my recollection to be honest is that in country, in all of Vietnam, there were
maybe twenty-five hundred pound bombs, it was an extraordinarily low number and the
emphasis in the briefing was on that fact because we were told, they’re coming. They’re
making them, they’re building them, or getting them out of depots as fast as they can, but
we’re using them faster than we can get them, because it was pretty much the standard
weapon, five hundred pound bomb and there were very, very few. There were some
others that were also in short supply, but that’s the one that really sticks in my head. In
general, my impression was that the good stuff was in short supply and there was a lot of
stuff that you would rarely use that they had enough of. Some of the weapons were, two
thousand pound bombs, they’re great for knocking down six story buildings but they
weren’t good for what we were doing out in the swamp and some of the wire guided
missiles. I think there was one called a bullpup, it was like a bomb but it was actually a
missile and it was guided by a trailing wire and the thing was frequently terrible. The
wire would break and the pilot would lose control of the missile and lots of times you
were pretty much where it was going. I can remember one F-100 guy yelling, look out
FAC, it’s gone ballistic and I could see the missile just kind of corkscrewing down at me.
Of course it went in the ground, a good enough distance away, so that I do remember if
you’re talking shortages, that’s the only shortage I can think of. We had enough
airplanes I think, the equipment was good, the maintenance was good, supply was good.
Everything was – the rockets, okay the rockets when we were first there, there were two
kinds of white phosphorus rockets. One had an warhead that was what I would call slick,
in other words the contour of the rocket just smoothed to a point and it was ballistically
more accurate than another one which we were using in the early going which had kind
of a bulbous warhead on it that I was led to believe was actually a warhead from an Army
recoilless rifle round. And it just wasn’t as ballistically accurate as the one that I
mentioned previously, we were given them, we were sort of told look, they’re in the
inventory, you’ve got to use them up, the faster you use them up, the sooner we’ll be
using just to good ones. So take them, shoot them, get them out of the inventory and we
did. They weren’t that bad, if you could put a slick one within twenty yards of your
target on a good day, you might have put this one within forty or so, so they weren’t that
much worse but they were worse ballistically, I do remember that.

SM: What aircraft did you prefer coming in, in support?
MM: The A-1 definitely, closely followed by the F-100, those were definitely the two best.

SM: No shortages of napalm, plenty of that?

MM: Not that I recall, napalm was in pretty good supply and a very useful weapon where we were. When you have troops hiding in tree lines and nothing but swamp on either side, the treeline becomes a very obvious target to the fighter pilot and because it’s linear, it’s an excellent target for napalm and we used a lot of it, an awful lot of it, yes.

SM: But based on what you said earlier, sometimes that you hit enemy with your own fire whether it be from the M-16 or whatever, did you ever get any kind of ground confirmation of enemy killed or enemy injured?

MM: I have to think about that, I don’t think so. I’m trying to think, no, not that I recall.

SM: But you would have to submit reports up the chain of command?

MM: No, we normally didn’t to tell you the truth, no. Again, in those early days, an after action report was required, things changed very rapidly I think after this time frame that I’m describing. We were still in the cowboy days, to use the term more loosely than I probably should, very free to do what you wanted to do, very little to no supervision. Once I left Bien Hoa that was it, it was just me and another FAC. We did what we felt like, so after-action report was required every two weeks and they were extremely brief. I think we were asked to keep them to one sheet of paper so it basically was number of sorties flown, maybe flew ten sorties in two weeks, how many flights of fighters controlled, forty, fifty, whatever it was. Numbers and types of ordnance used and results, twenty killed in action, three wounded, five bunkers destroyed, whatever it was, very, very skeletal information and unless you had some major action to describe, that was it and a major action would probably have been more accurately described in an award write up than in an after action report. As a matter of fact, I know in my case one or two that came later events, where I did get an award, I don’t think I sent a report on them at all, it was just the award write-up that somebody else did that would recover that information.

SM: Did you receive an award for anything that happened at Duc Hoa?
MM: No, air medals, one for every twenty flights, I think that was it because I didn’t really do anything particularly exciting at Duc Hoa. A lot of just what I would call onesies and twosies, you’d spot two or three Vietcong out in the swamp building something or trying to move, and it’d be a simple attack. You’d get up and fly in the morning and find something hidden under some trees that wasn’t there the morning before and you’d get a fighter and blow it up and things like that, very simple stuff.

SM: Now there were hazards to using napalm that aren’t typically understood, especially when you’re dealing with air breathing aircraft, and you had an incident early in the time that involved napalm, that’s a pretty interesting story, why don’t you go ahead and talk about it?

MM: All right, again, the details I don’t remember what it was, it was at Duc Hoa. I was controlling I think F-100s again, almost sure it was in this case, and we were using napalm on some pre-planned targets, probably tree lines, things in tree lines and I was very new at the time. Probably had been there a couple of weeks I would guess and for whatever reason was again flying pretty low, probably my guess three hundred feet at this point, making a pass just trying to see what the effect of the previous napalm can had been. And I flew [the airplane] in, fortunately I was in a dive and leveled out of the dive at three hundred feet and was starting to climb again when I flew through the remains of the napalm burst and all I remember is very, very hot still. There was no flame or I don’t think I’d be here to tell the story, but smoke, a very thick black smoke with a very distinctive napalm smell to it, and very, very hot in there. Only for a matter of a few seconds I think, but the engine quit, the engine starved for air and as I think I said in my memoir, I remember very distinctly being in an up swoop with a fair amount of air speed, which was good because I had to restart the engine in flight which was a fairly simple procedure. But again, as I mentioned in my memoir the one thing I do remember very distinctly is looking at the propeller standing straight up and down, motionless, with the manufacturer’s label very readable on the back of it. I thought to myself, this is, it’s much more quickly than it takes to tell the story, I think the thought that went through my head was something like, you’ve just killed yourself and very quickly got, I don’t think the fighters actually ever even knew it happened. I didn’t say anything, I just recremented it and you wind up, that’s one of those occasions where you wind up shaking like a leaf all
over, when it’s over, not during the incident. But you know a minute or two later, you’re shaking all over the place, realizing how close you came, but we do stupid things every once in a while. But again I think I did all my stupid stuff within the first month at Duc Hoa and when I left there I don’t think I had too many really stupid moves left in me, at least not unconscious stupid moves. Every once in a while you had to do something that you knew was dangerous, but at least you were doing it consciously.

SM: So that wasn’t something you were briefed on, prior to Vietnam, that you’ve got to be careful because napalm absorbs all the oxygen?

MM: No, well I think the answer to that would have been, anybody would have thought you’d have been smart enough to know that on your own.

SM: Well, it would seem that your time at Duc Hoa then, given the area that you were covering, very close to the Cambodian border, that the purpose for your being there was to perhaps interdict any kind of infiltration activity through Cambodia into South Vietnam from North Vietnam?

MM: Well ultimately, yes, from Cambodia where there were North Vietnamese I suppose, operating, but again in those days much smaller numbers, than became later. But yes I think just to keep them, you know to keep them honest at least in that piece of territory, make it difficult for them to use that territory as an infiltration route to Saigon and Bien Hoa, which were major cities and it was the closest approach. So in that sense, had we not been there it would have been useful to them.

SM: How effective do you think you and other American and Vietnamese, that is South Vietnamese military activities were in that province?

MM: I think it was effective, very effective, not necessarily because of us, by which I mean that it was a relatively simple job because of the terrain. It was literally impossible I would say, for anyone to get from the Cambodian border across Hau Nghia province in a night. So, anybody who made the attempt, no matter how he tried it was going to be exposed at some point during the day and if you made the reconnaissance daily, which we did, it was going to be very, very difficult for somebody to get across. So I think we were very effective, but against an enemy which was probably small in numbers and had a lot going against it, particularly in terms of the terrain that they would have had to operate in. There was no way they could build anything of any size at all
without us seeing it, a road or a depot or bunkers or nothing, there was just nothing that
could be done without us seeing it and destroying it the next day. So it was a wasteland.
SM: Now, you mentioned earlier that the only area where legal traffic was
allowed was on the river; I assume the river came down from Cambodia?
MM: No, it was more north/south than that. I think it just came probably down
from the central highlands and emptied out into the Mekong Delta, probably became part
of the Mekong river at some point, I could look up, tell you what that is. It was Vam Co
Dong or Vam Co Lam, the words meaning, Vam Co whatever meant the river to the east,
the Vietnamese language is extremely simple language by the way. As I understand a
created language, it wasn’t a real language, it was created by the French or somebody, but
Vam Co Dong meant the river to the west and Vam Co whatever the other one was,
meant the river to the east, and they were two rivers that ran parallel to each other fairly
close together and the one I’m talking about was the one that was west. Like I said
Nuoc-Mam, the sauce that I was telling you about, Nuoc was the Vietnamese word for
water, so water was Nuoc, Nuod-da was ice, which means water frozen and Nuoc-Mam
meant water fish, very, very primitive language, so again the river was just the river that
is west and again, it’s easily found on a map.
SM: Did you ever receive orders or authorization to fire on targets of opportunity
on the river, that may have been enemy boats?
MM: No, can’t imagine why we would have. The river was considered free
commerce, now if we found something on the west bank, theoretically at least it was a
target. You had to use your head about something like that, but the river was free
commerce.
SM: Do you think that the Vietcong, the NVA exploited that?
MM: Oh, absolutely because they would just mix in with all the commercial
traffic, fishermen and people going to the grocery store and all that sort of thing. Yes, I’m
sure they did, but they had to be coming from someplace in country and going someplace
in country in order to do that, but I’m sure there were plenty of them there.
SM: Well is there anything else you want to talk about with your time at Duc
Hoa?
MM: I can’t think of anything, no, just again to reiterate that it would have been
sort of a cozy little hole to hang out in for a year, kind of a nice little place with a few
guys that had a job to do. The physical comforts were not bad at all but beyond that, I do
have photographs of it that Dave Pinsky has subsequently sent me from his time frame,
aerial photographs of the air fields and photographs of the buildings and what not and the
ramp and all of that and some of the guys that were there later, with him, but, no that's it I
think for Duc Hoa.

SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Michael Morea on the 4th of January
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Michael Morea. I am in Lubbock, Texas; Mr. Morea is in Palm Harbor, Florida. It is the 25th of January 2001, approximately five minutes after nine, Lubbock time. Mr. Morea, why don’t you go ahead and discuss what happened when you left Duc Hoa.

MM: Okay, I think as I said last time, but just for continuity I was at Duc Hoa, just really getting my feet on the ground and got a phone call from the 19th TASS one evening, saying that I was to report very quickly to the southern sector of the 25th ARVN divisions’ area of responsibility which would have been Long An province and the airfield there, for reason I don’t know was called Tan An. Really just a wide spot in a highway about a thousand feet long with a very small PAP ramp and some sandbags and some fifty-five gallon drums that we used to re-fuel our, normally two airplanes that we kept there, but I’m getting a little ahead of myself. [Note: Transcript is accurate, but runway was actually 2100 feet long.] So with that introduction at some point in time I did in fact pack up, I don’t remember how I traveled, my recollection is I flew down, no, I do recollect, Pete Bernstein who was the other FAC down there, flew up and got me. That’s right, a very short flight, flew up, picked me up and took me back to Long An and to go back again, just for a moment, I think I mentioned, but the reason I went there is the other FAC who was there with Pete had been very severely wounded and evacuated back to the States and I don’t think ever returned to Vietnam, although he did survive. So my job was to go down and be the other FAC with Peter, and that’s what I did and again, as
in the case of Duc Hoa, I anticipated at that point that this would be my home away from home for the remainder of my tour in Vietnam. It didn’t turn out that way which will come later. So, about Long An, what kind of a place was it? It was certainly a nicer place than Duc Hoa had been. In that although we flew from the little airfield just outside town on the road, we lived in town in what I would call rather comfortable circumstances, I’ll try and describe it for you. We lived in a two story, and I have a photograph of it, a two story villa, certainly a large home, much better than normal Vietnamese standards, no question about that, we called it a villa and that’s where we lived. When I say we, I mean the entire advisory detachment that was there, of some reason I have better memories of the Army people there than I do of the folks at Duc Hoa. I guess maybe I was recovering from the shock of entering combat, I don’t know what it was, but I do have better memories of the people and the situation. The villa was a two story building as I said, fronted I think facing north, wouldn’t bet my last dollar on that. But fronted on the town’s soccer field and across the soccer field, some fifty yards away were some shops as I recall, toward the left end of the soccer field was a road that I think went over a bridge. A little river ran through town, I think the Long An river and took us among other places to the airfield, short drive. At the right end of the soccer field, looking out from the building again was the province chief’s, we called it the palace. And it was certainly an upscale thing for Vietnam, it was a very large villa on a good size piece of land with a walled and iron railing fence around it as I recall. It looked like a small embassy in some foreign country, it looked like what the U.S. embassy might be in some moderately small country, quite a nice place. So that was the geography of our situation. The logistics of our situation there was sort of like this, the advisory detachment was commanded by an Army Colonel, and again as in the case of Long An, we were nominally, I wouldn’t say under his command because that would be certainly inaccurate, but under his direction, let’s say. We were there to support the Vietnamese through him, I think that’s the fairest way to put it and again he didn't give orders and we didn’t say no when he asked us to do something and it was a good working relationship and that’s the way it usually works best in my mind. That’s how it worked out. When I say him, I think there were actually two Colonels. I think there was one just leaving when I got there, I remember nothing more than a short, wiry thin sort of a man followed
by a very large, blustery sort of man kind of on the Schwarzkopf model, both full
Colonels, Army guys, both good people, no problem. My roommate was an Army
captain, I think he was, he may have been a 1st Lieutenant. I think he was a very junior
captain, black kid, again kind of thin and wiry, don’t remember what his specialty was, in
terms of why he was there, what his advisory role was, but we roomed together, up in a
room on the second floor of the villa, quite comfortable, beds, dressers, mirrors,
bathroom down the hall. Very nice place and we got along great, I do not remember his
name, the only thing that sticks in my mind is that he had the same name as a black
basketball player who was famous at the time. I think a college player at NYU which is
interesting, but meaningless, I guess because I just don’t remember his name.

SM: What time period were you in Long An again?
MM: Okay, we’re talking now probably mid-March of ’66 would be about right. I got there early February, mid-March maybe first of April, I honestly don’t remember exactly when I made the move.

SM: When did you leave?
MM: Well, we’re going to be leaving about mid-May, so I was only there about a month and a half, again.

SM: Were there any significant operational differences between what you did at Long An and what you did at Duc Hoa?
MM: No, nothing that I can recall, it was essentially the same mission, visual reconnaissance, keeping the head of the Vietcong down, probably, well there were a couple of differences now that I think about it. We probably had fewer ground operations now that I think about it, and we did more air attack of opportune targets, that would be point one. Point two, I think it’s fair to say that the VC controlled most of the province, but probably the most significant point is it was not, as in the case of Duc Hoa, Hau Nghia province, Long An province was not a free fire zone. It was agricultural at least in good part, had been banged up and bombed and shot at for so long that it was pretty well beat up, but there was still ordinary folks in large numbers out there, farming, trying to make a living off the land and trying to avoid the Vietcong and us both, I guess would be the fairest way to put it and just get on with their lives, which wasn’t easy.

SM: So you had to be more careful?
MM: Yes, I had to be more careful on your target selection. The Intelligence was more important. We did spend some time up at the province chief’s villa going over, not so much plans as strategies I guess, what do we bomb, what don’t we bomb, where are the good guys living, where are the bad guys living, so that we didn’t make those kinds of mistakes. So yes, there were differences, again much more populated, as I said the town, I sort of glossed over that, but the town was a thriving little Vietnamese town, a market town, I guess if you were British you would call it. And we got along pretty well with the local folks, didn’t have a lot of contact with them, but we’d go out and play soccer on the field and we’d shop for little things downtown and that sort of thing. It was a fairly secure town, as towns went but again out in the countryside, things got different, once you left the confines of the immediate secure areas.

SM: Were there many young men in this town?

MM: Yes, good question. I was going to come to that, actually the town was what was known as a Chieu Hoi center. It was a place where when the Vietcong accepted the amnesty offers, usually in the form of leaflets and we dropped a lot of those in the area too. If they came in with a Chieu Hoi leaflet it meant they were defecting back to their country and out of the VC and there was a center there for rehabilitation and trying to give them job opportunities and what. So there were a lot Chieu Hois running around town, driving pedicabs, which was the little bicycle taxi cab kind of a thing and doing other functions in town. So there were more young men in that town I suppose, than in most because it was a Chieu Hoi center.

SM: Well, did the American personnel, you and other Americans that lived and engaged in activities with the Vietnamese civilian population; did everybody get along fairly well?

MM: Yes, those you contacted or connected with, you got along fine with and those you wouldn’t have gotten along fine with you never contacted, it was kind of that sort of thing.

SM: I didn’t know if there was perhaps any kind of concerns?

MM: In town?
SM: Well, yes concerns especially if you get a population of young men, Vietnamese young men, are they going to want a bunch of Americans hitting on their women, those type of issues?

MM: That wasn’t a problem, very little hitting on the women to tell you the truth, to my knowledge none, I’m sure it went on, but no. Later in Saigon it’s a different story, when I get to the Airborne division part of the story, but not in that town, no. I don’t know that anybody ever said lay off the women, but we did, it just didn't happen. Had a few young girls in the house of course, we had to run a household and we did, it was a cooperative mess kind of a thing, very informal. But we’d all chip in a certain amount every month and somebody would run up to Saigon once or twice a month and hit the commissary and bring back what we needed and we just had a sort of a communal kitchen, dining thing and a couple of fairly young Vietnamese girls. Who I remember one of them by as fact Co Lei, which just means Miss Lei, L-E-I, I think who was one of the girls who worked for us and worked in the house, she was hands off, she was a very nice young girl and if anybody had tried anything with her, he’d have gotten beaten up by the rest of the guys so it wasn’t a problem. That certainly wasn’t a problem; no we never had that problem.

SM: And how about prostitutes?

MM: Not in that town. I’m sure again they must have been in one or two, but not in that town, no, didn’t happen. Again, Saigon whole different story but we can come to that.

SM: You mentioned leaflets, did you guys ever get issued ammunition or waterproof magazine bags that had Chieu Hoi messages on them that you could then discard after you changed out your magazines?

MM: No, that doesn’t ring any bells at all. I can tell you a funny story if I hadn’t told you. It’s in my memoirs I think.

SM: Go ahead and tell it.

MM: About dropping leaflets, I was flying up and down the canals one day dropping leaflets. I was very low in altitude, maybe four hundred feet if I had to guess so you could tell right away, I guess I never followed the fifteen hundred foot rule. It seems that way anyway, dropping leaflets. I had a box of them in my lap or somewhere or in
the back seat and reaching back and grabbing hands full of them. In any case I had both windows open and I’m flying up and down the canals and throwing these leaflets out by the handful but the thing I didn’t realize, another one of those things you learn from experience, there was a light rain, very light, misty rain wasn’t bothering me. But as time went by, maybe forty-five minutes I started to feel like the airplane wasn’t flying right, it was flying very sluggishly and the controls weren’t responding correctly and I thought, what the hell is going on here. This airplane’s so simple, what could be wrong and the typical looking around in the cockpit, looking for something wrong, looking left and right. Finally I looked back over my shoulder and what I’d done is a lot of the leaflets were sticking to my tail surfaces and I was in a sense creating a big ball of papier mache on my particularly on my elevator surfaces and so I was losing control of up and down, pitch. I was just very slowly encasing my controls in this wet paper. Fortunately I didn’t get to the critical stage and I just stopped throwing leaflets and went home and cleaned the airplane up, but I think that one’s in my written memoir, maybe it isn’t.

SM: I don’t think we’ve talked about that yet.

MM: No, we haven’t talked about, but it may or may not be in the written document, but it’s another one of those crazy true stories.

SM: Now, when something like that happens, did you guys write up some kind of a lessons learned after-action report that circulated so that other guys wouldn’t make that mistake?

MM: No, unfortunately nothing that formal. We might get on the radio, we talked at night on the radio net amongst the various sites. Probably, not in the entire 19th TASS, that was too big, but lets say maybe the western side of the 19th TASS adjacent areas would talk to each other at night. Our radio operators would usually do the talking and we’d just chit chat and we’d tell them if there was something we wanted passed, or if there was some information we were looking for and they’d try and get it for us. So you might say hey guys, I made a big mistake today, you might keep this in mind next time you try it but again. A year later I’m sure the answer would have been different, but this early phase ’66 and just into ’67, the thing was just getting going, it wasn’t formal. The FAC School wasn’t up and running although it was about to be, the in country FAC school, so it just wasn’t that formal, we didn’t have the procedures.
SM: And you were still flying the O-1 there?

MM: Yes, still flying the O-1, I never flew anything else, different models, E’s and F’s and G’s, but there are very minor differences to those, just how the propeller works, basically.

SM: In terms of other differences between Long An and Duc Hoa, does anything else come to mind?

MM: There’s one thing that comes to mind that I guess I should mention for historical purposes and again it’s in my memoirs later when I talk about being with the Airborne Division and going up to the 1st Corps Area, because there was a semi-revolution in progress up there with the Buddhists and the Corps commander and what not. There was always a nagging suspicion I would say, in the back of our minds, when we got a target from the Vietnamese particularly, about whether this was really military or was it political. Or was it even, sort of political, meaning coercive, to be specific if you got a target that didn’t look right it was perhaps – and we bombed villages all the time. We tried to, by that I mean villages that were collections of buildings usually with some trees around them, that was the typical configuration, surrounded by open fields. We would bomb villages, we made a considerable effort to determine that they were empty and what we, at least the intent was, is we were destroying infrastructure. We were destroying places where the VC did live on occasion, had lived, had fortified, but at least in my case and I think in most cases, if I saw what looked like ordinary people walking around, and you could tell, children certainly, even women and probably they were VC. But in any case if you saw that kind of people just moving around in what looked like routine habit patterns for a small village, I wouldn’t bomb it and I don’t think most people would have. The ones that we did bomb were empty, lots of obvious entrenchments and gun emplacements inside the village and under the trees and that sort of thing and those are the kinds of things that we did attack pretty regularly.

Unfortunately, of course in the process of doing that we were decimating the countryside and driving what loyal ordinary people there were out there completely crazy, I’m sure but that had been going on since forever. But back to the point, the point is that every once in a while you’d get a target that was from the Vietnamese and you’d fly over it and it just didn’t look right, it looked too populated. It looked too prosperous, it didn’t have,
there was almost like a sinister atmosphere that after a while you got to feel about a place
when it looked like it should be a target and these places wouldn’t have that look and
you’d have to wonder about it. Did they not pay their dues to the province chief that year
and he was retaliating? So it was something that was always I think in the back of our
minds, something we were very sensitive to, to the point where I tell you one story, and I
don’t think this is in my memoirs, it might be, the written ones, again. In this province,
in Long An province I was out one day visual reconnaissance and I spotted a flight of, I
think four, Vietnamese A-1s up and down, most of these villages were long and thin, they
were built along a road or a track or a canal or something and they would just, the four of
them up and down this one village bombing the hell out of it. And number one, there was
not supposed to be any bombing in the province unless me or Pete was there, Vietnamese
or no. Well it was their country I guess they could do whatever they wanted, but
theoretically we were supposed to be there, and secondly I knew the village and it wasn’t
supposed to be a target. So I got on the radio real quick, took me two or three minutes to
fly over there, but got on the radio and called control back at Long An and told them
what was going on and asked them to find out what the hell was happening up at the
direct air support center at Bien Hoa, which theoretically controlled all the air and who
these guys were and how they got this target and how come there was no FAC. And
meanwhile because I just didn’t feel right, I just basically dove down to the village and
flew up and down the village at very low altitude, kind of figure eights so that basically
they couldn’t drop any more bombs because I was in the way and they could see me.
They went away and that was the end of that, but when I got back, we got some wishy-
washy answer that never really satisfied us and we were suspicious that this was one of
those political retaliation things that I think did occur in Vietnam.

SM: And what kind of aircraft what this?
MM: They were Vietnamese A-1s.
SM: A-1s, just bombing this village?
MM: Yes, sad story but true. That’s the way it works especially in that kind of a
war.
SM: Were those aircraft clearly marked enough to tell that they were Vietnamese
Air Force and not American Air Force.
MM: The U.S. Air Force did not fly A-1s, at least not to my knowledge. The only time you would see a U.S. Air Force guy in an A-1 is sometimes there would be, well not sometimes, there were U.S. Air Force advisors to the Vietnamese A-1 units. And they would sometimes fly as one of the flight of four, and sometimes you’d know that because if there was some verbal confusion between you and the flight leader who was always Vietnamese, every once in a while, an American voice would come out of the flight and say, ‘This is Gold-3, I understand what you want, hang on a second, we’ll get it sorted out’. We didn’t normally have the language problem and that didn’t happen often, but every once in a while the guy would just chime in to let you know there was an American in the flight.

SM: Later in the war, they did, maybe not in ’66?

MM: News to me, could well be, I didn’t know that. U.S. A-1 squadrons.

SM: We interviewed a guy just a few days ago that was an A-1 pilot in the ‘70s. He was in ’70, ’71 down there, but I’m curious because even though those aircraft were probably flown by Vietnamese pilots, Vietnamese Air Force pilots, could someone from the ground looking up tell?

MM: Yes, well someone from the ground, I see where you’re headed.

SM: Especially peasants, are they going to know that this is their own people doing this, or are they going to think why are the Americans bombing us?

MM: No, I think they know. That would have been my guess. They had been, this war had been going on for a long time and I think the local Vietnamese knew what kind of airplanes the local Vietnamese flew and which were the American ones. Probably, if my guess was right, that was exactly the message that was supposed to be sent, sadly. And I could be wrong but . . .

SM: Either one would be effective because then the province chief would be able to say, this is what I can bring down to bear on you, whether it’s Americans flying those missions or Vietnamese flying those missions.

MM: That’s true and he had that power, as I think I mentioned earlier, these province chiefs, the whole system over there was basically, at least in my mind, the entire political system was Chinese medieval, an emperor who was the president in Saigon and four major warlords who controlled provinces and then little sub-warlords who had
districts and what not so, four corps and the sub-districts, provinces and beyond. So, not
too surprising, that’s the politics over there, always has been and in many ways still is.

SM: Now when you were flying your missions out of Long An, what was the
aircraft support you would receive to bomb those, whether they be suspected enemy
villages or infrastructure?

MM: Basically the same as at Duc Hoa. A lot of Vietnamese A-1s, a lot of U.S.
F-100s because they were at Bien Hoa which was close. A lot of Navy coming off Dixie
Station, A-4s primarily, those would have been the three primary airplanes I think that I
would have expected to see down there.

SM: And what would did you bring in, preferably to take out a suspected enemy
village, conventional bomb, napalm?

MM: Napalm to burn down the trees and the buildings, white phosphorus bombs,
hundred and ten pound white phosphorus bombs which the A-1 used primarily but they
could carry a ton of them as I recall, twenty-four of them. A very effective bomb, small
hundred and ten pounds but just the old World War II scene of the white phosphorus
trails. It looks like a flower, very effective weapon, and ordinary five hundred pound
bombs, those would have been the three, and then guns, always, twenty-millimeter guns.

SM: In those operations did you ever come under fire from the ground?

MM: Occasionally, not often. It was not like up north or later, after Tet ‘68; they
did not have heavy weapons. When I came under fire it was always small arms, Ak-47,
nothing bigger than that.

SM: And you mentioned villages, how about other infrastructure like bridges or
things like that?

MM: Again, they would try to build bridges over toward Cambodia and we’d be
more careful, the whole thing was more careful. If you saw a bridge, it could have easily
been a farmer, because we’re talking a couple of twigs and a couple of planks when we
talk a bridge. It could have been a farmer just trying to create way across a canal
between one field and another and so we didn’t attack willy nilly like we did in Hau
Nghia province because we just didn’t have the same authority, number one. And we
didn’t have the same situation, so you had to be a little more careful. You’d go back and
say, here’s what I saw and somebody would say, no let’s don’t do that because the
situation in that part of the province is okay and it’s probably the farmers. So you
wouldn’t just automatically attack them, which is what we almost basically did in Hau
Nghia. That question prompted another thought. What we did more often, Pete and I, we
used to do what we used to call dawn patrol. We’d get up very early in the morning and
crank the engines just before daybreak and get airborne just as the sky was getting light
and we’d fly up and down the province. We’d pick a section of the province everyday
and we’d fly up and down very low. I’m talking fifty, sixty feet over little towns and
villages and our purpose was two fold, number one we were trying to send a message for
whatever psychological effect it was worth, that we were there, and so about the time the
Vietnamese are getting up to start their days work we’d come zipping over their houses at
fifty or sixty feet, a couple of towns, or three or four towns every morning, different ones.
The other things was that you could see a lot that way, you could really get at that
altitude, early in the morning when ordinary people in Vietnam are out doing their
ordinary thing, you could get a sense again, of is this village a functional, ordinary village
or is there something strange going on here. You could get that very quickly just by
going down the street, seeing what was happening, the kids out running around. Are
people carrying produce around, or does it look very quiet and do you spot a line of
trenches off on the backside of the village somewhere? We did a lot of that, trying to get
a feel for what really was going on because we had to know that more than we did in the
previous place in order to discriminate between what you did and didn’t do.

SM: What was Pete’s last name again?

MM: Bernstein. B-E-R-N-S-T-E-I-N. As I said I think he was a very quiet guy,
but very effective. I think he came from a very wealthy Jewish family up in Shaker
Heights, Illinois if I’m not mistaken and I have not been able to contact him, I wish I
could. I’ve made some efforts but he seems to have disappeared. [Note: Transcript is
correct, but Shaker Heights is in Ohio.]

SM: How many villages were in your aerial area or operations, can you
guesstimate?

MM: Oh, my God, hundreds.

SM: So, you wouldn’t be able to do this over the same village very often?
MM: Well, in an hour’s flight, you might catch twenty or thirty of them; I’m talking really little tiny places.

SM: So over the course of a week, you might be able to get a full spread?

MM: A couple of weeks, you might. Yes, a couple of weeks let's say.

SM: A couple of weeks, full coverage, go back again?

MM: Right.

SM: When you would conduct these, what did you call them again, dawn raids?

MM: No, dawn patrols.

SM: Dawn patrols, when you conducted your dawn patrols, what was the typical response of the people on the ground?

MM: You could see them.

SM: Would they stop and stare?

MM: They would look up, they didn’t seem to be frightened, they didn’t run away.

SM: Okay, they didn’t scramble.

MM: No, not normally, if they did, they were smart enough if they were bad guys and they scrambled that would be a signal so they didn’t. They just sort of looked up, kind of a curiosity thing, you didn't get any shaking fists or anything either, it was just sort of an oh, but we still had our purpose in doing it.

SM: I was curious, you mentioned one of the big differences between Long An and Duc Hoa is the more strictly enforced rules of engagement and restrictions and the fact that you couldn’t just, it wasn’t like Hau Nghia, which was more of a . . .

MM: It was [essentially] a complete free fire zone.

SM: Free fire zone. Here in Long An, you’ve got a significant civilian population that needs to be taken into account, and of course I’m sure you’ve heard the comments and the arguments that one of the problems about fighting the Vietnam War was the restrictive rules of engagement, but it seems that with your experience in Long An, those were necessary.

MM: Yes, I would not have called them restrictive, necessary, sensible, whatever word you choose. If you really thought that you were going to win this war someday, which back then we did, then the whole concept of converting the people to the
government’s side was viable and if you were going to try to do that, obviously beating them up unnecessarily was not going to achieve that objective so I think we took it seriously.

SM: So it did not frustrate you?

MM: No.

SM: Or your fellow pilots achieved.

MM: No, I don’t think so, no, we selected targets based on what we thought were real and those we attacked and the others we didn’t so I don’t think there was frustration.

SM: In the same regard, I was curious what you thought about if you even thought about the internal inconsistency between your experience and the necessity as you appropriately stated of having restrictions on your activities in that particular province, with the overall strategy employed by the American commanders of attrition, killing our way to victory.

MM: I understand the question and your preface was probably accurate. I don’t think, again in ’66 I don’t think we thought much about that. Everything was kind of new, I think we still believed that the effort was to win and that we could. I think all of that probably changed about ’68 with Tet and new administrations and when what’s his name got in.

SM: Abrams?

MM: No, I’m talking on the political side.

SM: Nixon?

MM: No, Johnson’s Secretary of Defense.

SM: McNamara.

MM: McNamara, there you go. Those days, I think that’s when, because I was home by then and those were the days when I think everybody started to get the sudden realization that our real intent here is to minimize casualties and get the hell out of here as quickly as we can, which took years, but still I think at that point it was obvious that that was our intention.

SM: Again, in your area of operation and in Long An itself, did you know that the standard tactic employed by U.S. ground forces was the search and destroy, the seeping clear or whatever they want to call it?
MM: Didn’t have any U.S. ground forces there, so again it wasn’t relevant. The locals did some of that, although I think, and I don’t know why, there was less of it there than there was in Hau Nghia and I think maybe the reason was the higher population density and the higher difficulty of actually defining where the enemy was.

SM: In Long An, versus Duc Hoa, which was a free fire zone.

MM: Right, exactly, so I think there was more surgical is not the right word, because it wasn’t that good, but it was more surgical let’s say, than Hau Nghia was in that we did look for specific targets. They had more artillery down there, the Vietnamese did, 105 Howitzers and they used that occasionally to fire on targets. There was one other things that’s of interest that I ran into down there and that was the Phoenix programs, you familiar with that?

SM: Yes, sir.

MM: Yes, okay that was a, I won’t call it a center, maybe it was, there was a Phoenix outfit there, very interesting operation, they lived nearby in town, but apart from us. I gave you a thumbnail description of what I remember of it. It was commanded as I recall by a slim, trim, taller than average, Vietnamese captain. Story was that his family was politically out at the time, whoever was running Saigon at the time, his family had been with the previous government. I think Diem perhaps, I think his family was connected with Diem, who of course was assassinated and Thieu I think was in at the time. Although I could be completely wrong on that, and so if that’s correct than this kid was kind of a Diem family and out of power and out of favor in Saigon so as a result he had to go find something else to do and I guess they told him why don’t you go be a Phoenix unit commander, so he was. His troops were, it was a small unit, if I had to guess I’d say he had maybe thirty people, I could be wrong. The story is that he did a lot of his recruiting at the Saigon prison, basically would go down there and I actually went with him once, and he would just talk to the prison keepers and say have you got any likely candidates, young tough men in here and he’d talk to them and make them an offer. How would you like to be out of here in five minutes? I can give you a uniform and a gun and three square meals a day and a place to sleep. But here’s the other side of the coin, and he would just yank them right out of the jail and take them back to Long An and train them and they were pretty good. They were very loyal as best we all
understood, to him and to the program and they did their job. The only other thing I remember, I did go out on one patrol with them, one night. You know what their mission was, it was euphemistically called counter terror, but what it was is we were supposed to assassinate the VC leaders before they assassinated the few remaining friendly village leaders. That was I guess the essence of it, went out on a patrol with them one night and didn’t make any contact, we were looking for some guy but we never found him and that was that. The only thing I remember is I was carrying a Swedish K submachine gun with a silencer on it and I’d never carried one before and the thing that stuck in my mind was how heavy the silencer was. It must have weighed five pounds, just the silencer, it’s not like in the movies. The only other thing I remember is that there was an American advisor with them who was not military. Again as I recall, big bluff Irish cop looking guy, and I think that’s what he was. I think he was a retired policeman from Chicago or some such thing and he was their advisor. He did live in the advisory detachment villa with us, but the Vietnamese captain did not, and again this is all best as I recall it. It may be eighty percent accurate, who knows.

SM: And the other side of the coin, as you put it was their mission, which was Viet Cong infrastructure neutralization, either capture or kill?

MM: Yes, that’s what I understood, yes. I’d never read any of the books about it, but that was my understanding at the time, yes.

SM: Did you ever witness them, actually bringing back prisoners?

MM: No, never. Again, I don’t think prisoners was the objective normally, although it may have been at certain times, but in any case, no.

SM: When was the first time you actually heard this referred to as Phoenix?

MM: There. It was the only experience I had with it.

SM: Any other Americans rotate into that unit while you were there?

MM: The Army guys were in and out, and again I just have vague recollections of people. Pete and I did our thing all day, we were preoccupied is almost the right word, with the airplanes and the maintenance and the fuel coming in and what our mission was, and timing and backing each other up and that sort of thing and getting three square meals and some sleep in between. The Army guys, at night we’d have dinner and chit chat and have a beer to two, never got close, I don’t have any recollection of any close
relationship with any of them at all, they kind of were preoccupied with what they did. We sort of came and went in the building and not a lot of deep socializing.

SM: How did the villagers seem to get along with that Phoenix unit?

MM: No contact that I was aware of. If there was, no, never made that connection. Did they know it was there, what did they think about it, never made that connection?

SM: How did you handle maintenance for your aircraft?

MM: Maintenance was very simple. We had a crew chief, I think who lived there with us and it was his job to go out may have been two to tell you the truth, I don’t know, and the radio operators, same thing. A couple and their job was to go out either with us or just a little bit ahead of us and prep the airplane, make sure it was fuelled, give it a pre-flight which wasn’t very complicated. Standby to untie the airplane or pull the chocks for us if necessary, pump fuel, very routine, very limited maintenance was possible if you has a brake that was low on hydraulic fluid and therefore a little mushy or what not. They could unscrew a cap and pump some more hydraulic fluid in there and put the cap back on. But on the other side of the coin the airplane was very, very simple so there wasn’t much that it needed. They could do basic stuff, mainly they were there just to pre-flight and kind of support us with very basic mechanical and ground service kinds of thing, although we could do it by our self for that matter to, pull the chocks and start the engine, hold the brakes and taxi off all by yourself, untie it and fuel it and whatever. Really the maintenance system in a nutshell was that the airplane was to be rotated back to Bien Hoa every hundred hours for serious maintenance and the airplanes as best I understand got a pretty thorough going over there. And then you’d get a fresh one and as you approached a hundred hours, you’d call them up and they’d tell you, come one, bring it on up and we’ll give you another one. Well, sometimes they'd give you another one. Usually, you had to wait for it. I think I mentioned that because we had quote our own airplanes and if you had to wait for it, usually it was an overnight stop at Bien Hoa. Different when I was in the airborne division again, because of Gene McCutchaon’s connections and just his personality, we never waited. When we got there we dropped one, picked up another one and left, but that’s later. I think, not to rush us along, because I’m not doing that at all, but I think that you’re going to find that my, that
for whatever reason, just the rapidity of the way things were happening, things were
happening and changing so fast to me that I don’t remember a lot about these first two
assignments when it comes to detail, you would think I would remember some of the
Army guys and what not, but I just flat don’t.

SM: I completely understand, it’s a long time ago.

MM: Well, it’s not the time so much, I don’t think I would have remembered it
six months later.

SM: Like you said, you were very busy.

MM: Yes, and moving fast and then the Airborne division thing I was there
longer, and then more settled and I do remember names and faces there.

SM: Well let me, just a couple more questions about your time at Long An. Back
to your village operations, when you would bring in air strikes or artillery or whatever,
into one of those villages, any secondary explosions?

MM: Rarely, I don’t think they had that level of munitions at the time. I think
what you were really dealing with was small units organized on the village level and
probably armed with individual weapons and that was it. Maybe a few, they had a fairly
effective Russian shoulder-fired rocket, kind of a bazooka kind of a thing, that the VC
had significant numbers of, they may have had a few of those laying around, but even
that’s a very light weapon. They may have had a mortar or two, but nothing in the way
of stockpiled munitions at any level at all. You were basically just trying to keep them
disorganized and if they were setting up something that looked like a military camp or a
defensive position, you tried to ruin it for them. It was really about that simple.

SM: So, no significant caches were?

MM: No.

SM: How about the presence of vehicles, anything?

MM: In the towns that was about it, in the towns.

SM: How about the villages you bombed though?

MM: No, I was going to say rarely, in fact to my knowledge never. By vehicle I
mean even something like a cyclo, nothing. No, that’s an interesting question, I never
thought about that, but no I don’t think I ever saw a vehicle, you would see the vehicles
of any description, and even those were primitive, only in the larger government
controlled towns. What they used outside was strictly the water buffalo, hitched to a
primitive but effective plow, that was it.

SM: And while you were at Long An did you ever receive any feedback after a
bombing run, where the Vietcong or, primarily the Vietcong but maybe even PAVN,
were trying to use that particular incident for propaganda purposes to try to turn the
population against you, against the American presence?

MM: Not specifically, I suppose we were generally aware that that could happen
and probably did happen, but specific instances, no.

SM: What kind of briefings would you receive while you served at Long An?

MM: Casual, be careful with that word, but they were casual. We would sit
around either at the villa or up at the province chief’s place and just in general go over
how have things been, what have we done, how effective have we been, where are we to
be focusing our efforts. Sometimes something fairly specific, but it was not, I guess I
never thought of this way, but it’s obvious in this conversation here that it wasn’t a very
specific kind of a place. It was a very general, the place was fairly homogenous as a
province and the mission was pretty much find out what’s going on, try to locate those
places where there really is VC activity, which was generally trying to build up
infrastructure, defensive and ultimately offensive infrastructure and destroy it without
destroying the local population that wasn’t involved in that. And I think as it turns out it
was probably about that simple and I never thought about it that way, but it seems to be
the way it’s coming out.

SM: Did you ever get confirmed enemy kills that you would send down to Long
An?

MM: Down there, not many, again it was only a month and a half, some I think
those that I could reasonably confirm, I probably confirmed myself rather than somebody
later on. On the rare occasion where I did see someone and there were two or three
occasions where there was obviously caught somebody in the act, so to speak of building
a bunker or digging a trench and was able to confirm just visually that we had killed him,
but it was rare, not often. I think more often we were bombing empty villages that either
had been or were being fortified. That was probably our main target.
SM: When you were doing your visual reconnaissance how long would it then take you, if you spotted suspicious activity or a suspicious village, how long would it take to you to bring ordnance?

MM: Oh if we really hurried, if there was no doubt in my mind something was going on and I made the call back through the channels and I’m not going to describe the system to you, I know you understand that silence is acknowledgement system which we had.

SM: Well, why don’t you explain it for readers later?

MM: I will, that was the standard classic system, but using that system, I could probably have air on station, it depended, if there happened to be somebody near by, maybe twenty minutes, if not, maybe forty, inside an hour, I could almost always have something working inside an hour.

SM: What would you do in the interim?

MM: Try to refine my impression of what it was that I was looking at, just fly over it, fly around it, see if I could generate any activity either good or bad. If I could generate civilians then I’d just call it off. If I could generate guys trying to sneak away into the bushes then it would just intensify my impression that I had a serious target. So that’s a fair description, just try and refine in my mind what it was I was looking at and how I was going to deal with it.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe real quickly the process of getting approval to fire on a target?

MM: If I can remember it. Well we had two systems, the pre-planned system and the immediate system. The pre-planned system basically worked this way, boy you’re really calling on my memory now. I would make a request to attack a target at a given time with a given, well I would request at least a given airplane, given ordnance for a given target at a given time. And that request would go in parallel up two chains, it would go up the Air Force chain, meaning my radio operator to the direct air support center at Bien Hoa to the TACC in Saigon which controlled all the air in Vietnam and the request would be dealt with and I would either get an approved or a disapproved or an approved modified somehow. Maybe, approved it but can’t so it until this time, and you’re not going to get F-100s you’re going to get something else, or whatever. And I
would get the word back down through the same channel that here’s your approved air
request, be there at this time and this is what’s going to happen. At the same time, that
request was going up through Army channels, and there was a parallel agency at every
level, so at the DASC there was an Army liaison and at the TACC there was and of
course at my working level there was. And that request would go up in parallel, the
significance of that being that at every level, the Army guy could say to the Air Force
guy, yes, we know what your Air Force guy down there is requesting our guy knows
what’s going on, they understand it, they approve of it down there and so do we and so it
was a coordination thing, and it worked quite well. It also worked on the Vietnamese
side, usually our Army guys would work the Vietnamese side for us. Well not usually,
always, Army side, so really in a sense it was going up three channels, Air Force channel,
U.S. Army Advisory channel, and the third channel being the Vietnamese Army channel,
and it was that simple. The immediate system worked essentially exactly the same way,
except that if I made a request, well depending on where I was, usually I would go
through my radio operator as I was always in his range and then he would go directly to
the Direct Air Support Center at Bien Hoa and ask for an immediate strike. Which would
mean either a launch of an airplane on alert or a diversion of something that was on a
lower priority and that was near to me and seemed to have the right characteristics to fit
the situation. The difference in the immediate system was very simply that in order to
expedite it, you did not require approval at each level, the only thing you could do at each
level was call a halt. So silence was considered approval so if my Army guy who was the
Army radio operator who was with my Air Force radio operator chose not to tell his boss
that I was requesting an immediate air strike that was essentially approval at that level of
my request. Or if he told his boss and his boss said sounds good to me, he did not have to
chime in officially with that, he just said nothing and it was approval and that procedure
was true all the way up.

SM: To include the province chief?

MM: Yes, to include him. I never thought about him to tell you the truth, except
that he was the Army Colonels guy and he didn’t have the communication, so I guess the
answer to that is if the Army Colonel chose not to mention it to him, then the answer was
yes. If the Army Colonel chose to mention it to him, and he said nothing then the answer
was yes. I think to be honest most often the Army Colonel chose not to mention it to him, unless he sensed something big enough. He probably took that on himself, probably in fact, the Colonel probably wasn’t involved that often. It was probably whoever the duty operations officer was, who was probably some Army Captain or maybe a Major.  

SM: What about Vietnamese personnel that were probably monitoring those exchanges and activities or were they intentionally in the loop, that is a Vietnamese radio operator listening in for that type of stuff so they can inform the Vietnamese civilian hierarchy?  

MM: No, if they were, they weren’t officially there. They would have been there just spying on us, which may be. They may have had people with enough command of English, radio people listening in on our nets so they could keep track of what we were doing. I was never aware of that; I don’t think they did, particularly not at the tactical level. If they were doing that, they were probably more interested in what was going on in Washington. So that’s a good question, never thought of it, but no, I don’t think they had a system like that. I’ve lived in other countries that I won’t mention here where I know that the host government, very friendly host government was very definitely listening and if I had been them, so would I have been, but that’s another story.  

SM: Anything else that you recall from your time at Long An?  

MM: If you’re interested in just a couple of amusing stories.  

SM: Absolutely.  

MM: Okay, I can remember, I’m a very heavy sleeper and we had a defensive plan for our villa, which was a good idea because if the town got overrun we were going to have to defend ourselves. And in fact in the front window of our bedroom, my roommate, whose name I can’t remember and I had a Browning Air Cooled, which is the barrel with the holes in it, thirty caliber machine gun from God knows when. But it was mounted on a table basically so that it would fire out the front window of the villa. Our filed of fire in other words was the soccer field, and he was the shooter and I kept the belted ammunition flowing smoothly. He was the shooter I guess because he was Army and he was senior to me although I was a better shot than he was. So that was interesting that we were set up that way, and the rest of the building was defended in various other ways, anything from passive, barbed wire and things like that, to active defenses that we
had located around the building, which is not the point of the story. The point of the
story is one night we did come under mortar attack, the village in general and I think us
and the province chief’s place in particular and it’s comical because the mortars were
exploding on the roof, light mortars, 60 mortars or something about that size. They were
literally exploding on the roof of the building and I slept through it. My roommate
literally had to shake me awake and get me out of bed and over to the machine gun. He
then explained to me, that hey we’re under attack and the plan calls for you to be here,
not in bed so that was kind of amusing, but I have always been a heavy sleeper and not
much bothers me once I go to bed.

SM: Did the village only get shelled that once while you were there?
MM: Yes, again it was only a month and a half but it was just that one time.
SM: Any casualties?
MM: No, it was over, just one of these brief flurry things. It was over before you
could think about it almost, there was no ground assault there was just mortar. The other
thing that was kind of amusing, in a way is I have a degree in accounting and I was fairly
fresh out of college back then. My roommate had among many other additional duties,
he was like the unit bookkeeper, he was supposed to keep track of the mess funds and
what not. I saw him one night out in the hall, there was a little hallway behind our
bedroom, there was a little desk out there with a lamp on it. He was obviously pulling his
hair out trying to figure something out and I didn't know what it was, so I said to him, I
said what’s going on, what are you doing? And he’s showing me these books, it was the
house books so to speak and he said I can’t understand it, and I’ve got to explain it to the
Colonel, we’ve run out of money. We don’t have any money to go to Saigon and buy
any food and he said, I don’t understand it. I’ve been filling out this, and he knew
nothing he was working from the Army how to be an accountant manual, put this number
in this box, add it to this box and that was about all he knew about accounting. But he
said I’ve been filling this thing out, I know it’s right, I’ve been sending them into the
Colonel, he’s been initialing them, everything’s okay, all of a sudden we’re out of money.
Well, the long and short of the story, which was obvious to me, I looked at it, it took me
about two seconds. He had been very dutifully at the end of each month, putting the
number that was the bottom line in parentheses, which is what the book said to do under
these given circumstances. If A is larger than B, subtract A from B and put the answer in parentheses and parentheses, and parentheses in accounting means it’s a loss, so for months they had been actually spending more than they’d been charging each of the guys dues, so to speak and they had been slowly but surely operating in the red and running out of money. But it took up till this month for them to run so far out of money that they really didn’t have any cash reserve to run up to Saigon and actually make the next months purchase. So I explained it to him, we had a good laugh over it, and then he said, ‘Will you go in and explain that to the Colonel because he will kill me if I go in?’ So I went in and explained to the Colonel that the Captain hadn’t done anything wrong. It was the fact that to be, and I didn’t put it that way, that both of them were ignorant of what they were looking at, the Captain and the Colonel, they didn’t understand the parentheses and I said, ‘You haven’t been charging enough so here’s what you’ve got to do, you’ve got to assess everybody a few bucks to build up the pot again and then you’ve got to start charging a buck or so more every month to stay that way’, and that was the end of that problem. I always remember that was kind of amusing, just another bureaucratic thing, you’re the unit accountant, all you’ve got to do is follow these rules and everything will be okay and of course it isn’t, but that’s about it. I don’t remember much else about the place, the friendly atmosphere, I remember that, the Army guys were great, the food was good.

SM: What was the total American presence there, approximately?

MM: I don’t know.

SM: Was it up to a hundred?

MM: Oh, no nothing like that, I’m talking maybe fifteen guys.

SM: That’s it?

MM: Yes, it wasn’t much more than that.

SM: Besides that mortar attack, how about occasional sniper fire, any of that kind of stuff?

MM: Nothing, no. Town was pretty secure as I said. It was a pleasant little town.

SM: What was the, how about the ARVN presence?
MM: In and out of town. The Vietnamese I think intentionally kept their soldiers out of their towns. The soldiers didn’t get paid much, they were inclined to steal, just petty theft, like soldiers anywhere, they go have a couple of drinks and get in a fight. Nothing unusual about them, they’re perfectly normal, just like anywhere else and I think they were kept away from town, not too far away but away. I’m talking three or four miles outside of town in a garrison area of some sort.

SM: Were there any other particularly memorable operations, that is villages that you bombed or operations that you engaged in?

MM: No, it’s a very routine place in that sense, very routine. So, what happened, to set the stage for the next time, is this. About a month and a half into my assignment at Long An, I got a message, verbal or whatever, one night, from my radio operator saying that the Colonel up at the 19th TASS, whose name I’ve forgotten although it’s on, I think one of my OERs, short name like Fisher or Thomas or Thompson or some such thing. The Colonel had called and he had a new job for me. I was supposed to go to Bien Hoa, post haste and I was going to be part of the 19th TASS infrastructure at Bien Hoa and I was going to be instructing Vietnamese pilots in the O-1, for the duration of my tour. I really reacted to that, was not what I wanted to do at all. I’d been to Bien Hoa, it was just dusty, it was like an old cow town, it was just a dusty place, not much going on, lot of guys. Just too many people around and it was non-combat, although certainly things happened there, but basically it was a non-combatant place, did not want to go there and I made that very clear. I got on the radio and I talked to the Colonel and I told him, I think I told him initially I’m not coming, to which he said, yes you are and then I calmed down and I told, hey I volunteered for this, I didn't volunteer to be an instructor in some garrison for the rest of my life, not what I came for. He understood and he said, well look he said, somebody’s got to do it. You haven’t been here that long, so we can get some longevity out of you in the program, he said you’re it. He said, unless you can find a replacement, somebody who would rather do it and you can have his job, I don’t care is basically what he said. So what I did is I got on the radio that night and I called around the 19th TASS area, I don’t think I went outside the TASS and I called all the sites and basically said, here’s the deal, is there somebody that would like to go do this, and I’ll come do your job. I don’t care where you are and I got a taker, I got a guy who was with
the Vietnamese Airborne Division, Advisory Detachment and see here now my memory
starts to get better, Detachment 192, based in Saigon, collocated with the ARVN
Airborne division which was based in Saigon and we’ll get into those details later, but
this guy, very frankly he was a captain.  [Note:  192 is correct vs. the transcript, but it was
actually 162.]  I think I remember his name but if not I’d rather not say, and he very
frankly said look, I got a wife and two kids at home.  He said I am Red Marker Four, the
last two Red Marker Fours within the last six months were killed.  He said I’m getting
shot at all the time, I’m not having a good time, I don’t want to do this and he said if you
want to come do it and let me go be the instructor, I’d be tickled to death to do that, so I
said sounds good to me and shortly thereafter, I talked to the Colonel again, he said fine.
And so without remembering the details of it, we made the swap and he came to Long An
and worked with Pete and that was the last I saw of Pete and that whole situation and I
somehow I was told by the Airborne Division Detachment to meet up with them at Tay
Ninh, which was the northern as it turned out, province of the 25th ARVN division.  In
other words Long An, Hau Nghia, Tay Ninh, up north, they just happened to be operating
out of there and the boss there, Colonel McCutchaoch said meet me up at Tay Ninh and
we’ll bring you into the unit, basically and so I did.  I forget how I got up there, maybe I
went to, matter of fact I think I did, I think I went to Bien Hoa, gave my airplane to the
guy who was going back to Long An and then took an Airborne Division airplane that
was there and flew it to Tay Ninh to meet up with the Airborne Division guys.  And so at
that point I joined my third and final unit in Vietnam and one where I have probably
more to say and more specific recollection of a lot of things, names and faces and things
that happened and all of that sort of thing, but that’s at least the intro into how that all
happened and that’s probably a good place to stop.  [Note:  This all is clearly incorrect,
even if it’s what I said.  He went to Bien Hoa.  Another FAC replaced me at Tan Ay.]
SM:  Just to clarify, which Airborne Division was this again?
MM: This is the Vietnamese Airborne Division.
SM: Vietnamese?
MM: Yes, the ARVN Airborne Division, so in a sense, a very accurate sense,
similar in many, many ways to the U.S. 82nd Airborne, kind of a quick reaction, national
reserve strike kind of a thing.  Light in terms of armor and weaponry but very quick and
it was stationed at Tan Son Nhut for reasonably obvious reasons, that was where you
could marshal a lot of airlift in a hurry if you had to and move them out to wherever they
really needed to be, so that’s that.

SM: Well, if you’ll hold on one second, I’ll just end the interview officially for
today. Thank you very much; this will end the interview on the 25th of January 2001.
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Mike Morea. It is the 1st of February 2001 at approximately 9:00 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas. Mr. Morea is in Florida. Sir, why don’t we begin by discussing your time with the ARVN Airborne Division?

Michael Morea: Okay, as we’ll recall last time I sort of set the stage for this by describing how I wound up assigned to the ARVN Airborne Division, so we can pick it up there. Again, as best I recall, I went to Bien Hoa, probably took an airplane in there for hundred hour inspection. Dropped it, picked one up that was destined for the ARVN Airborne, we’re going to use the shorthand here. The Red Marker FACs, that was our call sign, Red Marker Forward Air Controllers, we’re the Forward Air Controllers that supported the ARVN Airborne Division, just Red Marker comes out quicker than the other. So I picked up an airplane as best I recall and flew it up to Tay Ninh airfield, which is where at least several of them were operating at the time, landed the airplane and asked around I guess and was told, that I think those guys are having lunch. And so I made my way to a building which was very close by, hundred yards at the most and wandered around a little bit until I found the people I was looking for. Again in my written memoirs I remember the building quite distinctly. It was very, at least my recollection of it, it was very large for Vietnam, concrete, ugliest thing I’d ever seen, kind of an ugly rusty yellow color and I described it as looking like something left over from the Maginot line and in fact although I never knew for sure, it could easily have been...
built by the French as some sort of a semi-fortress. It was dark inside, thick walls, very
gloomy dingy place as you might expect somewhere in the Maginot line would have
been. In any case, I found the two people, two or three, may have been three people I was
looking for and walked over to the table where they were eating, introduced myself and
sat down and that’s how my relationship with these folks began. I have described again
in writing, my first impression, which was almost frightening. They wore the very
distinctive camouflage uniform that only the ARVN Airborne Division wore. I think,
again a leftover from the French foreign legion, it was not the same as what the
Vietnamese rangers or Vietnamese regulars or RFPFs or anybody else as far as I know
ever wore. Strictly the Airborne Division wore a kind of dull red beret, and the guys
were all in the ARVN uniform which I’ll explain in a moment. Joe Granducci, a captain
at the time, was one of the people I met. Joe had an enormous handlebar mustache,
fortunately I have a photograph of him from back in those days, which displays it
beautifully. Sergeant Balasko, spelled either with an E or A, B-E-L or B-A-L, I’m not
sure, I think B-A-L, was one of our radio operators. I’ve always described him as
looking like a Mexican bandit. He was Latino, short and squat and he too had a
mustache. So in the dark room and with the uniforms and the mustaches and what not,
they really made an impression, as I said of walking into a Mexican cantina in a bad B
movie or some such thing. And I was this clean cut twenty-six year old Lieutenant at the
time, was somewhat shocked, but it didn’t last very long. They were good people,
actually excellent people; I got along very quickly with them, very well. On that same
day, at some point the boss, who we all had Red Marker call signs, I turned out to be Red
Marker Four. Granducci was Red Marker Two, but the boss who was a Lieutenant
Colonel at the time, a very old man for the job, relative to other people who were in the
job, Gene McCutchaon was in his 40s, may have been as old as 47 at the time, and Gene
was just known as Red Marker. No number or The Marker, that was just a little pride
thing with him. Gene showed up at some point during the day, he had been out on a
mission and we got introduced. I don’t think I flew any missions that day or in that
period. I think the whole thing wrapped up, just about the time I was getting there,
whatever the ARVN unit was doing was wrapping up and somehow very soon, I think
maybe that same day or the next morning, we made our way back to Saigon, which as
I’ve said was the headquarters of the unit. Let me touch before we go further on the unit itself, as best I can. I think I’ve said before that it was called the ARVN Airborne Division, although at the time it was nothing like division size in reality. It was probably a large brigade, relative to say, the 82nd Airborne Division and had three full-up, maybe even robust regiments in it, but that was really as strong as it was back in those days and so although it was always known as a division and all the signs and what not in the cantonment area at Tan Son Nhut said division, at least in my time it was not. We had three combat ready regiments, as best I recall. So we can call it the brigade or division, in fact we used to refer to it both ways, just it wasn’t that important, we knew what we were talking about. The unit as I’ve said was very similar in structure, training, equipment, and mission as the 82nd Airborne Division was and is today in the United States, that is to say parachute very light. The best of leadership, probably man for man and the best soldiers probably man for man that the Vietnamese Army had -- I’m sure somebody would argue that with me, but that’s fine – had the mission of national reaction force or national reserve which meant that if there was a problem somewhere in the country. And it could be anywhere in the country, frequently a regiment of the division was directed to go somewhere to conduct some sort of a mission. It was also, I was led to believe in conversation with the Army folks who were the advisors there to the unit, the advisory detachment, 193 I think, 192 or 193, I think 193, I can check that. [Note: It was 162.] Detachment 193 had indicated to me that they were also there as kind of coup control in Saigon, they were at least theoretically and I think in fact, loyal to whatever the present government was in the interest of stability. And so they were there to quickly react should a coup arise either in town or from outside town, one of the Corps commanders or what not. That’s a thumbnail sketch, the leadership I remember almost no names, although I have documents, awards that I got from them and orders and things that I could probably glean some names out of, let me stop for breath. There is just by way of information for historical purposes, a red hat organization and I can give you leads to that if that ever becomes interesting to you. This is an organization of, it’s actually I think officially called the association of the Vietnamese Airborne and it is an association that’s here in the United States of people who were either in, which means some of the Vietnamese managed to escape here and still live here. Or advisors to,
namely people like myself and others, the division. It’s pretty well organized, a couple
hundred members, kind of focuses around Fort Bragg, which shouldn’t come as a
surprise, has facilitated a couple of monuments in fact. I think one at Fort Benning, one
at Fort Bragg and maybe one at Arlington to the Airborne Division Advisors, several of
whom were killed in action in the course of the war. They have published a hard cover
book, a little history of the division which I have a copy of, runs $50 to buy it and there
aren’t many left, but I do have one, just for the record, if some years down the road,
somebody is looking for one. That’s about it, the advisors were also top of the line, most
of them 82nd Airborne Division people, just as a matter of curiosity. Pete Dawkins who
was a very famous football player when he was at West Point, captain at the time, was an
advisor during my tenure there. Barry McCaffrey who is, as we speak, well he’s just
resigned, but he was the drug czar under the Clinton Administration after he retired from
the Army. I think he had been the commander so Southern Command down in the
Panama Canal area prior to that. And General Schwarzkopf who, everybody knows
General Schwarzkopf was also an advisor in the unit during my tenure, I believe he also
was a Captain at the time. He may have been a Major, but I think a Captain. [Not
exactly right. Schwarzkopf had left just before I arrived.]

SM: How much interaction was there between you as a FAC and the other
American advisors?

MM: God question and I appreciate you leading me. I’m drifting here and I think
I drifted far enough. It’s a good question; the answer is that, here’s the way it worked. In
Saigon, very little, we the FACs, five of us, [actually four], lived in a villa, a very nice
two-story, kind of what you might see in a middle-class Japanese family today. A
two-story stone building, bedrooms, a living room a kitchen, servants quarters, a
courtyard, that sort of a place. We lived at this place, the five of us, [four], when we were
in town. The Army advisors lived elsewhere in a MACV compound in their own setup,
so we did not have the interaction socially, or time off like we did at Long An and at Duc
Hoa. At work, when we went out to the division area to do one thing or another on Tan
Son Nhut, which was probably a twenty minute drive from the house through town, we
did our thing they did theirs, casual contact here and there. Our only serious contact was
when we went in the field, and when we went to the field, they and we, in other words,
the Army advisors and the FACs, would get our heads together with the Vietnamese commander, usually a regiment and it may be his operations officer and his company commanders. We would get together somewhere, at an airfield, usually and sit around a table, get our heads together and plan operations, or coordinate operations. They did the planning, I wasn’t directly involved in the planning unless I saw something that I thought didn’t look right, but then to coordinate what they’re plan was with me, so that I could provide the most effective air support in terms of time and objectives and potential danger spots and that sort of thing, ordnance and all those kinds of things, plan of movement. So we would sit around the table and talk about what we were up to until we had a good grip on what the plan was, and they would go back into the field and I would go wherever I had set up shop and prepare to provide the support that we had planned. That interaction, it wasn’t particularly exciting, it was very mundane, but it was very close interaction. Actually, in my mind at least the closest interaction we had was when we were actually in an operation, and although they were on the ground and I was in the air, that’s when we talked the most. That’s when, at least on occasions the communication was most intense, for reasons of contact with the enemy or other reasons, typically the latter. When I really did what I was supposed to be doing for them, namely provide them the kind of support they needed to effectively operate on the ground, so that is kind of a thumbnail sketch of what we did in one form or another many, many times. I would say that I and the other forward air controllers, and I guess I ought to name them for the record right now. The guys, when I got there, Joe Granducci, the captain I mentioned with the handlebar mustache was just about ready to leave. The guys who I worked with, we sort of all got there at more or less the same time and they were still there when I left were a Major names Paul, actually Oliver P., to be technically correct. Although he always went by Paul and preferred Bud, he certainly didn’t like Oliver. Bud Fisher was a Major, fighter pilot, there was also Bill Stewart, who was a Captain. There was myself, there was Wayne Kanouse, K-A-N-O-U-S-E, and the boss, McCutchaon. When I left all of those people were still there and I never met my replacement, I guess he was coming in just a day or so, at least I don’t recall. I don’t think I ever met my replacement; he was coming in shortly after I left. So those are the guys I lived with, and we would rotate the duty, if a regiment went out, one of us would go with them, usually
only one so it made it both good and bad for us and I can discuss that in a minute. So we
would stay at the house, a couple of days off if we’d just come in from the field, do not
much of anything. Just take it easy, then if we weren’t scheduled to go out immediately
and things got slow we’d go out to the field and do paperwork, performance reports on
the radio operators and the crew chiefs, or small, little things, nothing very earthshaking,
after action reports and things like that. Then our number would come up and we’d go
out with a regiment, typically wherever they were and whatever they were doing. So I
would say on average, I was probably in the field just a tad over half the month on any
given month and probably home just a tad under half a month, say twenty days out, ten
days in, would probably be about right. I have my complete Form Five, my flying record
from those days and if I had to, I guess I could sort of count flights and pretty much
figure out at least how much effort I was putting in on any given day. It does not
unfortunately indicate where I was; I wish it did because I’ve forgotten.

SM: The units that you would find yourself engaging, enemy formations, what
were they principally, Vietcong, PAVN, combinations?

MM: Depended on, as a very general rule in the early part of my time as a Red
Marker they were generally Vietcong. Toward the end we did start to make more contact
with North Vietnamese units, I think largely because toward the end we started to move
further north. To put it another way, my early operations and we would have gone up
and back and up and back and up and back on a rotation, were in the area from Qhi Nuon
north to a place called Bong Son and generally mostly let’s say, east of Highway 1, which
was the main north/south road. Sometimes operations into the mountains to the west, but
not very far to the west. So there was a sector there in II Corps that the division seemed
to have a lot of missions assigned in and so we spent months I suppose on and off
individually going up there to support the units that were involved. During those
operations the units that we engaged were almost entirely Vietcong. Later in the tour for
both military and political reasons and again it’s in my memoir there, but the written
memoir, but I can touch on it at least, we went up to I Corps and we operated say
generally in an area from a place called Hue Phu Bai to well ultimately to the DMZ, but
not beyond. So in the context of those operations, well let me back up, when were at Qui
Nhon I operated out of Qui Nhon itself. Qui Nhon city which was maybe a ten minute
drive from the airfield itself, a large MACV compound. Relatively comfortable concrete
building, rooms with bathrooms and all that sort of thing and I kept my airplane at the
airfield. I operated out of Phu Cat, which you have to be careful, in later years, well in
fact while I was there it was completed. There was an airfield that was called Phu Cat
which was very large American airfield, just as I recall, to the west of Highway 1. The
Phu Cat I operated out of was a little tiny RFPF compound, just to the east of Highway 1
and actually within sight of the new Phu Cat, very primitive place. Also operated out of a
place, had so many names up north. It was called Bong Son, I think Dog Field, English
Field, and it was a dirt runway that was heavily used by the 1st Cavalry division, U.S, 1st
Cav. There was a special forces camp very close, probably also called Bong Son, it had
its own little runway as I recall and I spent some time in the special forces camp
operating out of there. Just because it was convenient to the things I was doing, oh
maybe a week that I spent with those guys with my airplane parked inside the compound,
used to taxi it through their barbed wire gate and park it and then taxi out to the airfield
just when I needed to go because of security considerations, place was not safe.

SM: Again, PAVN or VC threat?

MM: Again, VC best I recall and see, I’m trying to think, during operations in
that area, I know I jumped up north and then came back, but during operations in that
area, that II Corps area, we did on occasion engage VC units. A lot of it I would say was
typical of the way at least I saw the ground war, they were milling around, we were
milling around. We were trying to find them, they were trying to either ambush us,
create some casualties, some morale difficulties, some psychological effect and then
disappear. In that area, to my recollection, no what you would call a pitched battle, even
at the low level, company level, that lasted for very long. It was just an occasional
contact, a quick fire fight, maybe some air strikes, and then the whole thing would just
sort of disappear and again, very typical, at least in my experience. Just as an aside, not
that it’s directly relative to anything, the South Korean units which had come over during
the same time frame for various political and operational reasons also had operations
within the same general area that I’ve just described. They had a small AOR, area of
responsibility, north and west of Qui Nhon as best I recall, and of course further west
toward Pleiku and into the mountains north of Pleiku was the 1st Cavalry was more of
than a headquarters it was a gigantic AOR with a lot of operating locations within it. So we on occasion did operate adjacent to and in coordination with both the Koreans and the 1st Cav. So, let’s see where does that leave me, okay you’re question, I guess I answered it, not a lot of contact occasionally, particularly when I was at Bong Son and there’s a story in there about kind of in my written thing again, sad story of which there are many about killing a friendly soldier who was stealing fuel. That was at Bong Son, a local, so much to say that it’s hard sometimes not to go forward on six fronts at once. That was a local regimental headquarters for that province similar to say what Duc Hoa would have been, I was there simply because it had an airfield and there was a U.S. advisor or two there and some semblance, well I won’t say some semblance, good security, a place to sleep. So that was the reason I was there and, why did I bring that up, help me Steve, where am I here? I’m talking about the kinds of operations we ran into, again at those kinds of locations we did on occasion we did come under probing attack particularly at night. You almost never even knew the size of the probing force, they were typically small, they were always repelled rather easily, trip flares would go off in the middle of the night. We might see a small number of enemy on the perimeter, some shots would be exchanged and the thing would go away, so I guess that’s a big long answer to the question of what the level of intensity was but I guess in the process I also covered some other things.

SM: Real quick, how close to the Cambodian border would you get when you operated in II Corps?

MM: Not close at all because we were over on the western side of the Corps. Highway 1 running pretty much up the, I’m sorry the eastern side, east coast in the coastal plain prior to where the mountains really began to rise toward Cambodia or Laos, so not close at all. When I was at Duc Hoa of course we would fly right up to the Cambodian border.

SM: When you operated out of your base there in Saigon, the further north you’d go from there, the more contact with potential PAVN, so I was curious how far that was from the border in terms of infiltration of the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam?

MM: We did not operate much in the highlands at all, and I think there were probably several reasons for that. Number one, an Airborne unit wandering around in the
jungle probably wasn’t going to get much accomplished. The population was highly concentrated in the coastal plain. I think the effort was at least an attempt to control both that territory and that population, again we’re talking ’66 so the political thinking was still kind of upbeat at this time hearts and minds and all of that sort of thing. We were going to win this thing, so that’s where they concentrated their effort. When we did go north, and again it’s in the written memoir, but my recollection is the first time and the first reason we went north was because there were two things, and history books may prove me wrong, but this is they way I understood it at the time. There were two things going on in I Corps area that were not good. Number one, the Buddhist leadership was creating a lot of political turmoil. An uprising I guess would have been, it may have been just short of an uprising, but Buddhist monks were burning themselves to death in town squares. There was a lot of agitation within the Buddhist church against the government and so I think the first reason we were sent up there was to kind of put a lid on that. My recollection is that the unit that went up that time was just a little bit bigger than one regiment, it may have been two. Although I was the only FAC, so maybe I’m wrong maybe it was just a regiment. I remember, it was just a regiment but there were other Vietnamese units that went up as well, Rangers and what have you, but we went first to Hue Phu Bai. Kind of a staging base, got our act together there a little bit. I ultimately, and again, there’s a story in my written memoir, went in a convoy from Phu Bai to Hue city, the old moated, medieval city with the moat around it and the old battlements that really look like something out of the crusades. I operated out of a small airfield that was inside the citadel, actually, inside the city and then the troops ultimately moved to a position, somewhat north and as I recall mostly a little bit west of town. The other factor, besides the Buddhists is, there was some intimation that the I Corps commander was trying to set up his own little country up there or break away form the Saigon regime or install somebody that he was more favorable to in Saigon. I don’t remember the details but there certainly was this suspicion that we needed to get more national troops into the Corps than he could muster on his own and put a lid on that as well. So probably a dual mission and as best I recall it succeeded, certainly things didn’t get worse and in fact they got better, quieter at least.

SM: How much time did you spend in Hue Phu Bai and Hue?
MM: That’s one of those things I don’t really remember, a couple of cycles, a couple of rotations perhaps, twenty, thirty days total, best guess. I sure wish I’d have written all that down, but I think I told you I tried to send letters to my mother with little hints buried in them that I could use later, and again, very untypical of my mom, she at some point got rid of them. So those are gone and she never threw anything away but those went for some crazy reason, so I’ve lost that chronology, I wish I had.

SM: Well, you mention in the written memoir that you sent to me, that there’s, apparently there must be two because you mention in this written, shorter version, a larger I guess written version with pictures and stuff.

MM: No, the one I sent you should be, what about ten, twelve, fifteen pages, yes that is it, that’s the memoir. Now I have, at home here, of course a box full of other things including photographs and pieces of paper, award citations, firearms that I carried while I was there. I’ve got a lot of things I’ve collected, but the one you have is it.

SM: I just brought it up because you mention in this written version that when you, I guess when you first arrived there in Saigon to work with the Airborne Division, that this was, most of the work, a lot of the work, especially I guess for the first months, was in the backdrop of a civil war in South Vietnam, I guess the Vietcong and as you spent more time there, slowly increasing amounts so, I guess, northern support, PAVN and stuff like that. I was curious if that was your perception at the time or is that retrospective?

MM: That’s retrospective. I don’t think I cared at the time, and it has to do, really with what happened after Hue and Hue Phu Bai because obviously the closer to the north you got, we were up in the Da Nang area, the air activity out of Da Nang was very intense, both in support of us and in support of other things that were going on up there. The Marine Corps had a very large presence and we were at least, generally aware of the kinds of things they were doing, and they were deeper in the mountains and the kinds of intensity of action that they were finding. Time had ticked by and I think that we were learning that there was a lot more infiltration coming in from Laos through the mountains, the western mountains of extreme northern South Vietnam to be accurate about it than we had to contend with down in the south. So there was at least a vague, probably more than vague recognition that we’re closer to North Vietnamese units. To
be honest, although probably not accurate, but the only time I actually remember engaging an obvious North Vietnamese unit was toward the end when we finally moved out of the Hue context and moved further north to Dong Ha. Now Dong Ha was just a lovely place, it was just solid mud most of the time, was a functional runway, and it was a U.S. Marine base for all practical purposes, like a staging area, a holding area, a jumping off point an operational area. So typically when you got to Dong Ha it had more the look of a real forward operational military base that maybe a guy like me would remember from Korean War or World War II films than anything else that I had seen, which was either small but tranquil to very large and semi-stateside, am I making sense there?

SM: Yes, sir.

MM: You know what I’m saying like if you went to Phu Cat or Qui Nhon, except you knew you were in Vietnam you could have been in Arizona in terms of the danger level or the level of facilities, which were decent at least. Phu Cat, old Phu Cat, the little place I mentioned was tiny and primitive but rarely seemed to come under any serious attack, probably because there wasn’t enough there to attack. But when you got to Dong Ha you got that different feeling, maybe it was just because of the Marines were there. But there was a lot of vehicle traffic all the time, like I said there was mud and rain and the airfield was busy as I indicated again in the written memoir, we did come under serious attack there, regularly, not a few sixty mortars, but 120 millimeter rockets and lots of them.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss the events of October.

MM: Okay, what is October, you help me?

SM: October 15, this was when you were flying a patrol and basically happened upon a North Vietnamese regiment?

MM: Yes, and that’s I guess what I was leading to, you’re right October 15. My regiment let’s say, was operating north of Dong Ha and there wasn’t a lot of room between Dong Ha and the DMZ, a map would indicate how much it was, but I don’t think it was twenty miles, and they were operating in that area. Doing search missions, trying to just control that territory and I was flying cover over them, had no, I don’t even think I had any air in my pocket, so to speak, nothing pre-planned, nothing in a holding pattern anywhere. They were maneuvering and I was flying cover over them and if my
verbal story doesn’t quite check with the written one we’re going to have just, if we care to, reconcile the details. But verbally, basically they simply made contact very suddenly, very abruptly as I recall with a North Vietnamese unit, of my recollection about equal size, fresh out of North Vietnam and just across the border. This thing all occurred within a couple of hundred yards of the border of the DMZ as best I remember. The terrain is relevant, it was what I would call almost like West Texas scrub. Not forest or jungle certainly, nor was it the farmland which was more typical of the coastal plain, it was probably coastal plain, but uncultivated because of its proximity to the DMZ and my point being that the visibility was pretty decent from the air, although not necessarily very good from the ground. If you can imagine hunting deer in West Texas, you don’t see very far in the scrub oak but I could see very well down into it. So they made contact and a firefight began. They were, I’ll come back to this point, but they were taking some fire, I don’t recall any casualties on the American side, at least not immediately but they were taking fire and there was a lot of initial confusion as there always is, as to where the fire was coming from, where the main thrust of the enemy force was. I was able to see that very readily, and to see the maneuvering. Of course by this time I’ve got an air strike on the way, I know, I don’t think, I know that Ken Karnes was my radio operator at the time, back at Dong Ha and close enough to where he could hear my FM radio transmissions, which we've never really touched on, but from ground to air, or air to ground, we were usually communicating on the FM band because that’s what the Army uses for close in coordination when they're on the ground. He was close enough to hear my FM transmissions and as soon as contact was made, he and rightly so, didn’t even bother to wait for me. He called a Direct Air Support Center at Da Nang and said, start getting some air up here. A few minutes later I called him and he said, don’t worry it’s on the way. I said, okay or something to that effect and went back to watching what was going on, on the ground. So, the first order of business and again, it’s in the written memoir was to try to get the guys on the ground to understand what the disposition of the enemy force was. I think it’s in there, I used a very simple technique which I had never used before, I thought it up on the spot, but it worked like, great. I could see one of the Army advisors on the ground, I could tell who he was, and I just told him simply lay down on the ground and I made him squirm around on the ground until his feet were
pointing at the main thrust of the enemy. I think he had a map on his face, just so I could see which end of him was which, it wasn’t that hard anyway. But I think I told him, put the map over your face and squiggle around until I tell you to stop and I said okay, you’re feet are now pointing at the enemy. And so they were able, because of that to concentrate the force and the fire in that area and they really did stop the NVA long enough for the air to get there. There is one funny story I do remember, funny, sardonically funny perhaps, but I don’t think this one’s in the memoir, I do recall throwing a red smoke grenade out of the airplane, again trying to mark the enemy position and it went into a foxhole. Foxhole I guess is the correct term, it was more like a small, it was like a grave almost in its dimensions, probably about six feet long and a couple of feet wide and not quite as deep, maybe three or four feet deep, pre-cut had been there for a while, by the NVA or the VC. But there were a couple NVA in it and I threw the red grenade and it actually went in the foxhole where they were. Now this thing, if you’ve never seen one, it doesn’t look like much from a distance, but it is sputtering smoke and fire pretty vigorously and so they bailed out of the hole and were immediately shot by the guys on the ground. I don’t think that ones in the memoir, but it’s a true story. I was getting by that time, of course near the end of my tour, at least well into it, getting pretty good with smoke grenades and as you can tell, both from this narrative and from ultimately when I got the DFC and from the Air Force side, the Air Medal with V from the Army guys, through Army channels, because the Air Force doesn’t do an Air medal with V, but the Army does. So they put me in for that but that narrative suggests correctly that when I get shot up a little bit there, that I had wandered rather low in the course of this thing, stupidly, but I did, I’d gotten down to, I don’t know, maybe five hundred feet, maybe four, I don’t know. I was really into the fight, but I wasn’t watching myself so I was able to toss a smoke grenade with pretty good accuracy from that altitude so the long and the short of that story of course, is that they were under some considerable fire and in some danger, it was getting late in the day. We’d been there a while, I was running out of gas and best of my recollection I did not put in an air strike, a local FAC, whose name I had not known until the FAC reunion, this recent past up at Hurlburt. I met the guy just by casual conversation we were talking and it turns out that without a doubt, this is the guy who actually, a local FAC who actually relived me as I was running out of gas and put in most
of the air strikes. In fact I think all of them to settle the area down while I flew back to 
Dong Ha and got my airplane repaired because it had been shot up a little bit, actually 
mostly just checked it to make sure it was still flyable and then came back to relieve him 
as darkness was setting in. I think the NVA had pulled out by then, although we never 
really knew and most of what I did on my second flight back in that area was to set up 
defensive positions for them, find some likely looking spots where they could put people 
and make sure that there was a flare ship on station for the night, a C-47 Spooky and then 
put them to bed and then went back to Dong Ha, and the next day back to normal. We 
ever made a contact like that again. I do remember certain things about that particular 
thing very vividly because it’s probably the closest I ever came to getting killed by the 
enemy. I probably came closer doing stupid things by myself in the airplane, but as far as 
enemy action is concerned it’s probably the closest I came. I do recall vividly one NVA 
soldier stepping out from behind a bush wearing khaki shorts, flip flops, a straw hat with 
a silver finish on it, I think, painted silver finish on it, probably to reflect the heat. A 
khaki shirt and an AK-47 and he opened up on me at reasonably close range for an AK. 
I’d say maybe four hundred yards [I said yards, but I meant feet] and hit the airplane two 
or three times, shattered the left rudder pedal, stripped the manufacturer’s label off the 
generator without actually hurting the generator, put a dent in it, and one came through 
the window and there was a huge amount of plexi-glass, actually broke both windows, 
came in the left window, went out the right.1 So broke some plexi-glass and had a lot of 
plexi-glass and dirt and dust in the airplane which is another story. That was obviously 
vivid in my mind, again, the only thing I remember saying was I’m hit and before I could 
even explain that I meant I, the airplane, which I considered part of me, Karnes had 
already called again. A rescue service was on their way, or rescuer helicopter was on its 
way from Da Nang before I could turn if off, so he was good like they all were, he did 
what he needed to do without a lot of guidance.

SM: Why is the plexi-glass and dirt another story?

MM: I’ll get to that, because let’s see, let me finish here and then I’ll come back 
to that. The other things, what else do I vividly remember about that? Well the guy with 
the machine gun who by the way, was killed as soon as he stepped out and fired at me 
somebody got him. I guess the point is this was fairly close, I mean this was very,
everything was very visible, not just a bunch of little dots running around on the ground, these were real people on both sides and very obviously so. There was something else I was trying to say, I’ve forgotten, it doesn’t matter. The thing about the plexi-glass is when the bullet came up, and I don’t know that this is in my memoir either, but when the bullet came up through the floor and broke the rudder, because there’s just a lot of dirt and debris on the floor, not a ton, but enough and the plexi-glass flying around. Later that night, I kept seeing something wrong with my left eye and I presumed that I had just maybe a piece of dirt or a piece of glass or something in my eye and it was of some concern to me. So that when I get back to Saigon, I went to see the flight surgeon, I said there’s something wrong with my left eye, and he, good examination at the hospital there which was probably the best one in country. Well that and Da Nang and couldn’t find it, the ophthalmologist or optometrist, ophthalmologist, I guess, couldn’t find anything. I said okay, that’s fine if you can’t see anything, I’m happy. He said no, I’m not happy, if you’re seeing something, there’s something wrong. They sent me downtown Saigon, this is very interesting to me, female Vietnamese optometrist. You’ve got to understand that we had this, sadly in almost every case, third world country kind of an attitude about the locals and being sent to a Vietnamese eye doctor wasn’t my idea of a great idea. What the hell is this guy going to do to me, turned out to be a woman educated in Paris, very, very good optometrist. She couldn’t find anything either, so I said fine, great, we’ll call it a day, but the system now was in full swing and it wouldn't stop. I actually got aerovaced, if you can imagine, out of Vietnam to the U.S. hospital at Yokota in Japan for a week while they looked at me there, and it was misery because it was Yokota. I’d been there many, many times as an air lifter, it was a pretty good place to relax and have a few beers and something good to eat in total peace and comfort, they wouldn't let me out of the hospital. Although I was ambulatory and the only problem I had was this maybe eye thing. Well, the long and the short of it is, it was finally diagnosed as something called a vitreous floater, which everybody has, they’re just little things inside your eye, like the little hard white part of an egg white that you get when you’re separating an egg. There are things like that floating around in the liquid part of your eye and they sometimes obscure your vision or what not. You don’t seem them unless you look up at a clear sky or swim underwater with your eyes open, normally and it had always been there is the
long and the short of it. It’s just that I’d never noticed it until this trauma of getting shot
at and hit, so that’s the point of the story about the debris flying around the cockpit.

SM: Now who was the other FAC?

MM: I think the other FAC, I have his name somewhere, if it’s not in the
memoir, if it’s not in the version I sent you, it is in my absolutely most recently updated
version, I won’t take time now, but I’ll look at it and I’ll get it for you next time, his call
sign and his name are in there.

SM: Oh, Dan Riley.

MM: Yes, there you go, right, so it is in there, good. I thought I sent you the very
last update that I did. So and he told the story absolutely perfect, he knew every detail,
and I hadn’t a clue who he was until the reunion.

SM: Now a couple clarifying questions, back to II Corps real quick, when you
were down there near the Bong Son plain and that area, did you ever fly into or hear
about a place called Two Bits?

MM: Two Bits, no, means nothing to me.

SM: Also, quickly back to the civil war issue, even though a lot of what you
talked about today and what you’ve written in your memoir seems to be retrospective,
when you were there what was your impression in terms of who you were really fighting?
Were you really fighting against North Vietnam, or did you feel you were fighting
against an internal threat, helping the South Vietnamese?

MM: Oh, we knew, when we went it I Corps that time, the Hue Phu Bai, Hue
thing, we knew we were fighting two enemies at that point.

SM: Two enemies?

MM: No question.

SM: And that was?

MM: Maybe three, the VC, Vietcong as one, in one lump, the North Vietnamese
forces, whatever size and style, and the Buddhists and the Corps Commander. We knew
it. It was all very subtle though, I think probably the commander of the Airborne
Division unit that went there was probably a little more senior than he had to be. They
probably grabbed at least a full Colonel, maybe the most senior full Colonel, and these
guys all knew each other, they'd been fighting in Vietnam for endless years. So this guy
was no stranger to the I Corps commander, nor vice versa and I think when he went up
there, there were meetings and it was all very cordial and lots of smiling and bowing, and
all that sort of thing. But everybody knew what was going on, that’s not unusual, you can
find that in corporate America, everybody’s having a drink and dinner and smiling and
being charming and they hate each other, or at least they’re trying to cut each other’s
throat in a business sense.

SM: Now, did you have an opportunity to talk about these types of things
amongst other FACs or with the Army advisors that you worked with?

MM: No, not those kinds of things. When we had a chance to talk, my
conversation with the Army advisors was generally strictly operational, and that’s the
only time I ever really saw them. Once in a blue moon the division would have a party,
some sort of a party in Saigon. They’d bring in some local girls of a better quality than
the normal and they would be there to dance with and that’s all. Just female companion,
somebody to talk to, and the conversation during once of those evenings might drift a
little bit away from operations, but they were rare. And at home in the villa on Yen Do
Street there in Saigon, I forget the number, I have it written down somewhere, number
three or number thirty-four Yen Do was the address of the villa. We tried, I almost think
now unconsciously, it’s a good question, I never thought about it. Unconsciously, we
didn’t talk much about operations unless something really worth sharing came up. The
operational discussion was when we passed the baton, if I was leaving say Dong Ha to go
back to Saigon for my break and Wayne or Bill was coming up. I’d certainly give them a
very good operational baton pass, the terrain and the threats and what we’d done in the
past and what it would look like into the future and where you could get good support
from the Marines and maybe what the DASC was doing well and maybe where they
weren’t doing so well. A good operational pass of the baton but once we got back to
Saigon, it was like trivial almost, just casual conversation about this and that. That was
about it. It’s funny because we spent like a full day, I think we slept a lot to tell you the
truth. I think we probably got up late in the morning, maybe ten o’clock, remember it’s
hot as blazes all the time, no air conditioning, we did have fans and what not. So you got
up late, you didn’t move very fast, might have had a light lunch, read a book, take a nap,
read some mail, write some letters, a little conversation in the afternoon, have an early
dinner, go to your room. Read some more, get to bed, it was pretty mundane and the conversations were very general and usually more about home and the future, what’s your next assignment and that kind of thing, than operational.

SM: Were you able to develop strong relationships with your fellow FACs, friendships?

MM: Strong, funny word.

SM: Was it avoided?

MM: No, it was not avoided, how do you put it? The opportunity was limited to get a very close relationship and since we rarely actually worked together. Like for example I read Charlie Pococks book, *Viper Seven*, and Charlie’s situation was closer to what I had at Duc Hoa and Long An, but never long enough to get involved. His relationship with the one or two other FACs that were collocated was obviously much stronger. You came home every night, same guys, same Army guys and you had a whole year there. With us, we rarely functioned operationally together and so just a friendly, more than casual friendly relationship I guess is as far as I would go with it.

SM: Another question about ARVN, what was your assessment of the ARVN units you supported down in Saigon and then in I Corps?

MM: Well, the ARVN Airborne Division was excellent in every respect. You couldn’t at least, within reasonable limits fault them on anything as far as I was concerned. Their leadership was hand picked from the best of the Vietnamese military leadership, had been in the division, it wasn’t like the U.S. Army or the U.S. Air Force, where you got a new assignment every three years. These guys had been with the division since forever, the senior people and the young guys I think anticipated staying and growing in the division. The troops were good as any troops will be if they’re probably led, they’ll do their job. The American advisors were, I won’t say a cut above, that wouldn’t be fair. I mean the American advisors who came to go to the Ranger units or even just the ordinary Vietnamese units were probably very good, but I can tell you that the guys who came to the Airborne division were, from personal experience, I mean guys like Schwarzkopf and I think I mentioned Colonel LaBrozzi, who had a battlefield commission in Korea, strangely for just reasons of rotation I think I seemed to find myself in the field with him more than most of the others. I’m a kid and he’s an old man,
it was another one of those father-son relationships almost like I had with Gene McCutchaon. I mean Gene was twenty years older than I was for crying out loud, and LaBrozzi with a battlefield commission from Korea was probably right up there too. So those are the people I remember best, but if you went to the unit area, the division area there at Tan Son Nhut it was well maintained, it was kept clean, it was good. I certainly never found fault with them. Oh, this is the thing I was going to touch on and drifted away from, we drifted back. There is, and we may have already discussed it, but it’s a fact, it’s just a matter of history that because of the strength of U.S. air power and the effectiveness of U.S. air power generally in the South, and the availability of it, and the fact that these guys had been fighting since long before we’d thought about getting over there. There was a tendency I think in all cases, when contact was made, to hold rather than attack and just hold position, sort of pin the enemy until the air could come in and destroy them. And frankly if I had been a Vietnamese division platoon leader or company commander and I knew that was the situation I can’t imagine why I’d go charging in with rifles. I’d be dead today, theoretically or perhaps, whereas I know I can get the enemy destroyed, probably better than I can do and I’ll be there to do it again tomorrow. So there was very definitely, at least in my opinion, that tendency and I think that tendency also applied in the division. The story up where I got my DFC is classic. I told them where the fire was, they held the enemy, didn’t retreat certainly, but they’re not going to do a cavalry charge like in the movies. Hold the enemy until the air comes in and destroys them. So that’s probably a point, that’s significant. I know you’ve been probing with a lot of your questions through the course of these interviews, so you obviously have some thoughts in mind where you’re trying to fill in some blanks and I know at least my experience, I haven’t been very helpful in most of them, but this one I think is significant.

SM: My question about ARVN, my interest is not so much in clarifying or verifying anything in particular, but there’s already assessments out there, and some of them are not very glowing or very positive. I want to know what you think because based on what you said already I thought that it seemed like the Airborne division and the units that you were fighting with, were pretty good, they were doing a great job.
MM: Yes, there was no question. I’ll be honest with you, what little I knew of the U.S. units, particularly the 1st Cav., because we worked adjacent to them very often, was that they were as inclined to do that as anybody else and for all the same good reasons. If you’ve got a company of NVA out in front of you, and you know exactly where they are, you’ve got to be semi-suicidal to go charging into them when you know you can have napalm and five hundred bombs all over the place in ten minutes. It makes no sense to me, there is an element of human survival even in the craziest soldier I think, or maybe not in the craziest. But I think that again it’s a question of leadership, I’m sure there were U.S. units with some Chargin’ Marvin in front of the, as the company commander who did things that were very brave and probably unnecessarily brave at times. But again, generally I would say that’s the way the war was fought, find the enemy, pin them, locate them and let the air destroy them, at least whenever possible, and I think, why not?

SM: You mention in your memoir another interesting incident, a personal attack against you when you were driving through a city.

MM: That was when we went up to Hue, when we went to Phu Bai and then as I said, we sort of got our act together there, I think is the phrase I used and then we convoyed up Highway 1 from Phu Bai to the Hue citadel and then beyond. We, now meaning the entire package, the ground units, myself, my radio operator, my crew chief wasn’t with us. I don’t know how he got there, or the airplane got there, now that I think of it because I didn’t fly it in. I don’t remember that part, but the airplane ultimately got to Hue. I did not fly it into Hue, I may have flown it into Phu Bai, or you know what we did? I remember now. We literally stole it from the local FACs, in the sense that McCutchaon got the TACC down in Saigon to order them to turn loose one of their airplanes for us, that’s right because it was too far to go, too quick to get our own up there. So I think they probably positioned it for us and I think my crew chief probably flew in a Caribou or some such thing and then my radio operator and I went with the Mark 108 Jeep to Phu Bai and then we convoyed. The thing was that I had to get into the Citadel which is where my airplane and I guess by then my crew chief was, and where we going to, again camp out and bunk out. I would up, now that I think about it, bunking out with an Australian captain who was the advisor to a local APC, armored personnel carrier
unit. I have no idea what his name was, but typical Australian. He had a bunk so that’s where I wound up sleeping, but I’m drifting. The story was yes, we had planned, using the maps that at a certain point as this convoy was heading north to a position northwest of Hue that I was going to have to break out of the convoy alone and go to the citadel. Now, I’ve described in the memoir that, as best I remember, practically speaking all the way form Hue Phu Bai to Hue city, which is a considerable distance, the road was lined with local people, stirred up by the Buddhist. And had their, the thing I most vividly remember is that they had their little home altars, or shrines, which every home has, no matter how small, just a table, foot and a half by two and a half or so, but a little altar with symbols which don’t mean anything to me, not understanding Buddhism. But incense burners and pictures and little statues and what not and has to do, I know enough to know that it has to do with ancestors and what not, but these were all moved out of the homes and lined the roads and then people standing there as well, watching us go by, obviously making a statement. I don’t remember any really belligerent or hostile looks, but sort of making a statement’s the best I can do. We’d just as soon you weren’t here and we want to let you know that, we’re not going to get hostile and they didn’t. The thing again in the memoir, I remember it has to do with the Buddhist colors, gold and red, very predominant, banners and things like that, or at least that sticks in my head. A lot of gold and red cloth, tapestries and altar covers and little flags and what not lining the route, and there were lots and lots of people. The long and short of it is that at the appointed point, adjacent to Hue citadel, I and my driver, who I’ve chosen, not to name, broke out of the convoy. Just very quickly made a right turn out of the convoy down a street, almost a boulevard actually. I can see it, it looked a little like Paris in Hue, making it for the military portion of the citadel. That sort of break in the pattern agitated a lot of the bystanders and we wound up being chased by a mob of a couple hundred people probably. And again the amusing part now is that my radio operator, who was not one of the brighter ones, reaches for his revolver which we all carried and he’s, almost before I can stop him, he’s leaning out the left side of the Jeep trying to drive it and playing stagecoach shotgun kind of guy with his revolver. He didn’t fire it and I just quickly told him to put it away, drive, and don’t miss a gear because they’re going to eat us if we miss a gear. And so we did, very quickly, this whole thing took seconds probably before we
finally outdistanced the mob and got to the citadel but it’s very vivid because I really
figured although the crowd had been peaceful. Things like this changed the nature of the
crowd and just the fact that they were running and now getting in a physical mode, if they
had caught us I think we would have been in serious trouble because we were absolutely
alone at that point.

SM: Now was this the time when someone hurled a grenade at you?
MM: No, that was different that was in Saigon, going from the house at Yen Do
to Tan Son Nhut, just a perfectly routine morning, just jumped in the, we had a couple of
Jeeps and drivers, the FACs had a driver, his name was Phoung, just a young enlisted
man out of the division and his duty assignment was the FACs driver. I have
photographs of him and McCutchaon had his own. Phoung served the four of us and
Gene had his own driver, named Loung, L-U-O-N-G, I think, I also have a photograph of
him. So Phoung I guess had picked me up, I think it was just the two of us at the house,
to take me out to the base to do something. As I said OARs, or after action reports or
something, just because I was bored and wanted to go out there, and we were driving
down one of the main thoroughfares that led from the house to the main gate at Tan Son
Nhut. I picture it in my mind as an intersection, fairly broad, again almost Parisian kind
of a boulevard, lots and lots of people around, cyclos and people on foot and bicycles all
over the place and a hand grenade was thrown from, we were heading north if I
remember right, that’s the way the road went to Tan Son Nhut from the house and the
hand grenade was thrown from the left of the Jeep somewhere. I never even saw who
threw it at us, I’m sure but it sailed over the Jeep and landed one the sidewalk to the right
and exploded and I’m sure, in a little market area, which was typical, something for sale
on the street kind of a place, fruit or coffee or God knows what, could have been anything
and it exploded. And we didn’t blink, we just kept right on going. I wasn’t about to stop
and render aid or see what the heck it was all about, that was just pure survival at that
point, get the hell out of here. I’m sure there were people injured if not killed, but that’s
they way it went, again, one of those over before you can think about it and it took less
time than it takes to tell about it, stories. And it happened occasionally in town, times
like that.
SM: Would you guys report that to anybody, it seems like that would be great fodder for Americans and Vietnamese both working on counterintelligence?

MM: You know I think I mentioned it when I got to the base but it was understood that those kinds of things would happened and probably generated almost no interest other than, oh, wow.

SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Morea on the 1st of February 2001.
Steve Maxner:  This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Mike Morea.  It’s the 13th of February 2001 at approximately five minutes after nine, Lubbock time.  I am in Lubbock, Texas, Mr. Morea is in Florida.  Sir why don’t you go ahead and talk about your final impressions upon learning you were leaving Vietnam and as you were getting on the plane to get back to the United States?

MM:  Well, that’s interesting, because I hadn’t really thought about that but I think I can sort of dredge it up from memory.  I guess again, I’ve probably overused the word, but it is the thing that sticks in my mind most about the whole experience is this aspect of surrealism that surrounded the whole experience of being in a war and I think what happened is that, past the six month point, you begin to realize that you really are there and you really have been doing certain things and you really have been fighting a war and more to the point.  You actually begin to realize, that I could get killed here, but I’m halfway through and I just might survive this thing and that sort of starts to dawn on you in an indirect, probably subconscious sort of way.  But it also starts to dawn on you that if that’s the case you’ve got to start planning for the future, I think when guys go to war, it’s almost like everything stops in their mind, at least it was with me and you just sort of get on with it.  Being a bachelor, maybe it was more that way, I didn’t have family and kids to worry about, but it was sort of like the whole world stopped and I’m just going to do this and maybe I’ll survive it and then you start to get this feeling, by golly I
I’m going to survive this. I’ve got experience, I haven’t done anything terribly stupid yet and I’ve got less than half the time to go, so you start to think about the future and assignments and all that sort of thing start to come up and I think probably, I think I went, I’m jumping around here a bit, but I went on two R & Rs while I was in Vietnam, I think the rule was you were allowed big one, and the married guys typically went to Hawaii or someplace and met up with their wives and the single guys like me took two shorts ones, like a week each, I think we were allowed two total weeks. I went somewhere, I forget when, but I think probably in about October or thereabouts I went to Bangkok by myself, ratted around town like a bachelor will in a place like Bangkok. Had a good time, drank way too much and got back on the airplane and came back to work a week later. Then in December I remember more distinctly, I took my second one, which was to Hong Kong. And by the time that second leave rolled around, I was only two months from leaving Vietnam, thoughts of assignment and a new life and going back to normality and civilization and all of that sort of thing were definitely beginning to take over a lot of your thinking. Particularly your spare time thinking, and I think that was the case with me. So you start thinking, well gee, what am I going to do, and you start thinking assignment and the interesting thing about that and I think this is also in my memoirs is that being an air lifter, C-133s at Travis before I went to Vietnam, I pretty much knew I was going to go back to air lift and the assignment came down, my assignment came down, probably about December there, I think I had a couple of months to work with it, that said I was going to go to C-141s at Norton Air Force base which was in San Bernardino, Southern California and of course that was a real plum assignment because the 141 was new in the inventory. It was a jet as opposed to, it was the first real jet transport airplane and it was going to be a great thing to fly that thing as it was almost brand new in the inventory and sort of progress through my career with that airplane. So I was pleased at that with one exception, problem was that I had at some point, and again I think it ties into this, I think I’m going to survive thing, at some point I had started writing to, I wouldn’t even call her my girlfriend, a girl I knew back at Travis who I dated occasionally, rarely I would say is more accurate and saw at clubs, bars in San Francisco and parties in the bay area and at Travis. We sort of seemed to be compatible, and I had started writing her and she wrote back, and we both I think thought there was something
cooking there and I knew very well that if I went to San Bernardino that was going to be the end of that relationship. So in the back of my mind, I had this idea which I didn’t bother with while I was in Vietnam that I needed probably to get my assignment changed and go back to Travis if we were going to explore this relationship. The long and short of that story, I’m jumping way ahead now, is that when I finally did get back in February I stopped in to see my old squadron commander whose got an interesting piece of history associated with him in Vietnam, which I think I will mention because it is public record. But I went to see him and I told him the story and asked him to get the assignment changed while I was on leave back in New York, which he did and so I ultimately reported back to Travis rather than San Bernardino and I ultimately married the girl and she’s still living with me here, so that worked out fine, but that is kind of an interesting thing. I know I haven’t directly answered your question Steve, but you so start to think, I think it’s the opposite, it’s not so much what you start to think about as what you weren’t thinking about up to a certain point, at least in my mind, you sort of close everything out and you just say, this is it, I don’t want to talk to anybody, I don’t want to know too much about what’s going on anywhere else. I’m just doing this and if it’s over and I survive then I'll get back to the normal world and that again, is that, we used to call the States the real world. There were phrases that we used that I think unconsciously suggested that that’s how we thought about things. I don’t think I was any different in that regard. Again, just to reiterate, sort of as time ticks by and you become more and more aware of the fact that you probably are going to leave this place and go somewhere else, you start coming out of that cocoon kind of a situation and starting to think about the broader world and reality again. That’s probably not as well as I could do if I sat down and thought about it for two weeks before I said anything, but that sort of was the feeling that I had.

SM: Now you mentioned that the commander, squadron commander you approached?

MM: Name was Jerry Kehrli, K-E-H-R-L-I, and he was a hell of a nice guy. He was a damn good commander, but he made a big mistake and people my age remember it because it was very public. He was a commander in Vietnam of one of the units there, I think at Tan Son Nhut, aerial port squadron if I’m not mistaken although I could easily
be. A full Colonel and he got caught smoking marijuana, which of course today is a joke. People say so what? But back then a commander in Vietnam in the ‘60s, it was a major, major deal and he wound up getting convicted and winding up in Leavenworth, believe it or not, five years I think, court martial, the whole deal. Yes, honest, it’s hard for guys your age to believe something like that but is absolutely true, Jerry Kehrli was his name, good guy. He got out afterwards and I don’t think they hammered him too bad in terms of retirement and all of that sort of thing. He might have lost one grade or gone back to Lieutenant Colonel for retirement purposes or some such thing, but sad story in a way because he was really a good guy, but he made a mistake. He wasn’t drinking, he was smoking a joint every once in a while at night. It was illegal, you could get plastered every night at the bar, but you couldn’t smoke a joint and that’s just the way the rules were and he broke them.

SM: How was he as a commander?

MM: Oh, super guy, terrific. He was the 84th Squadron Commander at Travis there for years, wonderful guy, great.

SM: Competent?

MM: Yes, completely competent, personable, everything, he was a good commander.

SM: What a shame.

MM: Yes, it was kind of sad, but again, I’m not telling any tales out of school, that’s public record.

SM: Yes, sir. Now, when you arrived in the United States what was that like, getting off that freedom bird?

MM: I think, actually I’m going to have to back you up to answer the question correctly. I think it started sooner than that, it started when the airplane lifted off from Saigon, it was like day and night. Like the whole thing almost disappeared from your mind, at least temporarily. It’s over, that whole thing is over, I’m out of here, I escaped, I survived, I made it. It was almost instantaneous when the gear came up on the airplane and you could feel it in the airplane, it was not just me it was everybody. You really at that point realized, I made it, I’m going home, and then you start to think almost as if it didn’t happen, at least for a short while. In my case probably for quite a while, it was like
okay, that’s done. The guys I knew back there, they’re going to continue their job, I
probably will never see them again. Although that turned out to be fortunately not
correct, at the reunion I saw several of course, but it was just an instantaneous sharp
break, like somebody hit you upside with something and snapped you back to reality,
almost that sharp I think in my case. Funny thing, I remember Phil Teague, who I think,
you met Phil at the reunion. If you don’t remember he was a kind of a boisterous isn’t
quite the right word, very, had an aura about him almost, a really outgoing guy. He was
walking with a cane, a little hunched over, not old but I think he’d been in an accident,
Phil Teague. Phil and I sat next to each other on the airplane coming home and the funny
ting I do remember is Phil had this enormous bottle of Lavoris, green mouthwash with
him and we drank the thing all the way home. Of course it wasn’t Lavoris, it was crème
de menthe, believe it or not, an enormous bottle of the stuff and we just quietly sipped on
that all the way back to the States and of course the stewardess knew what was going on.
It was a Continental flight if I remember, she knew what the heck was going on, but we
were behaving ourselves and they didn’t care. Kind of funny, but again, that does really
in a way tie to your question, it was like, okay it’s over. Let’s have a drink and by the
time we get home we won’t even remember it happened. I think, when I got off the
airplane, to answer your question directly, I think it was at San Francisco, I think it didn’t
land at Travis, it landed at the international airport, San Francisco and I don’t even think I
spent the night. I think I caught a flight, I honestly don’t remember, may have spent one
night. If I spent a night it was in the Jack Tar hotel, that’s a vague memory or else I just
cought another airplane and went straight to New York, I honestly don’t remember. No,
that’s not true because I went down to Travis to see Kerhli before I went home, so I
honestly don’t remember, I don’t remember how it all evolved.
SM: What month and year is this now?
MM: This would have been February of ’67.
SM: February ’67, any kind of anti-war protesting going on?
MM: None that I saw and again, you’ve asked that question before and I guess to
answer it again, we were vaguely aware through the Stars and Stripes and radio programs
that there was a protest in progress, don’t think we realized how intense it was, don’t
think we cared much.
SM: Well, I meant at the airport?

MM: At the airport, nothing that I recall.

SM: Did you ever have any run-ins with anti-war protestors?

MM: No, I subsequently came to know a few people socially who were very anti-war. We had conversations, they had their opinion, I had mine, it never got angry or anything as best I recall. The society that I lived in was not the, I was past the college thing and I was past the hippie thing. So that group of people was probably a subculture in a literal sense to me, in that they were younger, poorer, less worldly wise perhaps. Didn’t really know what they were talking about, was probably my bottom line opinion. If they knew what was really going on they’d understand better but they didn’t because they were just kids. That was probably my thinking and just leave them alone and they’ll go away or whatever. I think the only one that sticks in my mind in a different way would have been what year would it have been, ’68, probably, the ’68 Democratic National Convention in Chicago where they had the riots and all of that sort of thing, I think that’s correct.

SM: I believe so.

MM: Yes, and of course that was nationally televised and very intense, the politics within the democratic party with McGovern, who was considered a real peacenik for lack of a better word, was making a run for the presidential nomination. And there were a lot of people of that persuasion who had a lot of influence were getting a lot of television time. I remember there was a Catholic priest, Berrigan, Karragin, Garagin, [Berrigan is correct], some such name who was very politically active and very anti-war and there were. What’s his name, Jane Fonda’s ex-husband whose now a Congressman I think from California, who was very young, very active, anti-war protester at the time. I want to say Bruton, that’s not it, but it’s something like that, but again it’s easy to say Mayden, or find out who I’m talking about. He’s still out there and of course times have changed for him too. Although I think he’s still a very liberal Democrat but in any case that whole ’68 convention Brouhaha was brought the thing home in a different way. It was sort of like, holy smokes this is serious. This thing is really becoming a national problem here rather than just a bunch of flower children romping around in the park in San Francisco somewhere. So that I do recall as maybe an awakening of things to come,
which of course did come later, primarily through the Johnson administration because I guess he won that election and became the president. No, that’s not.

SM: That would have been ’64.

MM: No, that’s not possible, Johnson became president when Kennedy was shot, and then had a second term, so this may have been into that time. I don’t know, who won that election?

SM: In ’68, that would have been Nixon.

MM: Yes, actually Nixon beat the Democrat. That’s exactly right and Nixon then was almost in the process I think from that day on, I think he made a half-hearted attempt to take a look at the war and see if it was Winnable. Realized it wasn’t under the political circumstances and probably from early in his administration, the philosophy of the U.S. government, although it may have been a secret philosophy was let’s get the hell out of here as quick as we can. And it took years and years for it to happen, but I think at that point, probably that Chicago convention was where the thing went over the hump. Everybody said, and of course Tet had happened in January of ’68, Tet Offensive so combination of those things I think you could probably call that the point where we went from seriously thinking we could win to seriously thinking we ought never have started as a nation.

SM: Well, just out of curiosity when you got back in 1967, and then you found yourself back at Travis, I assume you were back, what were you flying C-130s?

MM: 133 again, yes.

SM: 133, okay. What did you hear in terms of the progress of the war throughout the rest of ’67 and especially leading up to Westmoreland coming back to the United States and giving his progress report that basically the war was almost at an end?

MM: My recollection is very little. I think I was busier, see two things happened, well several things happened. Now I’m dating this girl with some seriousness, I am now back with enough flying time in the 133 from my previous tour to where I’m sort of in a fast track to become aircraft commander, which is a biggie, the pilot in command and of course there’s an awful lot of studying and training and what not involved in that, in addition to just flying the missions. We were flying very heavily into Vietnam, I was flying, pilots don’t believe it today, or they believe it but they find it hard to imagine, I
was flying a hundred thirty hours a month or so, regularly. Which was over the
maximum by a few hours and usually wound up flying on a waiver, because we were
supporting Vietnam so heavily and a combination of all of those things. I don’t think I
paid a lot of attention to be honest with you. It was like I did my part, and the war is
continuing. I think in the early days I probably still thought we were going to win, in ’68
probably, but by ’70 I knew we weren’t, but I didn’t pay a lot of attention.

One thing does pop into mind though, that might be of interest, during those days
the black population in the military was becoming very agitated, very belligerent.
Obviously not every person, but particularly the young enlisted blacks were becoming
very agitated as a group. There were people within the groups that were stirring them up,
anti-war, black power. You’re talking about the period of time where black power was
big, where the Afro haircut was big and of course you couldn’t wear an Afro in the
military so there was agitation about that. The Black Muslim thing was starting to occur
and that included a beard and you couldn’t have a beard so there was a lot of agitation
about that. There were, Travis in particular, there were some riots in the dormitories,
which is historic. You can go back and discover the details from newspaper and that sort
of thing, but there was some level, relatively low level rioting in the barracks, amongst
the young blacks. That obviously got our attention and I guess we sensed that it was
somehow war related, but not necessarily directly. It was more related to the burgeoning
civil rights movement, which of course was in full steam by then, with a lot of Stokely
Carmichael, Malcolm X were all prominent figures of that particular period in time. So
that's something that I do recall and do recall being very concerned about because of what
it might portend for the future, you know where the hell are we going? We’re losing our
integrity, we’re no longer one any more, Air Force, now we’re a black Air Force and a
white Air Force and that’s not good. So that was a matter of real concern I think to just
about everybody. And kinds of attitudes among the white guys, hey if you wanted to be
in the military you knew you needed a haircut, what’s this with the Afro and you can’t
wear your hat on top of an Afro, you look like an idiot. But there was on the black side,
this need to, when they got out of uniform and went down to San Francisco identify
culturally within their culture. So very bad situation in terms of trying to sort it out. It is
to my mind, comical, maybe not to everybody. There was a disease which appeared
during those years that had never been anywhere before. That disease that struck black men only, or largely which came, was epidemic at that time and has disappeared since, and I say that somewhat tongue and cheek, because it was quite serious. It was called pseudofiliculitis barbae, and the disease basically was ingrown hair on the face, as a result of Negro physiological characteristics, particularly curly hair. The theory was that because their hair was curly, it tended to curl and in-grow and infect, and I think there’s probably some truth to that. If you think of maybe black men you’ve known, frequently they do seem to have like an acne problem around their beard area, but this thing became an epidemic in the Air Force and the reason, at least a lot of us white guys thought, the reason was because if they’d get the doctor to declare that they had this disease, then they could get a beard. Because you wouldn’t have to shave, because you’d let the beard grow out and this in-growing would stop. So it’s a little interesting point of history, this whole thing about this pseudofiliculitis barbae, which again, you’ve got tons of black guys in the military today and they seem not to be suffering from it any more. So it was a thing, it was an interesting cultural thing, unfortunately of course created division and that’s the bottom line and that’s why I say it’s funny, but it isn’t funny. It’s got comic elements, but it certainly wasn’t funny in the long run.

SM: Tragically comic.

MM: Yes, exactly, but again understandable in the context of 1968 and what was going on in the black community. So anyway, those are some things that do pop to my mind, but direct confrontations with anti-war protestors, no. See, another thing happened to me, which I think, no you don’t know from the biography because I didn't send you that part. I was only home one year, February ’68 I got home. I’m sorry ’67 I got home and February ’68 I’m sitting here now trying to, I think I had just become an aircraft commander in the 133. I’m getting more serious with my girlfriend and the Pueblo crisis kicks off in Korea. The North Korean Special Forces made a raid on the South Korean White House, called the blue house but their White house in Seoul, an armed raid, trying to assassinate President Park, which failed. But as a cover for that then the North Korean government ripped off the Pueblo which was a U.S. Navy Intelligence ship which had been sitting off the North Korean coast for endless years. But the next day they seized it and this became an enormous international incident and almost precipitated the third
World War. Although it’s not all that well document in history but I think people who know will tell you how close we came, so we deployed an enormous force almost overnight in February of ’68 now to Korea and I know because some of the things I did there, how close we were to war, again. So here now you’re fighting in Vietnam and you got this, probably more serious potential war, regenerating in Korea because of the nuclear equation, the Russians were still powerful then. The Chinese of course and I got deployed for that, after being home a year to be Forward Air Controller in Korea, should the war start. So again I was very busy, probably too busy to worry about politics at the time.

SM: Now for the year, the year from ’67 to ’68 that you flew support, you said a lot of missions you flew for that year were support for Vietnam?

MM: Right back into Vietnam, usually once a month.

SM: You were flying back to Vietnam, landing in Tan Son Nhut basically or?

MM: Yes, once a month frequently Tan, the big airfields obviously, we weren’t going any little places any more. Tan Son Nhut, Da Nang, Qui Nhon once and that was dicey because that airfield was really too short for a 133, but I did manage to get it in there and get it out. I remember another not so funny, funny thing, but I remember having to back the airplane. We’d back up because of the propellers you could reverse it and back the airplane right up to the fence at the very end of the runway for my departure and then ran the engines right to max power with the brakes set, which isn’t normal, but to get everything as powerful as possible before I let go of the brakes and roared down the runway and just literally blew half a village. Of course the village was made out of C ration boxes, but must have blown the thing to three hundred yards from where it was sitting when I started. That’s sad, these people, they’re used to it. They probably picked up and put everything back together by evening, but I do remember blowing the place all over, not intentionally. I didn't realize it was happening until it was too late to stop, so Qui Nhon once, Da Nang frequently. Tan Son Nhut frequently, and probably Cam Ranh bay once or twice, delivering cargo or picking up. Actually the primary mission we had for the 133 was helicopter rotation, we would typically fly either five or six Hueys or two Chinooks, I think it was two, I think we could carry two into -- here’s how it worked, let me start at the beginning. A typical mission would be to go from Travis to Harrisburg
Pennsylvania, which was a big Army depot for helicopters, repair and preparation. We’d land at Harrisburg, we’d pick up new helicopters, either refurbished or brand new. Go back to Travis and then head out to Vietnam and take them wherever, Tan Son Nhut, Da Nang or what not and then we would pick up beat up ones, shot up ones, crashed ones and bring them back to ultimately through Travis to Harrisburg again. And that was one of our primary missions in addition to installing the Minuteman missile during that same time frame and it was because of the size and weight capacity of the airplane of course. So, typically during a month I would probably make one circuit from Travis to Vietnam and back. About sixty flying hours, one trip over to Harrisburg, maybe another ten and a couple of short trips within the United States, running missiles and that sort of thing. Sometimes they'd squeeze two Vietnam trips out of you in one month, which meant you were gone for the whole month because they typically took two weeks to make the circuit and that was generally what we did.

SM: Now when you would land in Vietnam, how much time would you spend there and what kind of information were you able to get?

MM: Nothing and again because, the time would be always short, you only crew rested there in an emergency which is to say the airplane broke on the ground in Vietnam so badly that you couldn’t stagger it out to the Philippines which was the next stop. You know a couple hour flight to Clark Air Base, so you were there for minimum ground time trying for two hours, total and during that time of course you had to debrief your flight. You had to get something to eat if you could, get your weather briefing, file your flight plan, get an intelligence briefing, which normally just consisted of the essential information. Departure safety kinds of things, take off, climb immediately, turn left, turn right, avoid this area, and that was it, you didn't get a lot of detail, so and you were in and out before you knew it basically.

SM: Any time when you were flying back into Vietnam that you were shot at?

MM: Not that I know of, no, probably was but unless you got hit, which I don’t think we ever did, you didn’t know it.

SM: Other pilots that flew in, were there ever any stories circulated that there shot at or shot down?
MM: Not often if at all. The biggest concern actually was friendly artillery. We were much more concerned with that because at the altitudes we flew, enemy ground fire in the south was essentially a non-factor until you were extremely close to an airfield and we evolved procedures to defeat that. We evolved a very steep approach angle on final approach, so that you could approach an airfield much higher than normal, much closer in and then make a very steep descent to the runway. I think four, four and half degree glide slope, which sounds very shallow, but for an airplane is actually double normal. Normally you’re on about a two-degree slice, coming in and we were on a four, four and a half as I recall. So that wasn’t the problem, the problem was that while you were coming from the coast let’s say to Saigon, which might have been a twenty minute flight or so, and then maneuvering in the traffic pattern, we knew that there was a lot of artillery flying around and not ever really controlled in any sense. We always said if you could see. If every artillery round that the friendlies were firing had a tracer on it, we probably would have never entered the country, but never again, never had an incident where we hit or anything, but that was our concern, that and just traffic density. I, going into Saigon would have myself, the copilot and everybody in the airplane who wasn’t doing something, standing behind us, the two seats, looking out the windows. That was the biggest concern was just running into something because the traffic density, particularly as you approach the big airports, you got fighters, you got transports, you got little airplanes, big airplanes, helicopters, that was the thing we were concerned with, was a mid-air collision. Very definitely, the big concern, so we had eyeballs all over the cockpit looking.

SM: Did that ever happen to your, do you know?

MM: Not in the 133, now I had a couple of close calls in the O-1, but.

SM: No, I mean flying those operations, other C-133 pilots?

MM: Again, nothing that I ever heard of where there was an extremely close call but we were taking the precautions to avoid it.

SM: Any other types of support missions that you flew during that year, just primarily bringing in and taking out helicopters?

MM: The helicopters and as I said, the airplane, the 133 was really designed to take the Minuteman missile from, I think I’ve told you this, from the factory up at Hill
Air Force Base in Ogden, Utah where Thiokol put the solid propellant in the missile at
the factory. Of course at that point you had a very heavy object, a hundred thousand
pounds or so, that had to be delivered to the missile fields up in the northern tier, in the
northern states and a lot of research had been done about doing it by truck and by train
and various ways and ultimately they decided that the safest way was by air. Less likely
to crack the solid propellant through repeated shocks that you might get on the highway
or a railroad and so the airplane was basically designed and built to carry those thousand,
ultimately what amounted to I think a thousand some odd Minuteman missiles from the
factory to the various sites. So we were always doing that in between doing other things.
We always had a couple airplanes up running that route, you might put, depending on
maintenance and things. Winter was very bad if you’re trying to get to Maelstrom Air
Force base in Great Falls, Montana in the middle of the winter. You might spend all
week trying to make one run, but over the course of many, many years we put the whole
thousand in, that one squadron did. That and some other space support, we’d
occasionally go to Denver pick up a component, take it down to Cape Canaveral, things
like that. We did not do a lot of ordinary cargo hauling during those days just because of
the priority of the other things and our capacity to do them.

SM: What did you think when you heard about Tet, ’68?

MM: Tet, umm.

SM: Remember?

MM: Yes, I think I knew it was coming. Actually I hesitate to say this because it
really sounds overblown but I’ll say it because it’s true. In my memoirs there, and I
won’t, the last battle thing that’s in my memoirs there where I was, Colonel McCutchaon
had said no more combat for you. You’re going home in a few days and I was taking the
airplane, ferrying it over to Bien Hoa for maintenance, I presume you’ve read that and I
had the Vietnamese Lieutenant in the back seat. He was just along, not a joy ride exactly,
but for an orientation and just trying to get a look at the terrain around Saigon and we
accidentally ran into a battle just to the north and west of the airfield. We were able to
coordinate the ground troops and other things to basically destroy the enemy attack, had
quite a few kills on that one. Subsequently somebody told me, somebody in the
Intelligence business told me that that attack was actually a probe, a test, of an intended
1967 Tet Offensive and that when it failed by virtue of that little accidental encounter between the Vietcong and the Airborne unit that was out there patrolling that the Tet Offensive was actually put off for an entire year and didn’t occur till ’68. Now, that sounds a little crazy to me, that one little confrontation could have actually had that effect but I was told that. So I guess to answer your question when the Tet of ‘68 I don’t think I was too surprised.

SM: What did you think when you heard President Johnson decide not to run for re-election?

MM: That’s an interesting question. I don’t recall having a reaction; I think I just felt sorry for the guy. I knew the kind of circumstances, pressure he was under, actually when I was in Korea during the Pueblo I was involved with something I can’t even talk about, even today. It was a reconnaissance mission, I can tell you that much, but I actually was the action officer for it as a Captain and I talked to Johnson every day, personally. He called and he was, and this is not necessarily to his benefit, but he would call on the old Donald Duck secure telephone that we had and, KY3, I think it was called. Your voice was distorted, I don’t know if you’ve ever used one but you sounded like Donald Duck a little bit on it when you were talking and he would call every day, I think at about three in the afternoon, and he personally wanted, he didn’t want any filters between him and the data. He wanted to talk to me personally because I had the information. So every day at three o’clock I had to be by the Donald Duck phone booth there waiting for his call. I thought it was kind of pathetic in a way that he would have to do that. It was good in a way that the guy was that interested and that involved and had that kind of energy I suppose to be able to function that way, but I also though it was kind of sad that he had to do it that way, and I think, you could see on television as things started to deteriorate, the physical toll that it took on him. I mean the poor man looked horrible so when he decided not to run, I was certainly wasn’t surprised and I think I just felt sorry for the poor guy. That was my basic reaction.

SM: Now, when you were flying in Korea during the Pueblo incident, how long did you stay there?

MM: No, I was not flying.

SM: Oh, you weren’t flying?
MM: No, I gave you that impression, I’m sorry. I went there as a forward air controller, that’s a true statement, but the sad story was that when we got there, we discovered there was no close air support system of any kind and there were no airplanes. The country had evolved since the Korean War into an almost completely air defense orientation. There was a, what the hell was it called? ADCC, Air Defense Coordination or Control, I don’t know, Air Defense Control Center at Osan there, which is where I would up in the 314th Air Division headquarters, again, pathetic. World War II technology, grease board with guys drawing tracks on the backside of it with grease pencil. It looked like something out of the 8th Air Force in England in 1945, but that was the state of the art there and no close air support system whatsoever. So I and several other guys after, and again, this is in my memoirs but not the portion I sent to you. They sent ninety forward air controllers over there and all we could do is get drunk, there was nothing to do in the dead of winter, February, Korea, it’s cold. And some of us after about two weeks decided that was enough of that and we went looking for work, literally and I found a, long story, but I found work in the headquarters and basically I and some other guys who I knew, drifted over to the headquarters and formed a little nucleus. Kind of sub-office, under the guy who was DOCP, Director of Current Plans, but he sort of had a plans and operations job, full Colonel by the name of Alva P. Wilkerson. Very, very wonderful man, very brilliant, had just come from the Pentagon when the war started. I think he’d hardly gotten off the airplane when the whistle blew and he walked into a disaster. An area that had been neglected for twenty years and all of a sudden he’s got to fight a war from this office, but I worked for him for the whole duration of the six months I was there. What we did is we tried to create a close air support system and we did a lot, writing documents, concepts, philosophies, structures, regional geographic structures, equipment requirements, communications networks. Started the ball rolling to getting some airplanes, which after I left showed up from Vietnam as I understand, the O-1s as they were replaced by O-2s in Vietnam were moved up to Korea to create this close air support system which didn’t exist. So that wasn’t kind of an interesting phase in my life too, but how did we get on that, you asked me?

SM: Well, I was just curious how long you spent there?
MM: Oh, six months, six my was a TDY, it was a six month TDY that was almost over night, just got a phone call one morning in February and said come get your combat gear and stand by for a call to get on an airplane.

SM: Now, you mentioned earlier that there was obviously some reconnaissance going on, was the U-2 still the primary platform for that, especially in that type of environment?

MM: No, I guess I can probably tell you that the platform was an F-4, that’s probably all I can tell you. I think the U-2s were probably flying, but I think that was probably, the results of that were probably going straight back to Washington.

SM: Well, so after you got back from Korea, mid to late ’67.

MM: ’68.

SM: ’68, excuse me.

MM: Yes, now we’re in August of ’68 I think.

SM: Well, August ’68 getting geared up for the election.

MM: That’s right, the election was just about to occur wasn’t it? So I must have just got home when all of that hubbub was really going on the news in Chicago. I hadn’t thought about that, but that’s got to be close, that’s right. But again I think I was back from Korea, back in the squadron, back trying to get the rust off the edges in terms of my flying and, I’ll tell you again, one funny in a way. I use the word funny in a lot of different contexts, but at that point I decided this relationship with my girlfriend had got to go one way or the other. We’ve either got to quit this foolishness that’s been going on for years and years now, or we’ve got to get married so I think I proposed around Christmas. It was a couple of months later and we didn’t have a long engagement because we knew where we were going. We were married in April of ’69, so it wasn’t too many months after Korea that I just said let’s get on with this, or call it a bad idea. So it did have that effect, but again, so busy with other things. Keep trying to reorganize my life here every time I turn around that I don’t think I was, I was obviously saddened by what I saw in Chicago and I knew at that point that we were in trouble, but I guess in a sense not much I could do about it, so I didn’t worry about it too much.
SM: Actually, one more question about Korea, was there a point during your six months there, that you realized that what was happening was not going to escalate into a significant war?

MM: No, I think when I left we were just as likely to go to war as the day I got there, if not more so.

SM: Why’s that?

MM: We had built up a force and things have a certain momentum of their own. The Pueblo, if I’m not mistaken was still in North Korean hands. Just the general atmosphere there was, the day we got there the atmosphere was we’ve got to like hell to take the sleepy hollow backwater of the American military up to war footing as quickly as we can and I think that atmosphere was just as intense the day I left there. Every day was like, okay there’s still a few more things we’ve got to do and it could happen tomorrow. We knew that a MIG could get from the nearest MIG airfield across the border to Osan, with two five hundred pound bombs and be back across the border and I think the whole thing didn’t take five minutes, we were that close. So it was still very intense when I left. I think that politically, if you could talk to the right people or read the right books, you’d probably find that the burden on Lyndon Johnson just must have been unbelievable. Between Vietnam, trying to do the Great Society, his real priority on a domestic level, trying to make that happen, being completely frustrated I think, or not, being frustrated largely by having to focus on Vietnam and then Korea and then having in a sense probably the people he thought were quote his own people, namely liberal Democrats really turning against him, you could imagine what the effect on the guy must have been.

SM: Now, what about the nuclear threshold, was that always an ever-present threat while you were in Korea?

MM: Absolutely.

SM: And after?

MM: Yes, that was still, we were serious Cold War and so that was always very close to the front of your mind and again I can’t talk too much details there. But in Korea we knew what they had, we assumed they knew what we had and the impression was that the willingness to push the button was fairly high, at least on the Soviet side.
SM: They hadn’t bought into MAD?

MM: I don’t believe MAD, that’s a whole history book. What time frame was which philosophy the one that was driving the train? And not having been a SAC guy, I just have peripheral understanding of how that all worked, but we didn’t assume that they had bought into MAD, I think you can say that. For a minute I thought MAD, what the hell’s he talking about, Mothers Against Drunk Driving? But I do remember what the other one meant too, Mutually Assured.

SM: Yes, Mutually Assured Destruction. Let’s see, I want to say that was McNamara that tried to implement that and so by the time you got to Korea MAD would have been a tenet, a belief.

MM: Yes, I think it probably was, I think you’re right. I can’t really confirm that just from my own memory.

SM: The rest of ’68 unfolds, what did you think of Nixon’s secret plan to win the war, that is Vietnamization?

MM: I don’t think I thought about that much. I was more inclined to think about McNamara’s strategies and tactics, not so much the political overlay which was the Vietnamization, but McNamara’s drawing lines and fences and controlling key areas. And I knew that was a hopeless idea from having been there, absolutely hopeless. I think within the military community in general, by that time we were beginning to express the view, either privately or publicly that there’s only one way to win this war. You’ve got to fight, the whole concept actually of, and this is a Morea-ism that’s probably worth going down in the books is, the whole concept of a limited war is a mistake. There is no such thing. If there’s a war between me and my neighbor over our flower garden in the context, it’s a full scale war and if you think you can fight a limited war, the lesson of Vietnam is that you’re mistaken and you will lose. Because it’s a very simple, while we were fighting a limited war by definition. The enemy was fighting World War III by their definition and that’s why the won. Put it the other way, the only way we could have won, was to have fought the war within the context of one or two countries as an all out war, it’s the only way to win. I think we who were there at the time knew that, the memory is probably fading as time goes by and we’ll probably make the same mistake again as people traditionally do. They forget history after one generation or so, and make
the same old mistakes over again, but that is probably the one political – military thing
that I understood better than anything else by the time it was all over, is limited war
doesn’t work. So when we couldn’t do certain things in the north and we’re afraid of
what the Chinese might do and decided to pull out and let the Vietnamese do it, which
was what Vietnamization was, and was really nothing more than, in retrospect and if
anybody had a real brain at the time, could have seen it in real time. It was nothing more
than the beginnings of the surrender, the pullout, you knew it wasn’t going to work. So
certainly by that time we knew it was, forget it. And I felt pretty sorry for guys who were
still going over at about that time because I knew they were going into a futile effort, at
least when I went I thought that we were going to win the war and that certainly helps
sustain you, but the guys who were going over in ’70, ’71, and what not, they were just
holding the fort until somebody could get out the back door in my opinion.

SM: What did you think of the Kent State incident?

MM: Very sad, but I’ll tell you by that time I was mad enough to – I didn’t feel
very sympathetic about the students. They were rioting, they knew what they were
doing, sad mistakes – what’s the word I’m looking for- kind of a house of cards in
reverse kind of a thing. Just a series of blunders on both sides that escalated into a
terrible thing but my attitude by then was, hey if you want to riot on campus, you better
understand, and if you’re going to taunt guys with weapons and throw things at them, you
could get hurt. I see it on television, you see Palestinians throwing rocks at Israelis with
guns, well Palestinians are not stupid people. Certainly they know that at some point
some of them might get shot and that’s the way that goes and if you feel strongly enough
about what you feel strongly enough about, fine, but don’t come crying to me when you
get shot. I think that was my bottom line, so I didn't have a lot of sympathy for the Kent
State crowd. I still don’t, they had a memorial there a couple of weeks ago, believe it or
not, they still haven’t figured it out. They’re still talking about the wonderful liberal
principles they were upholding against the National Guard SS or whatever the hell, but
that’s always been a very liberal school anyway.

SM: And what were your thoughts as the war wound down and finally in 1973
we’ve got the Paris Peace Accords after the Christmas bombing and April of 1975 the
capture of Saigon?
MM: Well, even then I felt like we could have negotiated a better deal than we did.

SM: What did you think of the Paris Peace Accords?

MM: Well, it was obvious we were just surrendering, we were in such a hurry to get out of there we’d have given them anything they wanted. By that time it was just a, once you… I’m trying to find an analogy but it’s like you know you’ve only gotten, the thing is deteriorating so rapidly that you know you’ve only got a very short amount of time to even make it appear like things are in control. So you’ve got to move very quickly to get out before all the obvious flaws are detected and the bubble bursts and it just becomes total chaos. So I think, it was obvious to me that at Paris, we were just okay, whatever you want, please, come on, can we get on with this, can we get out of here, before somebody notices? But again, that was, I was aware of what was going on I watched the TV. I read the newspaper, but I had another life at that point. By ’70, we had three kids in a hurry so we had one in January of ’70, the next one was in January of ’72, and the next one was in October of ’73. So they weren’t even six years apart, three of them, so now I have other things to occupy my time as well. And I think I felt like, look I did my part, this isn’t working, it’s obvious and is too bad, but it’s time to get on with it.

SM: What were your thoughts, feelings, when news broke that Saigon had fallen in 1975?

MM: I remember it again, as to the question of feelings, I think it was ugly. It was just so pathetic, it was sad. You’d have wished that in the end it could have been, it’s a hell of word, but it’s one that comes to mind, more dignified, like it could have been done like with a, like Appomattox or something. Rather than this ugly scene of buildings burning and helicopters crashing and people running around frantic and all of that sort of thing, so that was certainly one thought, it was like rubbing it in. Like did it really have to end this way, okay guys we surrendered, did you have to do it this way. The other feeling of course, which was, thoughts about Vietnamese that you’d known and I wonder what going to happen to them. Did they get out, did they get killed, where are they, how are they faring? Anything from military guys just like your housekeeper, you’ve got to wonder, somebody had worked for the Americans for years and years, once the new...
political machine moved in from the north, what kind of treatment were they going to get
because people were certainly going to know that they had worked for Americans, things
like that, thoughts like that. Of course there was a great tragedy which, from an air lifters
point of view, maybe even... Well this is a terrible way to put it, but it sort of put the lid
on the thing, it was just like the ultimate tragedy was when that C-5, are you familiar with
this story?

SM: No, sir.

MM: They were evacuating the city, out at Tan Son Nhut and they were
evacuating Vietnamese, just loading them up and there was a C-5 that took off out of Tan
Son Nhut with a load of civilians, maybe some military too, but Vietnamese. Just sitting
on the floor, hundreds of them, none of this seats and seat belts and all that sort of thing
and I don’t remember the details. But somehow the back doors came open in flight and
literally, half the load of people went out the door. It’s something, again, that’s sort of
my recollection, it was just like, after everything else, this. Kind of a feeling that I
remember having, again, a guy in your position could I’m sure, find the newspaper
reports and the official reports on the whole thing, but it was just like not this too, kind of
a feeling ultimately. I think at that point, I think we psychologically, many of us just
turned our back on the thing and said I don’t want to talk about it any more. I don’t want
to look at it, I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to hear about it, it’s just tragic
beyond description for all kinds of reason.

SM: Before that had you talked much about your Vietnam experiences from the
time you got back until the end of the war?

MM: No, surprisingly not, not even amongst military guys, flying transports
across the Pacific, you take off from Hawaii heading for Wake Island and it’s eight hours
of just blue sky and boredom and we didn’t talk about it even then.

SM: Was there a reason?

MM: No, it’s just, it’s not normally done. I think guys only want to talk about it
to people who shared the experience or people like you who are rare who actually show
some genuine academic or other interest. But for example, I can tell you that when I first
joined the 84th as a 2nd Lieutenant, brand new green bean trainee pilot basically, I mean
not a trainee literally because I was out of pilot training, but trainee in the transport.
Huge numbers of the people in the squadron, the senior guys, were World War II veterans, the officers and the enlisted people. They never talked about World War II, not a word, you couldn’t get a word out of them, and if you really pressed them, you’d get a three sentence something or other and then they’d drop it and go back to something else. Now, I think only amongst themselves, I think World War II bomber guys alone somewhere would have talked a blue streak, like the FAC reunion but you get out of that context and it’s nope, it’s not so much personal or private. There’s got to be a better word, but it’s, kind of like you get the feeling there’s only a few people would understand and nobody else is worth talking to, I guess that describes it pretty well I think.

SM: Did you also have a sense that, not so much that no one else is worthy of talking about it, but also most people just don’t care?

MM: No, not to not care, just would never understand and it’s not worth trying to explain it. I think that's more accurate and I think the World War II guys, even talking to a guy like me, a young officer, a pilot and all, trying to explain what flying, B-17s over Germany was like and living in England and having you’re squadron decimated daily. They can’t explain it to me because I’m not going to understand it because I wasn’t there. I think that’s a fair assessment, so they just never talked about it.

SM: Well, after the war was over in terms of the fall of Saigon, how was the Vietnam War important to you personally in terms of you over all development, as a pilot, as a person?

MM: Very good question. I don’t, I can’t answer it literally in the context you asked it because it wasn’t after the war was over. It was after my experience, I think – a couple of things, I guess. I think first of all it was and again, I’ve said this, you have to be very careful who you say things like this to, because it wasn’t always the same for everybody, but for me it was the adventure of a lifetime to be perfectly honest. I was young, I was in perfect health, I was probably at the peak of my flying skills, or almost. I was doing something that I really got to be just unbelievably good at. I got to do it with almost no interference from anybody, it was just on your own for a year doing your own thing. So in that sense it was great in a way, again you’ve got to be careful how you use these terms but for me it was, it was just exciting, I was doing exactly what I wanted to do, doing it well, having a good time doing it, to tell you the truth. And I think in terms
of flying it certainly, not so much matures you, because it was such simple flying, but it
did give you a lot of confidence in yourself that you could do probably more than you
would have otherwise thought you could do. Because you’d done so many things, many
of them stupid and survived them and learned from them that I think I really felt like I
was a hell of a lot better pilot. Ten years better pilot after one year in Vietnam, just from
the experience. I certainly learned, I think I learned that despite the old adage that war is
too serious a business to be left to soldiers, it’s certainly too serious a business to be left
to politicians solely. The answer had got to be, in my opinion that politicians obviously
have to make the decisions, but they need to listen to military people a lot more than they
did in Vietnam, that hasn’t changed either and probably never will. You can see that
today with Clinton Administration and now Bush trying to take over and fix some things
and even in the case of Bush, not fixing things that people necessarily thought he was
going to fix. Or at least in the way that they thought he was going to fix them, and
frankly I think he’s right, but there’s an awful lot of pork, for example, in the defense
budget. I think times changes, threats change and we’re still building a military based,
still in a lot of ways, still of World War II kind of a scenario and really based on whose
district the factory is in. More than what the real military requirements are, but I
definitely learned, I guess in a sense, mistrust is too strong a word. But the mistrust, I
mean I’ve got a Master’s degree in political science too, so I tend to think politically
maybe more than most people do, but I won’t say I mistrust politicians. But I certainly,
they weren’t George Washington any more, I’ll put it that way. They were human beings
who made a lot of mistakes and that was something I learned from Vietnam, certainly.
The biggest effect is I really don’t think I ever have since really trusted my non-military
fellow Americans any more. Because of the, either because of what the protestors did
and what they were allowed to do by the rank and file and it continues to this day, with
the Clintons. And again, I obviously have opinions there, but the American people just
don’t care about their country any more, enough to get excited about anything if it
doesn’t effect whether they’re going to get home in time for the ball game tonight. And I
think that was very clear with the entire Clinton Administration and I think it began,
probably in Vietnam. So I just, my opinion of the average American is extremely low
and I think it began back then. I think they’re lazy, they are uneducated and uncaring
about almost anything unless it puts twenty bucks in their pocket and that’s obviously a
gross generalization, but I think probably the Vietnam experience taught me that more
than anything else, sadly, but it’s true.

SM: You mentioned earlier, that you didn’t, in terms of your concerns or your
comment about limited war and then some of the stuff that you said recently in terms of
politicians involvement and things of that nature, I’m curious what you think about some
of the recent deployments.

MM: That’s what I’m getting at.

SM: That are limited in the context of limited war.

MM: Well, they’re not even limited war. What I honestly believe is in most
cases the recent deployments were smoke screens to get Clinton out of trouble. But
soldiers are not trained to hand out box lunches to little kids, as nice a photograph as that
makes on the evening news. Handing out candy bars and box lunches in Kosovo is not
what militaries are constructed for and I think we make enormous mistakes when we do
things like. Among other things because of what it does to the soldier himself in terms of
how he perceives his real mission, and in peacetime what it does to the family of the
soldier and ultimately to the military structure. I mean our military is in disastrous shape
right now. You can’t retain the right people and it’s not money and if George Bush
thinks that by raising their pay he's going to solve the problem he’s as stupid as the rest of
them, I hope he’s smarter. I hope somebody is whispering in his ear, although it should
be obvious to anybody who reads the newspaper. The problem with the military is not
money, yes, give me a few extra bucks I won’t turn it down, but that’s not the problem,
the problem is trust in the leadership, which isn’t there. When Clinton says I want that
guy fired because he made that phone call and that came up in the newspaper and the
General says yes, sir instead of saying I resign, you’ve got a problem and we have that
problem right now. The other problem is going all the wrong places and sitting on your
ass to be blunt, doing nothing, for endless periods of time. Guys say no, it’s not what I
signed up for and they leave. Sadly, what’s even worse is that the ones who stay are the
ones who, in the gross sense that just perpetuate the problem so you wind up with a
descending spiral of leadership and morale and everything else and that’s where we are
today. It’s just too coincidental that every time Clinton got some bad press, some bombs
fell somewhere. In Somalia at the pharmaceutical factory and at Bin Laden’s camp in
Afghanistan and Kosovo and a half a dozen other places. It just, you’ve got to be real
stupid to buy that story, but the American people bought it, lock, stock and barrel
obviously. Now again, that’s sadly the biggest result I think of those years is this
cynicism on my part about an awful lot of things. Whereas I think in 1960, when, bright
and shiny graduate, I probably, I came from a ‘50s, World War II, post World War II,
we’re on top of the world mentality and there really is an Easter Bunny and come to find
out that if he ever lived he’s dead, but that’s life too, you learn.

SM: Now, in addition to what you’ve already discussed, are there any other
lessons that we as a nation should take away from the war experience.

MM: Well, nothing that hasn’t been said a million times before I don’t think. I
think it’s pretty obvious. When you go to war and involve a nation in a war, first of all
you’ve got, to one degree or another involve everybody. You can’t give college
dererments to kids with money and send all the poor black kids from Tennessee to go
fight the war. You have got to build a consensus so that at least the vast majority of
people in the country understand why you are in the war and believe that it’s necessary.
And then once you’ve done that you’ve got to go finish it quickly because Americans are
inherently impatient people and get back to the business of America, which is business.
Those are simple lessons, but they’ve been written about a million times, I think they’re
true. We did, I think generally follow that philosophy for example in the Gulf War, the
consensus was built, very quickly, needs to be done. We did it with forces that were
onboard at the time, we won it handily and we got the hell home. I mean there’s still
people there and that may or may not be a subset mistake but in general we did it the
right way. That’s the way Americans like to do business, understand that there’s a real
purpose, get the tools on the table, finish the job and let’s go back and have a beer, so I
think we need to learn those lessons.

SM: How long have you been involved with, and how has it been important for
you in terms of the FAC Association and the FAC reunions?

MM: Well, that’s just very recent. I don’t think I had heard of the FAC
Association much more than a month or two before the reunion.

SM: This past year?
MM: Yes, right and so really my involvement was going to the reunion and then subsequently, I volunteered to write a piece of that history book and we’re not sure where we’re going right now. The thing, unless, and I hope I’m mistaken, a lot of the enthusiasm seems to have waned since the reunion. It’s either that, or it’s this reticence thing, you can’t seem to generate guys to tell the story, for one reason or another. We chose consciously to wait for the first newsletter which is supposed to be in my mailbox today, coming out of Claude Newland and others up there in the Fort Walton area and then once that hit the street, we were going to use it as a springboard to open the door to this. Hey we want to write a history book, guys start sending us your… Ideally if every FAC we contacted sat down and wrote twenty odd pages or so that I gave you, and mailed it to me and other guys. We’ve got this thing pieced out by geographic region and time frame and things like that, but if they were to sit down and do that and then we could compile it into a book. That would be the fruition of our effort, but some tentative efforts in that direction, you just don’t even get responses, the guys don’t want to bother. I don’t know what it is. You may know better than I, you probably have more experience with that than I do. You talked to a ton of people at the reunion, it seemed like you were generating tremendous enthusiasm, but I don’t know if it’s sustained or if I’m the only guy that’s talking to you.

SM: I’ve talked to other FACs, it’s been mixed results. How has this been important for you in terms of, I mean you mentioned before that you haven’t really had too much opportunity to talk about your experiences, has the reunion helped you and has becoming involved in this project helped you in any ways?

MM: Well, at least temporarily it’s regenerated an interest and it caused me to do, look and see some things I had, photographs and what not, and organize them a little bit and make some folders and what not and the interview here and that sort of thing, but not, maybe just a consolidation kind of a thing, trying to get it all organized, but no going back and re-thinking or anything of that sort. I think the memories are fairly clear in my mind, they’re either clear I guess it’s one or the other, so I haven’t gone back and tried to re-think it anyway, I’m too busy.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to talk about today?
MM: Let me think, not really. I think the only thing I would say to, well I do.
You never really did tell me exactly what is the purpose of this thing, where does it go
from here, what do you do with this, the interview?

SM: Oh, the interview. Well, we’ll transcribe it, send you a copy of it and
eventually hopefully we’ll get it posted to the internet and it will also become part of that
ongoing project to write that FAC book, that is the transcript and recordings if you want
them are available to you for your project.

MM: Now, let me ask you this, when you transcribe, do you make some effort, I
hope you do, to clean up the English? Typical American, we talk in half sentences and
change subject three times in one sentence, do you just go with a literal translation or do
you try and turn it into something somewhat literate?

SM: Well, before I answer that question, if there’s nothing else you want to talk
about, I want to go ahead and end the interview.

MM: Yes, that was it.

SM: Well, thank you very much. This will end the interview with Mr. Mike
Morea.