Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. John…would you pronounce your name, sir? 

John Givhan: Givhan.

SM: Givhan. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Givhan is in… 

JG: Stafford, Alabama. 

SM: Stafford, Alabama. It is the 11th of September, the year 2000 at approximately 9:15 in the morning Lubbock time. All right, Mr. Givhan, would you please begin by providing a brief biographical sketch of yourself? 

JG: I was born on September 19th, 1940 in Selma, Dallas County, Alabama. I went to public schools in Dallas County, Alabama, graduated high school from Marion Military Institute, Marion, Alabama, in 1958, graduated Auburn University, Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics in 1962, commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant ROTC Armor Branch, entered active duty July 2nd, 1962, went to Ft. Knox, Kentucky, from there to Ft. Hood, Texas as a tank platoon leader, 2nd Armored Division. I went to Ft. Walters, Mineral Wells, Texas to primary helicopter training. December 1962, graduated helicopter pilot training. May of 1963, got orders to go to Republic of Vietnam, arrived in Vietnam September 1963 assigned to the 120th Aviation Company, Air Mobile Light Helicopter 145th Aviation Battalion, wounded in action April 12th, 1964 resulting in the loss of my right leg. I returned…
SM: Hello? Hello [phone hung up]? All right, so you attended Auburn
University in Alabama to get your Bachelor of Science Degree in Agricultural
Economics?

JG: Correct.

SM: Now while you were attending college there, the United States was slowly
increasing it’s presence in Vietnam in terms of advisory personnel, how aware of that
situation were you and your fellow college mates in the early 1960s, and in particular
when Kennedy came into office and started increasing American presence in Vietnam?

JG: I was an avid reader and I was aware to the extent that I religiously read U.S.
News and World Report, so I was reading what little there was to read about Vietnam.
That was about the extent of it. I was aware of John Kennedy’s election, of course. I was
aware of who he appointed to his cabinet, Robert McNamara, for example. I knew he
was Secretary of Defense; I didn’t know anything about him. But, that’s about the extent
of it.

SM: What did you think about what the United States was trying to accomplish?
At that time, did it catch your attention much more than just being news? Were you
interested in what the United States was doing in the context of our anti-communist
doctrine, things of that nature?

JG: I was interested only to the extent of it being news.

SM: Just out of curiosity, what about some of the more highly visible cold war
policies and activities that occurred I guess while you were still in college, in particular
the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion and also the Cuban Missile Crisis?

JG: I was very aware of the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion. I thought that was a
horrible fiasco. I did not think well of John Kennedy as a result of it. Moving to the
Cuban Missile Crisis, I was very aware of that for this reason; I was a tank platoon leader
in the 66th Armored, 2nd Armored Division at Ft. Hood and we were out on the Ft. Hood
Reservation – I say we, both the 1st and 2nd Armored Division – out there playing war
games which was very realistic because I know you’re aware of the size of Ft. Hood. It’s
almost as large as some States. Before we had finished our two weeklong war game
exercise, we were called back in to the cantonment area and we had to bring live
ammunition back in which we never did. In war games you drew live ammunition, went
out, and you always fired it up so you never brought live ammunition back. So, we were
bewildered as to why we were called back in early and why the war games was stopped.
As soon as we got back into the compound area, I never will forget my platoon sergeant
jumped off of his tank and ran over to his private vehicle and turned the radio on and he
came running back and saluted me and he said, ‘Sir, we’re fixing to go to war with
Cuba!’ That’s how I was involved with that. Also, to this extent, the 2nd Armored
Division did not go to Florida. The 1st Armored Division did. We helped load the
2nd...strike that, we helped load the 1st Armored Division on rail cars at Ft. Hood. I also
remember that because we didn’t get any sleep for about four days and four nights.

SM: What did you think about the resolution, Kennedy’s resolution of the
situation?

JG: At the time I was relieved, and that was about the extent of it. Of course
since then over the years I’ve learned that there were trade-offs that Kennedy made with
the Russians and he basically didn’t win that standoff as much as he compromised it or
caved into it. So, I guess that’s the extent of my thoughts on that.

SM: Auburn University, is that a land grant school?

JG: Yes.

SM: So after your first two years of ROTC you decided to stay in and continue
and become an Army officer? What were the driving factors or courses for you to do
that? Why did you choose to become an armor officer in the United States Army?

JG: I was very much a patriot. I might digress and say as you probably already
know I’ve written a book, *Rice and Cotton in South Vietnam and South Alabama* which I
talk about this very point in the first two chapters. My mother had five brothers in World
War II and none of them were wounded fortunately but I just worshipped them. I thought
they hung the moon. Of course I was born in 1940 so I was five years old when they
came home but I remember it very vividly. I was very much a patriot, and still am very
much a patriot. Also, my family has fought in I think I can safely say seven generations
of my family have fought in wars, so I wanted to be in the Army, I wanted to be an
officer, I wanted to be an aviator. Of course back then, as you know Army Aviation was
not a branch of the service as it is now. So, if you went in, what I did, they had a
program then where I signed up for ROTC and got ROTC commission, and if you
obligated yourself for three years instead of two years service, the Army would obligate itself to send you to pilot training. So, that’s the reason that after I went on active duty on July ’62 that I was involved in tanks until I got orders to go to Mineral Wells, Ft. Walters, Texas in December of ’62 to enter helicopter pilot training.

SM: Okay, now what did you think about your ROTC training? Was it decent? Did it do a good job of trying to introduce you to what life in the military might be like?

JG: Well let me say this to slightly correct what may be a miscommunication; I went to Marion Military Institute, which is referred to as the WestPoint of the State of Alabama, it’s one of the oldest military schools in the nation, founded in 1842, which is only about 20 miles north of where I live here in Stafford, Alabama. So, I was in 11th and 12th grade there ROTC. So when I went to Auburn I only had to do two more years of ROTC, and therefore I obligated myself to a commission and as it turned out it would be three years active duty. Now with respect to your question about training, the training at Marion Military Institute was absolutely excellent, and the training at Auburn in ROTC was good, very good, so I have no complaints there.

SM: Did they talk much about military history in both of those institutions, both of those programs?

JG: Particularly in Marion Military Institute we did.

SM: Any particular emphasis, like Civil War or the World War?

JG: Yes, Civil War. Actually, there was a club at Marion Military Institute called Morgan’s Raiders, named after John Morgan, one of the famous Raiders of the Civil War on the Confederate side. I was a member of that club. The school at MMI, Marion Military Institute, is just steeped in military history. At ROTC at Auburn, of course, it was less of military history taught. It was just basically advanced ROTC, weapons, tactics, usual run of the mill stuff with respect to just facts and how-to and that type of thing.

SM: Military courtesies, marching, stuff like that?

JG: Sure.

SM: Upon leaving college and entering the active Army, active service, what was that transaction like for you? Was there anything difficult about that transition? Was it just pretty easy?
JG: It was rather routine. I graduated Auburn I believe it was June the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of ’62 and I was commissioned and entered active duty at Ft. Knox a month later, July 2\textsuperscript{nd} of ’62.

SM: So what was training like for you at Ft. Knox?

JG: Well it was basic, what they called basic officer’s training. It was rigorous. It was ground rules and tactics with respect to armored warfare and so forth and so on. It was very good as far as the basics went with respect to that, respect to armored training.

SM: What was the most challenging part of the basic school for you, the basic course?

JG: I think actually the physical exercise, they were pretty strong on physical exercise. We had to run like a mile every week and do a lot of push-ups and sit-ups and that type of thing, so it was fairly rigorous physically. Mentally, for me, I’m not bragging but I was valedictorian of my class. Later of course I graduated cum laude from law school so mentally that part wasn’t that extremely challenging. I just took it in stride.

SM: You went from your basic officer training at Ft. Knox, where did you receive your advanced training for armor? You were branched armored?

JG: Okay my advanced, my…

SM: Or did you go to Armor Officer Course?

JG: I went to Armor Officer Course at Ft. Knox.

SM: Okay, same place. What was that training like?

JG: That’s what I just described.

SM: Oh, I’m sorry, I misunderstood. I thought you meant you had to go through some form of a basic course prior to your officer armored course.

JG: When I was referring to the basic course I was actually referring to the basic armor officer’s course.

SM: Okay, so let’s see here, the tactics and other things that they emphasize in your armor training at Ft. Knox, that was primarily conventional? Why don’t you go ahead and describe that.

JG: It was all conventional. It was very good for conventional warfare. I remember we had the M-48 A-2 tanks and the M-60 tank at Ft. Knox, but it was all conventional warfare training.
SM: Did you see any problems or have any particular criticisms of the training that you received as an armor officer?

JG: No, I didn’t.

SM: Then you left Ft. Knox after you finished the armor officer’s course? Where did you go from there?

JG: Went directly to Ft. Hood, Texas.

SM: And what was the unit like? What was the morale of that unit like? What were the more important experiences that you gained while you were in Ft. Hood?

JG: At Ft. Hood I was in A Company of the 66th Armored 2nd Armored Division. I was a tank platoon leader, one of the platoons. The morale in the unit was average at best. I was not impressed with the number of the troopers so to speak. I remember that vividly, and had discipline problems with a good many of them, that type of thing. The NCOs were adequate. I had one or two strong NCOs and I had one or two that were not so strong. The war games out on the Hood reservation were very realistic, strictly from conventional warfare. I remember several times I was attached to an infantry battalion, my platoon was, and maybe one other platoon, so we worked on the so-called combined arms team concepts.

SM: Why do you say so-called?

JG: Well I shouldn’t say so-called, that’s what it was called, it was the combined armed team concept. That was the label it was given when you had infantry and tanks moving in the attack together.

SM: Now one of the difficulties of that kind of activity of course in terms of combined arms, when you combine infantry with tanks, first of all, the unit you were training with, was it mechanized infantry or leg infantry?

JG: Leg infantry.

SM: Now how much of a challenge was it working with a leg infantry unit as slow as they move? Of course one of the big concerns is the mechanized or the armored element out maneuvering or out running the infantry, and was that a problem that you encountered in training?

JG: It was something we had to work on. I will say this; the company commander that I was under, the infantry company commander that I was attached to, his
surname was Thrower, T-H-R-O-W-E-R – I often wondered what happened to him – he
was absolutely excellent, and I was attached to him and we did this more than once. I
was attached to him and because of how much I thought of him and how great a
commander he was it made the experience of learning to fight together a rewarding
experience.

SM: Anything else memorable from your time at Ft. Hood that you want to
discuss? You already discussed your experience during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

JG: One thing that I very vividly remember is us being very short on parts for
tanks, for spare parts, and other equipment, other Tobe equipment during that period of
time.

SM: What did you think about that?

JG: I thought it was…it was a disgrace. I didn’t understand why.

SM: Was it something that was discussed amongst the chain of command, you
and your company commander, your battalion commander, and so on?

JG: It was discussed, you might say back channel. I remember one reason I
remember this so well is we had these [?] inspections, the NCOs in the 2nd Armored
Division would get together in the middle of the night and move parts from one battalion
to the other one to, ‘Be ready for the inspectors.’. I remember a lot of that going on.

SM: So basically sharing of equipment to make sure that it was up on their Tobe
just to pass the inspection?

JG: Exactly, exactly. I’m sure a lot of that is probably going on today under this
current regime.

SM: So readiness statistics, at least for the units you were in, for that time period,
would be very flawed?

JG: Exactly, and let me emphasize this; I told you we loaded the 1st Armored
Division tanks and equipment on flat cars and they went to Homestead Air Force Base
supposedly to jump off into Cuba for battle, you know?

SM: Yes, sir.

JG: The 1st Armored Division, like the 2nd Armored Division, equipment-wise,
was in very sad shape. At least one out of every four tanks never would have made it into
battle. As a matter of fact, I saw with my own eyes tanks towed aboard railroad flat cars
at Ft. Hood Railhead because they wouldn’t run or they were broken down, but they were
sent down there in any event. I remember that very vividly.

SM: Now what about man power-readiness? You’ve identified some problems
with equipment readiness, but what about training for the men? Were the people in your
unit ready, even if the equipment wasn’t necessarily there or up and running?

JG: The people in our unit were adequately trained, and we had as I recall we
were up to strength, so to speak. We were not short on people.

SM: All right, well anything else from Ft. Hood?

JG: I think that pretty well covers it.

SM: Okay, so you went from Ft. Hood to your aviation training?

JG: Correct.

SM: At Mineral Wells, Ft. Walters?

JG: Right.

SM: Now what was that transition like, going from armor to aviation? That was
quite a switch.

JG: It was like going from one sort of hell to another sort of hellish challenge
because of course I went from a combat environment at Ft. Hood to a school
environment, aviation school environment, at Mineral Wells at Ft. Walters. But, on the
other hand, learning to fly helicopters is quite a challenge so it was mentally, and
somewhat physically, very demanding and challenging. The training, I might add, was
excellent. As far as…and I tried to make it clear in my questionnaire, the training was
excellent as far as the actual flying a helicopter.

SM: How about otherwise?

JG: There was no training at any point for heliborne operations in the guerilla
war concept.

SM: What about the conventional concepts, just heliborne operations, the use of a
helicopter in support of conventional operations?

JG: Well actually at that point, Steve, we were just…at the Mineral Wells what
was called Primary Helicopter Training, we were just learning to fly the helicopters.

SM: You received that…
JG: That was basically hovering, just traffic pattern work on it forever and ever and ever. We were trained very well there.

SM: What was…well, that’s an interesting point to bring up. What was that like? I’ve interviewed a couple of other people who went through helicopter training and one of the things that there seems to be some agreement on is the hardest part about flying a helicopter is hovering. Is that the case for you?

JG: Yep, you got that right. The first time the IP actually let you hover it you better have at least five square miles. Helicopter is a very delicate instrument, and of course when you’re a novice at it and you’re very young and you’re learning you tend to over control. That’s the reason for needing all the area. You correct one way and by that time you’ve moved 100 yards and then you over correct and move 200 the other way.

SM: Anything else interesting from your basic pilot training?

JG: We had a very close-knit group of student pilots together. Many of us went to Vietnam together or about the same time, some of us served in the same unit together in Vietnam, some of us served in sister units in Vietnam, and those of us that are still alive are for the most part very close friends. As a matter of fact we had a big reunion in Springdale, Arkansas just this past June.

SM: And this was a class-based reunion that you had?

JG: Well actually, no, it was a reunion of our 120th aviation group in Vietnam.

SM: You completed your basic aviator school, went on to Ft. Rucker, Alabama?

JG: Let me stop you there.

SM: Okay, go ahead.

JG: I finished at Ft. Walters my training in the H-23D Hiller. That was the primary helicopter. They took about a dozen of our members from Ft. Walters and detoured and sent us to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, put us into little H-13D, the little bubble that you see on MASH on TV, and we did what’s called Nap-of-the-Earth-Training, flying contour out in the Wichita Wildlife Refuge and this was actual training for combat situations, our main mission being able to fly a commander from point A to point B down creek beds, down valleys and so forth without being detected by the enemy. This was a lot of fun but it was very hairy flying. The 12 of us, there was 12 or 15 of us, we actually got our wings at the end of that before going…we got our wings then about May of 1963.
So, I had my wings then. Then, I was sent back to Ft. Hood, not to Ft. Rucker at that particular time. I was sent back to Ft. Hood with the 502nd Aviation Company, which was the aviation company in the 2nd Armored Division, transitioned into the H-19, which is an old cargo helicopter that was used in the Korean War. Then, on or about August 1st of ’63 I was then sent to Ft. Rucker to transition into the H-21, the old banana, and then that lasted a month and then came home for leave for roughly three weeks and then went to Vietnam in September ’63.

SM: The additional training you received at Ft. Walters doing the Nap of the Earth flying…

JG: Ft. Sill.

SM: That was at Ft. Sill, I’m sorry. How did you get that position? Was there a selection of perhaps the top graduates from your class that were chosen for that? How did you go about getting that particular training?

JG: I actually don’t know how they picked those 12. All 12 of us had done very well in flight school but I don’t know exactly how they went by or how they actually did the selection.

SM: They didn’t ask for volunteers? They just said, ‘Hey, you’re going to do this?’

JG: Right.

SM: Did you find that that training helped you later, especially when you got to Vietnam and you had to do a little bit more aggressive flying?

JG: Definitely because I had experience in contour flying, much of which we did in Vietnam right on the rice paddy tops or right on the tree tops, depending on whether you were in the rice paddies or in the jungles.

SM: When you went back to Ft. Hood, what was the primary mission or what was the primary job of that aviation company?

JG: The primary job of that aviation company was to support the 2nd Armored Division. My primary mission there in being trained into an H-19 though was strictly training. Let me paint you this picture; flying an H-13 bubble is the most fun I ever had flying a helicopter. It’s like having your own personal little one seat or two seat motorbike and you just run all over the country and you’re wild and wooly. To transition
from that into an H-19, which is a large cargo, single-rotor helicopter, very
underpowered, was almost like learning how to fly all over again. So, that was the reason
to get to Ft. Hood to the H-19 was to get me and the others of us back into the large
helicopter mode of thinking and flying.

SM: Well the H-19 was used almost exclusively for resupplying and things of
that nature, or was it also used for tank recovery?

JG: No, it didn’t have the power for tank recovery. The H-19 was very
underpowered; as a matter of fact, ever helicopter I ever flew except the UH-1B was very
underpowered. Let me qualify that one step further; they were very underpowered - and
when I say they, I’m particularly talking about the CH-21 – it was very underpowered for
the kind of flying I did in it, which was in Vietnam at 110 degrees. The banana, the CH-
21, was manufactured for high altitude, cold weather operations. If it had been on the top
of Mt. Rainer, it would have been a different story.

SM: It would have had more power in that type of an environment?

JG: Right.

SM: It’s the heaviness or the thickness of the air, correct?

JG: Yeah, density, altitude.

SM: Density, okay. Anything else that you’d like to talk about with regard to
your training prior to going to Vietnam and/or the assignments that you held at Ft. Hood?

JG: I think that pretty well covers it.

SM: When did you find out, and what were the circumstances surrounding you
finding out, that you were going to Vietnam?

JG: Sometime around February or March of ’63 while we were still at Ft.
Walters, everybody in my flight school class went to the mailbox one morning and with
the exception of one or two we all had orders to go to Vietnam in or around September of
’63. That was a wake up call.

SM: How much had you heard about Vietnam since you had joined the Army?

JG: Very little, very, very little. I distinctly remember not long after we got our
orders on a weekend the phone ringing off the hook in our BOQ – I was a bachelor at the
time – saying, ‘There’s a guy that flew an otter,’ that’s a fixed-wing aircraft, a six or eight
seat fixed-wing Army aircraft, ‘There’s a guy that flew the otter in Vietnam that’s just
gotten back. He’s out at the club and he’s answering questions about Vietnam,’ and
everybody got dressed in a hurry or whatever and hauled buggy out to the officer’s club
and formed a big circle around this guy and just pounded him with questions about,
‘Where the hell is Vietnam? What’s it like? What the hell’s going on,’ and the whole
nine yards.
SM: Do you remember many of his responses?
JG: I remember some of them, being that it was hot as hell over there, very
dangerous place, organized chaos, that type of thing.
SM: And from that point on, did you and your fellow classmates take a keener
interest in this small Southeast Asian nation?
JG: Very definitely.
SM: Did you get briefings or anything like that on what was going on?
JG: No. Excuse me for laughing, Steve.
SM: That’s okay. That’s all right. I’m not surprised that you didn’t. I wanted to
ask just to make sure.
JG: You can ask anything, I just had to have a chuckle at that.
SM: So here the Army’s telling you, ‘You’re going to go over to this war torn
country, there’s a lot of hostility going on, it’s a dangerous place,’ yet they’re not telling
you anything about what to expect?
JG: Exactly.
SM: What did you and these other officers think about this?
JG: You’ve probably run into this before. When you’re on active duty, you’re
not paid to think although we were independent. I remember distinctly thinking at the
time, because I talked to one or two guys, I don’t remember if they were in our flight
class or the flight school class ahead of me, guys that I just knew because they
were friends of friends that had been sent to language school for some reason, but there
was only just a small percentage, like one or two or three percent, and I remember
thinking, ‘Surely they’re going to send us to language school at least to learn a few basics
of this damn language of these people before they send us over there.’ I remember
distinctly thinking that; of course they didn’t send us.
SM: How much…what did your family think? When you finally realized where you were going and what you would probably be encountering, what did you think about these new orders shipping out to Vietnam?

JG: Well I remember my reaction was I was an ardent student in history and it always stuck with me the story about when Columbus sailed, or maybe back before Columbus they thought the world was flat, that at some point they’d fall off the edge, and that’s the thought I had was when that big airplane leaves the West Coast headed over the Pacific, I’m falling into an unknown hole that I don’t know a damn thing about, and obviously that was frightening.

SM: Was there much talk about this amongst the people that were flying over with you, kind of the, ‘We don’t really know what we’re getting into?’

JG: There was some talk. Of course you’ve got to remember…well, I say you’ve got to remember, Steve, a 21 year old aviator is a macho guy, forgive the slang, but as several of us said, particularly looking back, we were young, dumb, and full of come, and that was just the way it was. You didn’t really question orders. I would have talked to my family and my friends on the home front more about being concerned than I would have talked to a fellow aviator, and he probably did the same thing for obvious reasons, being that, well, you don’t act like you’re scardy-crap to another aviator.

SM: Did you have any conversations with people before you left, family members or friends?

JG: Sure. My mother, as I think I mentioned earlier, had five brothers in World War II and she was distraught because she’s been through it as an adult and knew what war was like and now her son was going off. My father was less vocal but I later found out from my mother that he was very, very upset and concerned.

SM: What about your uncles? Were you able to talk to them much before you left and find out from them their perceptions of combat and their experiences, or was that not just an opportunity?

JG: Yes, I did talk to them. As a matter of fact, one of them, my uncle, I talk about him in my book, his name is Oliver Bell. He lives in Ashton, North Carolina today. Ironically, he was a mechanic at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, civilian, maintaining the fleet of H-21 helicopters that we transitioned in at Ft. Rucker. I went to his home several
times and it was the usual...I remember him saying, ‘At least in World War II we kind of
took what we were doing,’ but it was like then, Steve, not only, ‘We don’t know what
we’re doing in Vietnam,’ or, ‘We don’t know what our mission is,’ it was, ‘Hell, we
don’t even know where Vietnam is!’ It was that elementary at that point.
SM: Do you recall anything else about the conversations that you had with other
family or friends before leaving?
JG: I had a first cousin, have a first cousin named Walter. I actually print a letter
in my book verbatim that I mailed him from Vietnam in March of ’64. He was a former
Army aviator, by the way, and had gotten out, had served three or four years and gotten
out. Actually, there were three Army aviators in my family – him, his younger brother,
and myself - so I talked to him a good bit about it before going over there.
SM: Did he have any particular words of wisdom for you or anything that helped
you?
JG: No, they really didn’t know what to say to you. They just didn’t know what
the hell was going on, none of us did.
SM: All right, so you’re flying over to Vietnam. Where did you land and what
were your first impressions?
JG: All right, we left Travis Air Force Base as I recall it in California on a World
Airways Boeing 707, a civilian contract aircraft complete with stewardesses and carpet in
the aisle, the whole nine yards. We landed in Honolulu, Hawaii during the night. The
next stop was the Philippine Islands. I had on a khaki uniform, short sleeved shirt,
officer’s little khaki uniform, and I remember getting off that plane and thinking, ‘God
Almighty, this heat and humidity is just oppressive.’ We stayed there I think on the
ground I think like an hour or two and took off in the clouds, it was cloud cover. I
remember talking to one of the stewardesses on there and talking about...I mean, I was
really getting nervous then because I knew the next stop was on the ground in Vietnam,
and I will never forget, I told her, I said, ‘You know, I’m getting nervous about this,’” and
the other guys were saying things, too, because all of us knew that they had made this run
a number of times. I remember this one stewardess saying to me, ‘If you want to know
what Vietnam is like, look at the face of the guys that get on the aircraft who’ve been
here a year.’ I won’t ever forget her saying that. I remember coming in. We landed on
Runway 07 I believe it is. We broke out of the clouds at about, oh, I’d say 2000 feet, and I was looking out the window – I had a window seat – and I was looking out and I saw these beat up looking armored personnel carriers and all these funny looking little troops down there. They were Vietnamese troops, the good guys so to speak, that looked goofy as hell and dopey as hell and I remember when I walked off the aircraft they had one of those ladder things, it wasn’t as fancy as it is now where you have the tunnel, you just walk down the ladder and go down the steps, and I remember saying, ‘God, this place stinks like hell,’ and it was hot. To say that my stomach sank to the pits of my ankles is an understatement about that point in time. I did not have a good feeling about that place.

SM: Where did you go from there in terms of I assume you were processed in country?

JG: Right, that was at Tan Son Nhut of course. They took us to a little holding area, holding area, something like this. You keep in mind, this is way before all those big bases that were created over there and all that stuff. They took us to a holding area and told us we’d be assigned to a unit. That was some little holding area there on the base at Tan Son Nhut. Of course Tan Son Nhut even then was a big, sprawling air base. But, I remember being there and being told that…not being told, but overhearing conversation while I was sitting there in the room with some other pilots, that is my peers, these NCOs and some officers talking like, ‘Hey, we’ve got some new fresh meat here. We’ve got some new fresh pilots,’ and I remember the various representatives from like the 145th Aviation Battalion and other aviation battalions, there weren’t very many, but they were all looking at us like fresh piece of meat and they were all talking about, ‘We need replacement pilots bad,’ and all that, so I felt kind of like the new girl in the fresh whorehouse on the street. I remember that very vividly.

SM: What about in country briefings as far as do’s and don’ts?

JG: There wasn’t one formally. Informally, it was done by…your briefing, really, was done by your fellow pilots. Our unit was relatively small. The 120th Aviation Company only had about I’d say 40 pilots. At that time we were the only aviation company on Tan Son Nhut.

SM: Do you know how many were on Vietnam at that point?
JG: At that point in time I think there were total of about 10,000 Americans in Vietnam and only a small percentage of those were actually doing any fighting. There were five aviation companies in Vietnam, five helicopter companies, they all went there about the same time, all of them initially were H-21 companies. There were some special forces there because we resupplied them, but they were the A-teams, usually a captain and a lieutenant and 10 enlisted men, and of course they were so called U.S. Army Advisors to the upper echelon Vietnamese units, good guy units. But, that was it as far as Americans being exposed to gunfire.

SM: And when you say you received informal briefings from fellow pilots, can you describe some of the information that was passed on to you?

JG: Well it was…frankly, a lot of it was done in the cockpit. We were given…we had a unit instructor pilot and we flew with him for about a week just to get our flight legs back under. Keep in mind we’d been on leave for three and four weeks, hadn’t been in the cockpit. The H-21 was a very difficult machine to fly, very unforgiving and very underpowered. So, we had about a week of traffic pattern flying as you may and then we actually was put in the cockpit with a senior pilot in experience, called them OFGs, and those of us that were new were NFGs and called on what we called administrative missions; that would be whether it was two helicopters would say, ‘Take Colonel such and such, go pick him up at point A and take him to point B and then take him to point C.’ In other words, be a taxi for him for most of the day and that really didn't involve getting shot at that much. Most of our training actually came in the cockpit with respect to the senior pilot talking to us non-stop about do’s and don’ts, just about the whole gamut of what you can expect, that type of thing.

SM: Were you given any kind of briefing on things like rules of engagement?

JG: Heck no. ‘Shoot the son of a bitch if you don’t like him,’ was about it. There was never any rules of engagement, rules given.

SM: And any kind of policies or unit policies, or unit directives, on limiting your interaction with Vietnamese people or anything like that?

JG: Oh yeah, we had rules like we weren’t permitted to drive land vehicles, the officers weren’t.

SM: Why was that?
JG: For fear of say a lieutenant driving a jeep out the gate. We actually lived on Tan Son Nhut but it was about a 600 yard drive from where we lived in these so-called hooches to the actual where the helicopters were, a little road, and the reason officers couldn’t drive was because they were afraid some Vietnamese would push a Vietnamese child out in front of the jeep and then come to the U.S. with a big claim against, ‘An officer ran over my child,’ that type of thing.

SM: Were there actually documented incidents where that happened?

JG: Oh yeah. It happened more than once.

SM: While you were there?

JG: Oh yeah, yeah.

SM: Any other rules?

JG: Well there were official rules about not trading piasters on the black market, which that was a joke because everybody did it on the black market.

SM: How about interacting with female Vietnamese civilians?

JG: No, there weren’t any official rules ever laid down about that.

SM: Well, let’s see here, your first mission where you actually were flying either a resupply mission or a combat mission, why don’t you go ahead and describe that, your first time up in the air?

JG: Well I don’t remember the exact first mission.

SM: Well first memorable one.

SM: Okay, it was a two-ship mission where we usually got our missions the night before so we could plan it with respect to fuel and so forth. But four pilots, two helicopters, went to the flight line like at five a.m. in the morning, got a briefing from my intelligence officer about known VC activity in the area where we’d be going. Usually this briefing was based on what the Vietnamese had passed on. It usually wasn’t worth a shit. But anyway, say for example the first day we were told to fly to Bien Hoa and pick up a colonel and a major and fly them to let’s say Phan Thiet, which was on the east coast, for them to inspect some artillery emplacements, and we picked them up at the appointed time, flew them to Phan Thiet which was about an hour flight, landed, we were given the radio frequencies ahead of time for FM and UHF, landed, and let the guys off. We sat on the ground while they did their thing and then picked them up that afternoon
and flew them back to Bien Hoa. Then, we flew back to Tan Son Nhut and that was a day spent being a taxi driver, so to speak.

SM: Was it…did you take any fire? Was it a fairly uneventful experience?

JG: That first day was fairly uneventful as I recall it.

SM: What was your primary area of operations? What parts of South Vietnam did you principally fly into? It seems like you went down to the Delta some?

JG: What was called III Corps. The furthest north I ever flew was Buon Me Thout. The furthest south…well actually the furthest south I ever flew was the day I was wounded and that was Ca Mao but that was way south out of our usual operational area. We normally didn’t fly any further south than My Tho.

SM: So you never had occasion to go to, say, Can Tho, further south?

JG: No, because that was covered by the 121st Aviation Company at Soc Trang and the 114th at Bien Long.

SM: Well why don’t you go ahead and describe the first mission that you were on when you took hostile fire?

JG: I remember that well. That was sometime the first week of October. I got there on my birthday, September 19th. The first week of October we had a combat assault mission. I was flying with a lieutenant by the name of Miller and it seems like we had 12 H-21s and we had a combat assault mission that wasn’t too far from Tay Ninh and we had about three lifts into the LZ and on the second lift I believe it was we heard fire, automatic weapons fire and the crew chief came on the mic and said, ‘Sir, we’re taking hits,’ or, ‘We’ve taken some hits,’ and we didn’t have, fortunately, any mechanical failures and we flew probably 15 minutes back to the pick up zone and sat down with a crew chief. There were several holes in the aircraft and the fuselage. I remember that made a hell of an impression on me; some little weasel out there trying to do his level best to kill me.

SM: When you received your briefing prior to that particular mission, had they told you that you would likely run into enemy contact?

JG: Yes.

SM: So it wasn’t a surprise?

JG: No.
SM: Did you find that usually your briefings were fairly accurate with that regard, as far as if you were told you didn’t have anything to worry about as far as enemy contact, usually you didn’t make contact?

JG: Well 95% of the time we were told that we would have some type of enemy contact because we were usually flying into and out of very remote areas, towns, that if the town itself was so called controlled by good guys, even the suburbs were not, so to speak.

SM: Well at this point what did you think was actually going on in South Vietnam or in Vietnam?

JG: I thought it was unorganized chaos, because at about that point in time here we are out here flying helicopters and moving people from point A to point B but then you had on the national news or even the news we got over there, through Stars and Stripes, whatever, you had Buddhists demonstrating downtown, you had Buddhist monks burning themselves, setting themselves on fire, you’ve got a very unpopular president in Diem, even among most of his own people. There he was a Catholic and the Catholics only made up about 10% of the country. You got 90% Buddhists who hated Diem. It didn’t take me two weeks after being over there to thinking, ‘What in the hell are we doing over here, and how in the hell are we ever going to turn this thing around?’ It didn't take a rocket scientist to realize we can’t even pee hardly without getting in a helicopter. We don’t control any of the roads, it was a civil war, we don’t control any of the roads. Something’s just not right here.

SM: Did you have conversations about this with other aviators and other officers?

JG: Oh yeah. We’d sit in the club there and drink and carry on and after a while it was almost laughable to be quite frank. We had a tremendous amount of pride, we were the best aviation unit in the world, ain’t no question about that. We were going to do our job, and we did it. We executed the plan as we said every time. If we were told to do a job, we did it. We had that much pride in our unit. But, as far as the big picture, it was kind of like, ‘I hope I live through this and get back home.’ But, everybody - I say everybody - most all aviators realized this was something real bad wrong with this whole scenario.
SM: Well you mentioned President Diem. What did you think in November when he was assassinated? How did that affect your unit and what you all thought was going on in South Vietnam?

JG: Hold on just a second, Steve.

SM: Sure.

JG: Well I can shed some light on that. I can tell you a lot about what I thought because we were the aviation company at Tan Son Nhut and there was constant rumors of twos and all that type of thing. This is something you probably hadn’t heard before, hadn’t been told, but a week to ten days before the coup, we, the 120th Aviation Company, actually hauled ARVN troops from out in the country from various units to Saigon and I remember that was something you just never did, it usually was the other way around. I remember asking this ARVN lieutenant who spoke broken English what’s going on and he kind of smiled and he pointed towards downtown Saigon and then he ran his finger across his neck. I remember that very vividly.

SM: Do you recall about how many soldiers you pulled in from the field to go to Saigon?

JG: Oh, two to three hundred.

SM: Now this lieutenant’s cutthroat, when he did that, when he symbolized that, was he indicating that they were there to do the coup, or that they were there to try to prevent it?

JG: They were there to do it.

SM: They were there to help overthrow the government?

JG: Sure.

SM: What did you guys think about that?

JG: We just thought it was another rung on the laughable ladder of what the hell’s going on over here in this damn joke jungle place. It may be hard for you to picture that, but it really did right quick amongst those of us that knew, us aviators, we aviators, it just got to be kind of a farce quickly.

SM: Did you have much interaction with other service personnel or other branches that were in or out of Tan Son Nhut?

JG: Very little. At our level, we had very little interaction.
SM: How about with Vietnamese people? Did you ever come across a
Vietnamese officer who was a little bit more fluent in English and could communicate a
little bit better?

JG: Yeah, out in the boondocks, I remember one time out at a place near the
Parrot’s Beak, a place called Moc Hoa; I talked with a Vietnamese captain out there, an
ARVN captain, who I was very high on. He was a courageous little fellow, and some of
them had good units. But, this was…they were in the minority. I do remember thinking
that the Vietnamese that I talked to, whether civilian or military, that had good sense and
could communicate or speak in English some, the ones that hated communism and were
very freedom-loving, a number of them had been in the north prior to 1954 and then
when Dien Bien Phu fell and they divided the country in half they had a mass exodus
from the north to the south, and a number of those that were really honest-to-God and
freedom-loving and fighting communism had been exposed to communism in the north.
By the same token, they didn’t like Diem either. They just wanted the hell to be like
everybody else at this day in time with this Clinton clown; just leave us the hell alone!
Let us go on about life!

SM: And then what about the Kennedy assassination shortly after Diem?

JG: I remember that extremely well. The Vietnamese people, the vast majority of
Vietnamese people, for whatever reason, loved John Kennedy. They had a big poster, I
never will forget this, USAID, Agents of International Development, had an office
downtown Saigon, had a big plate-glass front window, and they had all these big posters
up there in Vietnamese of what had happened and all, and there was a line for days, like
three blocks, four blocks long of Vietnamese. Also, I remember the only magazine I got
over there, and it was usually like a week late but I did get it weekly, was U.S. News and
World Report, and I remember I would stick it in my flight suit pocket and read it when I
had a chance. We were way up north somewhere, I’ve forgotten the name of the place,
up around Phuc Bien or somewhere up there in the middle of nowhere, and we had
engine failure; not an actual engine failure, but our engine was running rough so we set
down up there in a friendly area and had to change the engine out, so that was basically
an all day job. I was sitting there reading my U.S. News and World Report and some
local Vietnamese saw me reading it and came up there and wanted to look at it and they
were very, very interested in looking at the pictures. That was out in the middle of nowhere.

SM: When you went out on those types of missions and you found yourself, as you put it, in the middle of nowhere, did you ever encounter English speaking Vietnamese or were they pretty much…

JG: Very, very few English speaking and most of them just one or two or three words. The fact that we weren’t taught the basic elementary elements of those people’s language is just absolutely an unforgivable sin in my opinion.

SM: Yeah, you mentioned that in the questionnaire that you thought that one of the things that should have occurred was at least some kind of rudimentary language training prior to going over.

JG: Sure. Vietnamese, as I have grown to understand, is a very difficult language, but still, just a few basic words and sentences would have helped out a hell of a lot, particularly when you were in their presence and you never even knew who was VC and who wasn’t. Even the guys that were supposed to be good guys, hell, as it turns out probably half of them were VC. Two or three of the little bastards would be sitting there talking and look at you and kind of grin and laugh and chuckle in Vietnamese and you’re thinking, ‘What the hell is that little son of a bitch thinking? What’s he saying?’

SM: When Kennedy was assassinated, what did you and your fellow officers talk about with regard to that?

JG: Well let’s go back 20 days to when Diem was assassinated. The place, Saigon, the whole area was in just utter chaos. As a matter of fact, the airfield at Tan Son Nhut was actually strafed by a Vietnamese Air Force aircraft more than once. Several rounds actually came through the roof of our operations building out at Tan Son Nhut because you’ll keep in mind that during the coup there were Vietnamese good guys on both sides, pro and anti Diem. So the 120th, we were briefed. We actually had stand-by orders in case everything really fell apart, to fly our helicopters out to an aircraft carrier supposedly on station off of Vung Tau and on the worst case scenario we would actually leave and land on the carrier and be out of there. Of course, that really got our attention because we were faced with the immediate threat that the good guys may not even be on our side anymore, you know what I mean? Anyway, that was the condition of our state
of flying, so to speak, and then 20 days later you’ve got Kennedy assassinated and that made things even worse because not only did you have chaos in Vietnam among the good guys with Diem being assassinated, you had chaos of a sorts back in the U.S.. So at that point in time, we as aviators were not only concerned about what direction is this so-called war going…it’s kind of like if you plan a football game and the Auburn Tiger’s head coach had been assassinated and the defensive coordinator and the offensive coordinator were having a knock-down drag-out fight on the sidelines. I mean, what can you expect from the football team? They’ve not only got the University of Alabama on the other side they’re having to fight, but their own coaches are fighting. So we were concerned obviously with the direction of the war quote/unquote, and also for our personal safety. The thing was just utter chaos is all I can say. It was a day-by-day operation, too, Steve. Our missions fell off the old man, Major Delvin or whoever our CO was at the time, Major Delvin, would just frankly tell us some days we didn’t do anything because nobody was in charge. Obviously most of the missions came from the Vietnamese through their American liaison and the Vietnamese were in the middle of a coup and as you know, there were several coups that followed. So, anyway, it was just disorganized chaos.

SM: What did you think prior to the coup and after, prior to Kennedy’s assassination and after, what did you think we were trying to accomplish there in Vietnam? Why in the world were we there?

JG: Let me digress just briefly; having been reared, coming up, during the Cold War I remember very vividly during the Korean War I kept up with it because I was…I guess you are steeped as a child in World War II and I remember I knew all the names of the generals like [?] and Macarthur and so forth. I kept up with the big picture, and the big picture being that communism was this big, bad, Russian bear that was going to engulf the world. I remember when Sputnik went up and how afraid I was and all that good stuff. So as far as the big picture went, I knew that we were there and we had been told, I read in *U.S. News and World Report* about the so called Domino Theory, I was aware of that. So, I knew that that was what we were supposedly there for, but having been there, like I said, after a few weeks, I realized, ‘Hey, this ain’t going to happen.’ This bunch of rag-tag soldiers called Vietnamese or Vietnamese Army and Air Force,
they ain’t about to whoop this bunch, because we learned right quick that the VC were very good soldiers, they were very well trained, their intelligence was second to none. They had, as you know, and it didn’t take a flaming genius to realize even back then that the VC intelligence network just permeated our whole command structure. So, to answer your question as best I can, yes, I knew there was a Domino Theory and we were supposedly there to stop communism, but I also knew from looking at what I saw, it damn sure wasn’t going to happen the way things were going in South Vietnam.

SM: Again, was this a general topic of discussion amongst you and other aviators and officers?

JG: Oh yeah, yeah. You know, most of the guys – let me reiterate this, too – most of the guys that we replaced, we couldn’t fill their shoes because most of the guys that we replaced, the guys in my class, for example, and the later class, we replaced seasoned warrant officers. These guys’ names like Who’s Who in our aviation today. But starting with my class and maybe the class behind me, I was class 634C, we were all lieutenants, all officers. But the point I’m making is, in flight school we had our whole flight school class was officers. So, we had guys there from all…and still a lot of us are good friends. I will just throw out a couple names, some of them from Texas. I talked to Mel Pollock, lives in Hurst, Texas. I talked to him the other day. Ely Elliott, Ely’s a nickname, he lives somewhere in Texas. Chad Payne, Duncan, Oklahoma, Ted Eisman from Vermont, Fred Binford from California, on and on, and these guys were college graduate type guys. These guys weren’t a bunch of dummies. They know something about the big picture of the world. We sit down and talk about it and just shake our damn head, you know. But let me haste and ask this; when you are in an environment, and this is so true, this is something that people who’ve never been in war really can’t fully fathom, when you’re going out and some son of a bitch is trying to kill you everyday, you really don’t think…let me put it in a positive light, you think in 24 hour segments. I remember many a night going to bed thinking, ‘Will I be in this bed tomorrow night or will I be in a damn morgue?’ So you talk about things like the big picture and then you just kind of worry about the next 24 hours, if you get my drift there.

SM: Absolutely, and I would imagine that was probably the case for most of your fellow aviators, survival?
JG: Right.

SM: After the Diem coup, after the Kennedy assassination, were there any noticeable differences in what was going on in Vietnam while you were there?

JG: Yes, particular from the periods from say November to about January, all during November, December, and on into early January there was a slacking off of combat assault missions, just a slacking off of combat operations so to speak. Still we were doing a lot of flying and getting shot at in this taxi cab stuff from point A to point B but as far as organized combat assault effort, there was a lot of slacking off. Then, that didn’t cease really until January 17th of ’64 when we flew the 120th and a number of Vietnamese helicopters and some other units flew what we called the Kien Hoa mission down south of Saigon in the area of the South China Sea and the mouth of the Mekong River, that was a huge helicopter assault mission, and actually the largest helicopter assault mission in history up to that date.

SM: What did you think about the enemy that you did encounter? What was your opinion concerning his fighting ability, his dedication?

JG: I thought he was highly dedicated, highly motivated. Let me digress; I mentioned Ely Elliott’s name?

SM: Yes, sir.

JG: After we’d been over there, he got there maybe a couple two or three months ahead of me, after we got over there I remember I was talking to some older pilots saying, ‘Is there anything we can read about this place? Anything we can read and find out what the big picture is?’ To a man, every one of the old guys said…there were several copies floating around in the unit, ‘Get a copy of Street Without Joy by Bernard D. Fall,’ and I’m sure you’re familiar with that book, ‘And read it.’ I remember Ely told me, ‘I got a copy, come over to my hooch and I’ll give it to you,’ and I read it practically non-stop over a period of two or three nights when I had a few hours spare and that was when I first…that was the first lesson that I had with respect to Vietnam, guerilla, counter-insurgency warfare, quote/unquote. I don’t even know if I answered your question, I think I lost my train of thought somewhere along about now.

SM: I was just asking about what’s your opinion of the enemy? In particular, you indicated on the questionnaire that you only had contact with Viet Cong, you never
encountered any main force North Vietnamese Army forces, and so I was curious about what your opinion of the Viet Cong is as a fighting unit, as fighting men?

JG: Very good, highly motivated, very professional, excellent intelligence. I had, and I still have, the utmost respect. I don’t like the little communist bastards, but I have the utmost respect for them.

SM: Do you remember what was most important to you as far as Bernard Fall’s *Street Without Joy*, what you took away from that book in terms of trying to understand better what was going on in South Vietnam at the time?

JG: I do. I remember what a motivator Ho Chi Minh was and how dedicated the bad guys were. I remember taking that away from that book. I’ll tell you, for years I’ve had a saying that I pretty well have stuck with, and I think this is original to me; when people ask me to describe the tandem team of Ho Chi Minh as president or whatever you want to call him, chairman, and General Giap as his commander in chief, I tell people that’s as formidable a foe as if during the Civil War if Robert E. Lee, Lincoln and Robert E. Lee, had been on the same team, and I really mean that.

SM: That’s a very impressive compliment.

JG: Well I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

SM: You mentioned questions that I asked in the questionnaire regarding weapons and equipment that the enemy used. Of course for an aviator it makes a lot of sense, the 12.7 millimeter anti-aircraft weapons were rather fearful as were the 50 cal machine guns the enemy might have had, but you also mention, I asked about booby traps and things of that nature, that punji sticks were the most feared. Were there any circumstances where anybody that you knew was injured by punji sticks or any kind of booby trap?

JG: I’ll tell you where most of that came from. We, as I mentioned earlier, we did resupply a number of Special Forces outposts, and I mean these guys lived in these little triangle places out in the middle of nowhere. These Special Forces guys were a breed of their own, and I did get to know several of our Special Forces captains or lieutenants on those teams because we resupplied them from the same ones several times and sometimes we’d be there an hour or two and they would see us inside their compound and most of those stories came from listening to those guys.
SM: Now you mention resupply; would you also act as medical evacuation for anybody, any Americans that were injured in those camps, or was that completely separate?

JG: Here is the answer to that; we did some medical evacuation with the H-21 on an as needed basis, but Dustoff, I’m sure you know that term, but Dustoff, Major Charles Kelly formed Dustoff in January of ’64 and that was a contingent of six or eight or how many Hueys that was dedicated solely for Medevac. So they did all the heavy-duty Medevac work. We H-21 people on these so called admin runs, I mentioned early, we did a fair amount of medical evacuation of ARVN soldiers, wounded, sick, ill, that type of thing, and a certain amount of civilians. We evacuated a number of civilians from time to time, and also bodies. God knows we did our share of that shit, of civilians or whatever. I’m sure you’re thinking, ‘Why civilians?’ A lot of times we were used as I guess goodwill people…I’m sure that some of our missions were formulated like for example let’s just say the district chief, say his daughter died and her daddy wanted her to be buried in the family funeral plot near Saigon for some reason so they have all these ancestral burial policies. Then, under those circumstances, we would haul a body from say Tay Ninh to Saigon, that type of thing.

SM: Did you ever encounter American civilians or were they pretty much exclusively Vietnamese civilians?

JG: Oh, I knew some American civilians over there. I knew some of the Americans that worked for USAID over there. Let me tell you why primarily, Steve. Let me explain this so you will know you need to know this from a little bit of historical perspective. Around 19…well, in December of 1961, at or about that time, five U.S. Army helicopter companies went to Vietnam. They went respectively to Tan Son Nhut, Soc Trang, Qui Nhon, and two other places, I’m not sure which. At that point in time, my unit, the 120th Aviation Company, was called the 57th Transportation Company, and those very helicopters, the bananas, arrived up on a ship, a U.S. Navy ship, actually a U.S. Navy ship Core was the name, C-O-R-E, went up the Saigon River and docked at Saigon Harbor with those H-21s on board. The 57th at that time was the 57th Transportation Company of the 45th Transportation Battalion. Sometime in the middle of ’64 those five transportation companies were changed from the 57th as in the case of my
unit, the 57th Transportation Company became the 120th Aviation Company and the 45th
Transportation Battalion became the 145th Aviation Battalion. There again, Steve,
forgive me, I’ve completely lost my train of thought and what my point was I was
making.

SM: I had asked you about with regard to the…now I’ve lost my train of thought.

JG: I apologize.

SM: No, no, hold on, it’s coming back to me. Just a second [laughs]. Oh yeah, I
asked you if you had ever encountered American civilians and in particular out in the
field?

JG: I know where I am, okay. The 120th Aviation Company which was formerly
57th Transportation Company lived on the air base near Tan Son Nhut as I told you, only
about half a mile, and we built our own hooches. They had these old wooden floors and
screen and all that, it wasn’t anything fancy to say the least, but we had a little office club
that we built right in the middle of the compound, it wasn’t nothing but a hut, but the
name of it was the Shawnee Tee-pee. As you may or may not know, the H-21s official
nickname was the Shawnee. As you may or may not know, also, all Army helicopters, I
think I can safely say, are named after Indian names. The Huey is the Iroquois, the H-21
was a Shawnee, the H-13, the little bubble I told you I flew was the Sioux. But anyway,
the Shawnee Tee-pee, at that point in time, let’s talk about ’62 and ’63 and ’64, Steve,
was the hot place. I mean, if you were an American civilian particularly or high-ranking
American officer, you didn’t come to Vietnam without passing through the portals of the
Shawnee Tee-pee. All these, well not all, but many of these journalists who’s names are
Halberstam, Sheehan, and others, were regulars at our bar, although they were our age,
but to be somebody as an American civilian for example, if you were a USAID officer,
you just had to come out and hang out at the Shawnee Tee-pee. To be frank with you,
they could find out – the news people and the American civilians – could find out a hell
of a lot more about what was going on in Vietnam from us than they can as you know
now from so-called the bullshit news briefings that General Hawkins and all that crowd
had. So, I wanted to explain how I was in touch, me and some of these pilots, were in
touch with a number of quote ‘influential’ civilians.
SM: Well what about civilians from other agencies, in particular the CIA had a presence in Vietnam of course going back to the ‘50s. Any contacts with those types of people?

JG: With which types of people?

SM: People engaging in black operations?

JG: Black market?

SM: No, black ops, spec ops, special operations, covert operations?

JG: Yeah, I get your question. We knew about Air America, that was the one. Those airplanes sat out there at Tan Son Nhut. It was a big joke, you know, didn’t have markings on them. I knew some of the Air America pilots, most of them were renegades. That was the only special operations there was to my knowledge. All of that Phoenix Program and all that stuff, that started later on.

SM: What do you mean by renegades? You said a lot of the Air America pilots were renegades?

JG: What’s the old story about some of the famous marshals out in Texas, all the town did was hire the biggest, baddest gunfighter and put a badge on him, and that was basically what some of these Air America types were. They were older has-beens, and not some of them not so much older, but the ones that I knew, a bunch were just a bunch of…hell, they were just a bunch of hot-shot renegades, that’s about all I can say; a lot of talk, lot of mouth, you know, tried to act the movie star role. Of course, that was all inside the Shawnee Tee-pee, that’s where I primarily met them. We met a little of every walk of life in the Shawnee Tee-pee, and that’s really almost a separate story in itself.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss…you mention that you saw…the question I ask in the questionnaire, describe the bravest action that you witnessed, you said that there were many. Would you either…is there anything that sticks out in your mind as one of the bravest things you witnessed in Vietnam?

JG: That’s a hard question to answer because professional aviators don’t think in terms – and I’m being very serious when I say – we don’t think in terms of bravery and heroes, we think in terms of people just doing their job. To be quite frank with you, looking back on it now, there were guys in my unit that did things everyday, pilots and crew chiefs, that would warrant a Silver Star, a Distinguished Flying Cross, a
Distinguished Service Cross, maybe even a Medal of Honor. They just did things that were extraordinary day in and day out, because we were flying old worn-out helicopters and we flew them in formation, in such tight formations, that we flew often times overlapping rotor blades. We did that for patrol purposes and combat assault missions. It’s just on and on and on and on. I think the next thing I could compare it to was probably the 8th Air Force or some of those during World War II when they would leave with 100, or we’ll say 300 B-17s and 100 of them would come back. The ones that came back, half of them are shot to pieces and they still landed them. You know, who’s the hero and who’s brave? That’s the concept that I’m getting at.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss then the circumstances surrounding getting shot down?

JG: Okay, on April 12th, 1964 which was a Sunday, a number of us pilots with the 120th Aviation Company were asleep and were waken by someone, I’ve forgotten who it was, a senior captain or a major, and told to get dressed and go to the flight line. This was not planned ahead of time, it just happened. Some of the pilots weren’t even there. There was probably three or four or more, five or six or whatever, that were not supposed to fly that Sunday and if we just definitely knew we weren’t supposed to fly that next day some guy would go down to downtown Saigon and spend the night with some gal or get drunk or whatever. But anyhow, they roused up enough crews for nine aircraft, nine H-21 I guess pilots, so we’re talking roughly 18 pilots, and in darkness we went out to the airfield. We were told to start the aircraft and fly in formation, follow the leader, and that’s basically what we did. It was cloudy, kind of misty, foggy, but we got off the ground and went to Can Tho still not knowing a damn thing about why we were flying, nothing. We landed at Can Tho and sat around for a while not knowing anything. Finally, we made one or two lifts. We picked up ARVN troops, and I believed it was Can Tho, it may have been My Tho. It was either Can Tho, My Tho, or Bien Long, but I think it was Can Tho, and we picked up…my best recollection is it was about 11 o’clock in the morning by then. We picked up troops, ARVN troops, and carried them and dropped them in our landing zone somewhere east of Ca Mau, C-A M-A-U. I don’t even know where it was really, but we really didn’t get any fire. It was fairly uneventful, and we still didn’t know why we were way the hell down there because that was way south of
our usual operating area. We came back to Can Tho, or I assume it was Can Tho, and sat
on the ground and after a while somebody, a CO who’s name was Mike Baldisar, told us
to start engines and then we were going to Ca Mau. Well I’d always heard about Ca Mau
because Ca Mau was about the furthest south you could go where there was any kind of
ARVN civilization but I also knew it was in the vicinity of what was called the U Minh
Forest and that whole area was just controlled by the VC and had been for years. But
anyway, we flew to Ca Mau. It was, like I said, on a Sunday. I think we got to Ca Mau
probably around three o’clock p.m. and they had a little gravel strip, the best I remember
it, there at Ca Mau, a little landing strip, and we landed and sat on the side of the strip for
a while and finally some ARVN troops showed up and we were told that the troops
loaded aboard our actually eight helicopters, there were two flights of four, Alpha 1, 2, 3,
and 4, and then Bravo 1, 2, 3, and 4. The ninth aircraft sat on the ground. It was what
was called a spare. We were told we that we were going north of Ca Mau to let these
troops out in the landing zone. That’s all the briefing we were given, that we were going
in formation, that is four flights of four. We flew in echelon formation. An L-19, a little
fixed wing aircraft, with our operations officer in it, would mark the landing zone with
smoke. As I may have mentioned, we would fly from the airfield, little strip, to the LZ,
landing zone, because actually it was only about 12 kilometers, I mean, just nowhere
from where we were so it wasn’t any sense in trying to go to altitude you see. We flew on
the deck. Well, there was a hell of a crosswind because that’s way down in the tip of
Vietnam and you know Vietnam’s peninsula and it was kind of like being at the beach in
Florida or someplace and you’ve got a 25 mile an hour wind. It was a hell of a
crosswind. I remember it was very difficult flying because we were flying contour where
there’s no room for error and we were fully loaded and we were flying contour, so both
pilots, myself and my very beloved, dear friend, co-pilot Robert O. Thompson, were just
literally having to work. We were both having to fly really to keep it in the air because
you had to monitor the RPM and air speed so closely. Okay, here we go towards this
landing zone without - and I emphasize without - no Air Force pre-strike of the LZ, no
artillery pre-strike of the LZ, and no helicopter gunship escort. For a combat assault
mission, that was something that was just absolutely a no-no. I had never been on a
combat assault mission when we didn’t have at least Air Force pre-strike in the LZ and
the Huey gunships right beside us doing their Daisy hain, they call it giving us close hand
fire support. So, we, all the pilots, just couldn’t believe it. I remember having this
sinking sense of foreboding that this is not good. Anyway, as we approach, we started
slowing down air speed and approaching the LZ where the H-21 is marked with smoke,
and for the first time in my career in Vietnam I see VC running along these dikes setting
up weapons. The VC were behind dikes firing at us openly. I mean, it was like the
gunfight at OK Corral. I didn’t think we would ever…I didn’t think I would ever see or
would have ever lived to get to the LZ frankly because my crew chief and gunner keyed
the mic on the intercom on the intercom and said, ‘Sir, they’re out there.’ We had two
automatic weapons, two M-60 machine guns, one on each side of our H-21 at the door,
and our crew chief was just firing away. Of course the two pilots, we were too busy
flying to do anything except fly and think. I remember I was thinking, ‘This is it.’ Well,
we let the troops off in the landing zone and then the commanding officers said we would
go out at altitude because of whatever reason. But, he made a very serious mistake. He
was a fairly new commander and did a 180-degree turn and told us he was flying Alpha
1, the lead ship, and he flew us back across the landing zone. Well that was real dumb
because they had time to really get the automatic weapons or whatever set up and they
just shot us full of holes. At about 400 feet, we were climbing out, I remember I was
looking at the altimeter and it was about 400 feet, I’m sitting there flying one second and
the next second my right calf and most everything below my knee just disappears.

SM: Do you know what you were hit with?
JG: Sir?
SM: Do you know what you were hit with?
JG: I don’t know for a fact what I was hit with. The people who saw the wound
and saw the aircraft said it was definitely something larger than a .30 caliber. It was
either a .50 caliber or a 12.7-millimeter anti-aircraft weapon. When that happened, I
remember, and I detail all this in my book in very much detail, I remember looking over
at my co-pilot. He was not hit directly but he had had shrapnel. A round came through
the radio, the radios were between the two pilots seats, and he had shrapnel in his right
hand. He landed this helicopter, believe it or not, the only reason why I’m still alive, he
landed this helicopter with his left hand. Again, it’s a miracle because the helicopter -
even though it had I think they finally said some 200-bullet holes in it of different sizes and assortment – was not ever mechanically disabled. But I remember when I looked at him for just a second he keyed the mic and this is that few second interval before the shock and the pain just hits you like a whammy and he said, ‘I’m blind.’ He had his visor down on his helmet and I reached over and flipped his visor up. The reason he was blind was meat and all that stuff from my leg was plastered all over his visor. He flew the helicopter and landed it with one hand. It was all over the sky, I do remember that, but he landed it without crashing or burning. Now you’re talking about an act of bravery! You mentioned that act of bravery? That’s one right there where he should receive the Medal of Honor or at least the Distinguished Service Cross. To my knowledge, he never got a damn medal or anything for that. But there were, again, there were a lot of instances of that happening. Nobody’s really bitching about it. But anyway, a few seconds later the crew chief and the gunner dragged me out of the cockpit through the door, because there’s a little door into the cockpit, and laid me down in the back. I remember my feet were facing the cockpit and I was still conscious and as I laid there I remember seeing this stream of blood come pouring…I was on my side, so my head was turned to the right laying on my back, this river of blood came flowing by my nose, and I remember thinking, ‘If this is the Red River Valley, I’m in deep shit.’ From that point on, I personally don’t remember very much for the next three days. What I do know happened was that [?] landed the helicopter, got it on the ground. Major Kelly would dust off in the area. They got me aboard his helicopter, Dustoff helicopter. My battalion flight surgeon, our battalion flight surgeon, Captain Jim Rapp, we call him Crazy Doc, we got on board and held this artery with his fingers all the way from Can Tho…maybe I met him at Can Tho. I’m not real sure about that. Anyway, Dustoff with Major Kelly flying touched down at Can Tho and Doc Rapp was in control then and he held that artery with his thumb and finger on the flight to Saigon. They had to fly treetop high to Saigon because they needed me to get all the oxygen I could get. They couldn’t go to altitude. They landed right close to what’s called Station Hospital Saigon. That was a hospital, a little hospital made out of an apartment that was created in August of ’63 by the U.S. Navy. The U.S. Navy had medical responsibility as far as hospital goes for III Corps. I was just, as I now know from various correspondence, I have made contact to both operating room
nurses. As a matter of fact, one of them wrote a book several years ago. Her name is
Bobbi Hoagie. She wrote a book called *Station Hospital Saigon* published by U.S. Navy
Press, or Naval Institute Press, whatever that crap is. Anyway, I was knocking on the
front of the gate big-time when they got me. That’s basically what
happened on April 12th and then I got to looking at...see, I didn’t really know what
happened on April 12th until 1994-’95. When I decided to write my book and retire from
law practice I got to really digging in to it and researching and writing letters and I
probably wrote 150 letters to different aviators and people that were there and what I
found out from other aviators on that mission, Chad Payne in particular who’s name I
mentioned earlier, he was down there on April 12th. As it turned out, which I didn’t even
know at the time, the 118th who had Hueys from Bien Hoa also went down on that
mission and they flew into a contiguous LZ next to us. They went in a few minutes
earlier into that LZ and Chad saw – you can see a lot more out of a Huey [?] than you can
an H-21 – he actually saw a VC dragging a 12.7 mic micro anti-aircraft weapon across a
dike and setting it up. That’s the way we know for a fact that there was 12.7 down there.
But anyway, that’s the bare bones of what happened on April the 12th. Let me add this so
you’ll know a little of the rest of the story; what I found out to be a fact was the VC has a
town north of Ca Mau not far, it’s actually two towns, one of them is a little, small town.
One of them is called Kien Long, K-I-E-N L-O-N-G, two words, and also Thoi Binh, T-
H-O-I B-I-N-H, two words. Kien Long was the district capital and they had an arun and
supposedly district chief. The VC overran that capital on that Saturday night and Sunday
morning, disemboweled the district chief and his wife and kids, that usual spectacle, and
they killed a bunch of friendly ARVN type civilians in town, and what they did, they just
overran that town and then they just stayed put so to speak instead of disappearing. They
stayed put. What they did, they had a force of three hard-core VC battalions, so on April
12th, ’64 for the first time in the history of the war to anybody’s knowledge the VC
operated at regimental strength at one time. Of course we didn’t have any intelligence,
the ARVN didn’t know what the hell was going on. We basically pulled a Custer, or
maybe even worse than a Custer. We went out there with eight H-21s and landed right in
the middle of three hard-core VC battalions, and the only reason any of us got out of
there was it’s just a miracle, and let me add this; I was wounded on the first lift as I
described. Our commander sent us, the 120th, back into that same LZ three more times.
We had a crew chief killed; we had another crew chief severely wounded. He was at our
reunion, and I saw him at Springdale. His name is Ken Sujimoto, he lives in Hawaii, he’s
a Hawaiian. A number of the ARVN troops on those various four lifts, Steve, were killed
aboard our aircraft before they even got to the LZ. Now one main reason that prompted
me to write my book was this – and I’ll digress just a second – there’s never been hardly
anything reported in history books or in media about April 12th, ’64, and the reason is
Steve, the reason is that there were no media down there. I know Neil Sheehan
personally; as a matter of fact, he’s been here to my ranch. He came here in ’95 and we
talked at length and I read his book, almost memorized it, We Were Soldiers Once…not
that one, A Bright Shining Lie, the one about John Paul Zan. One reason Neil Sheehan
took such an interest in Ap BAC which was on January 2nd, ’63 is that he was there. But,
there weren’t any Neil Sheehan’s or Pete Arnett’s or David Halberstam’s down there at
Ca Mau that day. They just weren’t there, and they didn’t know about it. The only thing
that I ever saw, my mother cut out a little AP Wire photo of a map, this was a week or so
after I was wounded, had about two sentences and it had an arrow pointing to a little town
of Thoi Binh. I’ve got that picture in my scrapbook. It just said something about there
was bad fighting going on, something about the VC were engaged with the ARVN in a
[brew-ha-ha] down there, and it was a [brew-ha-ha] because I talked to at length even as
late as June of this year with Sam Payne. Sam was a very interesting person. He was one
of our crew chiefs back then and I had not seen him since April 12th, ’64. Sam is a
member of the Blackfeet Indian Tribe and lives in Oregon. But, he filled me in on a lot
of detail with respect to that battle, the battle that went on down there. It lasted like a
week almost. Sam said that our H-21s stayed at Can Tho for he said they worked three or
four day’s non-stop flying non-stop. There was a hell of a lot of those ARVN troops
killed, and also I’ve got it on pretty good authority that most if not all of the Army
advisors, U.S. Army advisors with the ARVN were either killed or wounded. So, April
12th, ’64 is a major day in history and I’m not tooting my horn but for the pilots and crew
chiefs of the 120th, it had gone unreported. I’ll shut up for a little now and let you ask a
question.

SM: That was very interesting, very good information. Thank you very much.
JG: Thank you.

SM: So after your recovery to the point that you were lucid, you understood what was going on, what had happened to you, why don’t you discuss that briefly? Is the realization settling in that you lost your lower leg?

JG: Okay, I remember I think it was on Tuesday, the following Tuesday, waking up in a small room in a hospital somewhere which turned out to be Station Hospital Saigon which turned out to be a former French villa. It wasn’t anything new. But, it was a little small room and I remember being in intense pain but I remember being clean and I remember being on white sheets and my head on a white pillow and thinking, ‘Thank God.’ I remember being heavily medicated, pain medication. I also remember one of the things of course that stands out in my young mind while I was there was that I was there until the 17th by the way, and I detail all this in my book. I’m not going to refer to my book anymore, because I know everything I’m telling you is in that book. But anyway, I was alerted to the fact that I was having very important company, and I looked up and I recognized the man in civilian clothes because I’d seen his picture in the paper and he always wore – almost always wore – a white suit, and it was Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and with him was a four star general. I didn’t know who it was at the time. I later found out it was General Wheeler, Earl Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was over there visiting. They gave me the Purple Heart and pinned it on my pillow and I remember thinking, ‘Well, I finally made the grade. I’ve done what my uncles did in World War II. I’m finally a soldier.’ I remember thinking that. Of course I was real sick and I was heavily drugged to keep the pain away. I stayed there until the 17th. Actually, my leg was not completely amputated at that time, although all the calf had been blown away. They tried to get some circulation or something. They didn’t have the most advanced facilities at hospital Saigon. I mean, you’ve got to give them credit. They did everything; they kept me alive. They did everything they could do, but it wasn’t like being in Houston or some place. So, gangrene set in and they got my ass out of there. They put me on a – I remember this – they took me by ambulance up from…because Station Hospital Saigon, by the way, was in Cho Lon and they took me by ambulance to Tan Son Nhut and I don’t remember much about that. I was still real sick and doped up. I do remember that the guys, as I was on a stretcher, on rollers, one of the things like you
see them take folks off the football field, but the guys from my unit was standing
at…they loaded me aboard a C-130, one of those big four engine Air Force transport
aircraft and it had the ramp down and the guys on either side were there hugging me and
cheering me on, the pilots and crew chiefs from the 120th, the ones that weren’t flying
that day I guess. I remember Neil Paxton was one of them; he was one of our platoon
leaders, a great guy. I always smoked King Edward cigars when I was over there, mainly
something to chew on to keep from biting your tongue in half when you was getting shot
at. But I remember they loaded me on there and then I remember telling that beautiful
nurse to fill my ass full of Demerol. But, I got to the Philippines and Clark Air Force
Base and the good Lord was certainly with me because I did have gangrene. But, there
was a board certified orthopedic surgeon there at Clark by the name of Wrath Peterson.
The wrath saved my life. My flight surgeon was Jim Wrath and Wrath Peterson got hold
of me and he realized I was in bad shape. They immediately took me into surgery and
completed the amputation. I only have about an inch of bone below my knee, but he did
a miraculous job with the good Lord’s help saving my knee. I had to go into surgery
every other day for 14 days because lying on the back of that helicopter and all that,
people had been walking, troops had been on there, and you know what they fertilize the
rice paddies with, human feces and all that, so I had infections out the gazoo. So, I had to
go in every other day and debreed that thing for 14 days, so I had major surgery every
other day for 14 days so they could finally get it closed. I stayed there at the Philippines
for about six weeks, came then, and they brought me to Brook Army Hospital at Ft. Sam
Houston, Texas, which was a very bad experience. I’m so glad that over there that
Doctor Peterson had been treated, as it turned out, he was a board certified orthopedic
surgeon and had been treating gunshot wounds for two years because when I got to Ft.
Sam Houston, Texas, of course I was already…there wasn’t any more surgery required
there, I was just in the hospital and it was hot as Hades, no air conditioning. Many nights
in July and August it was 90 degrees at midnight in that ward and some of the surgery I
saw done on some guys there was just atrocious. So I stayed there until I learned how
to…obviously I went through very intense physical therapy training and all that and
finally got an artificial limb that I could get about on a little bit. I retired, got orders…oh
yeah, this is another thing I’ll never forget; while I was at Ft. Sam they told me I would
be retired and I was to meet with what was called the Medical Evaluation Board. They
took me downstairs in a room in an underground basement or whatever you want to call it
and there was a colonel, lieutenant colonel, a major, and a captain the best I can
remember and they were just bored, and this colonel pulled out this little book and it
looked like one of these little blue books that you evaluate cars. He thumbed through it
and he said, ‘Lieutenant, you got a below the knee amputation,’ although I had just one
inch of bone which is not anything like as optimum as having three or four inches of bone
because I still have to wear this corset and all this shit around my waist and everything.
But anyway, he said, ‘The book says a below the knee amputation, one limb, 40%
disability. Take it or leave it. If you don’t like it you can stay on active duty and sit
behind a desk for 20 years and if you want to get out, it’s 40% or nothing, and I don’t
have a whole lot of time, so let me know what you want.’ 40% it was. So, I was retired
on October 7th, 1964 and that ended me up with Uncle Sam’s Army. I retired as a first
lieutenant, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Air Medal, nine Oak Leaf Clusters, Armed Forces
Expeditionary Medal, for what medals are worth. I’m not, like I say, most of us aviators
and those of us that did fight, we’re not really big on medals.

SM: What did you think about that, 40% for losing half your leg?
JG: Well at the time it pissed me off but I was still only 24 years of age. I had a
positive attitude. When you read in my book you’ll find out that I had one particular
nurse in the Philippines named Lois Clamore who was an Air Force captain who had a
very positive influence on my attitude, and I just 40%, the hell with you, I’ll just get on
with my life, and that’s what I did; I just got on with life.

SM: What did you think about what went on in Vietnam after you left?
JG: Steve, to be perfectly frank with you, I pretty well shut it out of my mind
until 1995 more or less. I shut it out of my mind for 30 years. That wasn’t intentional or
not intentional, it’s just the fact my mind just shut it out.

SM: When did you attend law school?
JG: Pardon?
SM: When did you attend law school?
JG: Okay, let me tell you a little bit about that. My first real job was in…I had a
few piddling jobs, but in ’67 I got a real job with Southern Bell Telephone Company. As
a matter of fact, I was manager of residence telephones in Montgomery. I had a real
good job. I had a boss that was a sack of shit. But anyway, I had stayed in touch with the
American Legion and the VA and all that in Montgomery and the American Legion
contact man called me, and I’d kept up that congress was coming up with a so-called GI
Bill for Vietnam veterans, because you keep in mind, if I had retired prior to August 5th,
’64, the so-called Gulf of Tonkin thing, I don’t know what they’d have done with me.
But anyway, they didn’t have any programs for Vietnam veterans or whatever, benefits
and all that good stuff back then. When I say back then, in ’64, ’65. But, somewhere
around ’69 congress passed…anyway, the guy called me and he said, ‘Look, John,’ he
said, ‘You can go back to school for four years. The government will pay your books,
tuition, fees, pay you something like three or four hundred dollars a month in addition to
your little retired thing.’ As a first lieutenant I think I was getting maybe 175 a month.
He said, ‘You go back to school for four years,’ and I said, ‘I’m going to law school.’
There never had been a lawyer in my family, but I knew even if I got a law degree and
went back to the phone company that would enhance my position and all that good stuff.
So, I stopped…I resigned from the telephone company and went to the Colin School of
Law at Sanford University which you know is one of the two major law schools in
Alabama. Sanford’s our version of Baylor. I went straight through. You could go
straight through then. I went winter, summer, the whole nine yards, and graduated cum
laude in the summer of ’72 and started practicing law in Andalusia, Alabama. I practiced
there from ’72 to April Fool’s Day, 1996.

SM: During that time period, especially earlier, what did you think about…were
you at least aware of the news, what was going on with regard to American policy in
Vietnam, especially the Paris Peace Talks, the eventually Paris Peace Agreement in 1973,
the fall of Saigon in 1975? Were these things at least passing through your life?

JG: Yes. I became…particularly the fall of Saigon. I watched it on TV and I
became physically ill. It just made me absolutely sick.

SM: At that point what did you think about all the sacrifices we had made?

Going back to your tour in Vietnam, your sacrifice, your personal sacrifice, and then all
the sacrifices of the men following you?
JG: Well I can give you a good answer to that and that is I explain my frame of mind after I’d been over there several weeks or months, a couple of months, you know, the Diem coup, the whole fiasco thing, not having a good feeling, thinking, ‘This whole thing’s going to end up somewhere down the road sooner or later with a bunch of folks killed and it’s going to end up all screwed up,’ not ever thinking it would go on nearly that damn long. Yeah, I thought about that. That’s one reason I got physically ill. It made me sick because I had very good friends…I might mention to you, I don’t know if I mention on the sheet, Bo Thompson was at my wedding on December 2nd, 1966, he and his wife. He had a son, he came home and he had a son who is now Major John Thompson. He named him John after me. Bo went back second tour, C Troops, 1st of the 9th Cav, killed August 9th, 1967. I write a whole chapter in my book about him and about his funeral. I had another good friend, Hank Mosberg, that I mentioned. I mentioned the Nap-of-the-earth class at Ft. Sill? He was actually from Oklahoma from a place called Putnam or some little town I think was the name of it. I visited his home. He was a salt of the earth type guy. He’s POW/MIA to this day. There were others, and it just made me physically ill.

SM: Do you think it was worth it, what we sacrificed in Vietnam? Do you think it was worth the outcome?

JG: Hell no!

SM: Not even in the long term?

JG: Well I really don’t know if I understand what you mean by the outcome.

SM: Well for instance there’s a lot of people who argue that at least in recent years that the American policy of containing communism, slowing it down, is essentially what we did in South Vietnam. Although we were not successful in keeping communism out of South Vietnam, we allowed by going there and engaging the communists, we allowed the other Southeast Asian countries to become strong enough, either democratically or in terms of their free market economies, so that after Saigon fell those countries were still strong enough at that point to stand on their own with minimal support from us?

JG: I don’t buy that crap, Steve. I’ll tell you the reason why; communism as we know, I’ll say as I now know, take whether it was East Germany or whatever, was a
disaster of a concept to start with. It was bound to fall on its damn face. With respect to Vietnam, yes, we may have forestalled it a little bit, but what little we did to forestall it there is not what stopped communism. In my opinion, communism stopped itself because it’s communism, and to lose 58,000 Americans and another 100,000 wounded when there was no plan, no mission? No, hell no, it wasn’t worth it.

SM: This ends CD 1 of the interview with Mr. John Givhan. This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. John Givhan on the 11th of September. All right, sir, actually I needed to ask you to take a step back. You mentioned something earlier that caught my attention and I meant to ask about it, that one of the duties that you performed in Vietnam was transporting casualties; that is, dead bodies. I was wondering how routine that was for you, and for your unit, and how that affected you? How did that affect you psychologically, emotionally, transporting those men and people from the countryside back to Saigon and back to Tan Son Nhut?

JG: Having to deal with civilians whose lives were upset and up settled and unsettled, whether dead or alive, was unsettling for me and for the pilots, but we all took it and kind of, ‘Hey, that’s all in a day’s work.’ You ran into so many bizarre things over there, I mean you’ve heard these stories about civilians being hauled from point A to point B and then bringing their chickens and ducks and all that shit? Well hey, all that happened. We did that time and time again. You never know what you might end up on that aircraft with.

SM: It didn’t have a negative impact on your morale at all?

JG: Actually, I don’t think it really had a negative impact. We just sort of took it all in a day’s work. It was usually the reason we were moving civilians from one place to another was you might remember that so called strategic hamlet program?

SM: Oh yeah.

JG: That was the reason we were moving a good many of them and that did upset me because for the most part we were doing a lot more harm by moving these people from wherever they were to some other place. A lot of times they were raising hell about being moved; it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that all we were doing was hacking them off. We weren’t saving them from anybody. Now needless to say, there oftentimes they were upset because they wanted the communist, the VC to leave them
alone, but it wasn’t helping anything by moving them to some damn so called strategic
hamlet.

SM: Do you recall about how many of those missions you flew?
JG: I’d say a dozen or more.
SM: And was opposition to being moved pretty much a standard thing for those
operations?
JG: Yeah, particularly among other people because they didn’t want to be
uprooted. Its just like I’m out here in the middle of po-dunk, nowhere, west Dallas
County, Alabama right now and somebody said, ‘Hey, we got to move you and put you
in the outskirts of Atlanta somewhere in a compound.’ It’s the same reaction. I wouldn’t
want to go.
SM: Did you witness any other oppositions to American policies while you were
there or to South Vietnamese government policies besides resistance to relocation to
strategic hamlets?
JG: Well in one area I think, and I talk about this in my book, I think our
helicopters took the low level operations did a lot to aggravate the local Vietnamese with
respect to their water buffalos and their farming because that did disrupt a good bit of
that.
SM: That is the low flying aircraft would scare, startle, the animals and things
like that?
JG: Yeah, they used the water buffalo as much as we use mules here on the
cotton farm in Alabama back when I was a kid.
SM: So you could perhaps identify that or empathize with that plight or that
problem more so than perhaps other people?
JG: Exactly. As a matter of fact, that’s really the thrust of my book, the name of
it being Rice - relating to rice in Vietnam agriculture – and Cotton in Alabama, the
agriculture here.
SM: Is there anything that you took away from your time in Vietnam as far as
personal lessons that you learned about yourself, things that you learned about yourself,
things that you learned about the military? What did you take away from your Vietnam
War experience?
JG: Well one thing I took away that stuck with me, and I still hold this very true, is that people are the same, basically the same, worldwide, whether it’s in Vietnam, whether it’s in America, whether it’s in po-dunk, wherever. You have the basic family unit, and for the most part the guy and the lady want to raise their kids, they want to work hard and get a just reward for it, and they want the damn government to leave them alone. That comes to me very strongly, whether it’s Vietnam or whether it’s here, they just want the damn government to leave them alone, let them go on with life and earn a living.

SM: Anything else that you want to talk about today?

JG: Well I was very proud to be a member of the 120th Aviation Company and I’m still very proud to be a member of that unit. We were just a bunch of kids, say 22 to 24 years of age from all walks of life and all areas of the United States. We went over there and followed in the path of our ancestors, our World War II veteran ancestors, I can say this without a doubt, that we upheld their standards and we did it day in and day out. Some of us died, some of us lost legs, but we damn sure look back and hold our heads up high, and for that I’m very proud.

SM: Okay. You know, I just looked over the questionnaire, and I do have one question I forgot to ask; again, stepping back to your Vietnam War period and experience, you mention that the barber that you guys had was VC?

JG: Yeah! [laughs]

SM: I was wondering how did you find that out, and I you also mentioned that fact was the most humorous experience of base life in Vietnam?

JG: I’ll tell you exactly why, and you’ll get a kick out of this; we had a barber. On the compound, much like in the States, you had indigenous personnel working as cooks, our barber was a Vietnamese, we had hooch girls who from what I know now, I think I know now, turns out that every one of those hooch girls was trained VC. But anyway, the barber, I’m glad you mentioned that because it is the truth, and it is funny; one of the few things that came out of ‘Nam that was really funny. The barbershop actually was at one end of our mess hall, little partition, and we had margarine over there, butter. I don’t know why butter or margarine to those people…I don't guess they have it. Come to think of it I don’t think I saw a so called milk cow the whole time I was there, I know I didn’t see any real milk. But anyway, for Vietnamese, butter or margarine was a
hot, hot, hot item, big time. Well one of my...we had additional duties, and this is a good point, just so you'll know. In addition to flying, I had an additional duty as pilot mess officer where you know how that really is, the mess officer, I don’t know nothing about cooking, the NCO runs it, all that stuff. But I was mess officer, and we had this barber, Vietnamese barber, middle aged guy, and all of a sudden we started missing...they didn’t have anything locked or refrigerators and all that stuff, big old commercial sized refrigerators, they started missing butter from time to time. So, we had a gate there where the Vietnamese locals had to come in, nationals had to come in, and they had to show their pass and all that and be checked to make sure they didn’t have any weapons or anything and then be checked when they went out. Well one day the Shawnee Tee-pee was not but about 30 yards from the gate, and some of the enlisted men came up and said, ‘I want you to come down here. The barber’s at the gate, he’s leaving, and he’s got something stuck in his britches.’ Of course it was hot as hell over there. Well the barber, it turned out, had a pound of butter stuck down in his pants and it caught me on one of my bad days and I was pissed off about this, that, and the other, and you got to keep in mind this was ’63 and a lot went on over there then. For better or for worse, it wouldn’t have gone on later, and one of which is what I’m fixing to tell you. The guard was standing there, and American guard, and he had an M-16 rifle or whatever the hell it was. So I told the damn...I was just in a bad mood. The barber spoke a little, and I told the barber, I said, ‘You see that whatever tree down there about 100 yards away?’ I said, ‘I’m going to give you ten seconds to get to that tree, and you sorry son of a bitch I’m going to shoot you in the damn back with this M-16 if you ain’t to that tree in ten seconds.’ So he took off running like he lost his pants and his butter was running all down his ass and everything, it was funny as hell. Of course that was the last of him, but I forgot, the CO told me they found out later, they found some written material or something however they know that indicated that he was probably a VC and probably was, along with all those hooch girls. But everybody got a big kick out of the barber being caught with the butter in his britches. By the time he got caught, it had been four or five instances, a big deal full of a pound or two of butter come up missing out of the damn mess hall refrigerator. So anyway, that was the barber story.
SM: Okay. Any other interesting incidents involving Vietnamese who were working on base with you?

JG: Well, I don’t know. You know how things flash back. One thing I will mention, we had a Vietnamese. When we flew missions, we all congregated at the Shawnee Tee-pee and told the officers when they were driving, we had a little quarter ton truck that we would crawl in the back of and we had this Vietnamese driver called Bong, something like that, and he would drive us. It was like I’d say six to seven hundred yards, it was far enough to catch a ride. He’d drive us down to the operations shack and we’d jump off and go in and get briefed and all that shit, get ready for our mission, and Bon and I, everybody liked him. All the guys liked him. He probably is in his 30s. he was one of these specifically that would talk with us. He spoke fairly good English. He was one of these, I do remember, that came from North Vietnam and came south. He could tell you in some detail why he hated communism and wanted to be free, and he took a lot of pride in this truck. I remember he was always washing it and he took a lot of pride that he was hauling pilots of the 120th because we did have a reputation throughout Vietnam as being the best, and I’ve often wondered what happened to him when Saigon fell. I’m sure there are a lot of others like him and somebody probably cut his damn head off or put him in a damn prison forever. I’ve often thought of him, what happened to him, because he was really a nice guy.

SM: What do you think we as a nation should take away from the Vietnam War?

JG: I can sum that up briefly, and simply, I think, and you’ve probably heard this before. That is, before the United States gets involved with any nation, we need to have a clear purpose, we need to have a goal, and we need victory, however you want to spell it or look at it, is attainable, and that there’s no substitute for victory. We win it and get the hell out. If we don’t have that going in, don’t go! Don’t mess with it! I just got through reading this book Blackhawk Down about that debacle in Somalia. That’s obviously a classic example. But, we just can’t police the whole world. The whole world don’t want to be policed. If we just…I guess that’s the only way I know how to say it, Steve, and the military needs to maintain the role of the military. All this damn…like in Kosovo with all that crap, that’s no good. A man in uniform, a woman in uniform, they don’t need to be out here holding somebody’s hands or babysitting the damn nation or whatever.
That’s the lesson I hope we learned. It seemed like we learned it and it had a lot to do with us winning the Gulf War the way we did, but then after the Gulf War it seems that we’ve forgotten it again because it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know right now our military preparedness is in despicable situation. You probably saw the article in the Washington Times last week or in another newspaper about the report that was leaked that says even the Army Aviation School at Ft. Rucker, Alabama got a C4 rating which is the lowest rating you can get. I hang around Ft. Rucker some. We got the good old boy network down there, a lot of Vietnam veterans retired. Those guys down there that are student pilots and all, they don’t have many aircraft, and the ones they’re flying is a pile of junk. Ft. Rucker itself looks like a ghost town. I just don’t understand why.

SM: Well you ran into that problem yourself before you went to Vietnam. You said that your unit was woefully deficient in terms of its equipment. Of course, that’s part of the controversy today in terms of readiness and preparedness. Did you witness the same problem in Vietnam? Was your unit, the 120th, well equipped or were you guys short of stuff? How was that?

JG: Well, the 120th was ill equipped until June of ’64 when it got Hueys. The 120th was the last Army helicopter company to get Hueys in Vietnam, and yes, when we were flying H-21s, we were woefully inequipped, Steve, because those things, I love the old airplane, but it was nothing in the world but a damn antique. The things were manufactured in the ’55-’56, along in there, and they were manufactured for high altitude mountain flying. There we were flying them close to the equator in 110-degree weather.

SM: What about spare parts and things like that, things that you needed to function as a unit?

JG: I don’t think spare parts or that type of thing was a problem. It seemed like they were able to get all that.

SM: You didn’t have many aircraft downed then as far as maintenance?

JG: Let me tell you, our crew chiefs and our maintenance people did a phenomenal job of keeping somewhere around 85% of those aircrafts flyable at all times; just an incredible job, and there again is a story of unsung heroism, I can guarantee you. Those crew chiefs were kids, and I mean kids, 18-19 years old, Steve. You know how much maintenance a helicopter requires, particularly when they’re old and worn out, and
those crew chiefs, anytime that aircraft was in the air they were on board, and sometimes it wasn’t unusual for us at all to fly ten hours out of a 24 hour period, because like I said, there weren’t that many helicopters and we were just stretched out. But when those crew chiefs, when that helicopter was on the ground, hell, 90% of the time they were working on it. So between flying in it and working on it, I don’t know when any of them got any damn sleep. But, they did a fantastic job, just a monumental job.

SM: Anything else you’d like to discuss today?

JG: I guess I’ve flubbered my gums enough! I want to say this in closing; I really appreciate what you people at Texas Tech are doing in this archive. I found out about this three or four years ago. One of my very close friends who was in that Nap-of-the-earth class at Ft. Sill, David Price, who by the way now is living in Tuscaloosa and his wife is on faculty at University of Alabama, Dave is originally from Georgia but like I say, we were in flight school together and then were at Ft. Sill together. He went to ‘Nam twice after I did, was shot down a number of times, but he had been out to Texas Tech and was a member of a panel as I recall it and came back through and was telling me, he came back and stayed at my house a couple of days, and that’s where I first heard about Texas Tech and the archives, and now I’ve looked at the website, but I really applaud what you’re doing, I appreciate it very much, and a lot of my Vietnam veteran buddies do as well, so we really appreciate what you are doing.

SM: Thank you. We appreciate your service to our country, and the whole reason we do this is to preserve the memory of that, so we’re only as good as the veterans let us be, so thank you very much for participating.

JG: Well you’re certainly welcome.

SM: Let me go ahead and stop this real quick. This ends the interview with Mr. John Givhan.