Robert Tidwell: This is Robert Tidwell interviewing Mrs. Gerry Hemphill on the fourth of November 2003 in the Vietnam Center or the Vietnam Archive interview room. This is in the afternoon approximately two o’clock central time. Mrs. Hemphill, would you state your name for the record?

Gerry Hemphill: Yes, it’s Gerry Hemphill.

RT: What city and state do you reside?

GH: I live in Cerritos, California.

RT: Where in California is that?

GH: I’m about thirteen miles northeast of Long Beach, California, in LA County.

RT: So you weren’t far from where your brother had entered into the Navy?

GH: No, I’m not. In fact I was living in Long Beach at the time.

RT: When were you born and where were you born?

GH: I was born in Los Angeles, California, September 16, 1943.

RT: Your relationship with the sailor who had been lost aboard the Evans?

GH: He was one of my younger brothers.

RT: Were you the oldest then out of the children?

GH: Yes, I was the oldest.

RT: And your parents names?

GH: My father’s was James T, as in Thompson, Kerr. He went by Tom.

RT: And your mother?

GH: Her name is Fern Thompson Kerr.
RT: That’s interesting. Where were your material grandparents from?

GH: My grandmother was born in Minnesota. My grandfather was born in Iowa.

RT: And your grandparents on your father’s side?

GH: I believe in Kansas.

RT: Where were your parents born?

GH: My father was born in Olathe, Kansas. My mother was born in Regina, Saskatchewan.

RT: That’s quite some distance, Saskatchewan and Olathe, Kansas. How did the two of them met?

GH: Actually they went to a church, the same denomination, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, but one in Canada, one in Kansas. They met at a National Convention in Indiana. Those conventions were held every four years. They met there and they wrote for a year, became engaged, and then married.

RT: Wow, that’s an incredible story. I mean meeting in Indiana of all places.

WT: What sort of education did your parents have?

GH: My mother had one year of City College in Los Angeles. My father had a master’s degree in education through Pittsburg University of Kansas at Pittsburg, Kansas. I believe he has one other master’s degree.

RT: Wow. So what did your parents do then?

GH: As far as education goes?

RT: As far as employment, what kind of careers did they have?

GH: Okay. My mom was a stay at home mom once she married. She worked up until, from getting out of high school until she was married. Then about the time I was in high school she began working at a doctor’s office where I worked. She worked as the receptionist during the school year. Then I took the job back in the summer time when I came home from college. My dad was a full time teacher. He also sold insurance, personal and household insurance from about the time I was in elementary, on.

RT: Wow, working two jobs.

GH: Uh-huh.

RT: Wow, that must’ve made a—
GH: The insurance was actually kind of a part time thing. It became a fairly busy job for him at times, but then when he retired in 1973 from school teaching he went into the real estate business. He sold real estate until he was eighty-five.

RT: Wow. So your parents stayed quite busy.

GH: Yes.

RT: That must have had an impact on you and your siblings then, that kind of work ethic.

GH: Yes, it did. My father was very encouraging about the teaching profession and I followed him in that profession.

RT: What are the names of your other siblings?

GH: My brother Jim. The one who was on the Evans was James William Kerr and we called him Jim. My brother—and he was seven years younger then I. The next brother was Fredrick George Kerr. We called him Fred. He is fifteen months younger then Jim. So that would be about eight and a half years apart from younger then me.

RT: So where did all of you grow up?

GH: We were all born in the same hospital in Los Angeles, California. When I went to fourth grade we moved to Glendale, California. So my brothers were just a short time in Los Angeles.

RT: So what kind of things did you do together as kids?

GH: We did a lot of imaginary play in the backyard, camping and cowboys and Indians. I was quite a little tom boy so I fit right in with the boys. Most of the neighborhood had boys. So we did a lot of digging and fun things like that in the yard. We played a lot of games, a lot of Monopoly and things like that during the winter time or the real hot summer days.

RT: What kind of relationship would you say that you had then with your siblings, with your brothers?

GH: We had a good relationship. That’s not to say that they didn’t irritate me at times. Sometimes when I would be gone to school they would get in my playhouse and tear it up. One day they decided to paint it red. They got the paint my grandfather generally used, he was a painter. He lived on the property in an apartment, him and grandmother. They did quite a job of painting things from the dishes, to the teddy bears,
to furniture, to the inside walls of the play house thinking nobody would know about it as long as they didn’t do it outside. So you know sometimes they really irritated me, but the older I got, of course the older they were. During my teen years I drove them to the beach and took them everywhere and really had a neat relationship with them.

RT: So in the painting prank there, who was the ringleader?
GH: I think probably Jim was, because he was a little bit older and generally Fred followed everything that Jim did.

RT: So he was looking up to his older brother.
GH: Uh-huh, I think so. They must’ve gotten to feeling a little guilty because after they had done most of their work they came to the back door and Jim asked my mother, “Is it ok if we paint?” Here he had red paint on his arms and face and everything.

RT: So when you moved to Glendale did that have an impact on your relationship with your siblings because you had been in Los Angeles through the third grade?
GH: Yes. Of course they were just little babies, one, one in a half then. I was more momma’s helper with them at that time and played with them in the backyard. I remember being a little bit, probably what we would say today was jealous, over the new baby Jim when he came home. I got so that I really considered him to be my baby too. By the time we moved to Glendale they were a little older. That’s where the incident with the painting of the house came into core and all the backyard play and so forth.

RT: I would think so because you had been in Los Angeles until the third grade and then you moved to a new place and made new friends and everything.
GH: Right. We had a lot of kids in the neighborhood there. My brothers both played on little league teams and then went to Connie Mack. So I was there faithful fan. I went to every game they played.

RT: As Jim started into school and started kindergarten and elementary school what kind of kid was he?
GH: Well, he was a pretty sharp kid. He had a good intellect and that was obvious from the beginning, but he also was a little social guy. My mom found out one day through a friend, they called Jimmy and Freddy at that point, but Freddy told us that Jimmy had to sit on the gray bench again. My mom said, “The gray bench, what is that?”
Fred said, “Well, that’s where you have to sit when you talk.” She found out he spent quite a bit of time on the gray bench for talking. She had a little talk with the teacher and that was something Freddy held over Jim. Whenever he came home from school he would ask, “Well, did you have to sit on the gray bench today?” Then he’d tell my mom. So there was a little bit of friction there, but then Jim out grew that or I should say began to control his talking spree. From then on he really didn’t have any problems in school.

RT: Since he was the ring leader in the painting, was he a ring leader in other adventures or misadventures?

GH: I would say that the things that happened usually were generated by Jim the first few years while they were in elementary and junior high, but then as Fred got a little older I think he equally helped in the adventures.

RT: Oh, so he kind of caught up with his older brother.

GH: Yes, yes. We used to play tricks on each other. I would have to say I was involved in some of this.

RT: That’s what I was about to ask. Since you were the older of the three that there must have been times whenever you came up with some ideas that you thought would be great for them to do but not necessarily you.

GH: Yes. Well, I think particularly we were told that Sunday nights we tended to be a little wild. The only thing I can come up with was that we went to church twice a day. We probably had just about enough of sitting and being quiet so Sunday when they thought we were in bed I would sneak out of my room and go into their room and we would talk and do stuff and we had a good time together.

RT: As you said he was talkative. Was he that way at home as well as in school?

GH: My brother Jim?

RT: Correct.

GH: He was outgoing and talkative, but not to the point of getting in trouble. Kindergarten was the only time he really had any problem in school. He was very outgoing and just quite sharp. I think that’s probably why we were as close because it didn’t seem like he was seven years younger. When he was in high school he was reading books there for his classes like Mein Kampf and things like that in accelerated classes. So
I was into college by the time he was in high school. So we really carried on
conversation as equals.

RT: Okay. So you would say that between your two brothers you were closer to
Jim.

GH: Yes.

RT: What kind of things did ya’ll do together as you got older? For example
when you were in high school and they were probably in elementary or junior high, did
you spend much time together then or did you kind of go your separate paths?

GH: No, we spent a lot of time together because we went to the same church so
we would go to church camp together. We had some of the same friends. We did a lot of
camping as a family. So we did a lot with our cousins who we also went camping with so
we’d all be together. We loved to play games. So that was one thing our family did a fair
amount of it, especially my brothers and I. Now where am I going? Oh, with their
baseball, my dad and I were especially interested in baseball. My mom wasn’t so much,
but as long as the boys were playing she would go to their games. On Saturday nights
often times my dad would take my brothers and I to the Dodger games. We all knew the
batting averages, not just the boys, but I did too. We really had a lot of fun. If my dad had
to be gone someplace and there was a Dodger game on the radio, we would listen and
give him a blow by blow account when he came home.

RT: So you became junior sports announcer.

GH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

RT: From your perspective as their sister, how would you describe the
relationship between Jim and Freddy?

GH: Very close, very good. The older they got the closer they got as far as being
able to talk with one another than just being cohorts and mischief, like when they were in
elementary school. But they became quite close. Jim being two grades ahead of Fred in
school, even though they were only fifteen months apart, it just worked out that way in
the cut off at school entrance. Jim had a few friends of his own and Fred had a few of his
own and then they had some that were joint friends. Of course my friends tended to be
more my age. Then I went off to high school. We began doing a lot of letter writing when
I was in college I should say, we did a lot of letter writing back and forth.
RT: Between you and Jim?
GH: And Fred, too. Fred didn’t write as much, but Jim wrote quite regularly through college.
RT: Because as you had said the two of you were pretty much on the same playing field.
GH: Mm-hmm. Jim and Fred both played baseball and they played on the same team for several years. Then Jim went into the Connie Mack League where they start looking at you seriously. Are you good enough to go on to the triple A and onto a big league team? He got scouted. At that point Fred was not playing on the team. Then Jim began playing on teams at school, both basketball and baseball. That took them a little bit apart as far as there was more activity in the sports field with Jim at that point than Fred. I think sometimes Fred was trying to compete and keep up with Jim. He was a good athlete too, but I don’t think he pushed himself as much to go on. So probably there were lots of times when they were doing things with their own friends in high school.
RT: Would you say that between the two of them, was Jim kind of like the protective older brother towards Freddy or did the two of them not really have that kind of relationship that sometimes bind older and younger brothers?
GH: No, I would say it was very much that way. He really did kind of look after his younger brother and was concerned for him. We saw that a lot.
RT: Were you the protective older sister towards the two of them?
GH: Yes. I think they probably became even closer when I went away to college, you know? Then it was just the two of them. When I got married it added my husband in there. We spent more time with Jim because just being a little bit older and more advanced in what he was doing in school and all, he also liked to come to our house and spend quite a bit of time. Fred was more at that point with his friends. Of course, for a while there he wasn’t driving either.
RT: Okay. Whenever he got into high school, what kind of things interested him, even as early as junior high school? What sort of interests did he have?
GH: Well, he liked all of the subjects pretty well. I would say math was not his forte. He seemed to really enjoy history and English. He liked to read deep books and
discuss them with people. He did want to be a children’s dentist someday. So the sciences were of some interest too. He ended up working for a dentist, a dental lab actually.

RT: Wow, that’s good. He had some foundation, experience then. Was this a dentist that you knew? Was this the dentist that your family would see on a regular basis?

GH: Actually, it was a dentist that the four of them went to while I was in college. So I never went to this dentist myself.

RT: So what—?

GH: He became a family friend.

RT: Okay. So what kind of, aside from baseball, did he have any other extracurricular interests?

GH: He did quite a bit of drawing just on his own. He enjoyed doing cartooning. He didn’t have any real formal art training, but he enjoyed that and he enjoyed reading a lot. He enjoyed socializing. He had friends, both boys and girls and church activities. He was in the youth group.

RT: Boy, when you said he was social you weren’t kidding. He was very active in a wide variety of things. What kind of things did he do aside from working in the dental lab, what other kinds of jobs did he have or did he just work in the dental hospital?

GH: No, at one point both he and my brother Fred were working at Webb’s Department Store parking cars. They made good money particularly holiday time, kind of valet parkers. They did that for several years. Let’s see, what else? What other jobs? I’m trying to think. I know they did some other things and right now I can’t think about what they were specifically.

RT: What kind of things did they do around the house that all of the siblings, kind of you and your two brothers join together and do the housework?

GH: Yes, we each had our jobs and we let each other know if we weren’t carrying our weight. Another thing I thought of in high school, Jim took a cooking course. It was basically a baking course I would say. He had some wonderful recipes. So he liked to try them out at home and copy the recipes down for me. I still have some in my recipe box. That was kind of a fun and different thing. Several of his friends, guys, took the course also. At that time I had never heard of anyone doing that. I guess it was
something that an athlete maybe wants, just to be able to blow off one course or
something. He really had a lot of fun with it.

RT: Well, that and occasionally you would hear of guys who would take home
economics course just so they could meet girls.

GH: Yeah, that could have been too. Around home they worked more outside
with their dad, usual boy activities. They had to keep up their room. We all had to make
our bed, every single day and we had to hang up our clothes. We couldn’t leave our
clothes lying around. Mom kept us in shape about that.

RT: Well, it’s good training for when Jim went to the Navy.

GH: Exactly.

RT: When he decided to go into the Navy, that was after he had graduated from
high school?

GH: Yes. The first semester he said he was kind of burned out and he needed
some time to think about what he wanted to do. He knew some of the things that he
wanted to do with his life, but he wasn’t sure in what order. I can go on if you want.

RT: Oh, sure.

GH: At that time an unfortunate thing had developed. My mom and dad were
having some problems in communication. My mom decided to divorce my dad. My
brother on his eighteenth birthday, we went up to a birthday party at my folks’ house.

RT: This is Jim, correct?

GH: Yes. On Jim’s eighteenth birthday, Al and I went up to the party. Afterward
my mom and dad came out to the car and told us they were getting a divorce. I think that
kind of threw Jim for a loop. It just became uncomfortable when mom stayed in the
house, dad went to an apartment. So Jim decided that he was going to go into the service.
We were fighting Vietnam at that time and said, “I really do believe in the war effort. I
believe I need to do my duty and right now I just need to get out of this whole situation.”
He said, “Plus I understand that if I give four years they’ll allow me four years of college
and pay for it. Then I won’t have to depend on anyone but myself, my work, and what the
Navy will allow me.” Then he wanted to go and see if he could get in and be a children’s
dentist. One thing he wanted to do was work in the same building where my husband,
Allan, was a pediatrician.
RT: Okay. You said that he had made this decision after his first semester. I assume you mean the first semester of college.

GH: It was just after graduating from high school. At that time he took a trip with a friend around the country for about six weeks and came back and decided he wasn’t going to go to college and that he would stay out. Over that time period he decided to sign up. I didn’t know anything about him trying to sign up until he had gone and signed up.

RT: Then how did he tell ya’ll? Did he call you or did he say this in person?

GH: Yeah, he called me. Told Allan and I that, this is in January, that he had gone down to the Navy Center and signed up. He would be going. He said, “Probably we’re all going to have to go anyway.” He said, “I decided I would rather enlist and go into the service department that I most wanted to be in,” which was the Navy.

RT: Did he ever, at any time, earlier show any interest in the Navy in particular or was this something that you discovered on that day when he went into enlist?

GH: Well, three of my four uncles on my mom’s side, would be her brothers, were in the service during World War II and they each were in a different service. I think that’s maybe where he got interested in the Navy. One of them was in the Navy. I think he felt mainly from things he said that they just had the best plan for him. Well, I know he loved to travel and he thought he would get to do a little more traveling maybe in the Navy. That was the plan.

RT: Well, that and you weren’t too far from Long Beach either.

GH: Right. Allan and I lived in Long Beach at the time and Glendale where Jim lived was only about between twenty-five and thirty miles from there.

RT: Since Jim would come to your house as you said on a pretty regular basis did Jim and your husband form a pretty good relationship of their own as well?

GH: Yes, they did. In fact my husband asked Jim to paint with him in the summer to earn money and be his helper.

RT: Okay. So your husband had become more like a friend to Jim?

GH: Yes. They really had good talks. They both liked to talk with one another and that was real special.
RT: Okay. They probably had some common interests. Was your husband the
same age as yourself?

GH: My husband is a year older than I am so that would’ve made him eight years
older then Jim.

RT: Still close enough in age that it’s similar to the relationship that he had with
you.

GH: Right. My husband was very interested in sports. In the summers when he
would be out here from college he worked and lived in an apartment. He would go to
Jim’s games and everything too. So he often went to the Dodger games. You know, so
they had that interest in common.

RT: Jim must have really enjoyed that. He was able to hang out with someone
who was not only on the same playing field as he was in terms of interests but also
another guy.

GH: Right, exactly. It’s kind of nice when you’re the oldest in the family to have
someone come along who is older than you and you can say you have an older brother.

RT: When Jim made this announcement, what were you doing at the time? Were
you sitting at home and the phone rang and Jim said, “Guess what?”

GH: That’s my recollection. I was a little bit shocked because I didn’t realize that
he had been thinking about it, but I did know that he was really upset about the home
situation and had often called as well as Fred and talked to me about it, and was pretty
hurt about what was happening. So I could understand why he wanted to get away from
it. Knowing that he was gonna probably have to go, he just decided let’s get on with it,
get it over with and then I can get on with my life. So I was fearful because it was the
Vietnam War. We were hearing about people dying left and right. That concerned me a
lot, but my husband said, “We just got to pray for him. God can take care of him
anywhere and we don’t know what his plan for Jim is.”

RT: What was the reaction of the rest of your family when Jim gave the news to
them?

GH: I think my dad took it pretty well from my recollection. I know my mom
was not happy about it. She was scared about it. I think my brother Fred reaction was
more, he was proud of him for doing this. I would have to let Fred speak for himself on that.

RT: But by and large the family took it fairly well.

GH: Oh, yeah. Nobody ranted and raved about it or said you’re doing the wrong thing or anything. I mean he was well supported by everybody. Some of us had some qualms about it, but I was also very proud of him. For what he said about the Vietnam War and that he believed in the effort and felt he needed to do his part as an American.

RT: At that time he went to Long Beach for his boot camp training, is that correct?

GH: No, he actually went to San Diego. He was in San Diego for about nine weeks.

RT: You had said that he really believed in the war effort. Had he expressed this attitude prior to his entering the Navy?

GH: Yes, but after he had signed up. I don’t recall us talking a whole lot about it prior to signing up. Once he signed up it was another six weeks before he went in. So that’s when we got to talking about it quite a bit.

RT: So he must’ve talked to you and your husband like you said he had often discussed all sorts of things with you. At this time he must’ve laid out his entire thoughts.

GH: Mm-hmm. I think probably he had been thinking about it the six weeks he was gone on the trip late in the summer and probably throughout the fall. So I don’t recall him ever mentioning the possibility of going in though. So I think that part he didn’t discuss with anyone probably. I think he just kind of molded over that six months.

RT: Was he the sort of person that whenever he made a big decision like this he would think about it a lot at first and then tell people?

GH: Yes. Mm-hmm.

RT: So this was par for the course for him then?

GH: Yes, I believe so. We didn’t know he was going to go on the trip either and he just decided that that was something that he wanted to do. He tended to make his decisions not so much on the basis of what other people would think but what he felt was the right thing for him to do. Then he was very willing to talk about it after his choice.

RT: When he opened up and talked to ya’ll about this it was after he enlisted?
GH: Signed up.

RT: Yes. What sort of views and attitudes did he have towards the war itself, I mean so far as what he believed was justified, or his viewpoint towards the war?

GH: Just seeing the aggression going on by the North Vietnamese. He felt that we had every right to be in there to protect this country. He felt like he had a duty, he believed that, to go and help. That’s the basic thing he said and really the only thing that stuck with me about his thoughts on it.

RT: As you said he went to San Diego for boot camp. Did you ever have an opportunity to visit him or did he visit any of the family while he was there?

GH: No, he did not visit us. The first opportunity we were allowed to see him was at the boot camp graduation.

RT: I take it the whole family attended?

GH: My husband was not able to go down. He was in training, medical school training at the time, but wait no, I beg your pardon. He did go down. I’m sorry. I’m skipping to something else. I got it mixed up. I’m sorry. My mother and my brother Fred flew down and my dad, and Allan, and I drove down. We took our daughter Tammy. We were there for the weekend.

RT: How old was your daughter at this time?

GH: She was just a little less than a year old.

RT: Oh, okay.

GH: She’s about, I guess about ten months, ten and a half months old.

RT: So Jim did get to see your daughter.

GH: Oh, yes. He loved being an uncle.

RT: So when you told him the news he was really happy?

GH: Oh, yes. Carried her around a lot that weekend and kind of wanted to show her off to his buddies and stuff.

RT: Oh, so he was showing her off, “This is my niece.”

GH: Yes.

RT: Then after graduation what sort of contact did you have with him then?
GH: He was allowed to come home for two weeks leave and we did a lot of things together. Our church had a party for him prior to his entering the service. Then I had a little family party for him just before he left for the Philippines where he got to ship.

RT: At this time did he have any kind of serious girlfriend or anything of that nature?

GH: He had dated two or three girls in high school particularly. One was quite special to him. Through the letter writing they did in the service he came a lot closer to her even. She went to another high school across town, rival actually. Her name was Laurel Chadney. They were dating by mail I guess you’d say at the time of the accident.

RT: Did you ever get to meet this girl?

GH: Yeah, uh-huh.

RT: How did he meet her since you said they went to different high schools? Did they meet at church or what?

GH: I think they met through mutual friends, but I honestly don’t remember that.

RT: As you said you had a daughter at that time, how many kids do you have now?

GH: I have three.

RT: Okay. Obviously one girl and what are the others?

GH: My middle child is a girl, and my youngest is a boy.

RT: So it’s the opposite of your situation.

GH: Yes. We named our son after my two brothers, Fredrick James.

RT: Oh, well that’s good.

GH: Mm-hmm.

RT: Did your brother Freddy express interest in going into the service when Jim did?

GH: You know he did say a little something about it, but he knew also when he inquired, I don’t know if he went to the naval recruiting station or if he called or what, but he found out if you lost somebody in the service and you were the only name bearer of the family that you couldn’t go in. So he received that, I forget what they call it, a reprieve from going into the service. I know that Jim wanted Fred to enter the Navy and see if they could get on the same ship. They talked about that. I believe that once Fred
found out that he couldn’t do this, he dropped it. He never, to my knowledge, has talked
about wishing he could’ve gone.

RT: That’s incredible that Jim would talk to him about that, express an interest in
serving on the same ship.

GH: Yeah, I thought that was neat.

RT: When you discovered that Jim was going to Vietnam, when was this?

GH: The day of graduation from boot camp he left us for a little bit and said I’ve
got to go get my orders. He was hoping to be on a cruiser. He was gone for a little while
and came back out and said, “Well, I’m on a destroyer. It’s the Frank E. Evans.” He said,
“I doubt if we’ll ever make the front page of the paper.” Which that kind of came back to
haunt us a little bit. We said, “Well, we’ve never heard about it.” He said, “Me neither.” I
don’t believe he knew at that point where he was going, but sometime during that week
he did find out. I don’t recall how, but we did know when he left on the fourteenth of
May in 1969. We knew then that he was going to Vietnam.

RT: So what was your reaction when you discovered that his orders were to go to
Vietnam?

GH: My heart sunk. Of course he expected that he probably would when he
entered the Navy. The night he left we watched the car drive away and I started crying.
My husband put his arm around me and said, “He’ll be all right.” I said, “But you know
what? They shoot back. Jim says they do.” He said, “He’s going to be on a ship.” I said,
“Yes, but he’s going to be out there where the Vietnamese, even women come out in
boats and throw grenades and things.” I said, “I’m just worried for him.”

RT: So what was your husband’s reaction when both of you found out?

GH: Well, it was a terrible shock. It was a terrible shock to both of us. Of course
it wasn’t the case of shooting back. It was a friendly collision if you will.

RT: What was the reaction of the rest of your family when they discovered that
he was going to indeed go to Vietnam?

GH: Well, my mother particularly was really scared about it and not real happy,
but she knew that Jim really believed this is what he needed to do. She just prayed for
him. My dad had a similar feeling.

RT: How did your brother react from what you could tell from your perspective?
GH: From what I could tell he just was very proud of his big brother.

RT: Even whenever he discovered that his brother was going to go to Vietnam?

GH: I don’t recall him ever expressing a fear about it. Sometimes I think you think someone’s invincible, maybe. I’m sure he probably did have some feelings inside, a little bit of a fear, but he didn’t express them in my hearing.

RT: So when Jim was in boot camp what kind of correspondence did he have with ya’ll? Did he write or did he call or both?

GH: I wrote him two or three times a week. He wrote at least once a week. I told him, “I’ve got a lot more time then you and I’m just taking care of a little baby so I’ll keep you busy with letters.” He said, “Keep them coming.” He was able to call us one time that I recall.

RT: So in your letters what kinds of things did the two of you discuss?

GH: Pretty much blow by blow, daily accounts. He would tell me everything they were doing that he was allowed to tell of course. What he liked and what he didn’t like definitely. His opinion about the food.

RT: I take it it wasn’t a positive opinion.

GH: No, it wasn’t particularly positive. I would tell him everything going on in our lives. Allan was really busy with his internship at a hospital and would be gone for great amounts of time. I told him about Tammy’s progress. She was just about eight months old when he went into the service. So I wrote him and sent pictures of her. I sent him pictures of everything. I kept him up with what was going on in the family and the church. He philosophized a little bit about, you know, what he definitely didn’t want to do all of his life. What he did think he’d want to do and talked it up a little about Laurel, his girlfriend. He told us about some of the things that he had been able to do and about a good friend he had met, how he had done really well in his battalion and marksmanship and about his prospects of different things like fire control school and a few other things.

RT: So when he, as you said he would philosophize about things. What kind of things would he mention in his letters?

GH: I saw maturity in him. He was a young man who became a man if you will in the service and just that short time in boot camp. The responsibility and the leadership and he shared about his Christian faith too. He talked to us a little bit about his feelings
for his girlfriend and how much she meant to him. Talked a little bit more about what he wanted to do when he got out of the service and where he’d like to work and if he could work with Allan someday and how he would when he had leave he would be spending a lot of time with us because Long Beach, his home base was a lot closer to us, who lived in Long Beach than to go thirty miles home. He said, “I won’t have a car then.”

RT: So you also mentioned that he talked about things that he liked and didn’t like. Aside from the food what were the things that he liked and disliked when he was in boot camp?

GH: He liked the camaraderie he had with some of the other recruits. He didn’t like some of the recruits, or I shouldn’t say recruits, enlisted men who were above them. Sometimes they would get one that was rather verbally abusive. Sometimes he felt like they took a route they didn’t need to take maybe to show their authority and their (inaudible) a little bit. Some of them were very abusive verbally, bad language, swearing, et cetera.

RT: Turning the air blue.

GH: Yes. That really offended him. He basically had a very cheerful, willing, attitude. So I think he felt like a dog sometimes. I remember President Eisenhower died while he was in boot camp so they gave them a holiday. He felt bad about Eisenhower, but he was happy to have a holiday, with nothing he could do. He also ended up getting strep throat and he got very sick and had a fever. Sometimes he would stand up in the shower and just put his head back and kind of dozed. If they laid down or they went to the medical office then they would be put back a day or days in their time and would have to go in extended time in boot camp and nobody wanted to do that.

RT: So he was thinking to himself, heal, heal.

GH: Yes. This is probably telling something I shouldn’t tell, but he had a real problem in there with dandruff. They of course shaved their heads. The soap or shampoo they were using really dries their heads out. It bothered him a lot. I asked him if I could send him cookies and he said, “Yes.” He said, “Could you send me some”—it’s this horrible orange stuff for getting dandruff. Allan got it for me at the hospital. So I put it in little bottles. I put it in with the cookies. We weren’t sure that I was supposed to be
sending that in. He said the cookies were much appreciated by everyone in the unit and that his head was doing much better.

RT: Talk about a care package. You mentioned that he had made a really good friend when he was in boot camp. Was this fellow from California or did they just kind of hit it off because of their personalities?

GH: He lived in Torrance. He was just about Jim’s age, maybe a little older and he was married. He was really just within miles of where we lived in Long Beach. They expected to be able to hopefully get some leave at the same time and continue their friendship over the years.

RT: You had mentioned that he would, in his letters, write about his faith. How did you see his faith develop when he was in boot camp and when he was in the service?

GH: Well, he knew that at times there was nobody to rely on except God. I think his faith became even more real and more personal. He realized that if he was going to get through this toughest time to this point that he had ever had in his life that he was going to be really dependent on the Lord. He said, “I pray a lot.” He said, “I go to the worship services.” He said, “It’s not like church at home. About the only thing I get out of it is that I love singing the Navy hymn and when they read the scripture.” But he said, “Some of the chaplains are really bad.” He continued to go. He felt like that was something that he needed, whatever he could get out of it. So I’m proud of him for doing that.

RT: After boot camp you said he had spent a couple of weeks visiting with you and the rest of his relatives. What kind of things did he discuss or what kind of things did ya’ll do in those two weeks?

GH: Well, he came down several times and he wanted to see our little daughter Tammy. He was always trying to teach her something new. So he taught her to say— when he’d say hello she’d stick her hand up to her ear to talk on the phone. So one day he was feeding her a cupcake and it had frosting all over it. So he said hello and she stuck the cupcake in her ear. He was always doing funny little tricks and things. He would have her in the wagon and on his back and just loved to play with her. He had done some babysitting once or twice for us before he went in the service. Then after she would go to bed we would sit up and talk and talk about the world situation and what it would be like
for him to go. He said at one point, “Well, you know, if anything happens to me, I’m ready to go.” He said, “I know where I stand with the Lord and I know that I believe in him as my savior and that someday I’m going to be in Heaven with him.” So he said, “It won’t be a loss for me if I end up in Heaven before I get home or something.” We talked about that a little bit. I just had the confidence that he knew where he was going. I had the confidence in the Lord to take care of him, but whatever his plans for Jim’s life I wouldn’t feel that it had been cut short at any point, but we’re each given a certain number of days. When that times comes the Lord knows what’s best all around.

RT: You’ve mentioned several times how much he enjoyed spending time with your daughter. Did he always work well with kids? Was he always interested in working with kids because you said he wanted to become a pediatric dentist?

GH: Yeah.

RT: So was he always really good with kids?

GH: I didn’t see him work with kids a whole lot, but I saw him observe them a lot. One time I took him down to the John Tracy Speech and Hearing Clinic. He was real interested in that. I needed to go visit it for some speech courses I was taking in college. So he went down with me and we spent about half a day there watching little children who had autism. We observed them playing and interacting or not interacting with one another. So that was one of the times that I specifically remember. He played with the little kids at church some. But it became more personal and more interesting to him when there was one in the family, his little niece. I remember at church he’d always come out of church and go to the nursery to get her. My brother Fred would that too.

RT: Once he was aboard ship you continued to correspond with him, correct?

GH: Mm-hmm.

RT: Was it very much the same, you would basically give him the entire news report on the home town and what was going on?

GH: Oh, yes and Dodger scores and Fred’s scores. I knew Fred wasn’t writing letters too much though. I would give him the scores from Fred’s baseball games. I would give him the weather report too, everything I could think of. I knew he just was hungry for any information he could get. Of course we only had about two and a half weeks before he was killed to write. I sent quite a few letters and I got quite a few from him too.
RT: When he was aboard ship what sort of things did he write about to you?
GH: Well, he usually told what his duty stations were. They usually were a four to five hour shift. Often he would be doing something different each hour so he told us that. He would tell us about others on the ship. One day he mentioned that there were three brothers on the ship. Then he told about going to talk to the fire control engineer. I’m not sure what they called him exactly, who we later learned was Commander Riley, Lawrence Riley who lost his son on the ship. He and Commander Riley talked about Jim maybe getting into fire control school. I thought he was talking about being a fireman or something. I later learned that it was really having to do with weaponry. Jim’s one main duty station where they would go if they had a general quarters alarm sound was the number one gun. He spent quite a bit of time in that, one at the front of the ship.

RT: From his letters did he tell you where aboard ship his quarters were located?
GH: Yes. In fact I asked him to send me a picture. I said, “I’ve never been on a naval ship, would you send me a picture of where things are?” So he did. It was a rough picture, but it did the job. It showed me that he was in the third compartment down, on the forward part of the ship. It showed his duty station on the number one gun mount. He gave us some, oh like boatswain and a few other terms that I would’ve pronounced differently. It looks like boat swain, but it’s boatswain. That was a neat thing. He usually would tell us where he, what part of the ship he was working on at different times. It seemed to usually be on the front half of the ship.

RT: At this time what was his rank? Was he seaman apprentice?
GH: Yes.

RT: Did his opinion of things such as the food improve when he was aboard ship?
GH: You know he didn’t say so much about it so I think it probably did or he would have.

RT: You would’ve made some kind of declarative statement.
GH: Right. He did talk about the heat. He said the Philippines where he started out, he said it’s like the armpit of the Pacific. He said, “I get up and take a shower in the morning and I get out and get dressed and I’m just as perspiring as I was before I got the shower.” I guess they take showers a couple times a day, but down in their compartments,
way down at the bottom of the ship he said you can hardly breathe. It’s so still. They kept
the—I can’t think what they’re called—the opening, they didn’t have them shut a lot of
the times so that they could get air through there. The opening from one of the hatches,
from one where you pull up the ladder into the next unit.

RT: Whenever he was assigned to the Evans and he actually had his first day
aboard did he write anything to you about his impressions of the ship and his new
assignment as it were?

GH: Maybe, just to back up slightly, he had told us that he had to be taken out on
a ship with three others to meet his ship, the Frank Evans in the ocean I guess. I later
learned that he had—in fact at this last reunion I learned that they had left several days
before for some reason. So Jim and three others were taken out and brought on newly. He
told us a little bit about his quarters. Like he said there was enough room to walk kind of
side ways, one at a time between bunks. There were three bunks high. He said, “Every
time somebody needs something in the chest where we keep the clothes,” he said, “I have
to get up out of bed.” So he says, “You know where I am.” So he was on the bottom of
the three. He talked a little bit about what he had to do. He said, “Sometimes we’re
swabbing the deck or we’re painting.” He said, “We kind of get some of the menial
chores.” He had a lot of different things he needed to do.

RT: So they kept him pretty busy then.

GH: I don’t know if you want me to point out at any point, but at this reunion of
the Evans Association this last August and September I met the boatswain who was Jim’s
boss. He told me a little bit about his interaction with Jim.

RT: What sort of things did he have to say?

GH: Well, it was—it made me proud again. It was just neat to hear. I had taken
an album to the reunion. This fellow was looking at the album and he came over to me
and he said, “I know you’re brother.” He said, “I’ll never forget that smile.” He said, “We
were in the same compartment for quarters.” He said, “He worked under me.” He said, “I
was so amazed at him because every time I asked him to do something he said sure with
his big grin and went and did it.” He said, “He never complained and he always had a
smile.” He said, “I just never could believe anyone could be so happy all the time.”

RT: Do you remember this boatman’s name?
GH: I’m getting my album. I just forgot it. I’ll have to give you that a little bit later.

RT: Okay. Now as you had said it was only a couple of weeks later after he had come aboard Evans that the ship was struck by Melbourne.

GH: Yes.

RT: Where was your brother at the time of the collision?

GH: We believe he was asleep in his bunk. My mother talked to Commander Riley after the accident and judging from the time of duty that Jim had the night before which we had gotten a letter from Jim telling us he was on the eight to twelve shift. We felt and the commander felt that he had been asleep at the time and well into the sleep and probably wouldn’t be getting up for several hours.

RT: When did you hear the news of the collision and how did you hear the news?

GH: Well, on the third of June. It was the third in the Philippines. It was the second here so it was a Monday. I got a call about six o’clock in the evening and it was my dad. He said, “You better sit down. I’ve got some upsetting news.” So I sat down. He said, “I just got a call from your Uncle Lloyd,” and he was the one that was in the Navy. Our uncle who was in the Navy during World War II, he said, “He heard on the radio while he was driving home from work that there was a ship involved in a collision with an aircraft carrier. He said the ship’s name is the Frank E. Evans.” He said, “I’m just wondering if you know Tommy,” which is my dad, “who is on that ship that we might know.” My dad said, “That’s Jim’s ship.” My Uncle Lloyd said, “Oh, no.” He said, “Well, they’re saying that the ship was cut in two and the front half went down.” He said, “Do you know what time it would have been?” Then they compared notes and decided it was in the middle of the night probably. He said, “Do you know where Jim was on the ship, where he would have been sleeping?” My dad said, “No.” I said, to my dad, “I know where he is,” because today at twelve noon six hours earlier I had gotten a letter from Jim which had a picture of the ship that he had drawn. I said, “Dad, if it’s the middle of the night he’s either on the front half asleep or he’s in his duty station which is the number one gun rack or he’s eating between sleeping and going on duty. All of those things are on the front half of the ship.” Dad said, “Well, they think there’s maybe only fifty some that are lost. There’s probably 225 more.” So he said, “I’m sure he got off.”
thought, well, I’m not going to say anymore, but I was just sick. I called my husband at
the hospital and said, “You have to come home.” Then I went right up to my dad’s
apartment where he and my other brother Fred live and I brought them the picture of the
ship and Jim’s letter and showed it to them. Still my mother, who we saw later at her
house, and my dad were just hoping against hope. It wasn’t that I was being pessimistic I
don’t believe. I think it was just trying to be realistic. I told my brother Fred when we
went for a walk that evening, I said, “You know what? I think he’s gone.” He said, “I
know. I don’t see how he could’ve made it off.” So that’s kind of where we were at.
RT: So when your brother Freddy heard the news what was his reaction?
GH: Very somber. Just kind of shook his head like I can’t believe it. He just kept
saying, “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.” We stayed away from the apartment for a
while because all the relatives had come over and we both just kind of needed to get
away and do something. We just couldn’t sit. We were very anxious and kind of nervous.
RT: How long did it take for the official news to come to you that he was lost or
died?
GH: It took seventeen hours, the next morning. I actually went home Monday
night to our apartment in Long Beach with my husband. Then the next day my dad called
and said, “You better come.” He said, “The Navy just came and said that Jim is lost and
declared missing at sea.” So I went right up to the apartment. I had stayed up all night. I
couldn’t sleep. I called the Navy base every couple hours to see if they had any word. I
later found out that they wouldn’t have given me the word over the phone, but sometimes
I talked to them a little bit there and asked if they had any more details. They would give
me some details, but they of course didn’t tell me any names or anything. I don’t even
know if they would have had the names at that point in Long Beach.
RT: When you first heard of the collision itself what was your husband’s
reaction?
GH: He kind of was speechless. He just put his arms around me and I cried. He
said, “Well, we just need to pray for strength if he’s gone, for him if he is still living. This
doesn’t mean that he is gone, but it doesn’t look very good.” I showed him Jim’s letter.
So pretty much he just stayed with me and like I said took me up to dad’s apartment and
was there for support. I think we were each just really upset inside wondering what the
next few days were going to bring and scared when the phone rang and scared when it didn’t.

RT: What was your mom’s reaction to the news of the collision itself?
GH: Well, she was shaken I understand. I didn’t see her that night or the next. I guess I saw her later the next day. She kept maintaining, “Oh, I’m sure he made it off and all wishful parental thinking I think.” I showed her the picture and said, “Mom, we’ve got to face it. It’s very likely he’s gone.” She said, “But we can’t think that way.” That doesn’t change it one way or another how we think. I think we just have to be realistic, but it doesn’t look good. We need to be prepared. You never can be really prepared but you know.

RT: You said it took seventeen hours before they declared him missing.
GH: Yes. Right. Then the following day about twenty-four hours later we got telegrams, my mom and my dad got telegrams saying that he was lost at sea.

RT: What was their reaction?
GH: Or that he was declared dead I should say.

RT: What was the reaction of your parents?
GH: My dad really fell apart understandably. We all did. My mom, though she still kept hoping against hope that maybe he was picked up by another ship and that they just hadn’t located him yet. I kept thinking he’s gone, but I caught myself several times thinking maybe he did, maybe he did. I know Mom, she was having such a hard time. She didn’t want to have a memorial service at church for him for a while. In fact we waited until the fourteenth of June before we had a memorial service because she couldn’t give hope and didn’t want to have a service and then find out that he wasn’t gone. I know she felt like it was a final thing if she had the service. So I guess she was just hoping. We waited almost two weeks.

RT: How did Freddy and your husband react?
GH: My dad was devastated and you know on top he and my mom just recently having you know split up. The divorce was pending. I stayed all night and slept in Jim’s bed that night. I stayed with my dad. Fred went over to Jim’s girlfriends’ house, Laurel and talked to her and her sister I guess half the night and stayed at their house. He kept himself busy with friends. He had some really supportive friends both at school and at
church. I think as a seventeen year old he really needed that kind of thing. My dad needed me. I needed my dad, my husband. My mom was at her house. She kind of didn’t have anyone too much, but my relatives did visit her and they also visited my dad.

RT: How did Laurel react to the news?
GH: She was really upset and had a hard time believing it. I remember one comment to me was, “You don’t know how much you love someone until you lose them.” I didn’t know her real well, but that Saturday, Monday we got the news and on Saturday there was a naval service, memorial service down at the naval base in Long Beach. Laurel went and my folks and Allan and I. Afterwards the fellow, the Navy, it must have been who was our officer, who was assigned to us, asked if there was anything that he could do for us. We asked him if we could go on a ship. If there was any way that there was ship open somewhere we could see something like Jim went on. He said, “Well, I’m on the Mansfield. It’s just a destroyer very much the same and I guess the same vintage as the Frank Evans.” So he said, “Why don’t you come with me? I’ll be glad to take you on a tour.” We were so appreciative and I guess in some ways it’s morbid to think of us going on something like that, but for some reason it just was helpful to have been near something like Jim had last been on. We got to see what the compartments were like and the gun mounts and see what Jim had been talking about all this time.

RT: So it gave you a sense of what he must’ve gone through in the days prior to as well as possibly that night.
GH: Exactly. To this day I can’t really explain why that has been so helpful, but it has been. When people talk about the accident I see the Mansfield. I substitute the Evans for it, but I know what they’re talking about and I know what Jim was experiencing as far as life on a ship. I have a little bit of a better clue now.

RT: So when you went through there you think about things, oh he mentioned this in his letter and he talked about these things in his letters.
GH: Yes. At the same time I think the reality really set in of wow how could someone who had only been on the ship less then two weeks find his way out of this, up three floors, through a hatch where only one at a time can go, how would you in a sound sleep even know which way to turn when you got out of bed? It showed me how it was
possible for almost everyone in that compartment to die. In fact Jim’s boss doesn’t know
of anyone else besides him who got out of that compartment. He said, “You know I’ve
been on there for at least two or three years. I knew that like the back of my hand. It
wasn’t hard to find my way out.”

RT: So you said you had a memorial service at the church a couple of weeks
after. Did the whole family attend?

GH: Yes. We had several hundred people there, relatives from all over, friends.
My folks asked I think it was twenty-four of Jim’s friends to be honorary pallbearers.
They walked in behind the color guard and sat down in the front.

RT: I take it that Laurel was there as well.

GH: Yes, she was and her whole family.

RT: If you wouldn’t mind taking us through that service and describing what
happened.

GH: Well, the color guard being there, we had an aspect of the Navy present and
the men in their sailor uniforms. It kind of made it more somber, but also more special
and real that this was something that happened during the Navy. A good teacher friend of
my dad’s played Taps on his trumpet. My brother’s best friend got up and tried to do a
poem that he had written about Jim and their experiences on their long trip that summer.
He said, “I can’t do it.” So the pastor read it. The pastor who was currently there didn’t
know Jim quite as well because he was new. So our former pastor who was kind of like a
youth pastor too got up and spoke about Jim. One of Jim’s best friends at church read the
scripture reading and sang the Navy hymn. A couple other—actually the Navy hymn was
played, I’m sorry, on the trumpet. Then we sang a song from the Bible from 107. It talks
about those who go to sea and ship and in troubled waters go. It was hard. We sat up
front. I sat beside my dad and my husband on the other side and then my brother and my
mom. At that time being that they were in the process of this divorce that was very
difficult. I had not seen my mother from boot camp graduation until the day after Jim was
killed. Then I didn’t see her again until the memorial service at the naval base. There was
strained relationships and it was hard. My dad really broke down in the service. I said,
“Dad, just remember that Jim is happy now. He’s in Heaven. He’s got a gift.” At the
same time you know we selfish human beings we miss the people, but yet we realize that God had a purpose and even though we might never know, it was Jim’s time to go.

RT: Well, in the service you can definitely see that Jim did touch the lives of many people.

GH: He did. The pastor’s sermon was based on if you had been on that ship and you had gone down would you be ready to face Heaven and Jesus Christ today? That was a pretty somber thought. One of Jim’s friends later told us that that was the point which he really faced his own destiny and realized that he was not a believer. It really changed and turned him around.

RT: You had mentioned that one of Jim’s friends had read a poem.

GH: Tried to.

RT: Or attempted to read a poem. Do you happen to have any copy of it?

GH: Yes I do. His name was Jim Turner and it was called “My Friend and I.”

RT: Approximately how long was it?

GH: It was a full page.

RT: Do you happen to remember anything from it?

GH: It was kind of a little dialogue about their trip across the country and the people that they saw, the cat they took on as a companion, rescued I guess. I don’t have it right in my hands here. I can certainly get that later if you would like.

RT: They rescued a cat?

GH: That’s my recollection. They had a cat that I think journeyed along with them.

RT: They had a mascot. You said that the Navy had a separate ceremony as well.

GH: Yes.

RT: Would you mind taking us through that ceremony?

GH: Yes. It was a little bit more, I should say it was less personal because they were attempting to reach people from all faiths. So there was a Catholic aspect, a Protestant aspect and a Jewish aspect. They read the scripture and pretty much just made a few comments. There was a little bit of Navy, the Taps and everything, which again is a hard thing to listen to, but at the same time very beautiful, very poignant. It only lasted about half an hour and I remember one little boy crying out, “Daddy.” I later found out at
this reunion that that was Commander Riley’s grandson who must have been just maybe a year or two old at the time. We were there with a lot of other hurting people, who actually lost ones too, like personal family members like friends and brothers and so forth. It was good to be there. At the same time the one at my church was the more helpful to me.

RT: Because it was much more personal, both people who you knew and Jim knew.

GH: Yes and they knew Jim. They had known him since he was born. So that’s why that was a little different.

RT: The one with the Navy must have been interesting as well because you’re there with other people who are going through the same thing.

GH: Yes, exactly.

RT: Did you talk to any of the people there at the naval ceremony?

GH: Not really much because each of us, each family was assigned to one of the naval personnel. They came over and presented a flag to my mom and one to my dad, a folded flag. Then the men talked to us. As I said he took us aboard his ship so that kind of took us away from the whole setup there. I don’t really know if other people sat around and talked much with one another or not.

RT: In the days that followed the collision did you or your family, for lack of a better word, keep up with the court martial?

GH: Oh, yes. I walked up to the hospital every single day. We lived in the hospital parking lot in a building reserved for interns and residents. I got a newspaper everyday and cut out the clippings of the trial and really followed that.

RT: As the trial progressed and when it reached its ultimate conclusion what were your thoughts during that whole process? What kind of things went through your mind? What kind of things did you feel during that time?

GH: A lot of sorrow of course I was experiencing with regard to losing my brother. At the same time I really was feeling for the people in charge of our ship, our commander, even the ones who were really ultimately held responsible. I was just wondering how they must feel and thinking we’ve got a loss here, a physical loss, but how do they feel with the responsibility that has been laid on them and when it turned out
it was the fault of the Evans. Then I also wondered about the guys that were with Jim and
how many had been his friends, even in a short time. When you’re on a ship and you’re
heading for Vietnam I would expect you to get kind of close talking with some and have
some special friends. I wondered if they made it off or whether they were still alive. I
wondered how this accident affected those who survived. Those are questions that I never
got to really ask.

RT: When the Frank E. Evans Association was formed, that must’ve given you
and the rest of your family an opportunity to answer some of these questions.
GH: Yes. It was a missing a link that we never expected to have repaired. It was a
tremendous blessing. I can’t remember very things in my life that have been more helpful
and thrilling to me.

RT: The good thing is that you were able to, as you mentioned earlier, converse
with people who actually worked with Jim aboard ship.
GH: Yeah. That I didn’t even hope for. I didn’t even know if anyone would
remember him. He was on the ship a short time and it was so many years ago. That was
just a real bonus to find out five or six of them remembered him.

RT: He must’ve made quite an impression on them in those two weeks.
GH: He was always known for his smile. Everybody talked about that who knew
him. It always just went from ear to ear. I guess that one picture that was in the front of
my album was the key to unlock some doors of memory.

RT: In the years after the collision, from your perspective, not only in your own
mind, but in that of your relatives and friends of Jim how did the event impact your life
and the lives of others?
GH: I can speak mainly for myself. It showed me the brevity of life and how we
can assume we are going to be there for an average number of years, but we really don’t
know. Obviously Jim went to bed that night expecting to get a good rest and get up and
do the same thing the next day he had been doing. That didn’t happen. How would I
know, but what I can walk out the door here and fall down and break my neck or
something? We just don’t know. It made me look at my life, how I was spending it. I
used to, just the little for instances, I used to spend a lot of time watching morning TV.
Wouldn’t watch soap operas, but I would watch quiz shows and all these things. It just
seemed so meaningless after that. I couldn’t turn the TV on for weeks. I couldn’t even
listen to songs on the radio. I had a difficulty making an adjustment. I don’t know if it’s
what guys experience coming back from Vietnam, trying to get back into life. I’m sure it
was no where near that. To go to the grocery store, anything outside my house was very
hard to do. It just seemed so meaningless. I really had to ask myself now okay you trust
in God, you’re a Christian, and you know we live and we die. Why can’t you except this
and go on? I think there were just a lot things that were happening in our lives that were
just kind of coming down on me. I got very depressed. For about five months I really had
a difficult time. I prayed a lot and a lot of people were praying for me, but I felt like I had
to be strong for the family and for other people. I did learn through this experience
though that we need to be able to get our feelings out. We need to share them with people
and not say what isn’t true and not say I’m doing fine when I’m hurting inside. I think it
helped me to be more empathetic with other people. Some of the most meaningful things
happened the week after the accident when people would come to our door and bring
food. One young man, a friend of my brothers came. He walked in the door with a hot
dish his mother had probably made and the tears were just streaming down his face. He
put the dish down and hugged me, turned around and left. He never said a word, but just
that hug and the expression of his tears just was so therapeutic. I guess I now have been
able to feel a little bit of what people feel when I know they have a loss. Every loss is
different, but I know that a lot of chatter, even quoting a lot of Bible versus and trying to
figure out why a person died are not helpful at a time like that. I just learned that people
need a listening ear. They need somebody close by and just maybe someone holding their
hand or whatever. There is a lot of emotions are in those next weeks, but I grew a lot too.
I think it’s, I hope it has made me a better person.

RT: You had mentioned in the weeks, especially that one account of the young
man who had brought in a food dish and then hugged you and then just simply walked
away. I take it that you received visits from a lot of Jim’s friends.

GH: Yes, we did. I guess I was thrilled that they could do that because you their
anywhere from seventeen and twenty-one and that’s not an easy thing for anybody to do,
but to go at that age to someone’s house to talk to their parents when they’ve just lost
their son, that’s a big step. That was just very admirable for me.
RT: Shows a lot of maturity on their part.
GH: Yes it does.
RT: Did any of his friends come to you or your husband to talk to you about Jim
or to try to heal themselves?
GH: Not right away. Some came over, quite a few came over. Some would call,
some wrote notes. It was probably at least a year or two before any of them began to open
up and share their feelings about how they felt at the time and what Jim meant to them.
One fellow, the one that really was faced with his own destiny I mentioned from the
funeral said that he needed a place to live. I don’t remember the situation exactly, but he
was in between places or something. He was a few years older, but he had known Jim
and Fred really well. My dad invited him to come and live with them. So my brother Fred
and this guy, Big John we called him because he was huge, and my dad lived together for
close to a year I would say. They had a lot of good talks. Over the years I got letters from
people who just asked me about it. When they found out I was willingly to talk about it. I
guess they learned I wasn’t going to break down every time Jim’s name was mentioned.
They would ask me questions. So I’ve had a lot of people ask me about it. I keep pictures
up in the house so I look at them when I’m walking around through the house and when
people come they say, “Oh, who’s the sailor?” Then they often ask questions. Sometimes
they will say, “Oh, I didn’t know. I’m sorry I asked.” I say, “No, that’s why I have
picture there.” I don’t want to forget him. I want people to talk about him.
RT: Because as long as people talk about him he is still there.
GH: Exactly. Their are some people, there were a few that we knew that never
mentioned his name again. It was sort of like he had never existed and that hurts more
then anything.
RT: Oh, yes. As long as you can keep them in your heart they’re still there.
GH: Yeah, exactly.
RT: He’s important in terms of making you and your brother and mother and
your father the people who they became afterwards.
GH: Yes.
RT: That was an awful lot for your family to go through. First you have, your
parents are in the process of getting a divorce. Then you have a brother who has gone off
to join the service. Then he is off to Vietnam, and then the next thing you know he’s no
longer with us.
GH: Yes. Yep.
RT: That’s an amazing amount of activity in a very short period of time.
GH: Yeah and I think that’s probably why it was just so overwhelming to me
emotionally and having a new baby that year. I had a hard time coping for a little while
there. I got through it by God’s grace. My parents—the divorce was finalized on what
would be my brother’s nineteenth birthday. My mom was horrified when she saw the
date on the divorce decreed that she went and got it changed. Then she and my dad were
only apart for about a year and a half. Somehow or another they got to talking again.
They ended up starting to see each other again and they remarried in 1971. So they were
married until my dad died two years ago. So I like to think that possibly Jim’s death
brought them back together. Talking about him, that common thing and the loneliness
they each experienced, they didn’t have each other at the time of the death, but maybe
through the years he was somewhat instrumental in bringing them together.
RT: Something to open those doors of communication.
GH: Yes.
RT: That’s incredible.
GH: Yeah. It doesn’t very often happen that you hear people remarrying after a
divorce.
RT: And then to stay together that long afterward.
GH: Yes.
RT: You said your father died only a couple of years ago.
GH: Yes, February twenty-fourth year before last.
RT: Did the rest of your family do pretty much what you’ve done and that is keep
pictures of him throughout the house and discuss Jim whenever people mention him?
GH: Yes. The boys that came to the funeral from Jim’s class at school, the
honorary pallbearers, one of the mothers had two very large pictures made of Jim’s high
school graduation. They gave one each to my mom and dad. They had one at the funeral.
I have one of those up in my hallway now. That’s been a conversation piece I guess you
would say.
RT: Do you have any other comments or maybe stories or anything else that you would like to discuss or mention?

GH: Just another word or two maybe about the reunion. I was so impressed with the fact that many of the men were not afraid to come up to my mom and I and my brother, introduce themselves and say, “I’m sorry for your loss,” as if it had just happened. Their comments and some of them even cried and it was very touching. Some of them said is their anything we can do for you, any questions we can answer. We found that several were just so willing to answer our questions. When they saw that this was not something that was fresh and less devastative they were very willing to open up with some of the most difficult to hear items about the tragedy. We sometimes had to reassure them this is thirty years, some years later, we’re passed that initial time. We can talk about it. We have a curiosity. At some point I mentioned to a couple of men who obviously were having a little difficulty recounting some things and they seemed to want to talk to us too. I said, “I just have this sense that this accident was as hard if not harder on you men who survived as it was for those of us who lost someone.” Some of these men went through all kinds of things like guilt, why was I not taken. This is hard for me to understand, but some of them were burned badly and spent months in the hospital in a country not their own. Some of them had not been able until the last year or two to tell their wives about the accident, just amazing things. We just felt in that weekend we were asked to the reunion, my mom, my brother, my sister-in-law, my husband said they felt the same thing. It was like we found a family. We haven’t had a lot of contact since, but I know when we go to Lubbock, Texas, next year somebody will be like, “Oh, yeah, we know you,” and just continue talking and just some very special people we met. I just am really grateful. I never expected to have the opportunity to meet people who cared so much.

RT: The good thing is that you get to meet other people who knew Jim and you can keep him alive among those who served with him, through him.

GH: Right. One man, Steve Krauss, he was looking at the album and he saw a newspaper clipping he had never seen before. It was of a lifeboat and he said, “That’s me in there.” He came over to find me and said, “Come here. I got to show you something.” He said, “That’s me at eighteen.” He said, “I knew your brother. I was one of the four
that came on the ship together where we were transported on a barge out to meet the
Evans.” So he said, “I knew him.” It was neat because he hadn’t seen that picture. He
asked me for a copy and I had an extra one. So I gave him the original. It was just nice to
be able to share something with somebody that they hadn’t seen either.

RT: The good thing is now one of your children also bears Jim’s name. So his
memory can be carried on to another generation.

GH: Right. My daughter Tammy and my son Jim, I mean, my son Rick, they live
in Colorado Springs. So the year before we got to go to the reunion of the Evans in Long
Beach they got to go to the one in Aurora, Colorado. They were there for the banquet and
the memorial service. So they have a real empathy for what goes on there. Our daughter
Laurel is back east so she hasn’t been able to be as close to it.

RT: Oh, so you named one of your daughters after Jim’s girlfriend?
GH: Actually that’s where we got the name and I loved it. We didn’t really name
her after Laurel per say, but we loved the name.

RT: But still it’s amazing.
GH: Yeah, it is.
RT: Speaking of that, it’s just in the head of my mind, what ever became of
Laurel?
GH: She became head of a Montessori school. My mother ended up working for
her as a teacher in the school for a few years. Laurel dated a lot of different guys and just
couldn’t find anyone. Then somehow or another she met a fellow just probably seven or
eight years ago. So a little later in life and fell in love with him and she married him. So
I’m real happy for her.

RT: Good. Still I’m sure that there is some part of Jim that had influenced her life
and made her who she is today.
GH: Right. I did find that poem Robert, if you wanted to ask any questions. You
were asking about the cat. Let’s see. I don’t know if you want me to read it.
RT: Sure.
GH: Okay. “My Friend and I. We lived on an island of happiness last summer my
friend and I. He drove while I slept, we learned last summer, Jim and I. We did
sometimes argue about little things, bumper stickers, but he had a way of bringing us
together again, his smile. We saw this land together, he and I, and I think if ever there
was love between two friends we loved each other. He’s gone now, drowned in the empty
sea, gone from me, but I’ll remember his laugh and cry at his worries. I’ll remember his
friendship so endearing to me. The Mexican truck drivers, the Navajo’s, the Jet’s and our
cat, they were all ours once and if he can hear me I pray they still are forever.” Jim
Turner.

RT: That’s fantastic.

GH: I read a poem and I don’t know if you would want to have a copy of it.
RT: Sure.

GH: It’s called “A Precious Smile.” I wrote it on what would’ve been Jim’s
nineteenth birthday. Do you want me to read it?
RT: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

GH: Okay. “A Precious Smile. Time passes, so also do we. Many leave
memories to cherish. Some leave footsteps to follow. A few will treasures to spend. Only
one left a smile so big and wide, so genuine, so dear. It belonged to my brother Jim. Day
never done, night never falls, but loving thoughts of him dwell in my heart keeping him
near. Birds still sing. People still work and play. Life goes on. Memories will fade. But
Jim is gone and I’m still here. Heaven claimed a son June third while I lost a brother
instead. Why am I yet traveling through life’s pain when the journey here has ended in
peace for Jim? God must have more plans for me. I’m glad Jim’s smile remains to give
me courage to face each day. Today marks a birthday that would have been if God had
willed. Tis no use to wonder why or what if. Far wiser is God and happier is Jim then if I
decreed another year for him. I know Jim is smiling now, free from worry minus any tear,
eagerly awaiting the time to show me around when I appear. I wish I knew his message
for me. I feel it might be a just reminder. Take no thought for the ‘morrow, I must wear
Jim’s smile and share his trust in God to make my short time here memorable to others
and glorifying to God like Jim’s life on earth and now in eternity.” I put at the bottom,
“In Loving Memory of my brother Jim, Seaman Apprentice James William Kerr, USS
Frank E. Evans, lost at sea June 3rd, 1969.”

RT: You wrote this poem shortly after, after the accident.
GH: Right. His birthday was October twenty-fourth so it was about four months after, four and a half months after the accident.

RT: When you wrote this at the time did you share it with anyone else or did you kind of keep it to yourself?

GH: Well, I shared it with my dad. My dad was a shop teacher in junior high, print shop. So he said, “I’d like to make a copy of that and put it really on nice paper.” So he took it out to the school print shop and put it on white paper and made a red border around it and put two little American flags and then did the whole thing in navy. It looks nice. I have it in my album.

RT: That’s spectacular, a good tribute to him.

GH: Well, the take no thought for the ‘morrow is from a Bible verse in Matthew that says, “Take no thought for tomorrow, there’s enough trouble today.” That was kind of his thinking. He liked that verse and he said, “I just need to deal with today’s situations and problems and trust the Lord for tomorrow.” He also had a little saying. There was a song out, “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.” Claudine Langea and Lee Williams’ wife at the time used to sing that. He said, “That is so important. When we need each other we’re very fortunate indeed.”

RT: Wow. Just in this interview I almost feel as though I know a little bit of Jim.

GH: Well, I’m glad if that’s the case.

RT: Not nearly as well as you or Freddy or your mother and your father and all of his friends, but I really get a good sense of the person he was.

GH: Well, good. Now my brother Fred says we can’t forget the things that we didn’t like. He says there’s that tendency to always remember the good. I said, “Well, of course.” There’s certainly plenty of mischief that he, and you, and I all created together or separately that we can remember, but we won’t tell people all that.

RT: I thank you very much for your time and everything else that you have given to this interview.

GH: My pleasure.

RT: Transcripts of this will be made and they will be available on the website. If you want a paper copy we can send one to you as soon as the transcript is made.

GH: So it’s actually going to be on the website in written form?
RT:  Correct. It will be accessible and the audio will be accessible. Okay, thank you very much for your time.

GH:  Good talking to you and thank you.

RT:  It was good to talk to you as well and you have an excellent day.

GH:  Okay. I’ll see you in Lubbock, Texas, will I?

RT:  Absolutely.

GH:  Okay, best wishes on completing this big job of yours.

RT:  Thank you.

GH:  Okay. Thanks a lot.

RT:  No problem, thank you.