Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Fred Pierce on the second of October, 1999 at approximately 11:45 a.m. in Las Vegas, Nevada. So Mr. Pierce, if you would, start by giving us a quick biographical description of yourself.

Fred Pierce: I was born in Saginaw, Michigan on the eighth of October, 1932. My dad worked at the forest service, and then ensuing thirteen years, mom and dad moved eighteen times. Ended up in southern California in 1942. We stayed in California, they did, for the rest of...or for the next 45 years. I graduated high school in Pasadena in 1950, had been accepted at Michigan State University which was my dad’s alma mater and they also had police administration, which was my major. Being a land grant college, it was required to take the first two years of ROTC and was highly recommended by the police administration department that you take all four years. So I went into college with that understanding. In the mean time, Korea broke out and I wanted to serve my country but I wanted to go ahead and serve it as a commissioned officer. I was commissioned on the 20th of August, 1954, and went on active duty 14 March, 1955 as a Second Lieutenant Infantry, Fort Benning, Georgia. While there, we heard various pitches on airborne, ranger, and aviation, and I thought, “Hey! If I can fly, that’d be great! If the army will teach me, that’s even better!” So I went ahead and applied, was accepted, and went through fixed wing school, and started at Edward Gary Air Force Base, San Marcos, TX, and took my advanced training at Fort Rucker, Alabama. Graduated in July of 1956 and was assigned to the aviation unit at Fort Horde, California. While at Fort Horde I met my wife, we were married there, and promptly got orders to go to Korea. She was pregnant with our first
child and so I waited for the birth and then went to Korea for a year. Flew fixed wing, light, well
bird dogs, 0-1, 0-19 in those days, but the 0-1 aircraft in Korea for a year. I was with a K-Mag
detachment up in one of the front line corps, rock corps unit headquarters and in addition to that I
was also aviation advisor to the 3rd rock corps headquarters aviation. Came back, that was in
February of 1960, promoted…no, it was 1961…promoted to Captain. Assigned to Fort Knox,
Kentucky. Went through the advanced course down there and I was assigned to the 6th cav.
Squad first then went to the advanced course, our daughter was born while I was in the advanced
course. So we had one child before Korea, and one after. Took the advanced course, was
assigned to the ground assignment at Fort Irwin, California, served as headquarters company
commander, tank company commander, and assistant S-3 at the time where I actually was acting
as 3, the S-3 had health problems and had some surgery while I was there. From there assigned
to the 24th aviation battalion in Munich, Germany. I spent two years with the 24th with a short
interruption in between as troop commander of the 2nd squadron, 9th cavalry, the air cav troop
and the 24th division. Where I got my initial training in air cavalry. First initial doctrine in
training, and it was all trial and error because none of knew really too much about what we were
doing. From there I was called out of Germany, got orders on the 17th day of July of 1965 to
report to Fort Campbell no later than 1 August without family for further reassignment to a
restricted area overseas, Vietnam. Yes. When I received my orders they were marked secret. I
walked in the house and I said, “Honey, send the kids out to play.” And I was home a day early,
we were getting ready to move to Augustberg, I had been reassigned as the S-4 of the aviation
battalion. She said, “What is it?” and I said, “You’re going home.” And she said, “We are?” and
I said, “No, you are.” And she said, “Oh. You’re going to Vietnam.” You can’t hide things
from an army wife. So we went to Fort Campbell, formed an assault helicopter company, and
within two months we were onboard ship the 30th of September, sailed out of the golden gate on
the U.S.S. Buckner headed for Vietnam. Three aviation units and the support command of the 1st
division. SM: What year is this?
FP: Um, it was the 30th of September, 1965. Served the entire year with the 128 assault
helicopter company, 11th aviation battalion at Phu Loi. We flew missions mainly in III Corps
but also down in the Delta.
SM: Okay. What did…did your training…do you feel your training prepared you for
that particular assignment, that first assignment going to Vietnam?
FP: Not initial training, but I had enough experience. We were very fortunate in that unit that the average flight time per pilot was in excess of 2,000 hours. We had seven W-3’s. Senior aviators. I had about 2,500 hours, of both fixed and regular. So what I lacked in Vietnam experience made up for in experience in flying. We got in country, they gave us…they infused us out into various units for in-country training. We had to get so many hours, I don’t remember, ten, fifteen, twenty; something like that, twenty hours I guess it was. Flying with this other unit before we went back in, had started flying our own unit missions. But…as I say, we had the experience of flying. As far as map reading, as far as formation flying; all of this we’ve had. It was just a matter…we were operating at extremely high density area and high temperature which some of us had. Our replacements coming out of Fort Rucker at that time had had no load experience and no heat experience and we said up through the aviation brigade, “For goodness sakes, give them some load training before you pull their replacements.” Because we were hauling pretty heavy loads, right up at maximum. And with high temperatures and everything, it was…you were operating right on the edge of the envelope. Safely, but still…right on the edge. And of course that’s where experience paid off. The pilots that we got all turned out to be excellent, over there. But it took awhile to get them up to speed. The latter of replacements we got were much better because they had had some training. Came back from Vietnam in…see…September of ’66, was assigned to Fort Walters, Texas, the Army primary helicopter school and center, and was put in the troop brigade in the command of the officer-student company which I commanded for about a year, a little over, a year and a half, hell. We started expanding, I was in on the expansion, we, that was…I was appointed to second officer, student company. I moved up to battalion as the executive officer, and then we formed two more officer companies and ended up forming an officer student battalion and I moved over to that battalion as the executive officer, then from there was reassigned to Fort Hood, Texas, TDY [en route Hunter] Army Air Field for Cobra transition. In August of 1968 started putting together B-Troop, 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry. At that time was designated F-Troop, 15th Cav and I still have the [guideon].

SM: F-Troop [guideon]…

FP: F-Troop 15th Cavalry.

SM: Oh wow.
FP: And then we were redesignated B packet, 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry, 101st Airborne Division. But we weren’t allowed to wear any patches except the corps patch, the 3rd corps patch there at Fort Hood. And when we deployed we deployed in March of 1969 to Camp Eagle which was in Hue, right outside of Hue, in the northern part of South Vietnam.

SM: Let’s take a step back real quick about concerning your first Vietnam experience and more importantly you mentioned the fact that when you got your orders one of the first things you’re obviously going to do is to talk some with your wife, what you have to do, and she intuitively knew that you were going to Vietnam. How aware were you and your wife and your fellow officers about what was going on in Vietnam? It was this, and this was in ’65, mid ’65, so what kind of information were you receiving? And did you realize that we’d built up so much advisor personnel and so much of a commitment already that once the Gulf of Tonkin happens we’ve got a mass destructive war?

FP: Oh I knew what was going on. Fully. When I graduated in ’62 from the advanced course we were quite surprised it was only one out of our whole class that was assigned to Vietnam and he went over as public relations, he had a public relations MOS.

SM: Was Vietnam talked about during your training?

FP: Oh yes. During the advanced course. Oh sure, we knew what was going on over there. We knew that there was an advisory build up; in fact, we had some…some of our students had been advisors so we did discuss that. This was in ’62. ‘61-’62.

SM: What did they talk about in the advanced course, the former advisors, do you remember?

FP: The problems they had with the Vietnamese Army.

SM: Anything else stand out?

FP: That was the basic thing. You know, they’d be out patrolling and all of a sudden they’d be there all by themselves. They got up in the night and decided they’d leave. I supported in ‘65-’66 we supported…we were a separate aviation battalion and we supported whoever we were told to that day. Come down from our headquarters, so one day we’d be maybe the 1st division, the next day the 25th division, the following day it might be the 173rd airborne brigade, the following the 101st, the following ARVN.

SM: So as an assault helicopter company, what were the primary missions that you engaged in and your fellow pilots engaged in?
FP: Combat assaults. Taking troops in or picking them up. Resupplying them after they were in there. Taking them in and out of there wasn’t too bad, it was the re-supply that got a little bit hairy at times.

SM: How so?

FP: Because we had no support. We had no gunship support. You were out there by yourself.

SM: And what kind of weapons systems were on the Hueys, just the 60 gunners?

FP: Just two door gunners, one on each side, M-60s.

SM: Can you relate some of the more interesting, hairier events?

FP: Well, you never knew. I mean, I…taken several holes. I was fortunate I didn’t get shot up too bad, I mean, the ship didn’t. But we did take some rounds at times. One day we were out flying and I heard it go through the…you can hear it. I don’t care, I mean even with the wop, wop, wop and your radio’s going, and your headset, earplugs and the whole works it’ll still go plunk! Went right up behind my head and between me and the crew chief behind me and up and…he said, “Well, sir, I guess that was the right place for it because it missed us both!”

SM: It didn’t damage the aircraft very seriously?

FP: No, it just went up, just a hole up through the ceiling and the interior of the helicopter. It missed the blades, it missed the main rotor system, missed the whole works. Another one, I was leading a combat assault, we were on our about third and it was…we were out in an area east of Cu Chi which is where the 25th division was stationed and a round came through. We were on about our third insert and a round came through the front windshield, right over about there going this way. I took Plexiglas in the arm. If I hadn’t had my visor down I’d have probably been hit…I probably would have spent a good hour picking it out of my face because that and a nuclear shield, there was a big chunk of that ended up in the back of the aircraft and I could hear it bounce off my visor on my helmet. My co-pilot says, “Sir, I think I smell smoke.” So we turned the lead of the…and we were low level at about 90 knots when it came through. So that was the end of our flying that day, at least our crew. The rest of the company stayed on.

SM: What was your biggest concern as a pilot during that first tour? Maybe what weapons system, or what environment when going into contact, when going into an operation?
FP: After about the first three or four we didn’t even think about it. You were just doing your job and that was it. Day to day, “Where are we going today,” and, “What are we going to do,” and you just didn’t think about it. “Well let’s hope Charlie doesn’t get too friendly. If he does, call in some support and see what happens.” We, they developed an excellent chest protector that would stop a 50 caliber, yes. Of course it would give you a pretty sore chest but it would stop it. In addition to that we also wore flack jackets, but the flack jacket always has a chest protector so we wouldn’t get shrapnel. And no qualms about wearing it, I’ll tell you. They developed an excellent seat, it also would stop a 50. It was armored and it was a sliding portion that would slide up to the right hand side of…or the left hand side, depending on what seat you were in. You got, I got so I could fly the helicopter low in the seat because the seat hit. The armor didn’t, just the seat inside would move up and down. All the way down, all the way back. Got to fly that helicopter with no problem, I never flown one that way before. I like to sit up and closer, but you learn. You hide as best you can. No, it just, once in a while we knew you’re going to do a [hot air hit]. The Marine Corps and the Navy and the Air Force did a good job of prepping. If it was really bad sometimes we could call in our friendly artillery which I could when I was with the Cav Troop, I had my artillery observer with me in my aircraft. But really you just did your job.

SM: What were the biggest challenges in creating B packet, what became B-Troop?

FP: Probably making sure that the men were trained as best as they could be to do their job. The better a man is trained the more chance he gets of coming back and that was my mission was to bring everyone back. I didn’t succeed but I had hoped to be able to. You would have probably thought that was rather a wild dream, but due to the area we were going into. We found Hamburger Hill, so I mean, you’ve probably read the…even though we didn’t get the credit for it.

SM: Did you feel that the soldiers being sent to you were top notch, that they were being well trained in their initial training, their basic and then their MOS training? AIT’s?

FP: Yeah, they were well trained. As I say, as we were talking earlier, some of them had got to the point where…I had some goofballs because they’d been weeded out earlier and they were assigned to me. Well I weeded out the bad and we took the good. And the ones that I had turned out to be excellent. They were well trained, both in their technical and in their infantry.
And I had some squad leaders that had been to Vietnam before, I had some platoon sergeants that
had been to Vietnam before. I had some pilots who had been to Vietnam before. This all helped.

SM: You had been…

FP: I had been to Vietnam, my executive officer had been to Vietnam, my operations
officer had been to Vietnam, two of my platoon leaders had been to Vietnam. So the scouts and
the guns, we unfortunately lost our gun…platoon leader just before we left the states due to
health reasons. I think I remember he had an ulcer. Then our maintenance people had all been
over, the NCOs and the warrant officers. So this was a big help. The first two were in the 128.
We didn’t have but just 2-3 that had been to Vietnam before. Of course they could help, they
helped during our initial training phases, but it’s a whole new ball game. I mean, you’ve got
acres and acres and miles and miles of nothing but jungle. There’s no place to go. The aircrafts
got to, got to fly.

SM: So you credit your success and a lot of your units success with the combat
experience of many of its officers and NCOs?

FP: That plus the training, the training we gave them before they went over. We didn’t
cut corners.

SM: Could you describe the organizational structure of the troop? The manpower and
major unit breakdowns as far as groupings? I know, I’m sorry to put you on the spot like that.

FP: It’s been thirty years. Well it was basically you had, of course, your headquarters
with the CO, XO, clerks, first sergeant, and an operations officer and his operations sergeant and
an EM because of, and the operations being from both flight and operations. Technical
operations.

SM: Because you had both air assets and ground assets, right?

FP: Yes. Yes. And I had my air rifle platoon. They were lifted, they had the Slick
helicopters, the UH 1H model to carry them. They were basically an infantry platoon but it was
ground reconnaissance is what they were doing. They went out their fighting as infantry they
had to, of course, at times, but they were out there basically for ground reconnaissance. You saw
something you didn’t know what it was, you put your infantry in, they went and checked it out.
Then we had our scout platoon, which had 10 aircraft, the OH-6, and they each had a pilot and a
scout observer. They also had a machine gun in the door. And then you had your weapons
platoon, which had 9 cobras. Crew chief for each aircraft and a crew of two. There was no crew
chief that flew on those. You had a crew chief and a gunner on the Slick aircraft. Then in
headquarters we had two Slicks, my commanding controller...I was...had the intrical radios that
belong in the aircraft, there was three radios; one FM, one UHF and one VHF. And then in order
to also have contact with squadron and with artillery Mr. Thompson came up with a neat little
rack to fit in the aircraft that we could put two of the RC-25s or whatever, the vehicular mounted
radio. It was double stacked, plugged in, and they came up with that in less than 24 hours.
When the guy who was going to do it said, “Well Mr. Thompson I could probably come up with
that in about 3 weeks,” he says, “You got 'til the end of tomorrow.” And it worked. We ran the
antennas along the skids and had tremendous...so I had capability of using 5 radios at once.
Now I could monitor, and they set it up so that somebody sitting in the back, our artillery
observer, could use his hand right but I could also key in from my position in the aircraft. Now
that took some...we had some good electronics people. In addition to my troop, of course then I
have my maintenance section of the troop. The 333rd transportation detachment which was a
second or, no, the third [?] aircraft maintenance detachment was attached to the troop in directs
of order...directs of order of attacks. I think it was attacks. Anyway they all worked for me.
SM: Well what size was that detachment?
FP: I don’t know, you’ll have to ask Fred Thompson, I don’t remember. But it was one
officer, one [warrant] officer, and the rest were...one NCO, and the rest were enlisted. A
section...the detachment NCO, the maintenance technician, and I was a major, called for a
captain and he went over and he immediately left the unit when we got to Vietnam because I
promised him, I said, “You do a good job for me,” and I said, “I’ll see that you get a company
when you get over here.” He wanted to make this company, and he got it. I didn’t even have to,
so. And he did an excellent job.
SM: So in terms of both men assigned and attached, can you approximate the strength of
your troop?
FP: A couple of hundred, somewhere, give or take a few. Maybe a few more, I
really...that’s gotten hazy.
SM: Well that’s a good size unit.
FP: Oh yeah, oh yeah. ‘Cause they say I had excellent officers, excellent key positions, I
had excellent NCOs and I had excellent, very well trained enlisted men which made my job that
much easier.
SM: Now with your second tour in Vietnam with B-Troop, what were some of the more important experiences and engagements and operations that you guys did?

FP: Well, unfortunately as I said, I had got a case of [dysentery] which hit me in May so I was in command in Vietnam just about 2 months was all. During that period we were trying to get everything operational, get the rotor blades back in the helicopters, the helicopters flying back into a maintenance sequence once again so that they all wouldn’t come in to one hundred hour inspections at the same time. We had to pull complete periodic inspection which was the hundred hour before leaving. Mr. Thompson ignored that, put them right back on the schedule that he had on before so we wouldn’t phase them in and out. His product commander wanted to know why I had an aircraft in periodic, he said, “You just got here a short time ago,” “Yes sir.” He said, “Well didn’t you pull them before you came over?” I said, “Yep.” I said, “You want them all to come down to periodic the same day?” Said, “No.” I said, “Well?” End of that discussion. So as far as any really significant, we had been sent down into a valley looking for some of the enemy. Running an operation with the brigade when we were assigned to a division and I’m not even sure exactly what it was. Oh, they were going out into the A Shau Valley, one of the brigades, and they wanted an air cav troop on stand by for down aircraft to secure, be able to put the air rifle platoon in to secure an area of a crashed helicopter and the troops down there and so forth so we spent a day out in the A Shau Valley and the next day I got dysentery. It was that day that the troop found Hamburger Hill and got the division into one good fire fight which was a complete complex, headquarters complex of all kinds of sophisticated gear in it. Very close to the Laotian border, or back right on the border almost. Of course that got the division into a pretty good firefight. Unfortunately they finished the firefight, backed off the hill, and Charlie took it over again.

SM: What did you think of that? In terms of being an officer in charge of troops over there and here’s, you have a much better understanding of the strategy being in place and being employed; what were your thoughts, what were your contemporaries thoughts, about this kind of strategy? Go take this hill and then leave it and surrender it and let it be taken back over?

FP: All my training up to that point I’d been told, you know, you take the ground, you do the job that you’re to do, you close with and decisively defeat the enemy. Period. That’s the old armor doctorate and I just…I went back after a year, in ’65-’66 went back and ’69 they were still taking the same ground they were taking when I was there in ‘65-’66 and I said, “This does not
make sense!” And of course when an operation is being run by politicians half way around the world that are calling the shots, and you’re restricted by either a political or geographic boundary, there is no way you can win a war. When the ground commander’s got to call Washington and say, “Well I think we ought to bomb this…” “Well, let’s take a look…well no, not today.” Or “Well if you get shot at you can return fire.” Now, when I was there the first tour some of the best was when we were working the other Vietnamese. I said, “You receive fire out of that village, blow it”. We did one time, they burned the entire village, we evacuated all the civilians and burnt the village and boy there was all kinds of secondary explosions. It was on a river and it was an ammo and fuel dump. So…and they knew it, I’m sure. That was…but it is, it’s a little bit demoralizing to go back in and take the same territory year after year after year and not do the job and of course the ground commander’s hands were tied, so what could you do? We didn’t go over there to win the war, I promise. We should have, because we were over there to, actually, basically the good and evil. The free enterprise country vs. the communist socialist country. As far as I’m concerned those that are in Vietnam today…I’d love to go back, but I will not go back to Vietnam as long as the communists are in rule. It’s against my grain. I still consider them my enemy.

SM: When you went back the second time, this was after Tet ’68…

FP: Yes.

SM: …this was after Johnson made a decision to run for reelection, what did you think about that? What did you think about Tet and what did you think about Johnson’s decision not to run? How did that affect you as an officer?

FP: Well, it really didn’t affect me, I mean, Tet, I was thankful I wasn’t there but by the same token we should have seen it coming. Possible something did and it didn’t get to the point where it should have, to be disseminated properly. In fact, if we’d have kept right on pushing at that time I think we probably could have pushed ourselves all the way up. And of course with a little bit of bombing early in some strategic places in North Vietnam we could have probably ended the fighting soon. Granted you don’t want to purposely run and kill innocent civilians, but by the same token that innocent civilian can throw a grenade, strap a satchel charger grenade on a kid and send him into a group of GI’s and say, “When you get in there, just pull this pin, give them big surprise!” They did that. A friend of mine, it was his first tour, he was a Recon, ground Recon with the 173rd Airborne. They hit the ground and there was this woman standing
there in the field and his platoon sergeant shot her. He said, “What did you do that for?”
Walked over and he lifted up her blouse, she had a grenade in her hand. So this is the type of
enemy that you’re fighting. “Here, sell you a coke,” full of ground glass. Dig tunnels and tie
snakes in the roof…now I didn’t see any of this, but I heard about it. And you get these
warnings, “Be careful of…”. So to me we should have, after we kicked them…their butts in Tet
finally we should have continued but we didn’t and it wasn’t the ground troops. It wasn’t the
soldiers. And then it got to the point where it got more and more demoralizing and morale was
very hard to keep. I talked to many of the commanders who had problems with morale. When I
moved from the troop up to 17th group headquarters and we had 30 company size units in the
group. We got reports, I knew what was going on, I was [?] personnel administration and we
were having problems with drugs, with whatever.

SM: Racial tension?
FP: Some, sure.
SM: Fraggings?
FP: I don’t think…I think that was after I left, I don’t think we…or at least not in our…I
don’t think we had any in the group that I can remember. And I had no qualms about walking
anywhere in my troop very unarmed in the day or night because I knew they were going to take
care of me because I was taking care of them. I learned back in ROTC, I had a captain tell me,
he says, “You take care of your troops,” and he said, “and your troops will take care of you.
Don’t ever forget that.”
SM: What did you think of General Westmoreland and his decisions and things in
particular, for instance the emphasis placed on things like body counts and what not?
FP: Well that gets into a number of things. We should have been doing our job and I
was really…even though I wasn’t too far from Saigon we were under the 1st aviation brigade and
then we were under, our battalion was under the brigade and so…and I was down in the
company, so he went to company to battalion to brigade and USRV and MACV and he was way
up 5 echelons higher. I saw the man and that was because I was…I went to the Bob Hope show
and Westmoreland was there so I did see him but that was about the extent of it. As far as his
philosophy I was too busy out there flying helicopters and trying to keep myself from getting
shot and keep me out of aircraft in the air. And we had some old equipment when we went over
there in 1965. We got the equipment that the 1st cavalry had turned down.
SM: Did you see a change from ’65 to ’69 not…obviously there was the big change, but I guess you were there during the transition from Westmoreland to Abrams?

FP: Yeah, Abrams was the CO.

SM: So what did you…did you see any transition as far as that major change? Did the upper echelon have any effect on units like yours?

FP: I was part of a division. All I was interested in was keeping my squadron commander happy and my brigade commander happy because I was in direct support of the brigade and keep him happy. And then the assistant division commander who was out for operations who was out, you know, nosing around all the time. He was an aviator and he was rather demanding, would drop in on you. One day he said, “Major Pierce, how come you haven’t found the enemy?” I said, “Sir, we’re trying.” I wanted to get him into the biggest fire fight possible! We did out there on Hamburger Hill, finally.

SM: So Hamburger Hill, and then with your dysentery you moved up after that incident you moved up to S1?

FP: Of the 17th aviation group. I was reassigned back to the 1st aviation brigade for reassignment. So I went back to brigade and I walked in and the G1 and I had gone to the advanced course together so, I mean, I knew him and what he had to offer to us. He said, “Well how about going down to the 3rd Squadron” and he said, “You're out a little bit earlier than we planned on it but we’re going to assign you down to the 3rd squadron, 17th cav down in the Delta,” and I said, “Well what position?” And he said, “Well, special assistant to the CO.” I said, “Well alright,” and I said, “Then will I become the exec?” and he said, “No, the S3,” and I said, “Huh uh.” I mean, I could go in there and be a hatchet man for the squadron commander if I’m going to be the exec and not the 3 because then I have to start working with the guy. So I said, “What else you got to offer?” He said, “How about S1 for 17th group?” And I said, “Fine,” and he got accused of assigning nothing but armor officers as the [?] groups. And it was true, they all were.

SM: And your primary responsibilities there were administration of the…

FP: Actually my primary duties were personnel.

SM: Personnel.

FP: Officer personnel. I had an excellent NCO that handled the enlisted personnel assignments, and I handled all the officer assignments except field grade, but all company grade
and more went through me, across my desk. I made a tentative assignment, discussed it with my executive officer and kind of go or no go, but normally in fact it got to the point where I wasn’t even coordinating with the exec, it was my choice and I settled it and I kept track because as long as I kept the battalion commanders from screaming for help, and I had documented everything. I knew exactly where the people were, both enlisted and officers so there was no problem when I briefed every day incoming officers on what they would be expected to do, what units they were with, going to. First I gave them their assignment and then we went into a briefing, an in country briefing about the type of unit they would be going to. A couple of times I got some squawks from some cobra trained pilots that I had to put into assault helicopter companies, but I said, “Listen, you go down there and do the job for 6 months and put in a request for training, we’ll honor it.” Most of them didn’t, but we had a few more complained up to the command and came back down through channels and I said, “Hey, we’re short pilots and they’re pilots. You want to double load the cobra units or do you want to have all of our units up to strength?” That was the end of that comment. That was a…I had a captain air defense artillery as my admin or adjunct, and he was excellent with the paper work and so he did all the paper work. He was over there, he…so his records would show that he had served a tour in Vietnam. All of a sudden the DA looked and they had a lot of these air defense artillery personnel that hadn’t been to Vietnam yet and of course they were falling behind. Most of them were Westpoint grads, regular Army officers one way or the other. They said, “Hey, you got to at least have a tour if you’re going to be competitive.” Then they said, “Send them over and don’t get them shot! They’ve got too much training!” and I can see the Army’s point. And he was an outstanding officer, did a great job for me. And if I was gone for a day, either out inspecting or out assisting other battalions or down attending…once a month they had the S1s get together at brigade headquarters. The brigade commander would have his group commanders in for a commander’s call and the S1s went along for an S1 so we could discuss personnel problems and…which was good, excellent. So he’d fill in briefly. He did a good job too because I’ve sat in on his briefings, I’d get back early and slip in and he always already started so I’d just sit there and listen to him. First time, then I didn't have to anymore.

SM: What were the directives that…for instance when you were when you started off as B Troop commander, your brigade and your squadron commander; what were their prior A
missions for you, in the broad sense you know. What did they want to make sure you
accomplished?

FP: Well, the squadron commander just said, “You’re in direct support of this brigade
and whatever the brigade commander wants you to do until such time as we have a possible
squadron mission, you do what he wants.” So, and he took me to a brigade briefing, you know,
and then we sat down and this operation was going…and then I went back and briefed the troop.
I coordinated daily with the brigade 3, the S3, to find out what he wanted me to do. Well I
walked in one day and he said, “Tomorrow,” he said, “I want you to put this kind of a team here,
and this kind of a team here and this kind of a team here,” and I said, “Wait a minute, major.
You come down and sign the report and you put the green tabs on your shoulder,” I said, “You
make the decisions. Until that day, give me the mission and I’ll decide what I’m going to use.”
And boy it just got dead quiet. Silence in that talk. And the essence, 3 or the 2 was also a major
was going like this behind [makes gestures and noises]. And he said, “Okay, I want you to cover
this area.” I said, “Fine.” And as I was walking out the 2 said, “Listen, when you’re running
your teams back and forth,” he said, “How about checking this area out for me?” I said, “Sure.
I’d be glad to.” And from that day on we had no problems, he just gave me the mission. I said,
“Give me a mission order and I’ll do it. If and when I can’t do it and don’t do it to the
satisfaction, then you have your proper ways to go through your brigade commander to the
squadron commander and back to me and it will be taken care of.” I don’t believe in a staff
officer telling me how to run my unit.

SM: So it was very flexible for you?

FP: Oh, it was. Well, it’s a flexible type of unit. I mean, you’ve got your gunships and
you’ve got your scout aircraft and your scouts are out there looking for the enemy and
consequently they get shot down quite often because they’re low. You can’t see at 3,000 feet,
you have to be right on treetops and by the same token if they took fire there was a cobra going
like this almost immediately and you better get out of the way because he’s going to, he’s going
to shoot…and of course the standard thing of it, though, when you took fire you dropped a
grenade, smoke grenade. Then gave you a pretty good idea of where I was…I know during the
first tour occasionally we’d knickmark an LZ in a difficult area, I mean, you got a lot of rice
paddies, which one do you want, drop a grenade and Charlie would drop the same grenade and
same killer.
SM: Did that happen often?
FP: It was more a…as the year went on depending on the area. Didn’t work in the trees as much as it did down in the rice paddies.
SM: What other experiences from Vietnam do you think were important, significant?
FP: For me?
SM: Yes sir.
FP: It, well, from day one of your training as you well know, being an ROTC graduate, you’re taught that your job is, if called upon, to protect your country. And I feel very strongly towards that. As I say, the world broke up on Korea in 1950 and I had already been accepted to college. I knew it was a land grant college, I knew I was going into ROTC, so funny I would much rather go as a commissioned officer. In fact, had I, say, dropped out of college and been drafted, I would have applied for OCS. That’s how strongly I felt about…so one way or the other I was going to get a commission and I was going to serve. I knew that, it wasn’t a matter of if, it was when. So, and I think you always look forward to, although in a way, not…well you mentioned you missed Desert Storm and I missed Korea because by the time I got my commission Korea, the fighting, was over with. I did go over, but…and it was still not the safest place in the world to be, but a lot safer than it was in the early ‘50’s. You wonder, “How will I react getting shot at? Has my training helped me? Has it,” you know, “Has it not? Am I trained well enough to lead men in combat? Have I got them trained enough so that we take minimum casualties?” which is always the commander’s thought, or should be. Not necessarily so, but should be. As far as helping me, I don’t know, you mature immediately when you start getting shot at, believe me. I mean, these young men you took over, they were 18, 19, 17 years old and they came back as men, they weren’t boys anymore. Some of them were affected differently than others. Some of them had problems, no doubt about it. I guess due to my maturity and my belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, my personal Savior, I know that he has a time for me to go and if it happens to be in combat, well, so be it. So I…but I’m not on a fatalist, I mean, I don’t believe in taking chances. There’s just so much protection you can get. I did wear my chest protector, I wore my flack jacket and I took…I didn’t take unnecessary chances. But there were times on missions where you had no choice but to go to the extremes. I prided myself in the way I…my flying ability and I’m sure that saved me more than once; in fact, I know it saved me more than once. Every now and then they’d get me to try something to…I was over there the first tour and
the river rats were just coming in, they were part of the 9th division and they were river patrols
and they were out on some of the islands looking and they wanted to resupply them. There was
no place, you know, they went in by boat and there was no way they could go by boat so they got
the wild idea of using rubber rafts. Put the supplies in rubber rafts and then sling them
underneath a helicopter and well, I blew the roof off a Vietnamese hooch taking this up out of
this pond to see if it would work. Well it about half filled with water and it was really…I was
really pulling, but I picked it up. They’d built a frame so it wouldn’t bend in the middle, kind of
blew their…”Oh,” my crew chief says, “My gosh sir! We just blew the roof off that hooch down
there!” I don’t think we ever did that anymore. It was tried and I kind of went back and said,
“Well, it depends on who the pilot is and what the aircraft is if you’re going to do that,” I said, “I
wouldn’t recommend just putting anybody on that mission.” But those are the things that you
learn from and I was glad when the tour was over. I had a wife and two children and I wanted to
go home to them, but by the same token it wasn’t my choice. I was sent over, I knew I was
going back for a second tour. I wore the wings of an aviator and I took that…volunteered to be a
pilot in our Army. I could have grounded myself at any time, I mean, lost my wings and not
gone but I knew I’d be in another position so I’d rather fly. That’s what I was trained to do and I
did it.

SM: What did you think about Nixon’s program of Vietnamization, and you were back
in the United States I guess when a lot of that program was really getting pushed, really getting
underway and the pullout of American forces was going on?

FP: Well as far as I’m concerned we deserted the Vietnamese. I mean, we should have
done the job or not gone in in the first place. We were committed to protecting them from the
communists. What do we do? We pulled out and the communists took over, so as far as I’m
concerned we deserted the South Vietnamese. And it wasn’t the military, and some of them
blame the military. Well it wasn’t the military because the military’s hands were tied.

SM: What did you think about the rotation system? You just mentioned ’65, explain…

FP: ’65 was not good because, and in ’65 our company went in and the majority of us
stayed in the same unit for a year and then all went home at the same time. So you get in new
people and they have no idea what’s going on. They’re just in from the States and it’s like
you’re just bringing in a whole new company again. Later they got the idea of, “We’ll bring a
new unit in but certain people will be transferred into other units and we will bring people in that
have been in country for anywhere from 4 to 8 months so that it spreads out the rotation date of
the personnel.” And I think that was an excellent idea. Now I was able when I came in there in
’69 to protect certain individuals but only certain. So I kept my XO and my operations officer
and my maintenance officer. I said, “You can do the rest of it with what you need to.” And they
did. They took certain pilots and certain enlisted personnel and transferred them into other units
and brought in new people that had been in country. And then, as they left, we got in new people
and it worked out much better than everybody leaving at once which really stops operations for a
while because you got a new in country trainee you get a new aviator in who doesn’t know the
terrain, he’s fresh out of flight school, he needs some experience riding with somebody else for a
while until you can turn him loose, let him go out there on top of the jungles and not get lost. So
big difference in your navigation. Close to the ground, miles and miles of jungle, and then your
nice roads and trees and farm land in the United States.

SM: Do you think it’s different for some units, some types of units, air cav say vs.
infantry? One of the criticisms in some scholarly works is that the 365 day rotation system and
rotation of either individuals or small groups of individuals especially into combat units and into
ground units, that that usually disrupted morale. You’d have those…you’re in a competition, the
FNG vs. the guys who’d been there for a while. The FNGs sometimes were put in real
precarious situations in some ground units. So were there drawbacks, maybe, to that system
depending upon the unit?

FP: Well it’s up to the unit commander. You know, if he’s doing his job he can ease
that. He gets that new guy that just came in and he puts him with an older person and says,
“He’s yours, you train him for in country,” and unfortunately that doesn’t always happen. I
mean, I’ve read quite a bit of military history and replacements were going into France in the
second World War and the guys that didn’t know zip from Sinoloa and there they were and they
had the same problem in those days integrating replacements into units. So it’s been a challenge,
and of course sometimes if it’s heavy combat, you know, you’ve got to have the warm body
because you had casualties and you need replacements. Or you had people who reached their
365th day and they’re gone. Of course during the Second World War and Korea was duration. I
don’t know, I’m not so sure that it shouldn’t have been duration in Vietnam, gotten the job done
and then everybody…they didn’t. They decided, “Well morale will be better if they know that
they will be leaving in a year.” And sometimes they just locked on that date and to heck with
everything else. Others didn’t, you know, you had to pull them off to get down to the replacement stage. Just depended on the person.

SM: Do you think that was a mistake, not having a duration mentality?

FP: Well I don’t think we went over there with the idea of winning the war. Not the military, but the politicians. I really don’t think they ever…and look how Johnson got us into it. A lot of things have been pointed out since the end of hostileites and since Johnson’s passed away. Was the Gulf of Tonkin incident really instituted by the North Vietnamese? We don’t know. So, but we do know that the South Vietnamese were having problems with infiltration and with irregulars and with regular troops. You know that the Ho Chi Minh trail down through Laos and Cambodia was pretty good size, there was lots of stuff being brought down. But I feel, and that was bombed and it was worked over, but it still I feel should have gone further north which we finally decided. Then there was the excuse of, “Well, there’s foreign ships in Haiphong Harbor. Give them 10 days to get out or seal in the harbor. Blow all the docks, bomb the entry way, if there’s any ships in there, sorry. That’s too bad.” Whether they were Russian, Chinese, or what. We were fighting a war with them too. It was a cold war, but still it could have been a hot war at anytime.

SM: Well what did you think about that fear? Because of course, that was the justification given by politicians, by Johnson and others was we can’t go in and, for instance, bomb Haiphong Harbor because you’ve got Soviet and Chinese ships, you’ve got Soviet and Chinese personnel there and we don’t want this war to broaden, to include these other major powers.

FP: 10 days, 2 weeks, you get them out. And that can be done through different diplomatic channels and it didn’t have to…and I know we didn’t have diplomatic relations but there was ways…we did have countries that could have gotten it. In 2 weeks we would have gotten there, “Get them out, or we’re going to bomb. I don’t care whether your ships are there or not!”

SM: Do you think that the fears of broader war were unfounded? Do you think that if we had gone in and done, say, what you did, what you just said, “You’ve got this amount of time to get your people out and we’re going to bomb after that and if you’re there, oh well!”? Do you think that the fears that did exist were that this might cause World War III?
FP: I don’t think so, I don’t think so. Because I don’t think Russia wanted a nuclear holocaust. Unfortunately McArthur was not given free hand in Korea in 1950 and it’s escalated from that day on in Southeast Asia or in Asia. And I feel that if he’d been given his free run to bomb across the Yellow River into China where they were building up then that would have come to a screeching halt a lot sooner and we’d have had a lot less American lives lost. I feel that the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was a wise decision. It saved countless thousand lives on both sides. I had a roommate in college that was due to go to the Philippines on the first wave into Japan. Army grunt. He said, “Thank God we didn’t have to go.” Because he…after they surrendered they still put the troops in the same exact place they were going to go and he said, “We’d have never made it alive.” So sure innocent civilians were killed, but by the same token, it’s war, and if they would have bombed us it would have been civilians killed. So I feel it goes back to that point and has escalated every since.

SM: To MacArthur?

FP: To MacArthur.

SM: You actually agree with some of the theories and philosophies that were going around the 1950s, “We should go ahead and use nuclear weapons against the Chinese.”

FP: Well if not nuclear at least conventional across the Yellow. As I say, you can’t win a war if your military commander’s hands are tied or restricted by a military or geographical boundary. And he could not go across…political I mean, not military, but political or geographical. He could not cross the Yellow river, but they could. They could come south and go right back again and I’m sure some of our jet’s went over but…

SM: Well speaking of borders and I guess the important question of borders in the Vietnam War; what did you think about some of the Laotian operations and do you know if B Troop was involved in some of those cross border operations into Laos, for instance and stuff like that?

FP: You know, and there’s all that jungle down there, it’s awful hard to define a border.

SM: There’s not a nice line.

FP: Nope, nope. I know I flew over Cambodia in 1965 or ’66 sometime and they had a code word they used and we were on a night operation and all of a sudden on the emergency channel which we’d monitor all the time I heard this, “Aircraft on the 350 degree radial of the Ton San Nhut, V.O.R. you’re flying into stormy weather,” or “You’re in stormy weather,” that
was it, and I said, “Ooh.” We had, what was it, navigation aid. I flipped it out, the pilot ones set
right up over the console and with the light on at night it blinded you, you just couldn’t keep it
down. I flipped it on and looked and I said, “Uh oh.” Did a 180 and went back. We were
looking for a area on the ground where a Vietnamese unit had gotten badly hit and we finally
found it. Went in, made a night Medevac out of there and with the 8 aircraft and the aircraft and
took back wounded and dead to the military hospital, to the Vietnamese military hospital.

SM: On bigger issues of Vietnam and how it fits into the American experience; what do
you think we should take away from the experience, what lessons should we have learned or can
we still learn from the Vietnam War?

FP: I think the biggest one is that if you’re going to get into an operation like that, do the
job. Don’t mess around or don’t do it at all. If you’re called on by an ally then come in and
help. Do it and do the job and don’t just go in halfway because they’re still going to be your
enemy when you leave. We have enemies all over the world today. We got, and I know we got
the Chinese trade and all that good stuff but I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could throw them or
the North Vietnamese or the North Koreans and I’m not so sure about the Russians. Now most
of your Eastern block countries, yes. I think they were under Russian oppression and they’ve
gotten them out of there, but the Russians themselves I do not believe that they’re not our
enemies, and that they’re not our friendly…nope, nope, nope. I may be wrong, but that’s the
way I look at it. And the same thing with Castro and Cuba and Hussein, Sadam Hussein and
Iran. I think the Muslims are not friendly to us..non-Muslims.

SM: One last question…

FP: That’s the way I look at it.

SM: Okay. One last question…

FP: I think we need to be vigilant as a country.

SM: Do you see them, I guess the Muslims in particular, a lot of new cold war scenarios,
you know, try to identify who will be the next major enemy for the United States and some focus
on Asia, China. Other’s focus on Muslim countries. Do you think, perhaps, it is the Muslim
countries that are…

FP: Both of them.

SM: Both of them? Which one would you consider more dangerous, more threatening?
FP: Well I think China because who is furnishing equipment to all the rest of them, selling it? Well the Russians are to, I mean, let’s face it; jets, nuclear knowledge, that’s being stolen and sold. Because of the break up and the military over there is not being paid well and so they’re stealing and they’re selling and if they can…it’s chaos by the sound of things and by the looks of things and I think you probably gathered by now that I’m quite on the conservative side but I can’t help it. And so I read periodicals and things that are on that side, you don’t get it out of the TV unless you’re on Cox Cable or network news or their network, and I don’t have cable right now but I’m very considered as certainly considering it for that reason. Our journalism is all gone slanted as far as I’m concerned, so.

SM: Yeah, speaking of journalism, what did you think about the role of journalism in the Vietnam war?

FP: I think it hurt, completely hurt us. This instant TV, where in the second World War there was definite censorship and there should have been in Vietnam but there wasn’t and the same thing over in Desert Storm. It can hurt you, it can hurt the troops and then of course Vietnam was not a popular war and then they show the battles going on on the 6:00 news and you’re getting anti war rallies and no support, it demoralizes your troops, you get…

SM: So you think that the role of TV, the role of journalism generally was detrimental to the war effort?

FP: Yes, yes I do. Because of the effect it had on the populace and the anti war sentiment that we had to begin with. Just the mentality of some of our students and I’m not so sure that wasn’t stirred up, you know. Students are very easily led, shall I say? Impressionable, easily led. It doesn’t take much to stir up. One thing can lead to another and the first thing you know…I was in college during the panty raid days, you know? Panty raids. Obviously they had men’s dorms and women’s dorms, and you know, and it was…anyway. So I had to watch myself in the major that I was in because if you had any strikes like that against you, forget it.

SM: So what did you think of the Paris peace, and the peace of ’73 or January ’73 in Vietnam?

FP: I think it was wrong. It just gave South Vietnam back over to the North Vietnamese, it was just a matter of time before they ruled south even though we’d worked with the South Vietnamese when the amount of equipment that China had poured into North Vietnam, it was just a matter of time. And I don’t think that the South Vietnamese had that strong of a
leadership, either. When they started south and then we just got out and got out anyway we could. Hell I can’t say as I blame him, I mean, they knew they were marked people and we’ve made acquaintances with Vietnamese there, my wife in fact has assisted in English, she’s a teacher. She was an elementary school teacher and she volunteered to help work with Vietnamese on English as a second language. And we had some enjoyable times with some Vietnamese families, Cambodian. A lot of refugees came into the state of Washington, that was one of the areas that they allowed them in.

SM: What about how the government takes care of it’s veterans from the Vietnam War. Do you think the government has done a good job of taking care of veterans since Vietnam?

FP: No, no. I don’t. Not only Vietnam but Desert Storm. I think they…it depends on the administration and they hadn’t done as good a job as could be done I don’t feel.

SM: But what do you think they should improve on?

FP: Well, they've pooh-poohed that with Agent Orange has caused problems. They've pooh-poohed the fact that there’d been some strange diseases in the veterans of Desert Storm. Instead of jumping in and trying to find out, they tried to push it under the carpet, sweep it under the carpet, at least it appears to me. Fortunately my health has been good with some minor exceptions but I been working for the same place for 7 years and I think I missed 3 days of work because of sickness.

SM: That’s great.

FP: And that was because my wife says, “You will stay home today, you’re not going to work,” and I said, “I have to,” “No you’re not!” So I said, “Okay.” But no, I’ve had excellent health, a little hypertension. Other than that I’m doing fine. Last physical everything was fine and I’m about due for another one and I don’t know of any major problems. Oh, I’ve got some arthritis and stuff like that that comes on with age. I was fortunate and not only, I had my belief. My Christian doctrine my Christian teaching and since Vietnam I’ve even had more and I don’t feel that shooting your enemy in combat is murder. In fact in the Bible as it is translated is kill, it’s “Thou Shalt Not Murder.” Under certain circumstances, killing is perfectly legitimate, i.e. execution. Texas does a pretty good job of that and I say, “Right on,” every time. We need a little more of that in Washington. We do use it, but I think that…well don’t get me started on the court system, the legal system, but I feel that a lot more could have been done for the veterans and I don’t mean money-wise necessarily but I mean just listening to and taking care of some of
the needs of the veterans. And you know when I signed up for the regular Army they said,
“We’ll take care of you for the rest of your life.” Wrong. I’m 67 years old, or will be next
Friday, my 67th birthday.
SM: Happy birthday.
FP: Thank you. But I can’t use a military hospital anymore, haven’t for 2 years. Oh
you’re 65 you’re on Medicare, out! In fact before that, Tricare, “Well we’re pretty filled up
here,” and I been going every since I retired in 1976 so we went with Group Health Cooperative
in Washington which has got an excellent plan and we have our health insurance through them
and so we pay a little more every month but we have the ability to be treated anywhere in the
world and by any doctor, but no more getting the benefits that they promised you if you
dedicated your life to the military and retired, so and of course they lost my records too and my
wife’s records, and “Oh, can’t find them.” We wanted a copy sent to our doctor. I don’t know
whether she just didn’t want to or whether they actually found them and we hadn’t been using
them and they knew we were on…and sent them off to the archives somewhere. I have no idea.
That’s why I don’t have time to go up there and fight with them. But our doctor serves a lot [?]
for the last 22, 23 years. But anyway, I feel anyway, though that the veteran’s administration has
let some down, although they were very good about taking care of my brother in law, did an
excellent job, second WW, that had some major health problems, we got him into a facility there
and it was a state facility for veterans in Washington, they took excellent care of him and the VA
also furnished some of the support monetarily for his chemo.
SM: You mentioned your faith a number of times. Do you feel that the Vietnam War
strenthened you faith?
FP: Oh yeah. Sure. When Charlie gets close to you, you get close to God. You kid,
they kid about, you know, “Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will
fear no evil because I’m the meanest SOB in the valley,” still. You know, there were many
times when he was right there as my copilot. Because there were some days there was no reason
that I shouldn’t die. We won’t get into all those, but things got a little bit hairy sometimes.
SM: Is there anything else you would like to add?
FP: I don’t think so, I think I’ve probably pretty well rambled on long enough and
covered enough.
SM: This ends the interview 1.