Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Charles Lipe. We are at Ft. Walton Beach, Florida on the 22nd of September, year 2000 at approximately 10:30 in the morning. All right, Mr. Lipe, would you please begin by first of all consenting, if you will, to an interview agreement orally. The purpose for this interview is of course to provide a record to historians and researchers and I will release my portion of this, and I was wondering if you would also release your portion?

Charles Lipe: I agree.

SM: Thank you. All right, would you give us a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

CL: Sure. I was born in Cooperstown, New York, home of baseball. I grew up…and my home was actually Sharon Springs, New York, about 40 miles west of Albany. At completion of high school I went to New Jersey Institute of Technology, which at that time was called Newark College of Engineering receiving a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. I then joined the Air Force after working for an engineering firm for a few months, ROTC. The reason I took ROTC is because I wanted to fly. I’d always had a real desire to fly. To tell the truth, as a slight aside, when I was finally grounded in ’69 medically, my career very much took a change from being a ‘love of job’ to ‘survival to retirement’. I just never…flying was it. Flying was gone, and the job lost its spice. I entered the Air Force in February of ’56, went to flight school. Actually, I
went to Stallings, North Carolina, Stallings Field in Kingston, North Carolina, which was later closed down because Seymour Johnson Air Force base. They figured they couldn’t have brand new pilots and B-52s flying in the same traffic pattern. Then, after I went to Enid, Oklahoma and I was in one of the latter B-25s, the basic training for multi engine B-25s at that time. I came out of that and went straight into SAC, was stationed at Pease Air Force Base, New Hampshire from 1957 until 1963. In ’63 they moved me to KC-135s. I was there until the end of 1965 in Riverside, California, March Air Force Base. At the time, when we got to 1965, SAC people who’d had a tremendous degree of stability and were never transferred, to tell the truth I had an ops officer went up to 2nd lieutenant to lieutenant colonel in the same squadron, so we had just super stability. Well they were finding that all the TAC and MAC people were going back for their second tours in Vietnam and SAC had never sent anybody, so that became an issue and they started to really move the pilots out of SAC and knowing that when we left we were headed for Vietnam, just a matter of time. I was at Pope Air Force Base in 130s through Early ’68 and then came down here to Hulbert Field and then went on out to Southeast Asia, 20th TAAS at Danang. After the war, or after my part of the war, I came back to Pope. I was back in 130s, back in my old staff job. Actually, I was back in exactly the same job I’d left the year before for six months and then I was grounded medically, having developed long problems with asthma. I finished out my career in civil engineering since that was the natural place I would be. I ended up my last year and a half in Germany at Hahn Air Force Base in the [Hunsbrick] region and then I retired back at Pope at the end of 1976. There’s a brief biograph.

SM: Excellent. While you were at ROTC at Newark College of Engineering, 1955, you probably went in in 1951? That’s when you went to school?
CL: Yes, sure.
SM: Korean War is going on. Was there much concern for you during that period of being drafted?
CL: Well no because if you were in college during the Korean War you weren’t’ up for the draft, so we were safe as far as everything went; we didn’t give it much thought. I know if I’d gotten out of college I’d have been up for draft.
SM: And after you finished college you said you had a brief time where you went and worked for an engineering company?

CL: I worked in Philadelphia for six months, from June of ’55 until about February of ’56 when I left to come down here, move down to North Carolina.

SM: Was it that brief time in the private sector that had an effect on your decision making?

CL: No, flying was the name of the game. It was everything for me, everything. The thing I was thinking about just the other day, I never really cared what I did as long as I flew. I could happily fly as a co-pilot. I just wanted to fly. It didn’t matter. I didn't have to be in command, I didn’t have to to advance; just as long as I flew, I was happy. I mean, flying was just an absolute love.

SM: Did you care what kind of aircraft you flew, fast movers, slow movers?

CL: No. I was in KC-97s and I loved it. It was a wonderful airplane to fly in. It was a pilot’s dream. It was forgiving and it was big and it was safe.

SM: And the training that you initially received when you entered the Air Force, how adequate was that?

CL: Excellent.

SM: Was it good, the training?

CL: Yes. See, I was the last and primary, I was one of the last crews to fly the O-1, not O-1, the PA-18, Piper Cub. Then I was one of the very early crews to fly the T-28 so from the P-18 it should have gone to the [?] but we didn’t, we went to the T-28. So I was in that transition period and the same thing happened when I went into multi-engine school, I was in the B-25s. So, I was always World War II type aircraft, never the fast-movers. I’d never been in a jet until I got out to KC-135s.

SM: When you got to SAC in ’57 and during your nine year stay there, how aware were you and how much did this play a part in your Air Force career that competition, that internal competition between TAC and SAC and some of the issues of turf battles and things like that that were going on? Did you see much of that?

CL: No, no, you didn't because SAC was so insulated. SAC insulated its people very thoroughly. They also demanded of us keep on alert as much as 14 days out of 21.
We had some God-awful alert tours. To tell you the truth, at the height of the Cuban crisis, we’d been on alert for almost 40 days continuous.

SM: Well I was just going to ask you about that because of course when you were there a lot of interesting things happened around the world, in particular the Bay of Pigs fiasco and then the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of ’62. What was it like for you, and being in SAC, when the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out? What happened? What did your unit do?

CL: Well we were put on base alert, on base 100% alert in the compounds continuously. What was it like? The night that they pulled the…the night that they called their bluff and we were so close to war that when I got up the next morning somebody had vomited in the hall. The tension was that high that a crewmember had actually thrown up. I remember Joyce came out to see me one last time and I wanted to go over to New York and [?] stay right here and I said, ‘Well this is a target,’ and she said, ‘Well you aren’t coming back. What’s the use of going?’ I remember sitting in the car just sobbing in each other’s arms. I mean, the tension was absolutely overpowering.

SM: Did you feel that we very well may go there?

CL: I thought we were within 15 minutes of atomic war. I mean, I just felt that the odds were probably more that we would launch than they were that we wouldn’t. I mean, we were there. It was Armageddon. It was there, right then, right now.

SM: Was that sentiment shared by all the other SAC officers you worked with at the time?

CL: I imagine the one that threw up in the hall was! Yes, I think it was. It was everybody was scared out of their wits. Now we were perfectly ready to go; there’d been no question about launching. One of the directives that came out was that in case of a launch, if civilians come on the runway, even if there are civilians and children you launch; you go right through them. Can you imagine what those big props would do to civilians, do to people? That was a directing that was out; in case of protestors on the base, you do not stop launch.

SM: What did you feel about that? Do you think you could have done that?

CL: Yes, I think I could have because we were committed; we believed in what did. We didn’t necessarily like what we did but we believed in what we did and I think
that’s a lot of difference in what exists now. I don’t necessarily think that the young
people believe so much in what they’re doing, but we absolutely did. We were naïve
probably, yes, but we believed in the overall goodness of our country and if we’d have
been told to launch, we would have launched; even if we would have left a red stain on
the runway.

SM: Hard decision.
CL: It would have been.

SM: You mentioned…were there any other highlights while you were at SAC,
‘57 to ’66?
CL: Well I did an awful lot of artic work. I went to Thule and spent two short
tours in Thule and that’s unique in itself. You don’t have to worry about it now, but if
you’re interested in that era I received a letter from a guy a year or two back asking me
for any anecdotes from artic operations in tankers and I sat down on my computer and
wrote 18 pages, single spaced. If you’d like that, I’ll send it to you.

SM: Please do.
CL: That tells a lot.

SM: Is that when you were flying both KC-97s and 135s?
CL: No, just KC-97s.

SM: Just 97s? You mentioned earlier that the transition from 97s to KC-135s
was not a very pleasant one.
CL: I just didn’t like the airplane. I didn’t like swept wings. I found them
unstable, I found them a little bit uncomfortable to fly. I never really did a good job; it
just wasn’t my kind of flying. Probably was a good thing I got moved to 130s. I don’t
know how long I would have survived before I busted a check ride so badly I couldn’t
have…I just didn’t fly it well. Why, I don’t know. I just hated the damn thing. It and I
were at loggerheads every moment of the day. Hand fly it, and it wobbled; fell off on
one, fell off on the other. Even on autopilot I couldn’t keep the wing straight exactly. I
just did not like the airplane. I was so glad to get back in something with props on the
front of it you couldn’t believe it!

SM: Did you talk to other pilots that had similar problems with the KC-135s?
CL: None of them liked it. I just talked to a guy here at the convention, I was saying I hated the 135s and he said, ‘I did too.’ Well that’s the first one I’ve ever talked to that really hated it. It was just the difference in temperament I think amongst the pilots that controls how good you do. I look at the fighter jocks of today and I’m absolutely in awe. I don’t even conceive of what they’re doing. I know how airplanes fly and I know the dynamics of controls and stuff, but what they do is so incredible.

SM: Now in your C-130 time at Pope from ’66 to ’68, what were your primary missions there?

FL: Carrying troops at Fort Bragg. We did a lot of drops.

SM: Parachute drops from the 82nd Airborne, Special Forces?

FL: Yep, and then for our overseas flights we did the European loop. There’s usually one or two crews out on that most all the time. We would go from Pope up to either Charleston or down to Charleston up to Dover, pick up cargo, go into lodges, and then we’d get off and another crew that had come in before would take that airplane and go on into usually Frankfurt and then we’d go up to England and then come on back. So, they usually had about four or five crews always in the system, one in each spot waiting for the plane to come and then they’d take it on. We also had a short tour. I had a short term in Mildenhall. I had to come home early because my mother passed away, but that was fun flying all over Europe. We got to see quite a bit of Europe and then head down to Turkey and I got out to see [?] up near the Eastern end. The joke out there was that the new bridge had been built by the Romans. As my fellow pilot commented, he said, ‘Turkey’s an amazing place, that’s rushing head-long than the 14th Century.’ You fly over and see all these little round houses or domes out in the middle of no place! But, as I say, that was strictly transition for Vietnam because everybody knew that as soon as you got your minimum time in the 130s you were getting orders to go out. That was just the staging point and we were all prepared for it, so it wasn’t the least bit surprising one day I got a call and said, ‘Chuck, you better sit down.’ ‘What’s the matter?’ ‘You got orders for ‘Nam.’ ‘Okay.’

SM: Did you volunteer for that?

CL: No, but it didn’t make any difference.

SM: You were going?
CL: You were going. You couldn’t have gotten out of it. It was just because I had spent so much time at Goose Bay and at Thule and in the artic that I had a current overseas return date from TDYs. I spent 270 days in three years I think to get a current date. So, I had a date newer than some of the guys just coming back but I didn’t have Vietnam tour. Nothing counted unless Vietnam was where you were going, and that’s just the way it was.

SM: Now were you concerned about not having Vietnam time for career purposes?

CL: No. See, I love to fly; career was secondary. I never was a career-oriented person. I just wasn’t.

SM: But to stay in and fly, and to receive the promotions necessary to stay in and not be…

CL: I never thought about it, but you’re probably right. Probably in the back of my mind that was there.

SM: So you went from Pope to down here?

CL: Down here, yep.

SM: To go through your transition in the 0-1 and to receive your counterinsurgency training? What was that training like?

CL: Good. I enjoyed the 0-1. I hadn’t been in a single engine airplane since I’d been in pilot school and I flew the PA-18 and then the T-28 but it was a fun airplane to fly and I had a good time with it and we had some solo flights. I went down off the road here and I went slow flight and looked at cars pass me a few times; that was always fun. It was a good tour. I had my wife down with me, knowing we were going for a year and being aware that things in war are never certain we opted to pull the kids out of school and bring them out here and put them in school, and then the week after we got down here the teachers went on strike and they weren't in school for the whole time. So, we had just a big two-month vacation I guess.

SM: What about the counter-insurgency training you received? What was that like?

CL: I don’t remember. I honestly don’t remember. It was interesting, it was good, but I really couldn’t tell you what the classes were at this point.
SM: Do you remember how much they covered as far as what was going on in Vietnam, what you should expect to encounter?

CL: I think they were quite comprehensive. I think they were quite comprehensive. But, honestly I don't remember specifics.

SM: Do you remember when you got to Vietnam, do you recall wishing that perhaps they’d talked about certain things at Hurlbert that they hadn’t talked about?

CL: Not particularly, no. Well, when you hear about my in country training, you’ll know that things were rather loose.

SM: Well what did your wife think about you going to Vietnam?

CL: Well she wasn’t happy about it certainly. To tell you the truth, my wife would like to do an interview with you to get the other side because she had some very specifics. We were at Fort Joyce stayed at the fort in Fayetteville so she had the support of all the other wives and the support of all the Vietnam widows, with their husbands over there. She found very much that the further you got from the military the less news there is, and she hated it. She went to visit her family and they were worried about me but they didn't want to know about the war, and that was uniform. She finally came back to Fayetteville and never left it for the rest of my tour just because she wasn’t comfortable because she couldn’t find out what was happening over there. She would love to talk to you.

SM: Okay, that would be great. Now when you were [interruption]. So what did you find out in terms of before you left; did you go from Hurlbert to Vietnam or did you go from…

CL: Well I took my family back to Fayetteville and then I flew out of Fayetteville, but the difference was probably…they didn’t give you any time, so part of my travel time getting to the West Coast was going back to Fayetteville and then flying out.

SM: Did you know where you were going?

CL: No…yes! We knew where we were going but they didn’t know we were coming. Does that tell you something?

SM: Sure.
CL: I got to Danang and they said, ‘Who are you?’ and I said, ‘I’ve got orders.’

‘Well we didn't have you on the list.’ You could have disappeared and they would have never known the difference.

SM: Until you collected your pay?

CL: Well I don’t know. I’m not completely certain that you couldn’t collect your pay through any…because I was in country. I don't know. I don't know what the situation would have been. I knew guys that did take a month off and then finally show up with units later because they didn’t know they were coming so they didn’t know they were late. I knew a couple of guys that got away with that.

SM: Wow, just hung around Vietnam for a month?

CL: Or a few weeks or something.

SM: And just had fun and partied and whatever?

CL: It was a very strange war.

SM: Then showed up? Okay, more power to them. Just out of curiosity, what were your thoughts as you were flying over and what was your impression upon landing in Vietnam? Where did you land?

CL: I landed at Tan Son Nhut.

SM: And when they opened those doors, what were your first impressions, feelings, thoughts?

CL: Hot, jungle…well, hot, not jungle. It was more desert like than I thought it would be because everything had been bulldozed out and flattened out and stripped back. I was apprehensive. A person that doesn’t go into a combat zone feeling apprehensive is rather stupid. We’d taken a three day break or four days at Clark going through jungle survival training, so that was kind of a nice break on our way in. It was neat to go out in the jungle and wander around for a awhile and swim in the streams. But, actually coming into country, I just look back at a single word that fits going in country the first time; it’s confusion because there’s so many guys going through from here to there. They finally got us together after an hour or two, load us on a C-47 and take us up to school at I want to say Phan Rang, is that where it was? Just south of Cam Ranh Bay; that’s where the 0-2 FAC-U it was called!

SM: FAC-U?
CL: Yes. [laughs]
SM: Appropriate.
CL: Face it, what we do is go and FAC it. Anyway…
SM: This is recording. That’ll be part of the transcript!
CL: Hey, I didn't say anything wrong!
SM: Nope.
CL: It’s F-A-C! How people want to interpret it is a different problem. They load us on a C-47 and take us up there. It was amazing to me that as the plane broke ground the crew chief came around with a case of beer and everybody had a beer. Well, that was…
SM: Except the pilot, right?
CL: I think he might have had one, too, I have no idea. It’s a different war. We flew with our windows open; there were several times when I threw the beer can out the window after takeoff. I mean, they can’t do nothing about me now so I can say these things! Just as a little aside, the 0-1s used to take the rockets out if they had a quiet mission and they would fill the rocket to with beer cans and beer, full beer, and they’d put a little pin across the back with a wire that came up into the cockpit. Then they’d go over these outlying camps that hadn’t had any beer for months and they’d put the nose up and pull those pins out and all the beer cans slide out the back and drop down into the camp. So every now and then the guys or a buddy would do a beer delivery, and I guess those rocket pods could hold probably a dozen cans each, dozen and a half, so you could put a couple of cases on board the airplane and the cans coming down individually, I don’t think you could open them for a few days but most of them stayed whole. So it was different.
SM: Did you ever conduct a mission like that yourself, a beer run?
CL: No, never did. I conducted a Tang run which I’ll tell you about later where I blew up an engine and I got myself chewed out for it and I couldn’t say much.
SM: Tang run?
CL: Okay, remind me.
SM: I’ll remind you of the Tang story. All right, now just real quick, so you arrived at Tan Son Nhut and went straight up to Phan Rang and to FAC-U and received training in the 0-2. How was that training?

CL: It was cursory. Never in the course of the whole time that I was in Vietnam did I ever see a flight manual for the 0-2 never. There was none available, there was none in the ops center, there was none at any place that anybody had ever seen. You flew…most guys didn’t even have checklists. Now I made a checklist up while I was there and I used it all through my year, but I was one of the very few people that even had a checklist in there. We just got out and you flew it. Take off was you put the throttles all the way to the wall and put them back half an inch. That was takeoff power. Climb power, besides having the readings on the gauges they also had a green zone and the red zone and there were zones. Well climb power was top of the green. Cruise power was air speed, and so you just…when you leaned out the mixtures for maximum cruise, you pull back the mixture until the cylinder head temperature started to rise and then you moved forward half an inch or three quarters of an inch, I can’t remember what it was. You didn’t have any…it wasn’t how you need 30 pounds of this or you need so much fuel flow, you flew by…they were just things. As they say, nobody had any kind of a checklist. Nobody saw the manual. We knew our airplanes, but we didn’t have any…well, the 0-2 was pretty simple. Let’s face it; it was designed for a little old lady to fly from LA to Las Vegas for a few rounds at a slot machine. It wasn’t designed for a combat aircraft. It was terribly underpowered. I had a buddy of mine come in one time and he had a horrible mission and he set the parking brakes and he pulled the mechanism completely out of the airplane; brake, handle, cable, just ripped it right out of the airplane. Well, it was plastic. It wasn’t designed for that kind of thing. Then of course they took one of the two back seats out and they had all that comm. equipment back there and all kinds of communications stuff, and that was heavy. Of course we had the big seven-rocket pod, one on each wing, and we also had the two log flares. I heard the other gentleman talk about log flares. The log flares were really a four-foot long piece of four by four, standard issue four by four. You can go down to Lowe’s and pick one up. At the butt end of it they had a hole drilled in and they had one of those flares that they use on…you see them stuck in the ground on the highway when you have an accident, that’s
all it was, and the little trip wire that hooked up to the mount. You had one of those on each wing. I never used it; I never used it the whole time I was there. I never had an opportunity. They weren't any good in the daytime. They didn't smoke, just at night. But, if you dropped it it would burn and it would catch the log on fire so you had a flame that was fairly visible, and some guys did if you had an opportunity. But, you talk about primitive technology; that’s about as primitive of a marking device as you can get, a piece of wood!

SM: What about rockets? Would you load up completely with them?

CL: Yeah, we always carried our 14, full 14; seven in each pod. We normally fired them in pairs. The rocket pods were hung on the wings. They were not sighted, so you fire them in pairs and sometimes the rocket streams would cross over, sometimes one would go up, sometimes one would go down, sometimes they’d go left and right and My God, you’d have two smokes, they’d be two kilometers apart, and you’re looking for the target in the middle; it was pretty stressed! Sometimes they’d go straight and hit where they wanted them to. My most scary night flight was one in which the rocket hit exactly where I had wanted to and now all I do is try to piss somebody off and I did because they had no ordinance coming in. Anyway.

SM: Your training there at FAC-U, it’s…

CL: It was good. We had eight flights. We did fly solos I remember. Each one was a mission that had a specific…you were learning to land, you were learning to put in a rocket or something. As I say, in eight days and eight flights we were finished; we were fully combat ready O-2 pilots.

SM: Did you feel that way?

CL: Hell no. I mean, I knew what the airplane looked like and I could start the engine and that’s it. Then, I got to Danang; they sent me up to Danang. I arrived there, showed up to the squad with my orders and they said, ‘Who are you?’ They had no idea I was coming. I had not been on any roster coming through; I was there, physically there. So, they gave me a room to stay in and got me settled and I had four orientation flights. This is kind of typical in a lot of ways the way the early part of that war was. The first flight I got out of country to Laos, which is where I was going to be working. I was in the right seat so I didn't fly the airplane. The instructor pilot put in some ordinance. We
oriented the whole area pretty well and we came back and landed. That was the first flight. The second flight, the weather was lousy over the mountains so the IP got in the left seat, I got in the right seat, and we buzzed the top of the dives all the way up to Dong Ha and dropped off some more, and coming back we went through a couple of village streets and we knocked some people out of their boats and things like that. That was done all the time. I don’t really fault the Vietnamese for not particularly liking us; we were pretty arrogant SOBs. That was the second flight; hadn’t touched the controls either of these two flights. The third flight was our night orientation flight. I was in the right seat. Went all up and down the trail and I used the starlight scope just to find out what it was like; didn't touch the controls. Fourth flight, I was in the left seat and you get up to Laos, the ordinance is coming in, the only ordinance we’re going to get, and he said, ‘I don’t have time to orient you,’ he said, ‘I have to put it in.’ He puts it in, puts the ordinance in, gives the airplane to me and we did a complete orientation and he gives me the only advice that I use and that is, ‘Start high and whip down until you feel uncomfortable and then go back up a little bit until where you’re comfortable.’ Fifth flight, I was sold. I touched the airplane one time. As I say, that is not…you learn it yourself. You either survived or didn’t survive, and I got down to the point where I was readily comfortable – I was screwy as hell anyway – but I was relatively comfortable. There was several times that I went down below the tree line and flew upstream to see what was in the jungle on the other side. I’d just go up the stream right down figuring if they shot at me they’d shoot up; they wouldn’t see me coming through eyeball level.

SM: The first mission where you actually brought ordinance in…
CL: Well that was my next mission, fifth mission.
SM: What did you have, flying support?
CL: ‘57s I think. I think it was B-57s. I want to say it was a 57; it could have been one of the other fighters. But, it was bombs.
SM: Where was this?
CL: It was in Laos. It was a truck that I found. I found out later the truck had been hit about 9,000 times. Every new FAC found it and put ordinance in on it.
SM: I understand that happened a lot; they would leave a lot of dead vehicles on
the trail just to keep attracting attention, and since there was the rotation system, they
would always attract new ordinance, new attentions?

CL: Well sure, that and the fact that on the river crossings which is what we hit
an awful lot, but see, what we were doing was trying to stop building a road across the
mountains to Khe Sanh, so we were back in the western part. This is later on. I’m
getting ahead of my story. So, we did an awful lot of river crossing work and literally we
bombed it so many times that you’d fill up the old crater holes with the new crater holes
and they’d still just drive across. All you did was move the dirt around and it was you
didn’t stop anything. All you did was slow it down for an hour or two.

SM: Was that your feeling throughout most of your tour that you didn’t feel
like…

CL: Yeah because they had a cadre at every single interdiction point, and as soon
as you got back all these little guys came running out and then you’ve got it and then the
trucks roll all night long and the next morning you blew it up again. So you never really
stopped anything, you just…every now and then if you could catch a convoy on the road
and we really could get some good hits, the Puff, the C-47 gunships, were extremely
effective. I mean, they would cruise up there and we’d get them. I had the luck of doing
it but some of the guys that did they said suddenly the front truck just blows up and then
the back truck blows up and then the ones in the middle all blow up because see, the
Puffs would work like tracers so that you never saw the rounds your vehicle just boom!

SM: Oh that’s amazing.

CL: It was.

SM: The Puffs that you brought in did not use tracers?

CL: As I remember, they didn’t.

SM: That was to increase the element of surprise?

CL: Oh yeah, surprise, absolutely.

SM: Well, what about you mentioned the Tang?

CL: I was working in North Vietnam…

SM: Let’s clarify this for a minute; you worked in Laos, North Vietnam…
CL: A little bit in Vietnam but not very much; a little bit in the upper part of I Corps I worked with the Marines a few times but effectively I was an out of country FAC and I stayed that way the whole year. Later on when I had a staff job I flew the mail so then I was in country, but I was not really flying combat, just flying.

SM: Any Cambodia?

CL: Never got to Cambodia; never got near Cambodia.

SM: You mentioned earlier that during your orientation when you got to Danang, you flew some missions where you had a starlight scope?

CL: We did quite a few night missions. We always had an observer.

SM: When you went on those missions were you the pilot or the observer?

CL: The pilot. They usually had an intelligence officer who very often went with us, or it could be another pilot, but generally it was intelligence officers.

SM: Did they ever call those guys FANs while you were there?

CL: I don't know.

SM: Forward Air Navigators?

CL: I don't know. I never heard that term before, so I’m going to have to say no.

’68-’69 was early relatively. Things changed a lot between that and in ’72, very much so. I mean, we worked at 1500 feet, but by ’72 thanks to the hand held missiles they were stuck up at nine and ten thousand feet. In fact, you were probably relatively ineffective. I couldn’t have seen a damn thing at 10,000 feet when it comes right down to it.

SM: Let me see, you were just about to explain the Tang mission when I asked about the…

CL: That was during the time when I was flying in North Vietnam and during the 4th of July Offensive. Right at 4th of July in ’68 they sterilized the part of north Vietnam just north of the river, north of the DMZ, and that was the only time they would let the 0-2 FACs go into that area, because it was only 120 miles an hour for cripe’s sake, you were helpless basically, and the flatlands were really off limits to us because we couldn’t survive out there, so we worked the western part. You know how the lower end of North Vietnam looks? You had a flatland and had what was called bad lakes and they had what they called finger lakes and then there was Dong Hoi and then there was the DMZ and down south of that was Dong Ha. Now going west about 40 kilometers, then the
mountain ranges started. We could work the mountain range up into North Vietnam probably I would mention 50-60 miles. I’d have to look at my map, which I still have. I’m very proud of that. I’ve got it framed and hanging on the wall. So, on this one mission, or after I’d been up at Dong Ha for that 4th of July time when we did go north and find some artillery and stuff that we hadn’t been able to see before and brought in air power - the B-52s had just plowed that area level before we went up there – I’d made some friends. So I got a call from this one radar controller at Dong Ha, they had a big radar system there, and he said, ‘Chuck,’ he said, ‘Would you bring me up some Tang?’ He said, ‘I can’t get any but I really like it, so could you bring me up a case?’ and we had a little commissary there and I bought a whole case of Tang. So, I threw it on board the airplane for the next mission and I came out of north Vietnam and I had to go towards Dong Ha anyways so I just peeled off, came on in and landed – it’s PSP by the way – and right at the end of the runway toward the far end where you turn off where the FACs were [?], they had two pieces of PSP that were set the other way and spiked down. The PSP linked together made up the runway and there’s two pieces laid right angles. Well, when I turned off the runway the back piece of PSP broke the tire and it flipped up and went right into the engine. So, I had to call down and say, ‘Hey guys, I’m here at Dong Ha,’ which I wasn’t authorized to land at to begin with, ‘And I just happened to blow one of the engines on the airplane.’ They gave me a lot of flak over that. But, again, this is the way the war was; I was never criticized, I was never punished. It was one of those things that happened. Another one of my little R&R missions, a 130 had landed at Dong Ha and had hit the brakes too hard and it pushed the PSP up so there was a ridge, and not knowing it, because it wasn’t a very high ridge, one of the 0-2s taking off had hit this thing. Well he brought up the wings [?] and he really overstressed. Well they finally got him fixed up but they didn’t dare let him go back to contact. They had to take him down to Cam Ranh where the major maintenance facility is. So, it was a little R&R for me. They let me fly the plane down there and I kept it there a couple of days, went swimming on the beach, and just goofed off. PSP is a neat stuff to land on, slippery as shit, I’ll tell you.

SM: A humid environment and landing on steel?
CL: You came in, you landed with a great deal of care, always. Now some of the other runways, I remember one time I came in and we were working on that half the runway had all these [?] crews out there, most of them women, and they were packing down rocks. So you’ve got 25 foot of this 50-foot runway, you can go ahead and land, so I did. [?] people. They weren't any further away than me to this guy over here, and I just came on in and landed, no big deal.

SM: What about there was some form of wind sheer or something that would have knocked you sideways?

CL: Well that happened too at the time. One time I landed, not realizing that there was a big freight helicopter hovering off to the east of me about 500 feet and he was hovering, picking up a load and in a net, and you don’t think that airplane didn’t go sideways and hit that [?] coming off that helicopter! I remember I had to around, sideways. It got pretty interesting sometimes. The mine mission was interesting. The test is the squadron, to fly up to the DMZ and put in some of those mines in the river, and they dropped them…they needed a FAC for it to see if the armored or blew up because some of them would blow up after a couple of minutes, or when they tried down they’d blow up, so they’d stay for half an hour. So we go out this morning or afternoon as it may, and we taxi off the runway, and I guess the visibility must have been probably 250 feet, just absolutely soup, and I taxi up to the take off point and I said, ‘Tower, I’d kind of like to take off,’ and I gave them my call sign, and he said, ‘Nothing’s flying. As far as I’m concerned, you can take off.’ He said, ‘I can’t see what it is. I can’t see anything. I can’t even see the ground under the tower.’ So I told my wingman, I said, ‘You want to go?’ and he said, ‘Sure, why not?’ So now we’ve got about 150 foot overcast, it was right on the deck and we’re flying VFR. So he took off and I was in the lead and I’d been doing a lot of civic action work so I got to know the area fairly well.

SM: I’m sorry, define what you mean by civic action?

CL: Working with the lepers, working with the that’s a whole different part of the story.

SM: I was just going to say, after you finish pilot training I’d like to talk about that.
Sure. I did a lot of that. I don’t know how many hundreds of pounds of stuff I brought over and distributed on my own. So, we took off and set the gear up and kept it down to about 50-75 feet which is not something you do in the States and I flew kind of eastward until I picked up the river that flows back of Marble Mountain, that bay, and turned and went down that bay and went over the bridge and got out into Danang Harbor and I knew that I couldn’t go across the harbor because I couldn’t see that far. I wouldn’t have been able to turn before I ran into the cliffs. So, I followed around the harbor, went around the whole shore on the Danang Harbor, and the only frightening fact about that was that I met another helicopter going the other way around the harbor and of course there wasn’t any room…we were at the same altitude so there wasn’t any room to be at any other altitude, so we sort of zigged around each other. I got up and put in the mission. Once you got out of the harbor, before you got to Hue it was just clear as a bell. So, we flew the mission, and stayed around. As I remember one or two of the mines blew up and you reported which ones blew, number four or whatever it was. I came back, came around the mountain, got halfway across Danang Harbor and there was that bank again, right on the deck. So, I made couple of 360s over there and we talked it over on our discreet frequency and he said, ‘Well how did they get in?’ because you couldn’t make a GCA because the field’s brand new, so they couldn’t build us down through the soup and have us land. Besides that, most of us hadn’t done any instrument work in the whole time we were there, so none of us wanted to go in the soup and take the chance of flying instruments. It was just…we flew visual, that’s what we did, we flew visual. If you didn’t fly visual, you got to the point where you could fly visual. So I said, ‘Well I’m over Danang city, and if you drive in here and you hit the docks and you [stay on deck],’ so I flew the streets and I came to the big intersection in the middle of downtown I knew which road to take and I’d just banked and I cleared the rooftops by probably 30-40 feet and I went on out until I got down the marginal road and I sort of made a timed turn because I knew the runway was off to the left so I’d been out 30 seconds and hung a left and we were right up on the runway, came around and landed. I never, in the course of my departure and approach, I don't think we ever got above 100 feet the whole time, but we had a successful mission and [?]. If you got killed, they’d probably criticize you. If you didn’t get killed, you did the job. I loved to fly, though. I loved to fly, though. To
tell you the truth, I guess there are stupid things. I’ve flown with other folks and I firmly
believe that to fly combat, especially as we flew it, you had to believe you were
immortal. You couldn’t be hurt. You might get hurt, but I wouldn’t get hurt, because if
you got overcautious, you couldn’t do your job. But my idea of flying low was putting it
right on the deck. I remember having an observer with me one time and we came out of
north Vietnam and I was coming down along Route 9 and went out to Khe Sanh to Dong
Ha and of course I’d down in the rice paddy and these Marine convoys are driving by and
we flew with our windows down so I had my arm out the window waving to them and [?]
said, ‘Chuck,’ he said, ‘You mind pulling up a little bit?’ and I said, ‘What’s the matter?’
and he said, ‘I can see daylight under the trucks.’ I couldn’t have been more the three or
four feet off the ground, but you only did 120 miles an hour. You know, really, one time
you would go down the middle of the street and see what the people were doing in the
houses; come right down the level of the first floor, and couldn’t have been any further
off the ground. I did it numerous times. I scared myself a couple of times, too.

SM: I was just going to say!

CL: One time there was a big Navy hospital ship that always was anchored right
off of Hue. It was a monster, had a big red cross on it, and we used to go down on either
side, be at the deck level, and it’s a little something thrilling and they appreciated it. I did
it this one day and I get this splash of salt water in my face! It was a rough day and the
waves were breaking off the chop and I hit the top of a chop with a prop! I said, ‘That’s a
little low. That’s a little low.’ Another day, and this one nearly scared me - it didn’t
break me of the habit, but scared me…

SM: Didn’t scare you enough obviously!

CL: I took off out of Hue and was flying, coming back to Danang doing my mail
runs later in my tour, and I’m flying in that big bay that is right behind Hue city, it was a
big bay, and I’m flying along and I’m flying in relation to and suddenly it dawned on me
that that bay was crystal clear and I’m flying in relation to and suddenly it dawned on me
that the top. My heart went, ‘Kaboom!’ I went, ‘Jesus, how high am I?’ I had no idea. I could
have been six inches or six feet, because I had no reference on the surface. I only had the
little sandbags and stuff at the bottom, and it suddenly dawned on me, ‘I’m flying in
relation to the bottom of the bay, not the top of it!’ So, there were some…
SM: When you realized that…

CL: I pulled up, quickly!

SM: So you pulled up? Where do you think you were in terms of…

CL: I’d venture I was within two or three feet of touching. I used to do that over land. I’d come across a rice paddy at four or five feet, three feet, and not think anything about it because the plane was so damn maneuverable. It was fun to fly. You could fly up to a house, look in the window, and then pop over if you wanted to. I remember one time we were flying out, had a three ship formation, and we were flying out near… it was in the western part of Vietnam, we’d made contact with some little artillery outpost out there and the guy said, ‘Hey, could you buzz us?’ and I talked to my other two wing men and they said, ‘Sure, be glad to.’ ‘Okay.’ So we got back there and we flew it over and pushed to full power, came rolling across the field and I pulled up at a [?] and I pulled up and I said, ‘How was it?’ and they said, ‘Great, you took the top off of the radio antennae!’ As I said, there was a sense of immortality, a sense of recklessness, and when I was grounded after I came back, I figured I’ll never fly that way again, and I loved to fly that way. So, maybe the Lord’s telling me I need to be grounded before I kill myself!

SM: Why don’t you discuss some of the missions you went on into Laos and into North Vietnam where you actually went in, found activity on the trail, and brought in some aircraft, and some of the more interesting operations that you did?

CL: Sure. That was our standard. I remember one that I…it worked out alright, it probably shouldn’t have, and the guy did the same thing the next day and crashed. On a night operation, working the trail, I found a bunch of trucks moving along, and I got some ordinance and we’re putting it in, and again, these are canberras I remember and they made a pass and I came around and we checked it out and put in another pass and I’m getting near the end of the mission, ‘Just one more pass! One more pass! We’ll get another truck!’ We made two or three more passes and I figured, ‘Jeez, I’m out of gas.’ So normally we came in over Khe Sanh. That was the low point in the mountain up there. The mountains got high in the north and the mountains got high west of Danang, but there was a pass. That’s why Khe Sanh was there. So, that was where we normally passed over. Well, I looked at my fuel and I said, ‘There is no way I’m going to go north to Khe Sanh, out to the coast, and down to Danang.’ So, I opted to go straight over the
top. This was a good mission. I mean, I had gotten some stuff. I felt good about this. So
I climbed up about 10,000 feet and I headed straight for Danang right across, which
really wasn’t that far. It probably wasn’t more than 50-60 miles, 70 miles. Well I get
into the Danang area and I called for permission to come through and they said, ‘Oh no,
denied, artillery fans are active.’ Well, it’s a perfectly clear night. It was absolutely
gorgeous. I could see Danang. There’s no artillery flashes, there’s nothing lit on the
ground, and I made one 360 out there and I said, ‘Well I’m coming in.’ I told them, I
said, ‘I’m coming through the artillery fans,’ because nothing was flying! I said, ‘I’ll
take my chance.’ So I come in and landed, and the next morning the ops officer calls me
in, the ops officer, maintenance officer, and he says, ‘Chuck,’ he said, ‘Do you know
what you did?’ and I said, ‘No, what?’ He said, ‘Well,’ he said, ‘There’s an error on your
fuel tanks of plus or minus 40 gallons on your fuel gauges. You had 24 gallons in your
tank.’ So I was 16 gallons below the point where the tanks could have been empty if the
gauges had been the other way. Well that same day this friend of mine, I cant think of his
name to save my neck, he actually came through from Pope later on as a FAC, he put on
in the Danang Harbor for running out of gas. He landed it low tide and the plane stops,
and he gets out and he’s standing in water about up to his knees, the plane’s not hurt a bit.
So he calls in and if they’d have picked it up right then they could have saved the airplane
probably, but they couldn’t get a crane out until the next day and by that time the tide had
come in and the plane was ruined.

SM: Did he get in trouble for that?
CL: I don’t remember. I think he got criticized. We all got criticized for stuff.
SM: But he wasn’t held responsible for paying for the aircraft for something
stupid like that?
CL: It was stupid. It was stupid error. Actually, what I found out, and this is
something they’d briefed us on, I had flown the mission but I’d leaned my engines and
I’d flown on a lean mixture the whole time. He had flown his on full rich and didn’t
think it was worth while doing the lean up, so he’d had that much more fuel consumption,
and of course he flew a different mission, but if he’d had leaned his engines he’d have
had enough fuel. I mean, he [?] half a runway!
SM: That mission that you were coming back on where you were almost ran out of fuel, where was the…
CL: It was in Laos, it was on the trail, and it was about due west of Danang over the coordinates. It was just the trail.
SM: Was it near Tchepone?
CL: Tchepone, pass, no – that’s north.
SM: Further north?
CL: Yeah, if Tchepone Pass is, it’s further north. We never got up to Tchepone.
SM: What was the furthest north you went?
CL: We went about 40 or 50 miles up into that [?] region that’s just south of Tchepone, but the Tchepone area itself was out of limits for us. It was just…it wasn’t where O-2s could operate.
SM: Well the mission, again, that specific mission that you just talked about, what kind of aircraft did you have supporting you in terms of putting ordinance on the trail?
CL: I think it was B-57s. I think they were Canberras. But, again, we did quite a few canberras missions, but we also did a lot of F-4s, F-101s. Another mission that was real interesting, in North Vietnam, as I say, we worked in the west of the flatlands, out in the hills, and the hill country was…what we were trying to do basically was interdict the building of the road from Dong Hoi down to Khe Sanh and we were going right up over the ridge of the mountains and coming down the mountains, almost down the spine down into South Vietnam. Well, our job was basically to try to knock the damn bulldozers off the mountain. That’s the joke we had, knock the bulldozers off the mountain. Well, we had an overcast one time and I got in underneath it and I’m in this big, perfectly clear, beautiful dome of air and I’ve got a full solid overcast above me and I’ve got of course the and it goes up into the clouds all the way around, so we’ve got this big open space. Well, as I remember there was some Navy, I think they were Navy ships, I can’t remember what they were offhand, and I took them down through the clouds and they came down with me. So we have these three ships flying around in this big bowl, me and the two fighters. Well, I put in smoke, and I said, ‘Now there’s the bulldozers, they’re right there,’ and a bulldozer probably wasn’t more than 500 feet below the clouds, and
the Marine pilot says, ‘Jesus Christ,’ he says, ‘There’s no way to set up my gun sight! We’re used to shooting down! We never shot at anything level before!’ They fired their rocket - they didn’t hit it - but they fired their rockets at it. ‘We don’t know how to set up our gun sights for this! I’m going to level flight!’

SM: That’s amazing, isn’t it? So, in essence, they weren’t able to do anything?

CL: No, they didn’t do anything. They certainly scared the guys who were on the ground. One mission in that same area, because we probably spent two thirds of our time up there within an area probably 20 miles long and 10 miles wide, and I was up there one day and I was working right along the ridgeline trying to find what happened, and I got really hosed down. I got all kinds…you fly with the window open and then you hear the ground fire. You may not see the rounds, but it sounds like popcorn, ‘Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop.’ That’s the AK-47’s fire. So, it gave you good indicator when you start to pick up ground fire you can hear. So, I’m working this area and I don’t remember if I put anything in or not, but when I got ready to leave I couldn’t get out of north Vietnam. There was a cloudbank sitting right on the deck just north of Dong Ha, right along the DMZ. I would have had to go across the lowlands to get [feet wet] and 0-2s didn’t survive in the lowlands, they never did. So I said, ‘Well, I’m going to fly over Ubon, and I’ll fuel up, and then we’ll just come back later,’ myself and my wing man, ‘And we’ll come back later and fly into Danang after the evening.’ So we took off and of course going out across Laos was just clear as a bell, no problem at all. So I land at Ubon and I get out and I look and there’s a little round hole in the lower front cowling of the front engine and there’s a little round hole in the top. I said, ‘Hmmm, I got hit there!’ I never felt it. You don’t necessarily feel a hit when you get it. You very often as not find it after you land and it doesn’t make much noise. It’s not like you see in the movies where it rips and tears. So we pulled the cowling off and that damn round had gone [?] engine has the air-cooled, veins, on each cylinder. The round had gone right up through the front of one cylinder and just gone, ‘Ping, ping, ping,’ up through all the veins. It didn’t crack the cylinder wall; it just plowed through all the veins and came out the top. So, I think, ‘I have no money,’ because you weren’t allowed to carry American money. The scrip wasn’t any good in Laos, and I knew it. I think I finally borrowed ten bucks off the club officer so I could get some dinner and then I paid him back after I got back. I sent
him a ten-dollar bill after I got back to Danang. So, I talked to the maintenance people and I who checked the engine out. It wasn’t running hot, nothing was wrong, so I flew out. So I get backed to Danang and I get called on the carpet for not doing a decent post flight because if I’d have done a decent post flight I’d have seen that I’d taken a hit in the front engine. I said, ‘I knew I took a hit in the front engine! I made the [?] myself to fly back!’ Then there’s another interesting little part on this same flight. We’re flying back and it’s about 8:30, it’s just getting dark, and we’re just flying straight and level. We’re about 10,000 feet. If you can do it, we loved to get up to 10,000 because you finally got cool. It was so damn hot. I’d take three or four canteens of water with me on a flight and I’d be wet all the way down past my shorts, almost to my knees, soaking wet. But anyway, the wingman says, ‘Chuck,’ he says, ‘Rollover, take a look behind you!’ I said, ‘What’s up?’ and he said, ‘[?]’ and I rolled over and here’s the flak poof, poof, poof, poof, walking right behind me. He hadn’t caught up with me yet, but if I’d have flown alone I would have flown straight and level and he would have brought the flak right up to me. But there was this, ‘poof, poof, poof, poof,’ about four or five of them. That was the point where they, just before that they clear their guns, they’d fire off fuel rounds and just have something to shoot at. I don’t think they were trying too hard but they weren’t leading you anywhere near you.

SM: What were they firing at you, do you know?

CL: I don’t know. I don’t know what [?] like that. Now the time I got scared the worst, and this is where I told you I pissed a guy off. I was going in country and I had no ordinance whatsoever. There was nothing that night. It was absolutely dry as far as I getting anything. It was strictly an intelligence-gathering mission. I had an observer with me.

SM: This is a night mission?

CL: This is a night mission. So we come across the mountains, come across past Khe Sanh, fly over into the trail, and the way that the Viet Cong gunners did that is they heard you, but they didn’t know where you were. They just fired straight up. So you get these tracer streams coming here and there, coming right up. [?]. I said, ‘I wonder if I can hit that guy,’ and he said, ‘Let’s do it,’ use the rockets anyway, so I popped two rockets off at him. Well it was a case where the rockets track beautifully. They never
track beautiful when you needed them to, but this time those two rockets, and those
tracers were coming up through the smoke, you could see it, and I must have really pissed
them off; I mean, I must have really got to them. They monitor our radios, they knew
who we were. They knew I was Cubby 262 and I’m down the trail and I’m making
reports and I’m coming back up and all at once we got in the same area and all at once
the observer says, ‘Break left, break left, break left!’ I said, ‘Break left, hell, I got tracers
over here!’ He said, ‘You got tracers on this side!’ Well I broke [?] wing tip down and I
had four quad ZPUs firing at me. They must have just been listening. I had a very thin
overcast and about a half moon and they could see the silhouette and I have never
seen…if you have ever seen a tracer stream coming up toward you, it looks like a red
snake coming straight up that slowly differentiates from a stream into individual tracers,
and I had them in front of me, in back of me, over me, and under me, arching every
which way, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘There’s no way if there’s five rounds between
each tracer that our tracers…there’s no way I’m getting out of this.’ I didn’t crap my
pants but I came damn close to it. Of course the 0-2, it only goes so fast. I mean, I’m
cflopping my wings back and forth, but as far as I’m concerned on the ground, I’m a
stationary target. I didn’t pick up a hit.

SM: Not a single hit?
CL: Not a single hit. I got back that night. I was shook, I really was shook. I
was as scared as I’ve ever been. I’ve never seen so many tracers; I’ve never seen so
many tracers that night. The observer, he was as shook as I was. God, we were shook!
SM: In that type of a situation where you pick up really heavy anti-aircraft fire…
CL: There was no ordinance. There was nothing to put in.
SM: Right, but when you got back…
CL: I reported it, certainly. We reported back our coordinates. But, there are
those gun positions all along the trail. They would vary at points that you couldn’t pick
up one or two of those guys firing. The joke used to be that every truck that went down
the trail dropped off a case of ammo at every one of those sights and they shot it.
SM: Did you ever get shot down?
CL: Didn’t get shot down. I picked up hits three times. I picked up one hit that
went through my wing but about two inches behind my fuel tank; lucky. I picked up the
one hit that went through the front engine and when I was working the Marines, the 4th of July thing, a round came through the bottom of the airplane and hit right under my butt, square under my butt, in that little piece of armor plate, and it was too near spent that didn’t punch through. It went around the bottom and that damn Marine picked it up as a souvenir. I said, ‘That was my souvenir!’ I didn’t even think of it at the time. He kept that round because as we flew we could hear it rattling around underneath our seats, and he picked it up because…

SM: A Marine did?

CL: Yeah.

SM: Now why were you flying a Marine around?

CL: I don’t know. I was flying out of Dong Ha, even though they were out of country FACs, they were using us to work with the Marines to recon that area out to the west of us, west of Dong Ha, so I had several missions. I had one where the only mission I ever put in ordinance in country I had was with a Marine and he did it because I wasn’t cleared, so he didn’t the actual putting in the ordinance and I flew the airplane. Another thing about putting in ordinance would be the A-1s. They are beautiful airplanes, and they’ve got that 2800 or 4360 engine in them, and had tremendous torque, and if the Vietnamese were flying them you had to always set up their pattern. When they pulled out they broke right because they couldn’t break left, because it went right, just very few Americans could keep it straight. They weren't strong enough to keep it going straight; very few Americans could keep it going straight, and they said – I never saw it happen, but they told me – if you really caught the power to it on take off you could put the aircraft on its back. You could torque it over on its back. I don't know if that’s true or not. I was told that. It had tremendous power. I think it was the same engine that they had in the KC-97 which I like so much and that had 3500 horsepower. It was a brutally power airplane. It also could fly until as they said last night in that [?] they ran out of oil in the airplane. If you ran out of gas, you ran out of oil, so you flew until your gas supply got gone. We used to do that in the [87]. My God, we had a central [?] that had 65 gallons I think that you could pump out the engines as the engineer needed it, and then we always carried five or six five gallon [?] cans that we kept on the heaters in flight, set on top of our carbine heaters, and then you’d pour that into that tank as we needed it. So
it was not unusual to go through 100 gallons of oil in the course of an eight or nine hour mission. There was a radial; radials always leaked oil because you had air running down into the pistons, which were on the bottom side, so they always burned oil. It was not unusual to have your…you could lose a tablespoon of oil and the whole wing would look slick, you know, you’d think, ‘My God, I got a terrible oil leak!’ It might be an ounce.

SM: I didn’t realize it burned oil so bad!

CL: Oh yeah. All the radials always did. That was the standard. In the 97 they allowed for it. They put that big central oil tank that was right below cockpit in that compartment. So, they built a special funnel with a long tube on it and you’d open up the filler cap down on the lower deck and you’d put this thing down and you’d pour it on the top on the up deck. Of course the oil gets so thick in flight. The 97 was fascinating in the fact that it really was the first of the post-war transports, and as such, it was fairly well insulated but when you’re flying, especially in the winter, you’d build up ice on the inside and when you’d start…excuse me, especially in the summer when it was warm on the ground and you’d start down and [?] ice cold water would come pouring down onto the consoles, onto the radio, down your neck, down your back, a steady stream! There might be one and a half, two inches of ice up on the insulation, and all that would melt when you got in warmer air. So, it was fascinating.

SM: That is bizarre. Didn’t that have a negative effect on the controls or anything?

CL: I don’t remember a single time when we ever lost an instrument due to moisture, and it would pour down. It would just pour on the plane. What else can I tell you?

SM: Well I’m curious. It was a B-47 that supported you?

CL: 57s, Canberras.

SM: What about…did you ever have F-4s or F-100s?

CL: Yes, I did. At different times we had all of them. Its just the convair, it’s kind of unusual so you remember it a little bit more but normally it was 100s, 101s. The Voodoos were great. I remember one time we were trying to hit this infamous bulldozer, the 101 came in and he dropped his ordnance and he pulled back to pull out, and he missed, and he couldn’t have cleared the top of the mountain by…I don’t think he cleared
about 300 feet because when he pulled up he just kept on going down and I said, ‘Boy, that was close,’ and he said, ‘No, no, I do it all the time,’ one of these old fighter jocks you know. It scared the heck out of me because I said, ‘My God, I’m going to have a SAR mission up here,’ except there wouldn’t have been any SAR mission because if he hit the top of the mountain, he’d have been dead. But, [?] different planes, and I probably shouldn’t say this because it’s not fair to the Navy but they have a reputation for whoop ass, haul ass, and if you would put them in they would drop their ordinance, fire the machine gun, fire the rockets, pull out and they were gone, and you can’t hit anything when you’re doing it all at once.

SM: Was that in part due to fuel constrictions?
CL: They didn’t like being in North Vietnam.
SM: For being shot down?
CL: Yeah, and I don’t know. They were great guys, they were wonderful pilots, but they were just…for as far as I was concerned, far as what people told me, that was just operating procedure, one pass, and that’s all you got.
SM: One pass, drop all your ordinance, and get the hell out?
CL: Get out, and you really need three passes. You’ve got rockets, you’ve got bombs, and you’ve got machine guns, and you put them in a different pass so that you can make the allowances for what your ordinance is doing, and that was the only [?]. I didn’t particularly like putting in the Navy. Speaking of Navy, let’s talk about the New Jersey.

SM: Yes, bring in Naval gunfire.
CL: I flew with them a couple of times. It was like a floating city. It was the most beautiful ship I’d ever seen. I remember I was always amazed because it had two swimming pools up on the front deck. Here are these two big round blue swimming pools sitting there. But, you could liken the Jersey firing to throwing a Volkswagen 26 miles through the air because it was on the one mission when I saw it and I saw the effect of its coming in, it fired several times over Danang when I was not flying and at Danang was amazing. You would jump once when the shock wave from the gun went past you and you’d jump a second time when the shock wave from the ordinance hitting the ground came the other way because it had a 2600-pound shell and it was amazing. It was
the largest column of debris and smoke I’d ever seen from ordinance going in. It was just
amazing. I mean, it really cleaned out the countryside. Other ordinance, I put in artillery
during the 4th of July out of Dong Ha, I put in Marine artillery up north of Dong Ha.
They were trying to hit some bunkers and stuff up there and I did that, or I did it with a
Marine observer.

SM: How effective was it?
CL: I don’t know. I couldn’t even tell you and I don’t remember at this point.
SM: How effective was the naval gunfire? Were you able to fly in after it?
CL: I don’t know what they were flying at. We were just there. We just
happened to be going by. We weren't putting it in physically, but we got the report they
were firing so we sort of did a couple of 360s up in the area to see what it looked like. It
was amazing, it was really amazing. The ordinance flying out of north of Dong Ha, I
guess it was effective. We hit what the Marines said we were shooting at. Because those
guys, since they were gone, what they saw was different than what the pilots saw a lot of
times because you were firing at emplacements. They were actually shooting out bunker
holes, literally. The one time that I did put in artillery I got called…this is very early in
my tour, right after the Khe Sanh siege stopped, and we got called to go west of Khe
Sanh and put in some artillery. No friendlies in the area, so no problem with an out of
country FAC being needed and they were trying to hit this artillery piece on the back side
of the hill just west of Khe Sanh which they couldn’t see from Khe Sanh. These guys
were pulling the gun out firing over the top of the mountain, lobbing shells into Khe
Sanh. So they sent us out to shoot at this thing so we pretty well found the location and
we put it in fire for positioning and the round hits and I’d gone off to the side and I told
him, ‘Go north, right, clockwise, one click, fire another round.’ Well I’m [?] and all of a
sudden [makes loud noise], we passed the airplane. ‘What in the hell was that?’ and I
don’t see anything up to the north, and I said, ‘Did fire?’ I rolled up on [?] and they’d
gone the wrong direction and he put the round so close to my airplane that I heard it.
That’s when I heard that rumbling sound was that artillery round and then I had this big
column of smoke. I said, ‘Khe Sanh,’ I said, ‘Go right, the other right!’ Two clicks. I
said, ‘Go the other right!’ Then they got it and I think we got the thing. An artillery shell
will just raise hell with an airplane, especially if it goes through it, and it’s armed at that
time so it’s going to explode when it hits it. I don’t know of any other times I really
worked artillery.

SM: Did you have a preference in terms of air assets that you’d bring in? Did
you prefer the 57?

CL: No, never did. I mean, of course if you wanted accuracy you wanted the A-1s because they would sit there and they’d put the bullets through the window and shoot
out the left plate on the table if you asked them to. They were wonderful. They started
one wing tip and loaded ordinance when they got to the other wing tip and then they took
off and flew, so they carried everything but the kitchen sink and sometimes you could
probably throw that at them, too. It was a wonderful ship for ordnance, kind of like the
A-10 is today. It’s a ground support aircraft. It was relatively vulnerable; it was very
vulnerable if you had [enemy] fighters in the area, just like the A-10 is. But, the warthog
is kind of the A-1s descendant.

SM: What about accuracy in terms of hitting your smoke? I remember last night
someone mentioning that pilots would get smoke fixation. They had a hard time
adjusting.

CL: Target fixation?

SM: Well yeah, target fixation, smoke fixation, they would be told to shoot your
ordinance so many meters off of my smoke.

CL: This was always a problem because rockets weren't bore sighted. For us to
hit the target without smoke was unusual. I mean, it was 500 meters or 100 meters...100
meters up the road as it climbs toward the old, ruined church. Pretty effective.

SM: You didn’t have any problems with pilots fixating on the smoke instead of
the target?

CL: No, not pilot fixation. I always worried about fixation, and I think some of
the accidents that happened was people literally flew their plane right into the target and
never pulled up. But, as far as...no, I don’t remember that.

SM: Adjusting off your smoke, most pilots did well?

CL: Yeah, they did okay, yeah. Of course, again, I worked in the mountains and
it was very difficult to get the gun sight readings right, so one guy that was firing level,
no way because the gun sight just didn’t go there. He had to eyeball it. Civic actions, do you have anything more you want to ask me about that?

SM: Well, we can go back to it. Why don’t you talk about civic action?

CL: I have always been interested in working with the people. Quite early in the tour I started working with the Catholic orphanages. I worked with one right in Danang and I worked with one down south about 30 miles down or so and I can’t remember what the town is right now. I worked with Gordon Smith and his leper program. I worked extensively with him and I got to know his son real well. His son had been raised in Vietnam, had gone back to the States and went to work for the CIA and the State Department, but his knowledge was abused always. They had their minds made up on what the Vietnamese thing was like, and he’d say, ‘No, it’s not that way at all. That’s not the way it is,’ so he got into quite a bit of [?]. Finally, as a defense or as a help, he asked his son to come back and work with him with permission. Well Gordon’s son was just about my age. I can’t for the life of me think of his name anymore. He’s now up in one of the big TV systems up in New York City. But, he got going together and he’d come out to the hooch and he’d play cards, he’d have a drink, but he wasn’t doing much drinking. I’d go down to the house and stay down at the house, and since he was civilian he wasn’t subject to curfew. We’d stay up late down at Gordon’s house, and then he’d bring me back to the base way after curfew. I’d sort of take my hat off and snuggle down in the seat and he’d drive through the gate. Working with Gordon, I really enjoyed working with the lepers and we collected a lot of stuff. I did several…and my scrap books which are over in the hooch, I did several letter appeals which I sent to different newspapers in my hometown and at one time I had so many boxes in my room that my wingman, my roommate, couldn’t sleep in his bed because I had it piled up to the roof with boxes when he’d come in and I distributed. I really enjoyed working with that. The leper colony was across the bay and of course they had a lounge so we’d get a day off and we’d go over to the leper colony and we’d work over there, and of course [?], good swimming. [Passer-by says, ‘Sounds like Kontum.’ CL: No, this was Danang.] Gordon, because there was a chance that literally you could put your weapon down and stack it in a corner and go swimming. It was pretty safe because right above the leper colony we had the railroad, then we had the defensive perimeter, so the odds of the Viet
Cong coming down into the colony were pretty slim, which was a good thing because we went all over the place without any weapons. It was just a good...so I really enjoyed working with them. I really enjoyed it. I distributed a lot of stuff. I almost lost my life doing it. You’re going down to the high school. Now the 20th TASS was located at the north end of the runway at Danang and the main complex of units, of offices and stuff, is about mid-runway, and then a mile and a half, two miles off the south end of the runway was a big high school and we were distributing money to the...it was a big, mass distribution of funds for scholarships. So, a whole bunch of us had gone down and I’d gotten a ride down to the center of the base and I’d gone down to the base civic action officer and we went in and did our thing and we came out and I could have ridden back with him, he’d [?] back, but there was a fighter squadron civic action truck who’d just come all the way to the north end. So I said, ‘Why don’t I just ride back with them and save you the time?’ So he goes straight back to the office about two miles short of where I was. By the time I got to the office [?] trucks he said, ‘You know what happened?’ I said, ‘What?’ He said, ‘I walked in the office and the jeep blew up.’ The local ice cream man had slipped a bomb under the seat that I would have been riding in and he would not have made it. I’ve got pictures of the jeep. They made a big thing out of it and put it at the gates and said, ‘Watch your vehicles when you’re off the gates, guys!’ But, the jeep had literally buckled in half. My seat was gone. So, both our lives were saved by the fact that I got that ride with the other squadron. That was interesting. It also made all of us believe that there’s guys that don’t like us out there. But, it turned out to be the ice cream boy. He just down in his ice cream truck that he had. He had these bombs and he just, as he walked by, he just took it out and slipped it under the seat, and just kept going.

SM: How did he get caught, do you remember?

CL: I don’t remember. I know that they figured out that’s who it was, but whether or not they ever caught him, I don’t know. Who knows? I don’t know. I know that the jeep is literally buckled almost at a 90-degree angle in the center. Anyway.

SM: This will end interview number one with Mr. Charles Lipe.