Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m doing an oral history interview with Mr. William Holmes. Today is April 26, 2004. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. It’s about 9:35 a.m. Central Standard Time and Mr. Holmes; you are in Boulder, Colorado.

Bill Holmes: Correct.

RV: Why don’t we go head and start with a brief biographical sketch of yourself sir. Could you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

BH: Okay. I was born October 4, 1939 in Greenville, Texas, which is about fifty miles northeast of Dallas and grew up for six, seven years of my life was there and then moved to Lubbock, Texas where I stayed and in fact, lived until I went through college at Texas Tech and actually entered Texas Tech in 1957 and managed to cram four years of hard studying to five and so I got out and graduated in June of 1962 after changing majors a couple of times.

RV: Okay.

BH: I graduated with a Business Administration degree in Banking Finance and Investments, a degree I’m currently using and have used for about the last thirty years as
a financial consultant and money manager consultant currently with RBC Dane Rauscher
in Boulder, Colorado.

RV: Okay, okay. Tell me about Greenville, Texas. What was that like?

BH: Greenville was a small town, a kind of interesting…I remember *Time*
Magazine once had a picture of the sign over the city that caused quite a stir because it
said, ‘Greenville, Texas…’ something maybe, ‘Hunt County, the blackest land and the
whitest people’

RV: Oh gosh.

BH: And so you can imagine as the culture got more into racial things, I think in
the 1950s.

RV: Yes.

BH: Or maybe even earlier than that, they made them take the sign down. But I
grew up in a…it was a town of probably eight to ten thousand people, small town with a
lot of typical farming and family value type of orientations. A lot of really good quality
people, kind of salt of the earth folks.

RV: Right. Tell me about your family. What were you parents like?

BH: My mother was an only child and grew up in the Depression and had some
significant, what I call, Depression mentalities from that. She grew up as a teenager and I
remember her saying she had to borrow twenty-five bucks to go to school. She did seem
pretty goal-oriented. She did go to East Texas College, a state teachers college, which I
guess is now East Texas…I’m not sure exactly what the…it’s East Texas University
probably now and she got a degree in teaching. My father was someone I…a tremendous
role model for me. He graduated from the University of Texas after going to Virginia
Military Institute his first year and a number of things. A very quiet civil engineer type
that was a city engineer in Greenville, Texas, and then moved to Lubbock and became
city engineer and then eventually Director of Public Works in Lubbock. And then left
that and went to work as a part owner and vice president of Janes Prentice Gravel
Company, which has a large gravel operation in Slaton. So, he followed his civil
engineering duties. When I was very young, he entered the Navy as an officer and went
to Mine Warfare School, and was on a minesweeper, the YMS-300, which was a wooden
minesweeper and with the old saying, ‘Wooden ships, iron men’ type of thing. They
swept the harbors in the far east of Shanghai and so forth during World War II and he
used to send me sharks’ teeth and things they’d do. And tremendous role model, a very
quiet guy, but very principled and just a true gentle man. He died in 1995 of Alzheimer’s
and we watched him go through about a four year, very tough situation there. My
mother’s still alive, living in Lubbock and is at Windsong, I guess what you call a
retirement center or whatever, but she is there now.

RV: Okay. Any brothers and sisters?

BH: I have a sister that’s ten years younger, Kay. She lives with her husband,
Jimmy O’Jibway down in Bellville, Texas, where he is president of a Wells Fargo Bank
branch there. They have three children, all who have gone to Texas A&M and are dyed-
in-the-wool Aggies. The two boys have graduated and the younger girl, her daughter will
be graduating I believe this coming December.

RV: Okay. I imagine you were too young to have memories of World War II, is
that right?

BH: Not really because I was…yeah, I was pretty young. I was in the four-year-
old area I guess then, I was born in ’39, so yeah, I was four or five years old and I
remember my parents putting me in the car and we would go to Virginia, to Norfolk,
Virginia, for Mine Warfare School for my father and then he got transferred to west coast
where we went and said goodbye to him. We lived on the west coast, Long Beach,
California for a while. But I remember the long trips obviously as a kid. It was, you
know, many, many days and then going back through Greenville, Texas, on the way
through and saying, you know, ‘How long are we going to be till we get there.’ I
remember Mother getting letters and I got letters from my father, so that part of it, you
know, I remember kind of as a child, but no other memories, no.

RV: Okay. How about the Korean War?

BH: The Korean War, I remember…I think the thing that sticks in my mind is
how those poor soldiers fought in that tremendous cold. And in fact, my drill instructor
in the Marine Corps, who I don’t remember his name, but I think he had a couple of toes
had gone from his tour in Korea, in the Korean War. So, that’s pretty much my
recollection of it. I was a youngster when that happened.
RV: Well, tell me about your childhood, Bill. What was that like growing up in Greenville? Then you moved to Lubbock when you were pretty young. What did you do?

BH: I think I had a pretty normal childhood. I had a younger sister, you know, who was always young enough to get in the way.

(Laughter)

RV: Right.

BH: And then when I came back from Vietnam, I realized that she had grown into quite a beautiful young woman in just that short period of time. Pretty much normal in Greenville, elementary school, you know and we lived in a duplex while dad was overseas and then he came back and got a job as a city engineer for Greenville and then he was able to get a nicer job in Lubbock. And we moved to Lubbock, went through grade school there, probably the second or third grade and pretty normal growing up childhood. I enjoyed sports. My father was pretty much a workaholic, so he wasn’t really…didn’t foster a lot of athletics, but encouraged me of course. So I didn’t get a lot of athletic training when I was a kid, but I loved golf and was one of those kids that was not only small, but slow.

(Laughter)

BH: So I didn’t do too well in basketball or football or track, but I did enjoy golf and I started playing that in high school I guess. Well, maybe a little earlier, in junior high, and have played golf for a little over fifty years. So, that’s been kind of my passion avocation.

RV: It’s a good sport to play. Tell me about Lubbock. What was Lubbock, Texas, like?

BH: Lubbock was flat and I’ll never forget the night that my mom…my father was off to some type of [city] counsel meeting or something and we lived right next door to one of these wide open cotton fields and you could see the dust storms, the red line of the dust coming up. This was before Lubbock became very cultivated, and one night I woke up to hear my mother cursing in a kind of dark haze in the room and the back door had blown open and one of these cotton fields was blowing in the back door.

RV: Oh boy.
BH: And she had found some ten-penny nails and she was probably cursing my father for moving her there.

(Laughter)

BH: But the words I heard coming out of my mother were something I’d never heard before and she was nailing the back door shut, which had blown open and so, that was probably kind of a typical early experience of the real fine red dust that Lubbock experienced then and I guess it probably still experiences some to some extent. But the cultivation and the growing of trees, most of which in Lubbock of course were planted has dropped, I believe, those dust storms down considerably. But they used to be a major factor on the south plains.

RV: What was your schooling like? What kind of student were you?

BH: I would say an average student. I think when I got to college; I was just hanging on by my fingernails. I’ve always been the type of person that’s really more enjoyed doing things than reading about them. And consequently, I don’t think I’ve…I think there’s probably something in my eyes where they don’t focus as well and every time I sit down with a book, I get very sleepy. So, I’m not a recreational reader, nor have I ever been a really good reader, but I really had to grind in school to get what I had and I made very average B’s and C’s. I made very few A’s and candidly was not a very good student. But I think I’ve been…you know, that’s translated a lot of…that experience has translated into hard work and so forth for the rest of my life, so it’s worked pretty good.

RV: Right. What were your favorite subjects as a kid?

BH: I think probably math, trig, algebra. Algebra stands out probably as being probably one of my favorite subjects. I tend to be kind of a somewhat anal organized person and I think math appeals to that type of person. Now that I look back at, I enjoy history, but I didn’t enjoy memorizing history and doing it. I probably least liked civil government and those type of things. English now to me has become rather fascinating and I’m always respectful of people that can take the English language and do wonderful things with it and descriptive poetry and so forth and I’ve become somewhat of a lyrics writer for songs and a little bit of a poet, but that’s about it.

RV: Okay. Did you work when you were young?
BH: Yes. I worked in my father’s gravel plant. Probably the toughest job I had was the graveyard shift, five in the afternoon till five in the morning working, rolling big boulders off of a gravel hopper where the big Euclid’s would come up and bottom dump their gravel. A Mexican fellow and I would work all night rolling those things off of the gravel, so I remember many mornings trying to go home without going to sleep on the road from Slaton back to Lubbock.

RV: Right. How old were you?

BH: I was probably in the teens then and probably… I was probably thirteen, fourteen, somewhere in that neighborhood. And the valuable experience there was learning a lot about the mechanics of a lot of the way a lot of the heavy equipment works, but also, I learned some Spanish, because this fellow couldn’t talk in English and I couldn’t talk any Spanish at the time. Well, I took a little bit in high school. That was a valuable experience because he learned English and I learned… so all you had to do was talk.

RV: Right.

BH: Heavy manual labor there. Later on in high school, right before I went to college, and part of the time I was in college, I worked in the men’s clothing shop, Maloufs for Men out there in Lubbock, and that was a nice experience as far as just buying clothes and stuff like that.

RV: Right, okay. So was it expected that you would go to college or was this something that you had?

BH: I think it probably was, yeah. You know, I think at that age, that was sort of the big goal, you know. In fact, they sort of gave you this impression that if you went to college, once you got that diploma, there’d be a long line of people out there just waiting for you to hire you. And of course, now that’s become more difficult for a lot of people and obviously, that wasn’t true, but that’s kind of the carrot that everybody held out for you at that time for a lot of young folks I think.

RV: Right. Was it always going to be Texas Tech or did you look elsewhere?

BH: You know, that’s a really interesting story. I don’t remember ever looking elsewhere because I didn’t think I could really afford to go anywhere else. I pretty much lived…I did live at home. I didn’t ever live in the dorm and went to school, so all I had
to do was pay in-state tuition and we were not a very well off family at the time. My father eventually rose and he was a very good saver and investor and pretty frugal, and so he and my mother grew to be comfortable in their later years, but we didn’t have a lot of money when I was growing up.

RV: Okay, so it was…

BH: But we were a middle-income type of family, middle to low income.

RV: Okay, all right. Tell me about going to college and Texas Tech. What was that like for you? You already spoke about your grades and kind of being an average student, but what else was going on?

BH: Well, I formed a friendship with a bunch of SAE’s and eventually went and pledged and went into the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity and enjoyed that. I felt that gave me sort of a grounding there. I have never been quite candidly, a very good alumni, although I attended the fifty-year reunion of our chapter, not a reunion, but fifty-year anniversary of the Texas Alpha Chapter there at Texas Tech last year and that was a lot of fun seeing a lot of old friends. But I’ve never been a…in fact, candidly; also I’m not a very good alumni supporter of Texas Tech. We’re here in Boulder and we have season tickets to the CU Boulder games and so we go to those. But I look back at college as a good learning experience. I don’t look back at it with fond longing memories like a lot of people do. School was tough for me. I was not a very scholarly person and so my memories of school are one of a lot of good friendships and a lot of fun, but also a lot of really hard grinding.

RV: This is…you entered in 1957?

BH: ’57, yes and I graduated in ’62.

RV: Okay. Did you play sports at all here at Tech?

BH: I think I swam a little bit on the freshman team. I was a pretty good swimmer and diver and I think I played…I tried to play golf on the freshman team. I can’t recall really whether I made it or not, but I remember there were a lot of really great state golfers on the varsity golf team and I had two chances of making that, ‘none and noner.’

RV: (Laughter)
BH: Although I enjoyed the golf, there were people there that later on won the Texas Amateur that later on went to be professional tour players and they just had a tremendous quality, much better than I was.

RV: Right. Tell me about getting interested in the Marine Corps. How did that happen?

BH: Well, interestingly enough, it was kind of a fluke. I had gone through Air Force ROTC for what, two and a half years or something like that.

RV: Here at Texas Tech?

BH: At Texas Tech.

RV: And how did you get into that and why did you get into that?

BH: That’s a good question. I think, you know, the military was always kind of instilled into me. My father had done it, so I thought it was ‘the right thing to do.’ I currently now have changed my opinions on a lot of the nationalistic fervor that’s created in our young men, but that’s another subject. But I thought it was the thing to do and I participated in the drill team. I was a really good marcher and also became quite good at drilling and fast changes of directions and so forth in the ROTC and did pretty well in the Air Force ROTC. Had a lot of friends, a lot of fraternity brothers in there and so forth that were the upper senior officers in the ROTC. About my junior, probably in my junior year, maybe late sophomore, junior year, I flunked chemistry and when I did that, I was forced to take freshman chemistry over and when I did, that kept me from taking some courses like International Politics or Political Geography that were requirements for the contract that you go into in the last two years of ROTC. So, I had to give up my contract that I just entered into with Air Force ROTC and I still wanted to go in the service, so I found out I could enter the Aviation Officer Candidate course of the Marine Corps and that after school, I would immediately go into boot camp and then flight training, because I did want to fly. And I had the eyesight for it and all and passed the physical and so forth. The last part of my senior year, I think they put me in the active reserve, even though I had not been to boot camp there, so I went to the little monthly meetings I guess. And then I went into the Officer’s Candidate Course, which is effectively a six week boot camp; went in there and as I came out of it, they needed more officers in the ground corps than they did in the Aviation deal, so they said I had a slight astigmatism in one of my
eyes and that I could not qualify for pilots, so you automatically go into ground. I said, ‘Okay, well make me an Air Control Officer’ and they did, and so my idea was to go in and become an Air Control Officer until I could get accepted to F-4 Phantom School, which was a backseat job as a radar intercept operator, RIO, because that’s what the Marines were flying. They had a radar intercept operator in the back and they had a pilot in the front and I said, ‘If I can’t be a pilot, I want to be a radar intercept operator. So they shipped me in after the initial six weeks of officer training. I got my commission and then they…all the Marine Corps officers, they send you through a six-month infantry training course, whether you’re a dentist or lawyer or whatever.

RV: Right.

BH: Everybody in the Marine Corps goes through that to become an infantry platoon commander, so I went through that six months. Then they shipped me to Cherry Point, North Carolina, a Marine Corps Air Station there and I was in a VMS Squadron, which was a fighter squadron, A-4 fighter squadron. And I served in there just sort of doing nothing, I played a lot of golf at Cherry Point and it was kind of a waiting ground for me to get into RIO School. Then at that point, they changed the requirements for being an RIO for up to six year service, and after I’d been out in the real Marine Corps for awhile, I decided that I didn’t want to spend the next six years of my life after I got through with the RIO School in the backseat, and so I just said, ‘Okay, let’s cancel that and I’ll serve out the rest of my term as an Air Control Officer.’ And so they put me in a Marine Air Support Squadron, MASS II and which was a second Air Wings Marine Air Support Squadron and eventually we were shipped to Da Nang.

RV: Okay. Tell me where your interest in flying came from originally.

BH: I don’t know. I think probably just the romance of being a fighter pilot was something I had in the back of my mind and I’m very glad I didn’t do that. Fate was pretty kind to me because my attention to detail, which I think you need since [I’ve] watched my wife, who’s a pilot and has her instrument rating and I fly with her some. I’ve realized that I don’t have the attention span, although I really have attention to detail, but I don’t like sitting in someplace and having that attention span focused on one thing for so long, and so I probably would have not made a very good pilot. In fact, I probably would’ve crashed on some like carrier qualification.
RV: So this was something from your childhood that…
BH: Yeah, probably. You know, I don’t think it was really a burning desire after I think about it now.
RV: Okay.
BH: I think it was something I wanted to do, but it was just kind of considered a normal career path; become a Marine Aviator and you know, from there…
RV: Was ROTC good for you at Texas Tech?
BH: Yeah, yeah, I think it was good. I did a lot of things I enjoyed; the drill team was particularly enjoyable my early years, so that was fun.
RV: How did you do in that military type lifestyle? You know, it’s not total up here at Tech in the ROTC level, but…
BH: You’re a lot more…I sense that you’re a lot more engrained now in the ROTC that you take some more time. All we did is on Thursday we dressed up in our uniforms and wore those to class and then participated in drills that afternoon. We went to some ROTC classes, but we didn’t wear our uniforms the whole time, you know. It was not as maybe structured as it is now.
RV: Okay.
BH: I would assume, I’m just guessing.
RV: So in 1962, when you did graduate Bill, you were looking right at going into the Marine Corps?
BH: Yeah, that was my only option at that point because I…
RV: Right. What did you know about the Marine Corps? I mean, did you know about any kind of reputation about them being very difficult in training or was this something that was a challenge for you?
BH: Well, one thing…yeah, and that didn’t bother me, but the one thing that I liked about them is I knew that everybody that went in the Marine Corps was volunteer, so if you’re in a foxhole with somebody and somebody’s shooting at you, at least that other guy was there voluntarily, at least one time in his life, he wanted to be there.
RV: Right.
BH: And so, I guess that sort of philosophy of pretty good discipline and *esprit de corps* was pretty important to me at the time.

RV: Was it what you thought it was when you first got into it?

BH: Somewhat, but candidly, as I look back at it and particularly in Vietnam, I got very discouraged with all the politics of the service and the politics that the generals even play, you know, with young guys lives and sometimes the power struggles and the egos that go on, which are normal stuff in life, but I had to learn that, you know, as a young person.

RV: Right, right. Tell me about your initial training in the Marine Corps. You went to OCS?

BH: I went to Quantico, Virginia and went to OCS. That was just like boot camp.

RV: 1962?

BH: Yeah, let’s see. I went, probably was…

RV: Or did you go the summer before your senior year?

BH: I think it was April of ’61. Yeah, I probably didn’t….April of ’61, I went in and started going to the…(maybe it’s December of ’61), I went in to the active reserve.

RV: Okay.

BH: I served in the active reserve till I graduated like in June. Then I went to Chicago for three months waiting to go to OCS School and I think September ’62, I went into OCS.

RV: Okay, right. What was Quantico like?

BH: A very Marine Corps-oriented town and center. You know, I don’t know that it’s much different from any other military type base or whatever, but it was a very secluded, very focused on one thing and that was the Marine Corps.

RV: Right. Tell me about training. What was it like for you?

BH: It was tough. I think the thing about the Marine Corps and maybe this works in all the services, I don’t know, is that the Marine Corps tries to push you right up to your limit and see how….and they’re very good about taking you up to that limit and taking you back down. Hopefully they take you back down. I guess in some cases they haven’t. And I was a skinny guy, in pretty good shape. I wasn’t in great shape, but when
I went in there and when I came out, I was in excellent shape, so it was a tough training, but nothing really, you know, jolting or surprising about it to me. I pretty much knew what the training was going to be like. I talked to a lot of people and I was not one of these people that went in scared, although there were people that went in to that that couldn’t do one chin-up or one pushup.

RV: Right.

BH: One pull up or one pushup and obviously they didn’t fare too well. It was okay.

RV: What was your typical day like there at OCS?

BH: I’m trying to remember what time we got up. I remember we used to have this drill instructor who used to, on Sunday mornings when we’re supposed to sleep late till like 6:30 or something, he used to pick up the big steel G.I. can in the middle of the squad bay, which never had anything in it of course, it was white glove inspection, but it always was there. He’d pick it up with those big handles and just...he was about 6’4’ something. He’d pick it up over his head and he’d just take it and roll it all the way down the squad bay between all the two things and I remember hearing him say, ‘Candidates, can’t you hear those church bells ringing? Get up, get up, get up.’ And he was something. What was your question again?

RV: Typical day there at OCS.

BH: Oh, so you get up, you do calisthenics and then you generally have some type of training. Sometimes you’d have studies that you do in the classroom stuff, and then you’d normally have a...you know, the meals were always right on time and you know, a certain amount of time to eat and then you were...you’re always running, always under pressure basically. They want to see how you do under pressure.

RV: Was it brutal in any way?

BH: I don’t think so. I might’ve seen one person slapped or something like that, but nothing that we didn’t feel like deserved. No open fisted hitting or anything like that. Although my drill instructor appeared to be...never smiled and appeared to be pretty mean. I think he operated within his rules pretty much.

RV: What kind of weapons training did you have there?
BH: M-14 and I still have the stock of my M-14, and that’s one of the things I didn’t give you. It’s got my name on it. What is it, 50-Caliber machine gun training, anti-tank rocket training. I mean, we went through artillery training. I never became an artillery officer, so I didn’t get the fine points, but you get all that mortars. I mean, every type of handheld rocket launchers, you know.

RV: How did you do with all of that?

BH: Pretty good, pretty good. I was a pretty good shot. I think my first…I was an expert pistol shot, but with the M-14, I only got very strong, so I probably was just a marksman with that.

RV: What was your relationship like with the other candidates?

BH: Good, good. There were a bunch of guys from Texas. There was one big guy, it seems like, I forgot what…his name was Moody that was in our DL that always was bragging, yelling, and just made almost an ass of himself and the big braggadocios Texan, you know, and a couple of others of us just kept quiet, never really told much about where we were from and they couldn’t believe later on when they found out that this other fellow who was from Weatherford, Texas and I were from Texas, that we weren’t loud and boisterous like this other fellow because that was the impression they had. And I remember one of the guys from New Jersey in our squad, candidate training said something to the fact that one time I used the word, ‘you all’ and he says, ‘You all.’ He says, ‘That must be plural’, he says, ‘Like we say in Jersey like youse.’

(Laughter)

BH: And so we had a good time. We had a couple of guys in there that were shipboard Marines. Very, very sharp individuals that had been recommended for Officer Candidate’s Course, so they were going through boot camp for the second time, but one of them was a Private Gregory. I remember a big black kid that was just really sharp. In fact, I had…they had did this march around the squad bay when they first got us there and they’d yell ‘One’, you were supposed to be in your rack, in front of your rack standing at attention. ‘Two’, you’re supposed to be in your bed sitting up at attention. ‘Three’, you’re supposed to lie down. And they’d march you till you were at the opposite end of the squad bay from your particular bunk and then they’d say, ‘One’, and it was
just a mish mash. This guy was a big, strong black kid and a very gentle nice guy, but I bumped into him in one of these drills and he caught me in the ribs with his elbow.

RV: Right.

BH: And it broke, fractured a rib.

RV: Wow.

BH: The lower rib, so I went through a lot of the training with a fractured rib, which I will not forget because every time you breathe, you know, and you were doing a lot of taking to the limit type of calisthenics, but that happened to me about the last two or three, what was it, three or four weeks of training, I guess.

RV: Did you not seek medical attention?

BH: No, no. You never wanted to rock the boat in that thing.

RV: Right, didn’t want to draw attention to yourself.

BH: And it wasn’t that bad. It hurt when I breathed a little bit, but it wasn’t like it was sticking out or anything like that.

RV: Okay, okay. Tell me about John F. Kennedy. This is in 1962, is this what; summer/fall basically of ’62 is when you’re at Quantico?

BH: Yeah, I’m trying to remember. Are you talking about…when did he die?

RV: He died in ’63 and I was curious…

BH: Yeah, I was on the golf course in Cherry Point, North Carolina when he died, John F. Kennedy. I think he was a pretty well respected guy, President. Is that what you’re talking about…

RV: Yeah, exactly, in the Cuban Missile Crisis in October ’62, just what your general impressions of being a Marine Corps Officer at the time.

BH: I don’t remember candidly having a distinct opinion of the President at that point. Of course, he’s the Commander in Chief when you’re in the Marine Corps, and so, you know, you would never utter anything. I don’t think…I didn’t have an opinion of him to be honest with you, other than he was my C in C.

RV: Right, right. How long did OCS last?

BH: OCS I believe was six weeks and then you go into what they call the Basic School for six months. Well, you’re an officer then and you have a nice room and so forth that you’re sharing with another officer, but unless you’re married, then they had
actual people who were able to live at night...go off the base except when they had
bivouacs and things like that in the six month Basic School, live off the base, live in the
Married Officer’s Quarters. So there were a few people in our Basic School, but that six
months is devoted to making you capable being a platoon commander.

RV: Right. Before we move to Basic School, tell me about graduation from
OCS. Did your parents come out for that?
BH: Yeah, yeah, a big deal in Quantico. I’ve got pictures somewhere of all that.
I didn’t give you folks those.
RV: Right.
BH: But yeah, I remember that. It seems like they brought up a girlfriend of
mine, an old girlfriend out or something that I can’t remember too much about that. But
yeah, it was quite a deal.
RV: Okay, and then you went to Basic School. What was Basic School like?
BH: Basic School was like a gentle boot camp for officers.
RV: Okay.
BH: Once you’re an officer, you have a certain respect, but then the drill
instructor become captains and so, you know, they’re no longer drill sergeants. And they
don’t dress you down like the drill sergeants did, you know, get right in your face, but
they did, you know, grade you and a lot more classroom stuff. Of course, a lot of
bivouacs, a lot of physical stuff. I had a deal one time, I don’t even know if this is worth
mentioning, but on the cold ground, we all saddled up. In other words, we’d get
somebody on our back with their legs through our arms, you know, and I had about…I
weighed about one hundred and thirty-five pounds or something at that point.
RV: Wow.
BH: And I was on top of this guy that weighed about one hundred eighty, one
hundred ninety pounds and the idea was to play horses and you’d go and try to push other
people over.
RV: Okay.
BH: And we were just kicking ass and taking names. I mean, we were pushing
people over and having a good time, and they said, ‘Okay now, switch.’ And he got on
top of me and somebody I think blew on us or something...
RH: And we started down and his foot that I had under my right arm went right in my knee and I heard a pop there and so it definitely tore the cartilage in my knee. And in fact, right before I came back from Vietnam, I went to Okinawa for about a month or two and had the cartilage removed from my right knee, the inside cartilage removed from my right knee. So that was a deal in Basic School that I—you know, I came out of that, then I tried to go and play basketball or something, go up for a lay-up shot and come down on that knee, on that leg, and it would just crumble; I wouldn’t have anything under me. So, that was probably the biggest injury that I suffered.

RH: It seems like you kept getting injured.

BH: Well no, that sounds…I mean, those were the only two real injuries, but you know, if you didn’t have a sprained ankle or something occasionally or cut yourself a little bit or something at some point, I mean, it was rough training. It wasn’t torture, but these were just things that happened and I was not the strongest guy around either, you know. I was a pretty small guy.

RH: Tell me what kind of tactics and things they taught you to be a platoon leader?

BH: Basically, it was leadership and leading the men. And you really learned that the real code in the Marine Corps is kind of, and it’s not a negative thing, but if you don’t take care of your men, they’ll take care of you. And a lot of lieutenants I’m sure have been shot in combat by their own troops because they were arrogant. But the main thing you learned is to take care of the people under your command, and you’ve got a real concern for those people because you’re a team and you fight like a team and you learn to really consider those people because they’re your support. I always…I developed a very healthy respect for…and you won’t always have a gunnery sergeant in a platoon, but for the gunnery sergeants and the sergeants, the guys who had been around for ten years, you know, and weren’t fortunate enough to be an officer if they wanted to, some of them didn’t of course wouldn’t want to be…and listened to their advice. When I went to Okinawa, I went to Okinawa right before we went to Vietnam, and I had a gunnery…and everybody was up. When you go to Okinawa, you buy a motorcycle because that’s the cheapest form of transportation and there’s always somebody leaving, so I bought this big
300-CC Heavy Honda Motorcycle and this gunnery sergeant said, ‘Lieutenant’, he said, ‘Would you like a little advice?’ And I said, ‘Of course.’ And he said, ‘You’ll always remember that motorcycle’s a master of you, and you’re not the master of it, well then you’ll be fine. It won’t fall.’ And sure enough, I got a little cute with it one day and felt it slipping out from under me and those words came back to me and I fortunately didn’t hurt myself.

RV: Right.

BH: But you learn to value these guys experience particularly when you’re a young first lieutenant. If you don’t, they will let you go head and make your mistakes the hard way.

RV: Right.

BH: But once they see you’re a good guy and you’re perceptive to their advice and you want their advice, well then you got a pretty good team.

RV: Right. Besides taking care of your men, what other leadership skills did you learn there at the Basic School?

BH: Oh, I think probably just straightforwardness and honesty. Honestly not in the manner of not stealing or something, but in the matter of just being straightforward with people and not trying to hide things and also to react pretty quickly to situations. I’m always amazed at how slow my wife reacts to things when I ask her to do something or something like that. And having been in the military, you know, I came out and this was actually a negative when I first got married because she brought a ten-year-old red headed daughter into the marriage and Glenda had been working during the day and going to school at night and dating on the weekends and this redheaded ten-year-old daughter had pretty much had the run of her house and I came in, you know, as the ex-Marine Corps lieutenant saying my kids were going to do this and they’re going to do this and this is the way they’re going to behave and so forth. She made me eat every word.

RV: (Laughter)

BH: So, you know, but I’m always amazed at my wife and how slowly she reacts to things when I make a request of her. In fact, I had sort of this dream of having her in a precarious situation yelling at her to do something quickly to solve it, and you know,
she’s dragging her feet. So, those things come from, you know, your….that’s more
judgment and being anal I think than anything else.

RV: Were they specifically trying to train you for, say a Southeast Asia
environment?

BH: No, no, because we didn’t know we were in there, that we were going to be
in there at that time.

RV: Right.

BH: We were just trained for conventional warfare. Then when we got over to
Vietnam, there was a lot of training for guerilla warfare and unusual tactics. I remember
in Vietnam, there was a F-105 squadron that had all the planes parked down on the flight
line one night, the VC broke through and some of them had their tents out there, but I
don’t think anybody was killed. But, the VC went through and the next morning, they
[their pilots] went through and found grenades rolled into the tents by youngsters or kids
or whatever and the pins hadn’t even been pulled. And that’s my illustration of what a
crazy war this was, you know, that you never really knew who the enemy was. You
could go down to downtown Da Nang, be in a bar or something, and I’ve got pictures of
bars with metal work across them so somebody couldn’t throw a Molotov cocktail or a
grenade in the bar. There was a lot more, lot less ways to terrorize people than there are
now. And the Vietnamese very quickly adapted to that, and of course, the Viet Cong
pretty much stayed out in the field. If they were in the city, they weren’t identified as
Viet Cong. I mean, the VC, once you were out in the field, then you would expect the
VC. You didn’t expect them in the town and there were a few instances of terrorism
where they’d try to roll a grenade or throw a Molotov cocktail through a window in a bar
where G.I.’s were, you know, in town having a drink or something. But that was pretty
rare.

RV: Okay. When you think back at Basic School, what do you see? What’s
your biggest memory of the six months?

BH: I guess just the training and maybe the injury because the injury was a
lifelong thing, you know, with the cartilage.

RV: Right.
BH: I look back…yet again, my captain who was sort of our drill instructor was a graduate of Annapolis and his name was Tepcious, and it was obviously he was trying to climb the ladder, you know, and be…and he was quite an obnoxious guy. A guy, I mean, almost a little bit effeminate and nobody really in our platoon really respected him. Who was it? We had a big blonde headed guy, he was a lieutenant and after we graduated from Basic School, they had this big cocktail party for you where, you know, the captain comes around and congratulates you on making it through and so forth, and this guy got pretty drunk and when Captain Tepcious came up to him, he said, ‘Captain Tepcious’, he says, ‘You are the worst f*ing…’, and this guy came up from the ranks. He was in the enlisted corps and got nominated for an officer candidate course, and he said, ‘You are the worst f*ing officer I’ve ever served under.’ And he said…I think his name was Lindsey Telsher or something like that, he says, ‘Mr. Telsher, you’re drunk.’ He says, ‘Yes sir, Captain’, he says, ‘I’m drunk.’ And he says, ‘But I’ll be sober tomorrow.’ And he said, ‘Tomorrow you’ll still be the worst f*ing officer I’ve ever served under.’

(Laughter)

BH: This guy was really not respected by anybody. He tried to be over detailed. He had very few leadership qualities, you know. And just because he was an Annapolis graduate, he even kind of walked with a funny little feminine walk with the pot belly sticking…he was just very unromantic and unmilitary, what you think of as being…but I remember him.

RV: Okay. So when did you graduate Basic School, do you remember?
BH: Oh boy.
RV: ’62 or ’63?
BH: Well, I would’ve gone into my AOC in September for six weeks, it would’ve been probably the early part, I would say, April or May, yeah, it was in the springtime, so it would’ve been probably April or May of 1962. Is that right?
RV: ’63.
BH: ’63, yeah.
RV: ’63. Okay, and from there, you went from…
BH: From there, I went to Cherry Point, North Carolina and served…I’m sure I was there six months or maybe a year.
RV: And tell me again exactly what you were doing there?

BH: I was assigned to a fighter squadron and did various duties around there.

You know, they gave me all the…because the pilots were busy flying. But I really didn’t have too much to do and I played a lot of golf there at Cherry Point. They had a nice golf course. And then when I decided I was not going to be a backseat driver for the Phantom, the F-4, I think they transferred me to a Marine Air Support Squadron there, and that Marine Air Support Squadron was eventually transplaced to Cherry Point, North Carolina, a Marine Air…I’m sorry, no, no, pardon me, MCAS, Marine Corps Air Station in Okinawa.

RV: Okay.

BH: At Fatima Air Force Base, not Fatima, I guess Fatima was the Air Force Base, but Fatima was the town of Okinawa that we were…this is all pretty tough to bring up. And we were there for six months or so, nine months. I think I had about six or seven months left on my three-year tour, so from ’63 [‘64] to December ’65, so at some point, we were ordered to go to Vietnam because the VC had started breaking through at Da Nang [AFB].

RV: Right. Okay, so from Cherry Point, you went over to Okinawa?

BH: Yeah, we stopped at El Toro on the west coast, which is near La Jolla [CA].

RV: Right.

BH: And we were getting everything ready there and then we went overseas, so we weren’t there too long.

RV: Okay. What was your unit of assignment again in Okinawa?

BH: Marine Air Support Squadron II, which is the Marine Air Support Squadron of the Second Air Wing.

RV: Okay.

BH: And that’s a…in combat operations, that’s a rounded bubble, kind of a fiberglass bubble that’s probably thirty, forty feet by twenty feet that’s maybe eight, ten, ten to nine feet high. And that’s the general’s command post in combat. And the idea is that all the status boards are in there where all the flights report in and out. We call that RIO, report in and out and we launch medical evacs, we launch troop things, we talked to
the artillery, blah, blah, blah. So, the Forward Air Controller communications come in
there and relay, so the general theoretically knows what’s going on.

RV: Right. How did your family feel about you being overseas?

BH: My mother did her share of crying I think when I left, and so did my sister. I
don’t really know too much, you’d probably have to ask her.

RV: Okay. Bill, you want to take a break now for today?

BH: Yeah, I think that might be good because I’ve got a couple of calls I see that
just come in here.

RV: Okay.

BH: But I see we’re back on for 8:30 on Wednesday.

RV: Correct, we’ll go ahead and end it today.
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. William Holmes. Today is April 28, 2004. It’s approximately 10:15 Central Standard Time. I’m again in Lubbock, Texas, at Texas Tech University, The Special Collections Library and I’m in the interview room and Mr. Holmes is again in Boulder, Colorado. Sir, why don’t we pick up where we left off last time? You had reached Okinawa and I wanted you just to describe again what your duties were there and your unit and its transition into Vietnam.

Bill Holmes: Okay. We were sent to Okinawa from Cherry Point. We went there via El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, which was on the west coast and then were transported, or transplaced or whatever you want to call over into Fatima, Okinawa. Well, let’s see, not Fatima, I’m sorry, there’s another little town and it’s been a little while so I can’t remember it, but it was the Marine Corps Air Station on Okinawa. It wasn’t too far from Fatima Air Force Base. So, there were several airstrips there. Anyway, we were transplaced down to Da Nang and we went on huge LSTs. We had, our particular Marine Air Support Squadron had a large fleet of vehicles and big, what they called the 4 x 4s or 6 by I guess. Jeepers, my memory is really tough here. But full of equipment, radar equipment, communications equipment because we were the direct air support center for the 2nd Marine Air Wing, and basically that meant that we RIO’d [Report In and Out] planes in and out and launched Medevacs and stuff like that. So, we were kind of a support unit and when we got our stuff off loaded [from the LST’s], we were located across the strip from the main control tower at Da Nang Air Force Base.
RV: Bill, let me ask you a couple of questions. When was this again exactly?
BH: Oh boy.
RV: 1964?
BH: No, this was in 1965.
RV: Okay.
BH: Let’s see, I’m pretty sure, because I was only in Vietnam, I was released from the service, let me work back here, December 5, 1965. I can remember that date very well.
RV: (Laughter)
BH: And I was in Vietnam approximately seven months, so we should’ve gone down there around probably somewhere around May, June, July.
RV: Okay.
BH: Somewhere in that area.
RV: Okay.
BH: One reason I was confused here is that in the Marine training in Basic School back in Quantico, I tore the cartilage in my right knee on my meniscus, my right leg, and so during this transplacement, I had a chance to go back to Okinawa into a hospital there and get that fixed. So I was out about a month after going to Vietnam, I got to come back and get that fixed before I got out of the service, to make a long story short.
RV: Okay.
BH: Anyway, so that’s the reason some of my dates are kind of confused here.
RV: Okay. Bill, let me ask you real quick though before we get into what you did at Da Nang, tell me what your first impressions were of Vietnam?
BH: Well, you know, it’s like any island and when you come up on something in a ship and you see any piece of land, I mean, first of all, we’ve been on LSTs and LSTs are flat bottom boats that put an anchor out in the harbor and then come up and run up on the beach and open the fronts up there, open the bays and let all these vehicles out that. That’s what I was getting to and the flat bottom boats don’t have a keel, so you know, they’re huge, huge ships and so we had some really rough seas and boy, everybody in our group was very seasick going over. And I remember one time, we have to go down and
check all these vehicles that are chained down in the tank deck underneath inside the ship, and because they break lose sometime in the rough seas, they could really do some damage. And so, I remember one night, the top of the mast if you can see was actually going sixty degrees over to horizontal.

RV: Wow.

BH: And this thing was really rocking and rolling and I had already thrown up practically everything in my stomach.

(Laughter)

BH: So I was going down very weak and trying to check these chains and it was...as I look back on it, it was humorous, but at the time, it was absolute misery.

RV: (Laughter)

BH: But those are my non-combat woes. But anyway, so when you’re on this ship and you come in, you’re looking at land and in fact, you know, we could see when we got closer the beautiful white beaches and we sail right into a harbor, Da Nang Harbor I guess. And I said Da Nang Air Force Base; I think it was just Da Nang Air Base or whatever. Although the Air Force was there, it was a large airstrip with a lot of different military services planes there. And so, I don’t know that my impression was any more than, ‘Good god, we’re on land, thank goodness.’ And we get to be Marines again instead of Naval people.

RV: Right.

BH: And so, I think it was more a relief than anything else. The one thing that did strike me about Vietnam was the beautiful white sand beaches. And I said...this is kind of interesting because something happened the other day here in our office, which makes this come true, but I said, ‘You know, if they weren’t fighting a war here, this would be a beautiful place for a resort, a five-star hotel and people to come to have wonderful vacations.’ And coincidentally enough, I’m in the investment business, but a fellow that I play some golf with that does some different types of investments has some friends with the upper, in the real high echelons of the Vietnamese government now, the Vietnam government, which north and south are now one. And he came over with a proposal for an investment to buy some beach property at Cam Ranh Bay, which is up north of Saigon or of Ho Chi Minh City, now; Saigon then. And there’s going to be a
Disney theme park up very close to it. Their U.S.-1, which is along the strip [road] that runs from Saigon up to Nha Trang, instead of it being just a two lane virtual street, it’s going to be a six-lane highway. And so some interesting things are happening in Vietnam, but when I was there, that was my impression, I guess before I got into all the junk in combat and stuff that we got into, that was my impression that, ‘Hey, this is a beautiful place.’ Then we got…I’ll jump a little forward here, when we got into September, we got into the monsoon season. I’ve forgotten how many inches they get a year, thirty or sixty inches a year usually within a few months. And then, of course, it wasn’t quite as romantic because I’ve got pictures I think of some of the pictures I’ve sent you of the foxholes that we had dug outside of our strong back tents that we lived in while we were on the other side of the airstrip and they’re full of water. You know, they could’ve been swimming pools.

RV: Right.

BH: So that was…my impression wasn’t…I didn’t particularly form a major impression other than, ‘This is a beautiful area.’

RV: Right. How did you feel mentally being in a war zone?

BH: You know, I really don’t remember. I guess when you’re young, this is something I noticed about young troopers, I had a lot of them that just couldn’t wait to get into combat…if they could go on a Medevac or something where they could get close to the fighting. They’d seen the John Wayne movies and my little story about that is that many of them were raised early in their lives before it was color movies, that’s really going back, so they didn’t see that the blood was red and when some of them see some of their buddies coming out in body bags or with significant injuries or stomachs opened up and things like that, then it becomes much less romantic, but I think everybody wants to get into the fray and as a second lieutenant, I was probably, I thought, you know, and as your impression to…when you go on a deal like this, if you’re U.S. military, you see all the victories that the military has done, not disregarding the losses, but you think, ‘Oh boy, we’re going to come in here and we’re just going to kick ass and take names and you know, that’s going to be it.’ Well, obviously Vietnam was not that type of thing. So, I think everybody, (and I’m speaking for myself when I’m trying to characterize this), comes into a war zone like that, you’re clean, you’ve had plenty of showers, you’ve had
plenty to eat and whether you’re in a combat unit or a support unit, you know, you
haven’t really gotten into the hardships, particularly like in Iraq, where they’ve got wind
and sand and so forth and dust, you hardly ever get really clean and you seldom get a
really, really good meal. And so, you come in with a very good, kind of a good positive
gung ho attitude and I think most people keep some of that, but obviously, once you’re
put under a lot of the hardships, I think that changes.

RV: Right. What did you understand about why the United States was in
Vietnam when you arrived, when you got there or on the way over? What were they
telling you, what did you think?

BH: Well, they did quite a big propaganda campaign of how we were helping all
these people, and you know, the poor rice farmers and so forth were out there and it was
kind of the deal that they’re going to welcome you into their cities with flowers, and you
know, the same type of thing that a lot of the troops. Again, I make a lot of comparisons
with Iraq here because I think that was the impression of the people there that we’d come
in and we’d be hailed as the victors and rolling down the streets in their tanks, everybody
sitting at the top of the tanks and of course, that would not have happened in Vietnam
because it was a muddy type of…you know, they didn’t have a lot of roads. But what
I’m saying is, the government did a very good job of pumping the troops up and giving
them this wonderful feeling that we were going in and helping the people and that we
were kind of liberating them from this Viet Cong, which was this very insidious force
that was there. And you know, some of that was very quite true. I mean, we treated the
people very well as a general rule, unless you know, we saw kids throwing hand grenades
or something at us.

RV: Right.

BH: And it was a very crazy war as I mentioned to you. You could have…we
were raised in a culture that told us that, you know, our way was the only way and I still
say that we are deceived by our own deceit sometimes in thinking that everybody else
thinks the same way we do. So, we really went in there thinking that we were going to
do all these wonderful things for Vietnam and get the Communists out and the VC out.
And of course, they were quite motivated too coming down from the north and we didn’t
look at history and saw that the French, you know, I guess maybe you’re a better history
prof than I am, but I think there were not only the French, but several other countries or
cultures came in there thinking they were going to change that country, and they were
unsuccessful. So, I think this is a really good thing about history that if some of our
leaders were better historians, we might not be making the same mistakes that we’re
making, even currently. But, that’s my own opinion, not political, but just my own
opinion on war.

RV: Right.

BH: It was a significant campaign from you know, Westmoreland right on down
that we were in there to help the people, we were in there and so forth, and I understand
that our first people that went in there were advisors, you know.

RV: Yes.

BH: And they weren’t supposed to be combatants and of course, there was the
‘Tar baby’ affect, we just got pulled in by that. They did a good job of making the troops
and everybody feel like that we were accomplishing a good goal.

RV: What was morale like?

BH: I think morale was pretty good. Yeah, morale was pretty good. And I
wasn’t in any of the infantry units, I don’t know, I’m sure after you sit out there isolated,
you know, with VC around you at a certain point, your morale may not be quite as good,
but around my unit was very good.

RV: Okay.

BH: You kind of get into a routine in war zone where you feel like you’re just
doing your job. And then if some sudden hellish things happen or so forth, well, it kind
of wakes you up to that situation, but most of the time you’re in there and it’s like
anything else, once you’re there a few days, and you get into a routine, you’re doing your
job and you’re obeying your superiors and you’re doing what they ask and occasionally
an order will come down to do something unusual, but you know, it’s a support function,
so it’s a job.

RV: Right. Well, tell me about the first few days about setting up quarters and
things like that.

BH: Boy, you know, I’m really foggy on that. It’s been so long, I probably
couldn’t give you much. I know that we came back and the Corps of Engineers would
come in and did strong backing for our tents, which is basically build a frame that you put
your tents over, and we set up our Direct Air Support Center, which was a fiberglass, sort
of half bubble. It looks like half of an egg that sits on the ground with all the
communications equipment. I didn’t have much to do with that, I was…what was I; I
was probably in logistics or something like that. So I had more to do with getting the
stuff on the…I had wonderful NCOs that did a lot of the work of diagramming how the
equipment would go on the ship and then when it got off the ship, you know, how it was
off-loaded and how we transport it to the areas and how it was setup and so forth. So, I
really didn’t have a whole lot to do with that, being honest with you.

RV: Okay. Where did you all live? What were your quarters like?

BH: We had strong back tents and they were probably, I’m going to guess they
were twelve to fourteen man tents, very large tents that were thrown over again a framing
of 2 x 4s. And then of course the tops were secured down with tent lashes and tent pegs
and so forth. But, it was a pretty…and we had a flooring in the bottom of our strong back
tents, so it was pretty nice, I mean, particularly compared to what the combat troops had.

RV: Right.

BH: So, we had it pretty good. We had a water buffalo outside and we’d go
outside and get water. It seems like to me there were showers somewhere, and we’d go
to and just pretty normal stuff. Again, there’s some pictures in there of my rack and of
the strong back tents in my film, so you could see what those look like.

RV: Okay. And how many men were in your tents?

BH: I think there were twelve to fourteen officers in the tent that I was in.

RV: Okay. Do you remember how you got along with everyone?

BH: Yeah, we got along very well. I mean, you have a lot of downtime where
you’re just sitting around, we played a lot of poker, you know. We’d go over to movies,
to someplace, I don’t know where we’d go over, sometimes the Air Force Base would
have movies and sometimes we would have them within our compound. We would be
able to go into Da Nang and go on liberty. All the rest of the different services were able
to wear their utilities; the Marines had to dress in their khakis when they went in.

RV: Right.

BH: So, you know, it was kind of a traditional thing.
RV: Right.

BH: That always made me feel like it was a lot of BS.

RV: Tell me about Da Nang. What was it like? What do you remember?

BH: Not a city like you’d see in China where there are just thousands and

thousands of people running around like little ants. But more of a just a little seaside city
and nice city with good streets, the French had obviously done a pretty good job. Nice
buildings, mostly stucco. The marketplace was a busy area with people with baskets on
their heads on their bicycles and carrying things around and marketing all sorts of things
to the G.I.s, you know, from just having all the, you know, things for the people; fish and
vegetables and stuff like that. So a pretty normal, what most people would envision in
their mind as a marketplace. A lot of very intelligent people there, a lot of people who
were much smaller in stature than the U.S. folks were and you got some professors and
doctors and so forth. So it had quite a…what should I say, an integrated culture.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese civilians in general?

BH: I didn’t get to know them extremely well because quite frankly, we didn’t
spend a lot of time in Da Nang. The ones that I knew in the military were just
unbelievably loyal and committed to their cause and that was ARVN, The Republic of
Vietnam Army. And those guys were, I mean, they were tough little soldiers and very
committed to their cause. Again, they probably had some pretty good lectures like we
had. But in town, the people to me, they had that sort of Asian cultural look combined
with the French look. So, the women were…many of the women were quite beautiful.
They dressed very attractively with long skirts and so forth because they had the French
influence, many times a lot of these women had much longer legs, so they had the Asian
olive complexion and the long black hair and many of them had longer legs. There were
a lot of them with shorter legs too, but I thought they were very beautiful people and a
very nice people…I mean I thought that, I could see how we would come in and want to
help these folks because they seemed like a very…in Spanish terms, simpatico group.
They were very cordial, they would treat you very well and so forth.

RV: You talked about the ARVN troops briefly, what was your experience with
the indigenous military forces of South Vietnam?
BH: Really didn’t have much experience with them except watching them load on helicopters and go out for their missions. Never really fought beside any of them or did anything like that, so can’t speak to that. I know the ARVN pilots; again, I have some pictures in my slide group that I sent to you of some of these little pilots. They were quite proud and I don’t know what quality of pilot they were. And my sense was that they weren’t a big factor because they didn’t have that many aircraft, but we supported them quite well maintenance-wise and parts and all that stuff. But they had some real old aircraft that was used in World War II, and some of those were very appropriate because they flew slower and you know, when you’re shooting at people down in trees and so forth, you’re dropping bombs, you probably want to be slower to you, but I didn’t notice…I noticed there were a few planes there, but there wasn’t like squadrons and squadrons of them from my memory. But I didn’t have that much close personal contact with any of it.

RV: Okay. Can you describe Bill, the Da Nang Airbase? What did it look like in your memory?

BH: It looked like a regular military airbase by the time we got there. It may have been an international airport at one point, but it became quickly a military airbase with long strip and most of the military units including the artillery and so forth were on…let’s see what that would be, the ocean side would be the east side, so we were on the west side of the airstrip, if it runs north and south. I’m assuming it does. And all the permanent facilities were on the other side, the east side of the airstrip and again, I’m not sure that it ran north and south, but that’s my orientation. And again, I have some pictures of the airstrip and the airbase taken from the air when I got some jet rides there, so that might be interesting to you. I may have even had one of my friends take the camera up and shoot some pictures of the airbase from the air.

RV: Right.

BH: It wasn’t too far from the harbor, so you can kind of get a concept of what it looks like by those pictures.

RV: Did you feel like you had enough supplies and things there at base that you needed?

BH: Reasonably so, yeah, yeah, we were pretty well supplied.
RV: Okay. What about food?

BH: Oh yeah, we were okay. I mean, we had chow lines set up and so forth that we went to. As I remember it, we weren’t on C-rations and so forth. Now I remember going on R&R to Hong Kong for about a weekend and the first thing I did is go into the bar and I said, ‘I want three glasses of fresh milk.’ Because I loved milk at that time, I don’t drink it anymore. But we had powdered milk, and you know, but those things, which people today, hearing this might turn up their noses at. Once you get into a situation like that, you know, you get quite used to dried food and things that aren’t quite the way we eat here in the U.S.

RV: What was your typical day like? What did you do?

BH: Boy, I’m trying to remember that. We’d have shifts in the Direct Air Support Center, the DASC. And we’d get up in the morning and you know, we might have an afternoon shift or an evening shift. Sometimes we’d throw the ball around, played a little baseball, a lot of reading, so other than the duties in the Direct Air Support Center, and I can’t remember how long those shifts were, it seems like they might have been six hours or something like that, that was pretty much what we were there for. There was another thing we did, and that was some radar bombing. At that time, they thought it was a very sophisticated little container that had all this electronic gear in it that you would sit in with a radar intercept, no I’m sorry, with a radar operator and through the use of triangulation with the plane and your point there in that little container and the target being three points, this particular computer was supposed to…it was one of the early computers and it had huge amount of electronic gear and it was very seldom operating correctly. I jokingly say, I don’t think we ever killed anybody, but by triangulation, it would lock on the plane and do the triangulation between the plane, the target, and the radar location that we were sitting in. And what we would do is we would at ten thousand feet, we would talk a plane into a certain area and tell them when to drop their bombs. So it could’ve been a very effective bombing device with a plane at ten thousand feet and you think it’s not even near you and all of a sudden bombs are going off around you for the VC. And we would sit with a little needle, kind of sit there between our legs with this little needle going back and forth and the zero line was the target line and we would tell the pilot he’s…‘Turn two degrees left or turn two degrees
right’ and then we would say, ‘Stand by to release your bombs.’ And then we’d give him a ‘mark, mark’ and so he would hear. So he had two times in case of radio problems. We would guide him in to a certain flight path and have him on that path at a certain altitude. The trajectory, the bombs had been figured and so forth, so theoretically, it was supposed to be a very hi-tech way of dropping bombs from an altitude on unsuspecting groups.

RV: It sounds like in the sense, you all served as the laser that is now used in laser-guided bombs where they’re the ones that…

BH: Yeah, to a certain extent, but boy, that was real…as I look back on, it was very primitive, and like I say, the unit was always down. I mean, they were always…the poor technicians were working on this thing all the time. It was probably one of those things that had to be a precursor for the things that we have now, but it was just…it was pretty archaic. I really would be surprised if we ever hurt anybody with it.

RV: How effective were your efforts doing that?

BH: Well, again, I don’t know. I don’t think we ever…we never got back any reports that we hit a VC unit or something like that. But my thoughts are that it was an area-bombing device, not a pinpoint-bombing device.

RV: Right.

BH: So I just don’t know.

RV: Okay.

BH: I’d prefer to think we never hurt anybody after being back out, but that’s not very military, but that’s…anyway.

RV: Okay, so that’s one major thing you all did. Are there any other duties that you remember doing?

BH: No, that was pretty much it.

RV: That was it. It sounds like you had a lot of downtime?

BH: Yeah we did, and we would go over from time to time. We were real close to the helicopter units, which were the Hueys, H-u-y-i-e or something, and we’d go on…sometimes we’d jump on there with a crew chief and go on a medical evac and I’ve got some pictures of that too in the slides or we’d go into an LZ, a landing zone and just go on the trip itself, particularly if it wasn’t a major combat operation or something where
we would catch a lot of fire. Never went on any of the patrol boats or anything like that, never even really got close to that type of action.

RV: Okay. What do you remember of the relationship between officers and the enlisted?

BH: I think they were very good. I think we had a group of officers and this is true I think in the Marine Corps, I think the Marine Corps, they educate you very quickly that you know, you’re tied to your men and your success and your life really. And so I think you take really good care of them in the Marine Corps and I think our officers or our NCOs, we had really good NCOs, people who had been around the Marine Corps a long time and knew how to handle the troops and were probably a hell of a lot better leaders than the young lieutenants, you know. But I think we had a real…we had a lot of fun with them. I mean, we were there with them, it wasn’t like it was, ‘You’re separated from us,’ although in the military, there is that sort of status separation, but once you get over there in a unit like that, you know. I mean, I’ve got one picture for example…I don’t know why this sticks out in my mind of somehow down in one of the marketplaces, one of the guys came back with a little puppy dog and we just all…you know, of course, we all just went crazy over the little dog and he was a little puppy, and so he was doing all sorts of cute things. So that was a nice distraction, and he uncovered – the little puppy uncovered a mice den and I’ve got some pictures there of all these little baby mice that have just been hatched in a dustpan. You know, goofy things like that stick out in your mind. I don’t remember too much of the…

RV: Right.

BH: There was a lot of artillery shelling, so you know, sometimes it was a little tough to sleep at night, but you get used to all that. You know, your body really acclimates to that.

RV: Tell me about that. How often was the base shelled?

BH: Well, our base wasn’t shelled. I didn’t mean that, but next door to us was a 105 artillery unit that was shelling up in the hills, you know, anytime. And you know, they have huge ranges, so they could be shelling a mile off or something like that.

RV: So you guys didn’t get mortared?

BH: Oh no.
RV: Okay.
BH: No we never did.
RV: Okay.

BH: There were a few times that the VC did come through the base and made
attacks maybe a couple of times, they made attacks on it. I’ve got pictures too of when
they hit a F-105 squadron, which the planes were parked out on the airstrip way out, you
know, and that’s what I was telling you about earlier where they had some tents out there
for crew chiefs. I’m not sure the pilots, I guess the pilots probably did…well no, they
probably slept over at the Air Force Base, but this was an Air Force unit, and one night
the VC broke in and they destroyed a couple of planes and that was where I told you they
were rolling grenades in the tents and the next morning, they found a bunch of grenades
without the pins even pulled. So, that just kind of illustrates the craziness. But that was
the only really…what’s the word I want…penetration of the airbase. We did go over
there because they had broken into the airbase a couple of times. That was the reason our
unit or that all these…this whole Marine 2nd Division Air Wing was sent in.

RV: Okay.
BH: I believe that’s the reason.
RV: Okay. Did you ever hear of any incidents of fragging or real problems
between enlisted and officers?
BH: No, no.
RV: Okay.

BH: I mean, when you’re going through it, you hear deals where, you know,
lieutenants were shot in the back in combat because they weren’t, you know, but I think
that’s more of a…I really don’t want to make any… I think that’s more of a situation
where it may have happened a few times in World War II or something where somebody,
you know. I mean, people get under stress in combat or maybe some troops felt like that
this guy was going to do them more harm than good, you know, as far as looking out for
them.

RV: Right.
BH: But I never heard of that and maybe it did happen over there, but I certainly
didn’t hear it.
RV: Okay. You were someone who stayed in the rear and part of the very, very important support structure. Did you ever meet; come across anybody who was out in the front lines?

BH: Yeah, I think we talked with guys all the time that would come back you know or come back on a Medevac or so forth. But you know, they didn’t really talk a lot about what went on.

RV: Why do you think that was?

BH: I’m not sure. I guess they just wanted to get away from it.

RV: Right. You’re talking about the Medevac helicopters?

BH: Yeah, I guess. I’m trying to think of a case where somebody came back and told me a long story of what had gone on out in the bush, but I really can’t remember any of that. I can’t remember that happening. Maybe it did and it’s been too long or something.

RV: Okay. Talk to me about what your opinions were of the Viet Cong and the NVA and what you were told, what you heard, and what you think about it.

BH: Well, you would hear that they might be a farmer out, you know, in a rice paddy by day and that then they’d put on the black pajamas at night. I mean, they painted a rather deceptive type of person because I think they wanted…the military wanted you to be on alert all the time. But I just remember, I guess the biggest impression I have of them with respect to the war was the fact that they could be somebody who smiled at you and so forth in one instant, and stick a knife in your back in the next. And now that I’m back off from that, I probably know that that was a little bit different, that the VC probably were more organized than that. They may have had a few terrorists so to speak that’d come in town and filtrate occasionally and do a few little goofy things, but they pretty much were out in real-estate trying to control real-estate or take over real-estate or you know, get the Americans out or whatever. So it was a more organized type of thing than I guess in my mind, it was when I was over there.

RV: Right, okay. Yourself, did you have to carry a side arm or anything like that?

BH: Yeah, I carried a .45.

RV: Okay.
BH: And again, one of the pictures shows me wearing it with a shoulder holster; you know, with your utilities, your fatigues.

RV: Did you wear that when you went into Da Nang?

BH: No.

RV: Okay.

BH: I don’t think so, I don’t remember taking a side arm in Da Nang. I’m not sure they would let you do that. No, I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t let you go on liberty with your side arm.

RV: Right. Bill, what was your standard uniform then like day to day?

BH: Just green utilities. Again, pictures of that are all over the place. So, that was pretty much it. There was no camouflage. Later on, they did camouflage things I think and I even came back with a camouflage flight suit, which was used over there. It just looked more like the green, you know, dark green camouflaging, but we never wore those around Da Nang.

RV: Okay. How would you rate American intelligence and American communication there that you witnessed in Da Nang in 1965?

BH: American intelligence. I don’t know. I’m probably not in a real good position to comment on it. I would imagine on a scale of one to ten, I would imagine our intelligence was probably five or six.

RV: Why do you think that?

BH: I’m just not sure we knew what was going on. Again, my bias, and this is a bias, that there was more of a propaganda machine going on with the officers and troops from Westmoreland and the Defense Department on down than there was just genuine stuff coming through. I’m sure tactically, as far as intelligence was concerned, they had…maybe it was a seven, I don’t know. I think if they had really good intelligence, and again, it’s hard to have that when all your…you know, the VC are coming from the north down into an area and you don’t have anybody located up there I wouldn’t think, or if you do, very few and can they speak English, can they not speak. Maybe I’ve got a very limited view of all this, but I think if our intelligence were very good, then we wouldn’t have had some of the massacres that we had, you know. So, that’s the reason for my rating. You said intelligence and what else?
RV: And communications, just how do you think the Americans, from what you witnessed communicated amongst yourselves and then with folks out in the field and the pilots, etc.

BH: Oh I think the communication was reasonably good as far as radio and all that stuff, yeah, I think it’s excellent. But that’s what we were, was a communication unit basically, to be the eyes nears of the commander of the Air Wing.

RV: What was your relationship with the pilots? Did you frequent with them very much?

BH: Not very much, no. Occasionally we’d go into a bar and see some or some would come by the unit or something like that, but there wasn’t a lot of…and we had pilots in our unit you see.

RV: Right.

BH: We had a guy named Jeffrey Heller who is Ross Perot’s pretty much second-in-command at EDS right now or was for a long time. He retired and now he’s come back and I think he even lives here in Colorado, I need to look him up. He was an A-4 pilot and in a mid-air collision or something with another fighter and he ejected out. That was an interesting story, but we had a couple of pilots in that fourteen man tent. We probably had one or two pilots there.

RV: Okay.

BH: But that’s the only communication we really had. I mean, we would see them occasionally when we’d go into the Division Headquarters and went into the bars.

RV: Okay. You talked about your downtime and some of your entertainment playing poker and things like that. What else did you all do to pass the time?

BH: That’s about all I can remember to be honest with you.

RV: Okay.

BH: I mean, between reading and throwing the ball around, it was very hot there in the summer and we were there right in the middle of the summer. See, I only was in Vietnam for like six or seven months or something like that, counting the time I went to Okinawa to get my knee fixed and so, I guess in that respect, I was very fortunate, but when it’s one hundred and twenty, one hundred and thirty degrees out on the airstrip,
you’re not out doing a whole lot of things. You’re lying in your rack just hoping the 
breeze…trying to find a fan somewhere and stay cool.

RV: What about keeping up with folks back at home? Did you write letters?
BH: Yeah I wrote letters and I had a little tape machine that I did and we used to 
have a lot of tapes and things like that. I think I may have tossed those at one point. I got 
tired of holding them; this was before I found out about what you folks do. But I wrote 
letters, and in fact, I think I passed some letters, some of those letters on to you there for 
your Archive. So I think that’s in the stuff I sent.

RV: Okay.

BH: There was letters, you know, basically. It was interesting. One time I 
looked over one of my… he was a truck driver you know or something like that in the 
mass unit that we had and from Okinawa. (This was before we ever went to Vietnam). I 
looked over his shoulder one time, I couldn’t help but notice and he was writing his letter 
to his girlfriend and he says, ‘Life here is measured in seconds.’ (Laughter) He was 
really…and this is what happens to a lot of the young kids when they go over there, you 
know, they haven’t had much, or at that time, they hadn’t had much experience with 
relationships, so a lot of them tried to magnify it, a lot of them tried to play it down, you 
know. So you saw different types of letters, but I thought that was pretty funny. And of 
course, when we were in Okinawa, and this is backtracking a little bit, I found it 
interesting that the Okinawan women, particularly the gals in the bars and so forth would 
latch on to a certain young enlisted person, G.I. and this wasn’t totally exclusive to 
enlisted, but it happened more with them not because they were younger, they’d latch 
onto one and they just make them feel like they were the only guy in the world, you 
know. And a lot of these young guys, their hormones were raging, so they would come 
to you [and say], ‘I’m in love. I want to marry this gal.’ Then you’d have to talk to them 
and say, ‘Now wait a minute. Make sure you know what you’re doing here and let’s talk 
about this a little bit. And what’s going to happen when these situations happen, when 
you leave, and blah, blah, blah.’ But occasionally, these guys would take these little gals 
into the PX, which was to them, like taking somebody from a slum into Neiman Marcus 
or something like that. So, we used to kid them, the troops, a lot of these gals, and not all 
of them were bar girls. Some of them were just young women in the town, but they
would see you as a ticket back to the land of the big PX, because that’s the way they viewed the U.S.

RV: Right.

BH: And so when you ask about…I forgot what your last question was, it was about…

RV: Just about the…I was asking you in general about entertainment and about downtime and you started talking about Okinawa and that.

BH: Okay, but the downtime, you know, we all had it and a lot of times, most everybody had a job that they did, whether it was some type of maintenance or some type of technical or communication or keeping the communication gear up or all the logistics of supporting a military unit.

RV: Did music play a role in your life over there?

BH: Yeah, I can remember guys having tapes and things over there in the little tent that we were talking about. You know, a few guys had tape players. I don’t remember much about the radio, where there were radio stations. I’m sure, I remember a movie made about that with Robin Williams, *Good Morning Vietnam*, but I don’t remember a lot of radio stations that we could tune into. So I don’t know that I ever heard a radio station.

RV: Okay. Were you ever able to make any mars phone calls?

BH: I may have made one or two from Okinawa. I don’t remember ever making any from Vietnam.

RV: Okay. On base…I’m sorry, go ahead.

BH: I could be wrong about that, but I don’t remember.

RV: Okay. On base there at Da Nang, were there facilities for religious services that you could attend?

BH: Yes.

RV: Did you use them?

BH: Well, they’d have them pretty much out in the field. I mean, again, we were in such a hot climate, that they’d have a tent or someplace that you could go or every unit had its chaplain, which were attempted to be nondenominational. But as far as I
remember, on Sunday, you could get in a truck and ride a truck over to someplace where
they would have services.

RV: Would you go?

BH: Occasionally. Not every time I don’t think. A lot of it depends on the
weather, what shift you were on, you know, if you were on a midnight till six o’clock
shift the next morning, you probably were sleeping in. So, war is kind of a full time deal.
You’re not on a regular schedule.

RV: Right. What about drug and alcohol use? Did you witness any of this?

BH: You know, I really, and I’m being very candid with you, I never witnessed
any of that and maybe I was there too early. I got out of there December ’65. But I never
saw any of that. When I hear about that, I shake my head because I don’t remember
seeing any of that or being near it or having any problems with the kids. I probably had
more problems with the kids; I say kids, the enlisted people and the people under my
command with venereal disease and making sure they didn’t get gonorrhea or something
like that versus drugs and alcohol. We had one guy I think in the squadron that drank a
little too much, but that would be about it.

RV: Okay. You mentioned going on R&R to Hong Kong. What was that like?

BH: Heaven.

(Laughter)

BH: Got on a plane, went and landed at this airport. When you go [fly] into
Hong Kong from a place like that, and it really doesn’t look that much different, but it
looks like New York City, because there’s all these high rise buildings and you’re
landing out on a…I believe the landing strip was out on the…it was built out into the
harbor and so when you come in, they make this circle around all these huge, very tall
buildings. And they’re not sky scrapers, but they’re twenty stories, forty, fifty stories,
maybe not fifty. But anyway, you come in and you come through all this. And man, it
just looks like you’re back, almost back in the U.S.

RV: Right.

BH: So, that was nice. And landed, and like I said, the first thing when I got off,
I went down to a bar and got three…I checked into the Hong Kong Hilton, and again, got
some pictures of that. I actually brought back one of the books from the Hong Kong
Hilton that they give everybody that stays there.

RV: Yes.

BH: It’s a thick book, about an inch thick, a half an inch thick and it’s got colored
pictures…of course, it’s supported by all the different merchants when everybody
shopped with them. But I remember it being wonderful to just sleep in sheets under air
conditioning. I believe there was air conditioning there. And I don’t really remember
what I did, except during the days, I went out and did a lot of shopping, bought a lot of
beaded cashmere sweaters and pearls for my mother and my sister and my grandmothers.
And, at the time, of course, I wasn’t married. But anyway, that was what I did mostly
there.

RV: How long did that last?

BH: I don’t remember exactly. I think it was about two or three days.

RV: Okay. And did it really help you?

BH: Yeah, I think it does. I think it gives you a taste of reality again. You get a
different routine and also I remember trying to…I don’t know whether I did this or not,
but there was a bus you could take and go up to a certain observation point and look into
China and that was at Kowloon and I don’t think I ever did that. But I think I kind of
regretted not having done that, you know. But, of course, Hong Kong is in China, but
this was where the border, the boundary was between the British, at that time, British
controlled Hong Kong and Kowloon, which I think was over on the China side.

RV: Were you by yourself?

BH: Yes.

RV: Okay.

BH: Yeah, I don’t remember going with anybody else.

RV: Okay. Tell me about back at Da Nang USO shows. Did you have access to
any of those?

BH: I don’t remember ever going to a USO show to be honest with you.

RV: Okay.

BH: Maybe, again, that’s gone from my mind, but I don’t remember going to any
USO shows.
RV: Okay. Let’s talk about the relationships within your unit. Were there any racial tensions, anything like that that you remember?

BH: No, no, I really don’t remember anything like that. I think we were predominantly white. We may have had a couple of African-Americans in our unit, one or two Hispanics, but I think that…no. Our unit was kind of interesting in that I don’t remember anybody in our unit being real intense, you know what I mean.

RV: Yes.

BH: Except our commanding officer, and he was kind of an interesting guy. I think his name was Cunningham or something like that, Major Cunningham. He was a ‘by the book’ guy and real stickler for details and so forth. But a fair one, you know what I mean. I think he did a pretty good job with what he had, what his job was.

RV: The other men in the unit, you said you all got along well?

BH: Yeah, yeah, I think we got along very well. You know, we tried to have fun. Again, the NCOs, the non-commissioned officers, the gunnery sergeants and you know, anybody from E5 on up, seemed to kind of be the glue that held the unit together and they would keep things fun or you know. I mean, they did their jobs obviously very well, but they seemed to keep things reasonably pleasant.

RV: Okay.

BH: As pleasant as can be in that type of situation.

RV: Okay. Do you remember any particularly humorous units or using humor to help the situation?

BH: I’m sure there were some, but I can’t recall a lot of them right now, the ones I remember I pretty much already told you, you know. I’m sure there were a ton of humorous deals that we did over there, but I’m having a hard time bringing up any of that.

RV: Right, okay. Bill, how anxious for you to leave Vietnam? Was it six or seven months that went by fast and you’re ready to get out or was it something that was just another routine assignment for you?

BH: Well, it certainly wasn’t a routine assignment, and I was blessed by the fact that I had already spent almost four years in the Marine Corps, including my time in the active reserve there at Texas Tech.
RV: Yes.

BH: And so I was ready to get out. I knew that I did not want to make a career of the Marine Corps. I always felt like the Marine Corps was a little too focused on tradition. I mean, the fact that we couldn’t wear our utilities into town when everybody else could, you know, things like that. The Marine Corps just does a lot of things where they’re very…and I understand when you’re dealing with young people age twenty to thirty-five or whatever, that you’ve got to have some structure and you’ve got to have some real major discipline, and in fact, I think it’d be good for all of our kids to have to go through boot camp for six weeks, why not just appreciate, you know, learning to do things when they should and so forth. But I was definitely ready to get out. I mean, when you’re in the military, you count down those days. I mean, you got a calendar and you get down to a point where people start calling you ‘short,’ you know, I remember the, ‘You’re so short that you could walk under the door’, and all that stuff, when you get down with the last few weeks or days, and unlike some of the combat troops where it really gets critical. I had a good friend who was a helicopter pilot…I don’t know whether this has anything to do with what I’m talking about, but he had been over there for nine months or ten months and had never been shot down, never been…. I don’t think he’d been hit very much, maybe a few little rounds or something in taking guys in and out of landing zones. And crew chiefs, he told me crew chiefs either really wanted to be on his plane or wanted to stay away from it because they either thought that he was very blessed or that the law of averages was going to catch up with him.

RV: Right.

BH: And the big fear is that you’re a week from the time you go home and then you get both legs shot off or something like that. That’s the real tragedy. So when you get down to those last few weeks, that last month and start counting it down, it doesn’t make a difference whether you’re in a support unit or combat unit or whatever, the time can’t pass fast enough.

RV: And that’s how you felt?

BH: Yeah. I think I did, because I was anxious to get out, get my life started, and get back home.

RV: Did they try to talk you into staying in the Marine Corps?
BH: They always give you reenlistment options. I don’t think, the officers, they
do it as much as they did the enlisted, but they’ll come up to the enlisted and they’ll offer
them huge bonuses. I mean, you know, four or five thousand dollars and you know,
depending on what your rank is and what your experience is and what the MOS is that
you need, if they need that, military occupation especially, and they’ll really try to keep
those guys in. And I’m sure I could’ve re-upped, but I didn’t see much pressure….no, I
didn’t see much pressure to do that at all, particularly in the officer.

RV: Did you change your activities, your day-to-day activities, as you got
shorter?

BH: No, I don’t think so.

RV: Okay.

BH: No I don’t believe I changed. You still do your job; you still do whatever’s
required of you.

RV: Okay. Bill, why don’t we stop for today?

BH: Okay, that sounds good.
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Bill Holmes. Today is May 11, 2004. It’s 9:32 a.m. Central Standard Time. I’m again in Lubbock, Texas and Bill is again in Boulder, Colorado. Sir, let’s start with where we left off from our last conversation. You were leaving Vietnam and I’d like for you to kind of describe again the circumstances under which you did so and your feelings on leaving this war zone.

Bill Holmes: I think that I was kind of in a little bit of an unusual situation in that I didn’t have a full tour in Vietnam. I was there…it’s hard for me to remember the exact dates, but probably six to eight months on the very end of my three year tour, three year active duty tour and some time before that.

RV: Yes.

BH: And so I was pretty fortunate in that I didn’t have to spend a whole year over there. The Marine Corps tours are normally I think thirteen months and of course, the Marine Corps, whenever they go overseas, they go totally without any dependents as opposed to some of the other services. So I can remember somewhere around December 5, 1965 was it, yeah, being a great a day because and of course, in the military, you look forward to what they call getting short and you’re looking forward to getting out of there because, you know, there are obviously more pleasant places, family and so forth to be.

RV: Yes.

BH: So I can remember crawling on that big…I think it was a C-130 and we had….or no, maybe out of Vietnam, it was more of a traditional type of airliner that was
contracted with the government to take us out of there. And I think they took us to Guam or Hawaii and maybe we changed planes there or…it’s hard for me to remember. It’s been so long ago. But anyway, that was looked forward to as a great day, so I was…I mean, anytime you leave a place like that, you’re pretty happy. That’s probably one of the happiest days of your life and I said that that Christmas that I had in 1965 with my folks was probably one of the best, most valued Christmases because when you…first of all, I had ordered a little P18 Volvo to be waiting for me in San Francisco and I was going to pick that up and drive back to Texas and enjoy this little sports car all the way back and totally different lifestyle without all the demands of military service. So I was released from the service in San Francisco at Treasure Island.

RV: Bill, let me interrupt just for a moment.

BH: Yeah.

RV: Do you remember the flight back as far as how you felt and the mood on the plane or planes?

BH: No, I don’t remember the food on the plane.

RV: The mood, not the food, the mood.

BH: The mood on the plane.

RV: Yes sir.

BH: Not really. I have one story that will stick in my mind as long as I live and that was I was sitting next to a private first class or something. I think he had one stripe from the Army and I could tell by the patch on his sleeve that he was from the 1st Infantry Division and I remembered that they had just been…they had some people totally overrun by the VC at a place called Dong Xoi. And I never will forget, we came over the Golden Gate Bridge in preparation to land whatever Air Force Base was there in San Francisco and they tilted the plane over so that we could see the Golden Gate Bridge because that was our first image of the U.S. I mean, we didn’t see Catalina or anything; well, Catalina’s further south. But that was our first image of the U.S. and he was a little African-American private and the tears welled up in his eyes. And it’s hard for me to tell the story without getting pretty emotional, but I remember looking over to him and I remembered, he had told me how he had been in this foxhole at Dong Xoi when the VC hit and he was in there with a buddy of his who had been killed and he was with his dead
friend for, I guess, I don’t know, eighteen hours or twelve hours or maybe twenty hours, I
don’t remember the time frame, but a long time not knowing whether he was going to
live or die and whether [he was] going to be rescued or not. And fortunately he did get
out, but he lost his buddy and I looked over at him, I saw the tears well up, and I said,
‘Private, does that look pretty good to you?’ And he says, ‘Yes suh, Lieutenant.’ He
says, ‘About three or four weeks ago,’ he says, ‘I didn’t ever think I was going to see this
place again.’

RV: Wow.

BH: And the mood when you get back into the States is really incredible. I
remember I went into a restaurant and I sat down and I had something like a milkshake
because, you know, we hadn’t had anything but powdered milk for a while or some type
of meal. And anyway, I remember sitting behind or across from a couple that was
arguing about something that was so menial. I mean, it was the color of her dress or
something and your whole sense of values really becomes concentrated or really
appreciated, the small things in life and you sit there and wonder, you know, these people
are sitting there eating a wonderful meal, they don’t have any issues of security, that they
should be pretty happy, they probably got plenty of money and they’re arguing over this
thing. And so you’re transformed from an atmosphere where a lot of things seem very
valuable; home, family, companionship of your friends, family, loved ones and so forth
into an atmosphere where many of those things don’t seem to be appreciated.

RV: Right.

BH: And I guess that’s the one thing that stuck with me. And for that reason,
I’ve always thought that it would be nice to have all of our kids certainly not go through a
war, but go through some type of military training where they were suffering some type
of hardships or everybody should have to, where they come back into the world where
they’re much more appreciative of something to eat and they’re not worried about eating
broccoli or cauliflower.

RV: Right.

BH: I was just saying that I think somehow in a wonderful utopian world that we
would be able to train all of our young people or children or whatever somehow to have a
period in their life of some type of hardship or scarcity where when they come back into
the type of world we have where it seems like most all of us have everything we really want or need, maybe not want, but certainly need, and we have plenty to eat, clothing, plenty of water and things, it would really make them appreciate the things that we do have in this country and what a rich lifestyle and what an incredible standard of living that we have here. So, that was the one impression I guess that I left with is that, you know, we really don’t appreciate the things we have and I think everybody that comes back from a war zone or even the military in country that’s impoverished, has that sort of appreciation; they’ve seen, and for that reason of course, being real philosophical here, traveled has broadened us and our kids and lets them know there’s other things besides video games and those type of things.

RV: Right. Were you in uniform when you came back here?
BH: Yes I was. Yeah, everybody comes back in uniform.

RV: Right. Well, tell me, of course, this is in December ’65, so the controversy really hasn’t begun to boil up, but what was your reception like at the airport and your travels back across the country to Texas?
BH: Well, certainly I was not in uniform going back across the country.

RV: Right.
BH: And, you know, I wasn’t advertising the fact that I just got out of Vietnam, maybe I told a few people that stopped. I don’t think there was…I don’t remember any positive or negative reactions there. Again, it’s been so long, I probably would’ve stored those back in my…I mean, I would’ve put them away if they had been negative, unless they’ve been extremely negative, but I don’t remember any positive or negative things there.

RV: Okay. So, you didn’t experience anything at the airport in San Francisco?
BH: No, no, it was a military airport, so, you know, they welcomed us back.

There was no banners and bands.

RV: Right, right. What was your transition to civilian life like? Was it difficult for you? And how much…tell me about your discussions about Vietnam with your family.
BH: Boy, you know, I really…my mother could probably answer that question better than I could. There’s some things with respect there she remembers a lot better
than I do because it was...I won’t say more meaningful to her, but more emotional to her than me. But I don’t remember. I guess the one thing I remember is when I came back, when I left, my little sister was kind of a pesty little girl. She was ten years younger than I and she always wanted to go with me and my friends and do things when we were. And when I got back, she had grown into a young woman and I was really amazed at how extreme that transition had been.

RV: Right.

BH: And that was really about all I can remember. I’m sure that everybody was...my mother and my father were very happy to have me back and I don’t remember, for example, the newspaper coming out and interviewing me or anything like that.

RV: Right.

BH: So, I did have I think in the memorabilia that I sent you that there was one article about that I wrote where I talked about the winds or something in Vietnam, I don’t know what it was. So, you know, might refer to that, but that might refresh some of my memory, but I sent all that to you.

RV: Right.

BH: But anyway, that’s it.

RV: Okay, okay. Tell me about your thoughts about the continuing war. I mean, how much did you keep up with it? Obviously it exploded after you came back.

BH: You know, I really didn’t...I kind of enjoyed being aloof from it as much as I can remember. I don’t remember involving myself one way or the other. I just was happy to be out of there.

RV: Okay.

BH: And so maybe I was a little in denial or numb or whatever from it.

RV: So you did keep up with it, but on the fringe?

BH: I probably read some stuff about it in the newspaper, but I didn’t get a map and, you know, follow the progress at all.

RV: Right. What did you think of the overall U.S. strategy and policy in Southeast Asia?

BH: Well, again, I think I’ve mentioned this before. When you’re there, you’re pretty much...there’s a lot of, I won’t say brainwashing, but a lot of propaganda to make
you feel like you’re doing the right thing and that you’re helping a lot of people and so forth and I’m sure we did. As I became older though, I realized that very similar to what I feel today is that our leaders, you know, it’s the old deal that the old men declare the wars and the young men fight them or whatever. There’s got to be a saying about that somewhere. But I think the politics and after I found out later on what was going on, I was pretty sickened by seeing all the poor decisions and I guess I would say really lack of integrity among our leaders and so forth because they were playing the international politics.

RV: What did you think of the idea of Vietnamization, turning over the war to the Vietnamese? Did you think that was viable?

BH: You know, I’ll be honest with you, I don’t even remember having an opinion on it.

RV: Okay.

BH: And I may have, but that’s been forty years ago.

RV: Right, right.

BH: So, it’s hard for me to… I don’t know whether I’ve kind of consciously blocked a lot of that stuff out or whether maybe after that, I just didn’t really care, it wasn’t part of my life, maybe I’m too selfish, maybe I wanted to get on with my career. You know, so many other things that were running through my mind that were much more important to me at the time.

RV: What about April 1975? Do you remember that when South Vietnam fell? What were your thoughts and feelings?

BH: Vaguely, but I don’t remember my emotions surrounding that to be candid with you.

RV: Okay. Well, how do you feel about it now today?

BH: Well, it’s kind of funny. Did I mention to this, that a fellow brought by a prospectus on a land deal that’s he doing where he’s in somehow with some folks that are in the hierarchy of the government, I guess it’s still a bit of a Communist government, but they’re trying to develop the tourism to Vietnam, which I always said would be a beautiful place. And you know, they’re selling property on the beaches and so forth, they’re going to build Five-Star Hotels, Disney’s going to go in there and put a theme
park in. There’s going to be a large airport; U.S. 1, which goes up and down the thing is
going to be improved from a two-lane road to a six-lane highway. You know, one of the
things I’ve always tried to do is accept change, and I think unfortunately a lot of people
hold grudges and things. If we could just accept the change that happens in the world,
we’d be better off as well as respecting the diversity and different ideas of our neighbors.
I don’t really have, except for the fact of seeing that the way went into Iraq and the way
we plunged into there and thought we were going…to me, although our political leaders
will tell you, ‘No, it’s different from Vietnam,’ it is exactly like Vietnam. I mean, it
couldn’t be, but it’s the ‘Tar baby’ effect once you get involved in there, well then you’re
stuck and you’ve already made a commitment, you’ve spent all this money and resources,
and lives of course, which are the most important. So I guess I’ve become, and this is
strange for a first lieutenant in the Marine Corps, become much more of…maybe not a
total pacifist, but recognizing that the world has a lot different ideas about how to conduct
themselves, different religions and so forth than we do and when we stir that bucket, it’s
like stirring a bucket of bees. I mean, you’re going to get stung. So, I’m not sure exactly
what the right answer is, but I think we took a very poor course and I can see that. So
that’s the thing that sticks with me, in answer to your question.

RV: Okay. Do you think the United States learned lessons from this experience
in Vietnam?

BH: Well, I’m afraid they didn’t, you know. I guess it’s been long enough that
the young folks who are actually fighting the war probably weren’t even around then or
were babies then. So, they certainly didn’t remember the history of it and it’s sad that our
leaders who are fifty, sixty years old in Congress and our leadership didn’t realize it.

RV: Right. Well how do you feel about your service in Vietnam today? I mean,
you’ve kind of addressed that already, but just are there specifics that you think about or
is there…?

BH: Well, I think my military service was a positive thing in my life. I think I
may have mentioned a friend of mine back in school who went in the reserves for six
weeks and then was in…oh, in active duty for six weeks, and then was in the reserve for
x number of years and came out and said, ‘I wouldn’t go through it again for less than x
million dollars.’ And I certainly wouldn’t want to repeat it, but I think it was a character
building experience in the military because it developed discipline, structure, organization, those qualities in my life. But it also gave me a sense of values to think for myself and recognize that our leaders aren’t always correct and that they can make mistakes. And so that this fierce nationalistic feeling of whatever track the U.S. decides to go on that everybody should just line up like little baby ducks and follow the mother, what obviously what the mentality that you have to get in the military is once you get out of the military, you need to understand that there’s good judgment and that you have the ability to exercise that. And so I guess that’s the thing that I take from the military service as far as being in Vietnam, sure it was a character building experience. You can’t go over there and see people wounded and killed and hauled out in body bags without growing up, probably a lot faster than you would if you were just simply back home running a business. But I guess that would be my overall general impression.

RV: Okay. Is there anything that you would change about your Vietnam experience if you could?

BH: Hmmm. I don’t know. I guess in an ideal world, I probably would’ve more enjoyed being a pilot over there than in the controlling aircraft. That’s coming from a mechanical standpoint. Anything I would change. I met a lot of nice people, I met a lot of great guys, one or two I’ve kept up with. No, I don’t think…I don’t know anything that I could’ve changed, being practical.

RV: Right.

BH: In an ideal world, sure I’m sure there were things that I would’ve changed, you know, have a lot nicer quarters. (Laughter)

RV: Right.

BH: No mosquitoes and no rain and no monsoons, but you know, other than that, yeah.

RV: How do you feel about Vietnam today? You’ve talked about the development issue and the tourist thing, but just looking at the country today and where it’s come since the war, what are your feelings?

BH: Politically, candidly, I don’t know much about it. I mentioned before, I think it’s one of those kind of tropical, potentially, a tropical paradise. From an economic standpoint, it’s very close to Japan and all of the Asian nations and as the Asian nations
obviously gained wealth and they’re going to do that because China and all those nations
have a lot of people who are willing to work more than eight to five and work very hard
and some of them are going to accumulate wealth, particularly as the societies become
more capitalistic and I feel like they’re probably going to wind up going down to
Vietnam and that it will wind up being a very resort type of area eventually.

RV: Would you ever want to go back?

BH: Sure, yeah, I’d like to go back. I don’t have any…I don’t harbor any dark
thoughts or anything of Vietnam that would prevent me from going back. Again, I think
that’s part of growing. You clear your mind and you accept change and you understand
the same people who may have tortured our troops and so forth probably aren’t alive
anymore and new people have come along. I don’t know much about the politics for the
government because I don’t read about those type of things, but yeah, I would love to go
back and see it. In fact, I’ve been thinking about if I had the money to make this
investment opportunity, I probably would do that. And that might include a trip over
there just to see what the country’s like now.

RV: Right, okay. Tell me about what you’ve seen on Vietnam since the war; the
books and the movies that have been out. Do you see them, do you read about the war
and if so, which ones; and if you don’t, why not?

BH: It seems like a long time ago, I’ve forgotten the name of the…I did see the
Mel Gibson movie. I can’t remember the name of it.

RV: *We Were Soldiers*?

BH: Yeah. And I did not remember that particular incident in the way it was
portrayed, you know, where they kind of got left out left field there. And there was
another one, there were two or three there that were pretty graphic that I never saw. I
may have seen portions of them and I forget what one of them was called. Something
about doomsday or help me…

RV: *Apocalypse Now*?

BH: *Apocalypse Now* and I don’t think I watched…I may have watched that a
long time ago. I married a lady who doesn’t particularly enjoy violence in movies and I
kind of go to movies to walk out feeling good if I can and that’s just more recent, but I
think at the time, either I was too busy or I just didn’t care to go back to those situations.
It wasn’t, again, a fear of darkness or anything like that, it was a just choice. There were other things I would want to see.

RV: Right.

BH: I didn’t read a lot and the movies…I really, maybe to a certain extent, I avoided it and didn’t realize. I sort of self consciously avoided because I just didn’t…you know, I was glad to be rid of it. But I don’t remember that being a feeling that I had. And I’m sure that probably five years or three years after, maybe I did a lot of these things. Maybe I read a lot about it, but I don’t remember doing that.

RV: Okay, okay. Bill, let me ask you a general question. Your perception of the Vietnam Veteran today, what do you think the public thinks about Vietnam Veterans and are there myths or misconceptions about the veteran?

BH: I think most of the people alive today now or most of the people alive today, I emphasize most are so consumed by their own lives, their own wants, needs, greeds, that they don’t think about it. I think, when you go back to Washington, D.C. and you see the black Wall, that that really made an impression on me, was a very emotional moment. I cried like a baby.

RV: Tell me about that. When did you go and what happened?

BH: It seems like it was about five to seven years ago, and just walking along that Wall and touching it really pulled a lot of emotion out of me and I think that…I wrote the lyrics to a song recently that I’d be happy to send you, but I want to do it…I don’t want you to publish it because it has some strong political beliefs in there, and I’m sure, particularly in Lubbock, Texas, it would offend many and maybe think I was a crazy liberal or something like that. (Laughter) I think I have your card and I’ll send you a copy of it. I’m having a fellow write some lyrics to it now, so I’ll trust that you don’t share it with anybody. But it talks about, you know, I think the chorus is, ‘Linear minds, technology reigns, we’re masters of the dance.’ Showing that we mastered the technology of the war, but what have we done to our souls. Do we still have a chance? And there’s several verses in there, ones about the black Wall and I think it’s a fair representation of somebody who maybe has been there and yet, has an open mind to how other people think besides our particular culture. I haven’t even shared it with my mother.
because she has such strong, you know, conservative beliefs. It would only…we’d spend
all our time arguing.

(Laughter)

BH: And I don’t know what your political beliefs are. In any event, maybe it
would be better if I can find it here, if I could read it to you. But go ahead.

RV: Okay, while you’re looking, and of course, realize that if you do read it, that
this is part of the audio, which will be part of the public interview.

BH: And I don’t mind that if somebody…I don’t know how many people play
this or will see this, will this be something that’ll be, you know, on…

RV: It’ll be out there. It’ll be on the Internet, it’ll be here in the Archive.

BH: Well, I might do it off the record.

RV: Okay, that’ll be fine, whatever you prefer. It seems like, just based on what
you’ve said in the last half hour, that you have really put Vietnam behind you. You do
have some strong emotions about it obviously, based on your experience at the wall, how
do you think you’ve been able to do that? Is it just a determination to do so or is it
because of your experience?

BH: No, I think just a natural moving on with my life. I’m a person who lives
very much in the now and in the future. I have seen people wallow in the past and get
stuck in it and they regret it and all this stuff. And I’m a very much…it’s like my golf
game, you know, I have a poor shot, if I don’t forget it. In fact, I’ll even say to people
sometimes, ‘That shot is just as over as the Vietnamese War, the Korean War and it’ll do
you about as much good to worry about it because you’ve got the shot coming up to you.’
And I project that in my life, I project that in my golf game just for sanity’s purpose. Not
sanity, but just a good healthy attitude. I think, you know, at my age I’m starting to go to
a bunch of funerals and memorial services. I went to one the other day. I’ve got one
Wednesday to go through and I go to them and pay my respects and then I’m out of there.
I don’t wallow that stuff; I have some very strong beliefs about that. It’s kind of let the
dead bury the dead type of philosophy.

RV: Okay, okay. Well Bill, how was participating in this interview and the oral
history project affected you? Has this been a positive experience or has it been
something, again, just that you’ve wanted to do and you did and it’s over with?
BH: I think, you know, as I look at it, the sending of the memorabilia was kind of clearing all that stuff out of my life. I said, ‘What am I keeping it for? When I die, is my daughter going to drag all that up and then not know what it was?’ So, you folks provided a wonderful opportunity for me to purge that if you will from my basement. But secondly, I think there may have been a little bit of mental purging too.

RV: Okay.

BH: And I feel very good about it, I don’t feel, ‘God, it’s relieved, and I’m over that. That’s something I’ve been carrying around,’ it’s not that at all. It’s just that simply maybe somebody can use this historically. Maybe it will do some good somewhere and maybe help some students appreciate what went on. I think it’s a positive experience and quite frankly, it’s kind of flattering to me for you to interview me as somebody because I don’t feel like I played any major role in the war. I wasn’t a war hero or anything like that and I just think I did my job. And to a lot of young people, that might be very glamorous and wonderful, but that would be kind of a caution to anybody listening to this is that war is not glamorous, it’s glamorized by the people who pin the medals on because they want to keep the ball rolling and keep people thinking that they did something wonderful. It’s been a good experience and when we say goodbye, well, I’ll see you when I’m in Lubbock and visiting my mother occasionally and I wish you the best.

You’ve been a wonderful host and I obviously think the work that you’re doing is very positive. I wish you could be jammed in the face of some of our politicians and leaders and they could hear some of this stuff.

RV: Right, right.

BH: But that probably won’t happen.

RV: So Bill, you went into the reserves, is that correct?

BH: Yeah, I went in at school. I had flunked a chemistry course, and so instead of completing my Air Force ROTC contract to be a pilot, I decided at that time…and we didn’t know whether or not we’d be drafted, but I was gung ho to serve my country and so I went into the Marine Corps. You know, I think the Marine Corps has a certain attraction. I see some youngsters in my church going into the Marine Corps because they think it’s very glamorous and so forth. And if you’re going to go be in the service, it’s a
great place to be because you know you’re well trained and people are beside you there
are volunteers, they weren’t drafted. So…
RV: Right. What about afterwards, after December ’65, were you ever in the
military again?
BH: No.
RV: Okay, okay.
BH: No, I didn’t go back to reserves or anything.
RV: Okay, okay.
BH: I didn’t enjoy a lot of…as I mentioned before, I didn’t enjoy a lot of the
politics of the military and so I chose to just, you know, I’d done my deal and I was
through.
RV: Okay. All right Bill, well is there anything else that you want to talk about
or add to our conversations?
BH: No, I think for the record, that’s probably it.
RV: Okay. Well, very good. We will end the oral history interview now with
Mr. Bill Holmes. Thank you very much for your time sir. We appreciate it very much.
BH: Thank you, I appreciate your time and the work that you’re doing.