Jonathan Bernstein: This is Jonathon Bernstein conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Dave Tela. We’re at the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Connecticut on March 11, 2002 at approximately 12:15 Eastern Standard time.

Now, Mr. Tela, could you start off by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Dave Tela: Grew up in Turners Falls, Massachusetts, went to school at Rochester Institute of Technology to study photographic illustration and was there until 1968. I graduated from high school in ’65. Went through three years of college and, basically at that point, realized that I was going to get drafted if I continued because I came from a small town. I didn’t see it being worth my father’s investment for me to go to four years of college and just have me go off to war so I went to the Rochester post office, went into the Army recruiting station and while the recruiter went off to get a cup of coffee I looked at the posters on the wall. I saw one for becoming a pilot and he comes back in and says, ‘So what can I do for you?’ I said, ‘What does it take to become a pilot?’ He says, ‘You need to take an exam in Buffalo.’ And he gave me some other background details and I committed to taking the exam. Went to Buffalo, took the exam, scored well so they basically, when I did my formal enlistment, I was targeted for being a helicopter pilot. So I went to basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The company I was in, B-Bravo, B-4-1, was led by a Special Forces Green Beret Ranger who was now in charge of a basic training company. It was kind of an odd mix with a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears guys and here was this combat experienced guy with responsibilities that I don’t think he was really looking forward to. Two weeks into the training the drill sergeant, Dixon, yelled out, ‘We’re going to hand out weapons after chow’ and I raised my hand.
Normally, in basic training you don’t raise your hand. But I raised my hand. They went, ‘What is it, Tela?’ ‘Drill Sergeant, I’m not going to carry a rifle.’ I thought for sure at that point there would be some push-ups or something of that nature happening. But instead, I think I stunned him and, of course, everybody else is gasping because they want to go to lunch and like there’s like two hundred of us in this company. It was at the peak of the training period for Vietnam. So, he says, ‘Tela, you come with me, everybody else go to chow.’ So, we walk into the orderly room and the captain’s there. The captain says to the sergeant, ‘What is it, Dixon?’ ‘Well, Mr. Tela has something to tell you, sir.’ ‘So, What is it Tela?’ ‘I’m not going to carry a rifle, sir.’ ‘Not going to carry a rifle?’ ‘No.’ ‘What’s going on?’ ‘Well, I’m going to apply for conscientious objector status.’ So for roughly four weeks, went through getting interviewed by the Catholic priest, the Episcopal minister, and some Baptist minister. In the meantime, every time they went out to the rifle range, I still had to march out and go out with them and come back with them. But I’d be doing things like warming up the water for the C rations, so the water was hot, so they’d have hot food when they opened up the C rations and helping with the dishes. Then I’d march back. And one day I was told by the captain, he invited me back to his office, that I had a choice, ‘Fifteen months in the stockade or get with the program.’ ‘I’ll get with the program.’ And so, from that last two weeks I had to get qualified in pistols and rifles and did quite well with that because I had been in Boy Scouts. After basic training went directly to Fort Walters and at Fort Walters I was the first one to get the Golden Sledgehammer to carry around. When we got in formation I did something stupid. I cannot tell you what it was that I did that was stupid, but out of like two hundred guys, ‘You’re carrying the Golden Sledgehammer.’ So, I did that for a few days. Then that was one of those things that they tried to break you into, to go by the rules and do everything properly. In flight school basically it was survival, learning how the helicopter flew, how to fly the helicopter, learning about the aerodynamics. Texas was a totally different place for me because I had grown up in New England and had never been further south than New York. Texans and Texas were, it was like being in a different country. Eventually soloed. I flew OH-23s, I think they were the D-model. OH-23Ds. Went from there to Fort Rucker. At Fort Rucker I wasn’t there maybe two hours and this woman comes into the barracks saying, ‘Dave Tela around?’ Little did I
know that my one and only relative living in the South lived just off base and her husband, her husband had deceased, was a master sergeant in the Army. So she knew the ways of the Army and she had already gotten permission from the commander of the student company to let me go away for the day to let me have dinner with them at their house. So, while I was at Fort Rucker at different times of the training there would be periods of time where I’d get to fly around her house and her catfish pond while I was training. It was within the traffic pattern. And the best part of the whole story is that she was leasing to the Army the field that we were practicing in. Fort Rucker was one of those environments where things got very serious. There was less of a washout at the Fort Rucker stage than there had been at the Fort Walters stage and you got a very clear sense that you needed to stay focused on the problems at hand, whatever problems you were facing that day with your flight exercises, the flight exercises, whether it be instrument training or formation flying or whatever. There would always be a sense upon just about everybody in the class at this point that it got real serious and you paid attention. Because the few times you did see mid-air collisions with students going down were just enough to keep everybody real. In fact, during that whole time of training, outside of being off the base, on base I had never witnessed anybody goofing off. I mean it was that kind of a serious endeavor. At Fort Rucker, I ended up being selected for, of all things, gunship training, which I thought was kind of interesting. And I didn’t think anything of it so I and a bunch of the classmates that were selected for it would go off and do day and nighttime gunship training at the firing range with rockets and machine guns and 40millimeter grenade launcher, the M-5 unit that was mounted on the nose of some of the practice ships. We’d go off and practice gunship tactics, formations and so forth while the other students flying the slicks were off learning how to do sling loads and other kinds of things that were more appropriate for slicks. Graduation time came, parents came down and about that time everybody of course was getting orders as to what’s going to happen to them when they do graduate. For most of them they were going directly to Vietnam and they had the unit assignment. I was in total shock, especially with my earlier history in the Army. I was now graduating fifth in my class out of my final class of about 181 or 182. I was fifth in my class and had been selected to go to Cobra school and I started out as a conscientious objector. So I’m thinking about it
and I’m thinking about it. Okay, thirty more days in the United States, you know for the
training, versus going right over to Vietnam after thirty days of leave. I said, ‘Well, I’ll
see if I can’t go ahead and get transition training in another aircraft, like a Chinook, or
Crane or something else.’ So, I go in to see this officer who happened to be a wounded
returning warrant officer from Vietnam. He was wounded in Vietnam. He had a hand
that was permanently in a leather glove. I say permanently, that is he never walked with
out it. He always had it on. Apparently his hand had been burned in a crash. He was
now writing with a hand that was the unfamiliar hand. ‘What is it Tela?’ ‘Well, I’d like
to change from gunships to something like Chinooks or Cranes, some other transition
school.’ ‘If you don’t take what you got, you get to the bottom of the list and you go
right over with the rest of the guys.’ ‘Okay, never mind.’ I went to Cobra school.
Started Cobra school in Savannah, Georgia, about a month there. We were training with
Marines who were learning to fly Cobras as well as the rest of the warrant officers. At
that time, by that time, there were two classmates that I had started flight school with who
were now training with me in Cobra school: Jim Elkin and Ed Soliday. We eventually
got orders to go from there, once we graduated from Cobra school. Just about everybody
that entered the class graduated from the class. In fact, I think in looking at my records
the other day, it indicated that everybody that entered that Cobra class graduated from
that Cobra class. Ended up shipping out of the state of Washington to Vietnam. From
Fort Lewis, refueled in Alaska, landed in Japan and then from Japan we went over to
Cam Ranh Bay. Landed at Cam Ranh Bay at night and the tracers were real. There was
a lot of action off base at that time. This was about September 15, of 1969. Hamburger
Hill had just basically concluded and they had decided they didn’t need all the gunship
pilots up north like they originally thought. Of my classmates that I had gone through
training with, into Cobra school with, they had been shipped directly to the South. I was
the only one of that group to go to the North. They told me they didn’t need me up north,
so they shipped me to Long Binh. At Long Binh I got picked up by 3/17 Air Cav
helicopter once they got me processed and assigned to 12th Combat Aviation Group of
which, 3/17 Air Cav was attached. When we landed at Di An, D-I A-N, started getting
walked out to the processing headquarters of the Red Horse. It was called Red Horse.
3/17 call sign was Red Horse, the squadron headquarters. Did some in-processing there,
which didn’t take too long. Then the various platoon leaders who were going to get those
of us that shipped in, came to pick us up. As I’m walking with my new platoon leader,
Clayton Marsh, over to the hooches, he says, ‘We just had a couple new guys come in,
Jim Elkin and Ed Soliday, do you know them?’ ‘Uh, yes. They were my classmates.’ I
spent an entire training period in flight school in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, now I’m here
in Di An South Vietnam with two guys I know, same platoon, flying the same kind of
aircraft. Spent a full year in South Vietnam, flying Cobra gun ships. I got to be an
aircraft commander early, probably because I had survived a couple of episodes where,
including one, where a pilot shot himself, and the pilot was sitting in the backseat. He
had a loaded M-1 in the aircraft leaning up against the aircraft wall next to the collective.
The story gets complicated, but in the end it basically ends up, he shoots himself, I’m at
the controls in the front and I’m without SCAS. That’s the Stability Control
Augmentation System, where the gyros for it are behind the back seat. Bob Scurzy was
the scout pilot at the time. He was flying so when he heard on the radio, that my pilot
had been shot—now I didn’t know, it didn’t click with me that the gun he had put in the
back earlier in the morning was what shot him. All I heard was a loud explosion and
smelled gunpowder. He’s leaning over, I can see him in the mirror from the front seat.
He’s leaning over and he gets on the radio and broadcasts to the world that he’s been hit.
First thought that came to my mind, I can remember it today just like it happened
moments ago, ‘No shit!’ So, I’m in a left turn when that happens, rotating around
because we’re a hunter-killer team. I probably should have told you that mission
involved flying as a hunter-killer team. The LOH, the observation helicopter, was down
on the deck looking for signs of activity when this happened. We ended up landing at
Long Binh medevac. Then I flew solo from the backseat back to Di An with the LOH
leading and telling the guys at Saber tower at Di An, this guy’s in the backseat of the
Cobra hadn’t flown in the backseat before and that they should clear the airfield. As I
come in the guy in the tower says, ‘Just set it down in the middle of the runway.
Somebody will come out and move it for you.’ At this point I had already been through
the training, I knew what I was doing, so I just basically came to a hover, turned went
into a revetment, shut her down. Only a couple of hours later would I find out that the
bullet that went through the pilot, missed the pitch-change horn on one of the rotors by
about two inches. The pitch-change horn link, rather. It hit the horn, but the link was
about two inches away. After living through that kind of thing and then I did a rescue
with—in fact, the platoon leader was flying that day [as my aircraft commander] and a
scout ship had been shot down. While the platoon leader stayed in the Cobra, I went and
pulled out the scout, the observer, out of the helicopter. Shut down the helicopter, pulled
the observer out pulled the pilot out. Some ARVN’s happened to be driving by - literally
it’s the weirdest story. It’s hot, a lot of activity going on. The ARVN’s, the South
Vietnamese soldiers, weren’t very enthusiastic about going into battle, so they were more
than pleased to help me move these two wounded people into the Medevac ship when it
finally arrived and make sure that nobody got near the turning rotor blades of the Cobra.
We had landed on what might be called in a Vietnamese sense a main drag, a paved road
which was just—you could hear the battle going on behind us but we were far enough
away that we weren’t in immediate threat. But having gone through a number of those
kinds of moments, apparently the major [Air Cav Troop commander] decided that I could
handle flying as aircraft commander so I got an early assignment as aircraft commander
before my other classmates did and ended up from January to September of 1970, flying
as an aircraft commander. But, before that even happened, in November of ’69, late ’69,
later November ’69, I was given the orders for being a functional test pilot - normally, a
position where you get trained for it. But, based on what had transpired over my first
three months in Vietnam apparently the commander thought that I could handle being a
functional test pilot. When I became aircraft commander, the functional test pilot role
was integrated into that, so that if somebody got shot up during the day and the ship was
marginally flyable, it would get stripped of armament, rockets and ammunition. The
guns would stay on, but unloaded. I’d fly back solo with a Huey flying trail to either pick
up the pieces, or pick me up if I survived the aircraft flight to the ground if it landed that
way before getting to the airfield. During that time, there were probably a number of
challenges that really validated the intensity of the training in Texas and in Alabama.
That would be including a tail rotor failure that I had. I had an engine failure, where I
was in a high hover and it turned out that I think it was the second stage compressor blade
disk fractured and fell apart and literally crystallized or broke apart the rest of the blades
in the engine. This big ball of fire is coming out of the backside. I had to do a high
hovering autorotation. There were a lot of experiences in the aircraft that I’d fly, whether
it would be tail rotor failure or that kind of thing. Of all the experiences what was most
interesting was, I never got shot down. I got shot up, but I never got shot down. So, it
worked out to be quite an intense experience.

JB: I guess going back to flight training, was it integrated flight training in doing
instruments as well as flying?

DT: Flight training, basically the way the flight training started is you had the
first few weeks of flight training involved classroom instruction. With that classroom
instruction, we each, each of the units, each of the companies were broken up into
platoons. Student companies were broken up into platoons, Warrant Officer Candidate
companies. I was part of what was called 4th WOC. So, each platoon basically would
have its own TAC officer. The TAC officer, on weekends, could take us out to the flight
line and Mr. Petty was our TAC officer. There were some photographs of him on this
day, because I was a photographer and I had practiced photography and I had dared to
take my camera to flight training and basic training. I have some photos of basic training.
He spent the time to explain what we were learning in the book and how it related to the
aircraft out on the flight line and what we would eventually get to. Things like that were
a part of the process. During that period of training there was a very intense focus on
team coordination, team effort, whether it be preparing the barracks for inspection, doing
exercises, physical exercises outdoors. There was a very strong focus on the notion that
you had control of yourself, but at the same time that control needed to be contributing to
the benefit of the greater team. That process was worked into you over and over and over
throughout flight school. In an interesting way, it was never hammered home, you know
like something that was spoken, but by the way they did the exercises. You learned the
benefit of that, especially if you were doing night flying and you’re entering a traffic
pattern. You’re new to night flying and everybody else in the air is new to night flying.
You learn to pay attention to what was going on, outside and inside. That was a
discipline that not everybody came to the Army with. A lot of the people were either
very extroverted, some were introverted. You needed a real good balance of that, so your
sensitivities were basically, constantly three-dimensional. It was an interesting time
because of that. Some students, and actually in terms of my impression, some students
that failed training because of those demands. Not so much of the flying skills required but the execution of the flying skills became a problem with their inability to manage their inner self. That, for some people, was the challenge, to get themselves under control. Some people couldn’t do it.

JB: Going from Walters to Rucker did you transition right into the Huey?

DT: Basically, the transition was very abrupt, because you did transition directly to the Huey from the, in my case, from the OH-23, the Hiller OH-23. The training was, again, like Walters where you learned the systems of the aircraft. Earlier than Walters, at Rucker, you got into the aircraft and you stared flying with the instructors. In our case—in my case, we had in the inventory of Hueys we still had a few A-models, B-models, C-models and some D-model Hueys. In fact, I think in my records it indicates that my training was in A, B, C, and D. Because the C-models had the—actually it was the B-models that had the early gunship mods and then they had a few C-models there with gunship mods.

JB: Now, was everybody trained on gunships?

DT: No. How they selected who got gun ships, I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea on that. If they had really looked at my record, I don’t think they would have. Of course, here’s the other thing about the conscientious objector thing, it may not be anywhere on my record just other than a certain minister or certain priest says a note of a certain visit by a certain, you know, basic trainee who’s looking to establish conscientious objector status. But that was a problem because I grew up in a small town in Massachusetts and I grew up a Catholic. I also was a Boy Scout. I just didn’t fit their notion of someone that could become a conscientious objector. By that time, I had already - I should also tell you this part - between the time I enlisted and the time which I was still in school and the time I went to Vietnam, I had already been subscribing to North Vietnamese newspapers via Prague, Czechoslovakia. There was this Vietnamese House of Culture address that was published in the New York Times, as an address that the F.B.I. was closely watching. I went and wrote to that address and said, ‘I’d be interested in some of your materials.’ They sent me freshly printed Vietnamese newspapers that were published in English. The ink smelled like it had been thinned with kerosene. So, I kept those. They sent me books on the Vietnamese culture. Then on my
own I was reading Mao’s *Little Red Book of Quotations* and a few others of his *Little Red Books*. So, when I did get into basic training, I had already had some effort at perspective as to what was going on here between us and the Asian cultures, if you will.

JB: Did that, I guess, help dealing with the Vietnamese civilians?

DT: Big time. Big time. Yeah, big time. This is one of the deficiencies, I thought, and I still think about in terms of the U.S. military today is that there needs to be more formal effort at educating the military people, the soldier, actually the lowest ranks in the nature of cultures. Because one of the things that was really interesting was, for me, was to feel comfortable having a personal encounter with an ARVN soldier. In fact, one, I’ve got his photograph. We’re in the U Minh Forest. We’re going to go off on an assault. You can tell he doesn’t want to go. You can tell he doesn’t want to be there. So I started talking to him and it turned out he spoke excellent English. The reason he spoke excellent English was because he had it in school and he worked at the U.S. Embassy until they drafted him. So, I got to spend some time with him in the couple hours we had before he had to go off on his mission. I got to spend some time learning about how they got their education and how the people in the villages were thinking about the war and so forth. It was an interesting experience because if I hadn’t read that material ahead of time, I would have probably been quite uncomfortable approaching a Vietnamese and just going with an upfront dialogue like that. I think unfortunately, for a lot of the American military that were there, most of their education about Vietnamese was experiential. There was very little academic background, very little of anything, if anything at all, taught about the Vietnamese culture and its segmentation and the difference between the different segments of the Vietnamese culture whether you were talking religion, politics or ethnicity. Because it was, and still is—Vietnamese society is probably every bit as mixed as American society is, with a predominance of Asian influence, obviously in Vietnam, but a mixed Asian influence. I think that was, in fact, probably the best way to describe it. My experience there, now that I’ve told you about the conscientious objector part, I made it a practice when I was using my aircraft to only shoot when I was shot at [or when covering someone else being shot at]. Now, that didn’t keep me from teasing, by flying by, flying low and deliberately setting up situations. I basically made it a practice to have them fire first and that gave me an
advantage. I immediately knew where they were. Nine times out of ten my response was very effective. It made some co-pilots very uncomfortable to be sitting there with a mini-gun turret control and me telling them, ‘Hold off, don’t fire, don’t fire,’ while we passed by a setting, if you will, where there was firing taking place. Then we’d get our marks where the tracers were coming from. Then we’d come back and we’d do our duty. We were very effective that way. But it was in part, my sense of, my fundamental sense, my real fundamental sense that the war was wrong but not for the same reasons everybody else was talking about. I felt the war was wrong from a cultural perspective and that there was clear misunderstanding at the highest levels of government that the culture of Vietnam was being ignored and being looked at through Western eyes with the expectation that their responses, their motivations and responses were going to be Western. And they weren’t. So their choices on a day-to-day level would not match our choices. Things got a little bit complicated for me because I came home and my mother asked me if I was going to go to church Sunday and it happened to be like I came home on a Thursday and of course Sunday’s coming up. I simply had to tell her never again would I go to church. What she didn’t quite understand was that one of the things I learned about Vietnam was that religion played a big part in breaking up that society. When the Jesuit missionaries went to Vietnam and began to align themselves with people of power and convince those people of power that their way was the better way, if you will, through astrology or whatever means they used, they began to segment the society by religion. When they segmented the society by religion they also created economic units that previously didn’t exist because the French Jesuits now opened up a component of the Vietnamese society to French commerce. Hence, the Michelin rubber plantations and the other French aspects of the business there. From the Western perspective there was nothing wrong with that because the Christian missionary notion was, ‘We’re only good. We’re never bad.’ What we didn’t appreciate at that time was that we were fragmenting that society long before I was born, centuries before. We’re taking about 1400s or 1500s. That particular culture being made up of so many different ethnic groups including substantial numbers of Chinese who had left China because they got fed up with the Chinese problems and wanted to move to Co Chin China which is Vietnam. It became quite obvious to me, that as a gunship pilot, that there were certain
responsibilities that I needed to exercise being there. The practice of gunship flying for me was, more one of survival. I tried to use my best judgment in doing it. What was kind of strange for me was I’d end up with four Distinguished Flying Crosses; two Bronze Stars just for service, two Bronze Stars in one tour; forty-two Air Medals and two Air Medals with ‘V’ device. I never intended for myself to become representative of a combat-nut, if you will. I think probably that was the hardest part of the struggle was just keeping that in balance. There would be moments of disappointment where I saw killing that was just totally just unnecessary from my perspective. Years later I would have to deal with that. Vietnam was quite interesting because the need to get the systems in place for the soldiers and the pilots to use often times caused the process of integrating the new technology to be, I don’t want to say slip-shot, but quickly done. I mentioned to you earlier about the tail rotor on the Cobra, how it was rotating in the wrong direction and how things got worse as it was needed. Until they flipped it over and rotated it the other way, did the problem get fixed. But there were other things like that that gave you the sense as a soldier that—for instance, an open weapons sight that in certain situations when we went to a dive, the sun hit it. You lost your ability to use it effectively for targeting because of the glare. All it would have taken would have been a little shield.

JB: When was the first time you saw a Cobra and what was you first impression?

DT: The first time I saw a Cobra was at Fort Walters and it was parked on a helipad up on a hill next to the Post Exchange. Bell Helicopter apparently would have to—as a normal practice, they’d have to test fly each of the aircraft before they were turned over to the Army. Apparently there was an arrangement where they could bring in the Cobra and land it at the Post Exchange on some test flights. My reaction to it when I saw it the first time was, ‘Neat looking.’ What was interesting about it, because of my makeup, my orientation at the time, I just never imagined myself being in a Cobra. I could see myself flying maybe a Medevac or a Crane or a Chinook but never a Cobra. It was not something that I sought, which made the whole situation very odd because here I am at graduation time and I’m an honor graduate. There were only five honor graduates and I was the fifth one. My certificate says honor graduate, but anyway I’m given this chance to go to what some guys would consider a dream school. One of the fastest helicopters at the time, most heavily armed aircraft at the time and helicopter at the time
and I was doing it with like a shrug of the shoulders. ‘I’ve got to do something and I
don’t want to pound the ground. I don’t want to be a foot soldier so okay.’ That was my
reaction. Then I think the next impressive reaction was the first time in Savannah when
we were out on our initial training and the flight instructor took it into a dive that wasn’t
ninety degrees, but we were leaning up against the straps and we were in this dive that
was probably close to eighty degrees. It was kind of funny because he was making a dive
to a huge sawmill, sawdust pile. All I could think of is, was it going to be soft enough if
he didn’t do things right? I never got to the point where I looked at the aircraft as a ‘gee
whiz’ kind of thing like getting a Ferrari. Getting a Ferrari, I’d probably do a ‘gee whiz.’
For my own reasons the Cobra gunship was just—I basically looked at it as something
that needed to be done responsibly. What was interesting was to find that quietly and
steadily there were a lot of guys that felt the same way I did. Because once you went to
the training you realized how much power you had and you could mess it up real quick.
There was nothing more intriguing than a W-1, Warrant Officer One, out on a mission
with another W-1 in the scout ship. You guys could start a battle; literally start a battle
that would require jets flying in to bomb, artillery or troop inserts. It was kind of strange
to have that kind of power because I don’t think there had been much of any other kind of
war where people of that low a rank could initiate battle. When we were sent on hunter-
killer missions, our job was to get information and then, if we found something, deal with
it. The most notable experience there was finding North Vietnamese, not their
headquarters, but a substantial headquarters element in Cambodia where there was a log
cabin, landing zone, a broadcasting antennae that was used for, I think it was an FM
frequency, but it could be used for low-flying helicopters because the landing zone was
set up that its flight path was perpendicular to the antenna and when you looked at the
long axis of the landing zone, it lined up perfectly with a curved part of the Mekong
River in Cambodia. There were things that you got to experience and began to
understand how complicated this whole thing was. In today’s reading, when you read
what people now know or are talking about, there was a lot of significance to what I was
witnessing. But what was kind of sad at the time was that there were people who were in
command who didn’t have the depth or time on duty, if you will, because the tour of duty
for commanders was sometimes as short as six months and they didn’t have enough depth
or time on duty to understand the nuances of what was being discovered. That was kind
of sad. That part was kind of sad. There would be a lot of people who would have done
a lot better, been a lot more effective if the command structure had been more formally
integrated, committed to, rather than the cycling through of command people. Having
them there until their unit got certain things accomplished.

JB: Heading overseas, what was it like getting in country? You mentioned
earlier getting to your unit, there was the whole rigmarole. What was your impression of
that?

T.D.: The first thing that struck me because we landed at night, so it wasn’t really
hot, but it was really humid - was the smell. The smell of Vietnam was the first thing that
struck me. It was different. The next thing that struck me was in what would in at
moments seem very quiet, placid, countryside, there’d be moments, right after I got there,
these are the kinds of things where there’d be moments of just outrageous noise.
Weapons going off, aircraft flying around, then it could be quiet again. It was probably
the most, let’s put it this way, the introduction to that environment was probably not—I
was not well prepared for it as well as I thought I would be. There were certain things
you just had to get used to; the heat, the humidity, the monsoons, the sounds. For
instance a street-smart person is always paying attention to what noises there are as well
as what’s happening around them. If you’re going to survive you’re using all of your
senses. When I got to Vietnam I was using all of my senses. When you get into that
mode, you realize there is a lot they didn’t tell you about that they didn’t think you
needed to know about when you got there. They would talk about Vietnamese food.
They’d talk about they way the Vietnamese dressed. They talked about superficial things
basically, but they wouldn’t talk about dealing with the environment.

JB: Was there any indoctrination arriving in country?

DT: The only indoctrination was basically malaria pill kind of thing, you know,
‘Make sure you take your malaria pills, drink clean water, avoid certain women and
certain situations, be careful in terms of the way you handled yourself around the
Vietnamese because you never knew who would be out to hurt you.’ That was literally
as vague, as precise as they got. We were given some booklets, some of which I think I
kept, I’m not sure. I’d have to look back now. Some of it were narratives that told about
issues about living in Vietnam that you needed to pay attention to. There was not much sophistication to it at all. It was, ‘Learn how to operate the equipment, move us there, operate the equipment and if you survive we’ll take you home.’ It was that fundamental. There was not anything done if the form of educating the soldier who had family at home, friends at home, who maybe had a viewpoint that was very anti-what you were up to. There was never any real effort to provide the big picture. Compare that with today and where we have 9-11, the sixth anniversary today actually, six-month anniversary, and everybody’s got some perspective on it. Whereas with Vietnam, depending on who you were and where you came from and what community you came from, the political, social, economic, religious, academic. What community you came from within our culture, it pretty much shaped the way you felt about what Vietnam was and it’s usefulness or non-usefulness or whatever, if it was good for us to be there or not be there. There was very little dialogue. There was a lot of yelling. Most impressive about that whole experience and being prepared for it and getting there and being there and the thing about being exposed to it for the first time was with all the academic strength that this country had, we seemed to have had a miserable failure during the Vietnam period to adequately educate the public, the students, on that culture, that culture’s history and how Western influence had altered its course, Vietnamese course, in history, some positive, some negative. The consequence of the negative was what we were going through right now. That surprised the heck out of me. For as much anti-war movement as there was on college campuses, there never seemed to be an in-depth attempt to talk about it like there is now at Texas Tech where you’ve got multiple aspects of it being looked at, the culture being looked at. I mean none of that was happening, which seemed very strange to me in a society that prided itself in having a strong academic community.

JB: Getting to your unit, how were you assigned?

DT: It was basically like a lottery. When the unit assignments came my understanding of it was, that each, I wouldn’t say brigade, it would probably be at battalion or group level, combat group level, would have a list of needs in terms of qualifications. ‘We need this number of people with these qualifications in this time period, if you will, because we’ve got people leaving country; we’ve got people that have been wounded, killed or whatever.’ That data would be fed up to places like Long Binh.
I guess initially it was Tan Son Nhut but then as the war went along, Long Binh and Cam Ranh Bay. There would be somebody there with some big charts and they’d say, ‘Okay, these bodies need to go here. These bodies need to go there.’ There was never any sense that I got that there was anything more. It was never a personal engagement like, ‘Where would you like to go? Do you like the North or do you like the South? Do you like the hills or do you like the flatlands?’ None of that. It was strictly driven by, you might say, management needs or command needs.

JB: Getting to the 3/17, what was the atmosphere like or morale of the unit?

DT: The morale of the unit was kind of mixed because they had just a few days before I got there, and literally I think it was about three days, four days before I got there, they had lost two gunship pilots in a crash. It was the kind of Cobra crash that was a bit spooky because, going back to my original comment about the sophistication of the hardware that we had that was being handed to us, there were some things that were showing up that obviously hadn’t been fully checked out. Not because there wasn’t integrity in the testing process, but because the testing process hadn’t accounted for things that we were being exposed to that they had yet to learn about. One of the things that the Cobra had was a SCAS system. One of the dangers with the SCAS system, if the Cobra was flying low-level is if one of the three rate gyros—for the pitch, roll and yaw gyros [axes]—if any one of the three failed and the pilot either failed to detect its failure, or it failed in such a manner as to cause the ship to quickly move in a direction, if you were low-level that could just instantly cause you to crash. Many of those crashes were identifiable in nature as to what had happened when you’d never hear a call like, ‘I’m going down. Something’s happened.’ It would be a case of literally what might be defined as a mystery crash. The accident investigators might strictly define as pilot error when those of us who had had, what was called a hard over, a SCAS hard over, where the SCAS system failed and in the moment it failed it caused a servo, whether it be for pitch, yaw or roll, to fully extend or fully contract. When that happened if you weren’t ready for it to get your control and it would be basically the cyclic or pedals—primarily the cyclic—if you weren’t prepared for it you were in real trouble. Once it did happen the next step was, let’s say you’re okay, you’re still flying along fine but now your cyclic’s way over here because your servo is gone to one extreme or another. The next step was
to pull the circuit breaker for let’s say the roll gyro. When you pull the circuit breaker, you had to know that when you pulled the circuit breaker for the roll gyro that you would have to instantly bring your cyclic back to neutral because the servo would instantly, once that circuit breaker was pulled, would go to it’s default position, if you will, which is sort of a neutral position. Things could get complicated. They got further complicated if you were getting shot at. You’ve got issues with bullets and you’ve got issues with aircraft and if you’ve got a co-pilot that’s not got much experience, that was pretty common. The transition for pilots was you started out as a co-pilot gunner in the front seat of the Cobra and you worked your way back. Two specific moments. The first day for one of the pilots that ended up being quite a good pilot, in fact they both did, Mike Billow, he was flying front seat. Beautiful day. We fly off to the west of Di An. Ground troops are in desperate need of gunship support. The only thing that will work for their needs is what we’ve got in the turret. Here I’ve got a guy going out on his first mission in Vietnam and they’re popping smoke. Smoke is drifting in the jungle so you don’t know really where the troops are. And you’re saying, ‘Okay, Mike, see where the smoke is?’ and you’re hoping that his sight, his aim is going to be good. ‘Go to the left of the smoke by whatever, and commence firing.’ You just waited to hear on the radio that friendlies were getting hit or everything was okay. That was always the moment of tension. In another case, the first day of combat for this other pilot who’s now an engineer at Sikorsky, really nice guy, was in one of those triangular situations Jim [another pilot interview] was talking about where it was three 50 cals. When the three 50 cals are shooting at you and you’re in the middle of your dive and you’ve got to decide, sitting in the front seat as the new guy in Vietnam, which of the three guns you’re going to shoot at, the emotional stress is extreme, really extreme. There were a lot of those kinds of things that would happen that would test both your confidence in the aircraft and the reliability of the training that you got before you got there, that your reactions would be all appropriate and so forth. So it was quite an interesting challenge that way.

JB: What was your first mission like?

DT: I do not remember. I honestly do not remember my first mission in Vietnam. It’s blocked out. I can remember the first time I had to fire and it was with a 40-millimeter and it was my first experience trying to chase somebody down and kill
them with a 40-millimeter. The party that was armed—now it was the choice of the aircraft commander that I do the shooting. It was my decision, do I tell him, ‘No, I don’t want to shoot,’ because he’s not shooting at us? Anyway, I can still remember it was out at ten o’clock [position relative to aircraft] we were about maybe five hundred feet and the guy was running with his AK to some cover. I’m flying the front seat and the guy in the back said, ‘Shoot him with some 40-millimeter grenades.’ Well, the guy got away. I mean there was just no way that the 40-millimeter grenades were going to get anywhere near because he was to our side and we’re zipping along and as the grenades go, it looks like they’re in this sharp—it almost looks like they’re taking an exit ramp off the interstate, the rate of curvature is so bad as they descend. So, shooting from the side was quite—that was the first experience that I remember as being an actual firing experience from the front seat. I honestly don’t remember my first day in combat, you know, where it was real. When I went to Vietnam, when I landed in Cam Ranh Bay, I fully expected not to come out alive. I fully expected not to come out alive. My bank account had been squared away with my father. I had given away things that I figured that if I didn’t want. I told the people if, ‘I come back alive, I’ll come back to collect them.’ There were some in Rochester, New York; some at home; that type of thing. I had basically decided that I wasn’t going to get myself caught up on living as my single objective, you know, that I myself would live. I made it my objective to survive which was slightly different than dealing with it as purely life and death, which may sound strange, but it wasn’t going to be a case of me focusing on staying alive. I felt that the idea was basically to do the best that I could with what I had with as much intelligence applied to what I had to do as I could. That was my challenge. So when the pilot shot himself or when I had tail rotor failure or when I found myself flying through, purely by accident, two C-121s spraying Agent Orange and I’m sucking up Agent Orange or another time flying through—the last days of Cambodia, Chinooks were taking off and going over to Cambodia area or the sanctuaries and dumping barrels of CS powder, powered CS. It was coming out of the sky. Well, no one told us they were doing this. So, there we are flying alone, in fact it happened to be this pilot, his first day in combat was with the three 50 millimeter [cal.] guns shooting at us. We’re flying along and all of a sudden we’re sucking up what essentially is tear gas. With a Cobra you just don’t open up the cockpit and ventilate so
we were having to lock-in straight and level so that we didn’t go crashing or anything
else. We just had to go off and cough it off and let the tears…but it was totally bizarre. I
mean, you’d run into those situations where you weren’t really prepared for it, but you
had to be mentally in gear to be, if you were in a survival mode, to be ready with options.
If this happens, you’re going to go do that. If that happens you’re going to go do that.
You had a left, right, up, down option. Those guys that didn’t have options in their mind,
parked in their mind if anything should happen, they were often times casualties because
they did not think through beyond their immediate problem. It was kind of an interesting
demand. Especially for gunships where you are by your—usually hunter-killer teams
you’re with one scout ship, one gunship and you’re off in some remote part and you
really rely on good communication and you really rely on making sure that the guys back
in operations, in the bunker, know where you’re at. Because, if anything should happen,
they could always send somebody out as[to] your last reported position. It was an
interesting way to fight a war.

JB: As a front seater, what were your responsibilities?

DT: Navigation. Navigation was critical. Front seat guy made sure he had—
when he left in the morning he had the targets that were designed [assigned] to be
searched first worked out because the Cobra front seat guy was at an altitude and with
visibility that the LOH flying low level didn’t have the advantage of. So, the front seat
guy - the new guys had this function - the co-pilot gunners had the function of telling the
scout pilot where to go, then once the scout pilot was there, to accurately call back, mark
on the map and call back to operations the coordinates for the position what had been
found. Sometimes that radio communication could be handled by the aircraft
commander. As the inventory of finds would come in, the aircraft commander would
have a grease pencil and could be probably listing on the side of the cockpit [Plexiglas],
you know, so many bunkers, so many personnel, so many weapons, whatever. That type
of thing. Then the other duty was basically responding to the direction of the aircraft
commander as to weapon choice, minigun or 40-millimeter, and what to use it on based
on the situation. There’d be times where it’d be more appropriate to have the turret
locked down in the stowed position and the guy in the back, the aircraft commander, be
using the turret in its stowed position for the straight-on dive, if you will, instead of the
coopilot gunner using it.

JB: Any memorable missions?

DT: Yeah. Oh, yeah lots of memorable missions. Late at night, literally, a
battalion of ARVN troops had gone outside of their, this is in the U Minh Forest area
down in Fourth Corps, gone outside their artillery cover, perimeter, and North
Vietnamese were waiting for them and they killed every single one of them. During the
night, to substitute for the artillery cover, old C-47s, the C-46 types of aircraft, DC-3 type
of aircraft, Puff the Magic Dragon would show up with their—they showed with their
Gatling guns. We were out there working with them and artillery was firing out flares
and we were working under flares at night lighting up the jungle area trying to protect
these guys on the ground who had basically gone outside their protective perimeter.

Turned out to be a failed mission because the next morning we were covering or
escorting Chinooks who were picking up all the dead bodies. That was one. Cambodia
there were several episodes. The week before the actual incursion making trips into
Cambodia one ship at it a [time], solo, no other ship. Huey at the borders, checking in
with the commander aboard the Huey that we were going across into Cambodia and we
were going on a specific mission, then checking [in] with them on the return and this is a
week before the actual incursion. Then once the incursion occurred there were missions
in Cambodia that were one of the—I think it’s Svay Rieng, I think that’s the name of the
town—flying around, firing away like crazy, shooting at different targets who were NVA
and mostly NVA, in that area. And to be flying around and fly by a schoolhouse that had
a basketball court just totally, totally blew my mind having grown up in Turners Falls,
not far from Springfield.

JB: Springfield, where basketball originated, yeah.

DT: It was just a moment of total strangeness to me. There’d be other times
flying back from a mission under radar control, Air Force radar control, because it was
foggy and having my wingman say—one of my wingmen say, I had two wingmen at this
time—one of my wingmen saying, ‘I see a hole up above. I’m going to climb above this
stuff.’ It was a moonlit night above the fog and the haze. He saw a sucker hole and he
went up through it. I told him, ‘Okay, just maintain your heading and your air speed and
we’ll see you back at the airfield.’ He separated visually from us. Then a few minutes later I look over to my right and, without saying a word, he found another sucker hole and he’s coming down through this other sucker hole, never even calling and telling us that he might be coming down and joining us. And because he had maintained his heading and airspeed, he ended up back in formation. But, it could have been on top of one of us.

JB: It could have been a disaster.

DT: Yeah. So, there were memorable moments. Firing rockets that were really fired too close to the target and then flying through the explosion. Firing rockets at a thatched structure and flying so close and so fast, that when it blew up, the thatched structure went up and - I didn’t see this because all I saw was dust, dirt, things clanking up against the fuselage, but Paul Chalet screaming on the radio, ‘Jesus Christ, did you see that?’ And what I had done was, when the explosion went off of the rockets, the structure had lifted and I had flown underneath the thatched structure as it was airborne and came out the other side. It’s unfortunately something I couldn’t enjoy because I didn’t get to see it. I was on the inside with all this dirt and shit and all I knew was I had hit it. I should tell you that what was interesting about that day was there was no one shooting at us but it was a structure that needed to be destroyed in the free-fire zone. It was a hazy day, cloudy day. No bright sun. There were two of us with Cobra gunships, trying to just hit this thing with our rockets and we could not hit it. After two runs we had yet to put a rocket into this structure. So I told my wingman, ‘Hold off and I’m going to go in and I got in real close, like maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty yards,’ and I just let go of some rockets. That’s way too close, but I got rid of the barn. It was about one third the size of a tobacco barn, what might be referred to as a tobacco barn, Connecticut Valley tobacco barn. It was next to a canal. So, the reason we were destroying it was it might be cover for re-supply of the North Vietnamese that were in U Minh Forest area, something like that.

JB: There was nothing confirmed in there, though? Just a building?

DT: Just a building. Just a structure. There were a lot of those moments. Flying back in a monsoon, thinking you’ve got it figured out. That the monsoon, which usually had a linear quality to it, had a thin or narrow and a long side. It had a narrow side and a
long side. One day, thinking that I had finally figured it out, took off from Tay Ninh, we’re heading back to Di An, I figured out I’d go penetrate the narrow side of this monsoon and then head south. Well, I got it wrong. So, there were two of us, Jim Elkin, my classmate [flying off my right side in another Cobra]; Ed Soliday, my other classmate, is my co-pilot that day and we’re now flying in this monsoon. The water’s coming down so heavy that when the rotor blades hit it, it’s just misting. And the—you’ve seen them; the seams on the high side of a cockpit are just leaking water. We’re getting wet inside the cockpit it’s coming down so hard. The altitude at that point had to be about 100 or 150 feet off the treetops, following a road. Jim is my wingman, he’s back here, been there the whole time. He suddenly says to me, ‘3-8 I’ve lost you.’ I look over. Rotor blade tips were probably about fifteen to twenty feet apart, and as he’s going by me, he’s got target fixation. He’s just staring; he’s lost his peripheral vision. He doesn’t see me right beside him and he’s going straight ahead. I didn’t even respond until he’d just passed me and I said, ‘Roger.’ I just left it at that. I slowed up enough so we could get some distance [apart from each other]. He made it back safely, I made it back safely. There are those kind of moments that have nothing to do with combat. Another moment got a slick pilot, platoon leader who—prissy is probably too strong of a word, but had a tendency to act a little bit, less than masculine—gets on the radio one day when the slicks are doing an insertion and we were west of Quan Loi. As we’re going in command and control ship’s always overhead in the Huey, directing everything and timing everything. As the slicks are headed in, the gunships have prepped the area but before the slicks got there. The slicks are now there. They’re on final. This platoon leader in the front ship says, ‘Spur Six, these gunships aren’t covering us too well.’ Well, it was my chance to shoot a few rockets under his skids. The rockets blew up off his nose, sticks, mud and shit landed on his windshield. And it was, ‘Cease firing, cease firing, cease firing.’ But to get—that’s kind of a dangerous place to get with your mind and with the tools and with the attitude. But war, prolonged war…prolonged war without satisfactory conclusion or any clearly stated objective, when you’re back for the fifteenth time to the same place, had a way of creating a group chemistry that you’re going to die anyway. So, hey.

JB: Sooner or later your number’s going to be up.
DT: It was a very strange way to live. In the ’69-’70 time frame there had been less than effective resolution of these hot spots and we were constantly revisiting them. So, you get a sense that there is a certain absurdity to the process.

JB: We’ve been going for an hour and a half. Would you like to take a break?