Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Colonel Ernie Sylvester. Today is Tuesday, November 12, 2002. It is approximately 8:40 am Central Standard Time. I am at Texas Tech University Southwest Collection Interview room on the campus of Texas Tech. Mr. Sylvester, you are in Tampa, Florida, is that correct?

Ernest Sylvester: That’s correct.

RV: Sir, if we could, let’s start with some basic biographical information. Could you tell me where you were born and when you were born?

ES: I was born in New Orleans at Charity Hospital on the 7th of November 1940.

RV: Did you grow up in New Orleans?

ES: No. I didn’t. Actually, my mom and dad lived at that time in Lucedale, Mississippi. They had gone down for my birth in New Orleans. They lived about half way between Mobile and New Orleans and they chose New Orleans for me and a year later they chose Mobile for my sister. So in the very first few months of my life, I lived up in Lucedale. My father was from Louisiana. He was born in Washington, Louisiana in Cajun country. He spoke French until he was almost 21 when he was at LSU. But after we moved from Lucedale, we went to the Carolinas. My father was a forest ranger. He
worked for the United States government doing marking of timber, management of forest, et cetera. We were originally in Edenton, North Carolina.

RV: Edenton?

ES: Yes.

RV: Oh, there on the coast.

ES: That’s correct. Then we moved up to Raleigh, North Carolina. I spent a period of time, until I started first grade there in Edenton. I was there for only about four months in my first grade and we moved to, he got a transfer to Gulfport, Mississippi, which is on the Gulf Coast. Its about 90 miles from New Orleans. It’s east of New Orleans. That’s where I lived from 1947 until 1959 when I went off to college.

RV: What do you remember about that time in you life before you went to college?

ES: Well, I remember many things. Of course, we lived right along the Gulf Coast. I remember having the freedom of playing with kids, my sister and other children in the neighborhood, one of which I still have contact with, Jimmy McDaniels. Mom and Dad rented a place. Basically, it was not right in Gulfport. It was in a little community between Long Beach and Gulfport, Mississippi. We rented that for some time. I went to Catholic school there. Then I don’t recall when it was, probably the third, fourth grade. I was in Gulf Port, went to another Catholic school and I attended those schools quite a bit. I remember one of the best activities that I did was I liked to play marbles and I had quite a collection of marbles. We’d shoot different kinds of games that we made up when you played marbles. But I also collected marbles. I liked to read comics, and I wish I’d kept them all but I had quite a collection of comic magazines.

RV: What did your father do?

ES: My father there in Gulfport was the Desoto National Assistant District Ranger. He oversaw the Desoto National Park. He spent most of his time in forestry throughout the years. He was a very active outdoorsman. He liked to hunt. Some of the times that he would let me go, he would take me with him. He would always put a red sweater on me so I wouldn’t wander off and get lost. I remember that, but he would around Thanksgiving whenever turkey season was open, he would go out and spot turkey and shoot one turkey and bring it home. He always knew where the turkey and the deer
and that kind of thing were because he was out in the woods most of every day, almost all
his life. I think that’s one of the reasons he was able to live as long as he did live because
he was in very good health and was able to do almost anything that he could with his
hands. He liked to garden. I liked to watch him garden. My mother and he always had a
very, very large garden all the way back to Lucedale and Edenton, those other areas. He
had beans, snap beans, beets, lettuce, cabbage, corn. He raised tomatoes, squash,
cucumbers. Really and truly, we could all live on that food. I think that was primarily
because he did grow up on a farm, a very large farm in Louisiana, around Ville Platte in
fact. His family had probably over five thousand acres in the beginning. One of his
uncles, great uncles had given much of the land that LSU, Louisiana State University,
was built on in downtown Baton Rouge. That same gentleman, Arthur Sylvester was a
representative for the state of Louisiana.

RV: How about your mother, was she a homemaker?

ES: Mom was from Coolidge, Georgia. She met my father in Port St. Joe,
[Florida]. She had education up to the fifth grade. She had lost her mom in birth so she
was the last of the family. She is a Montcrief from around Coolidge, Georgia. All of her
family at this point in time are dead now. A little bit of background from my mother’s
side, Ernest Hemmingway is a distant cousin of mine. I’ve never, obviously, met Ernest
Hemmingway, but we have quite a collection in my files about Ernest Hemmingway.
Mom, her first job was waiting tables in Port St. Joe. She married Dad. He was 32 at the
time, she was 22. The only thing that I remember growing up is that I wish my father was
a little bit younger than he was because he was fairly mature to start his family. But Mom
was a very innovative person. She liked to find ways to raise money or make money. She
cared for the family quite well. She became an LVN working part time and then full time
when I was in high school, junior high, and elementary and did quite well for herself. But
she was always thinking of ways to do something different. My father was very
conservative and worked very long days, hard days, every day. And to supplement the
income, he also did people’s yards. He developed a yard service along the Gulf Coast
with probably almost 30 to 40 homes along the Gulf Coast, big, old, beautiful plantations
[antebellum home yards] and he cut that by hand with a push lawn mower, not powered. I
did the same thing when I was a young boy.
RV: Would you go work with him when you were old enough?

ES: In fact, the whole family would at times if my father had too many jobs for a particular day. But, we did that all by hand. He, like I said, worked probably every day. He didn’t really take days off like he probably should have. But he was well liked in the community. Mom was too. She primarily worked private duty as an LVN and primarily night duty. She’d do that so that she could have time with the kids when my sister and I, Mary, we’d get home from school. So she would always be up and always had a good hot meal on the table. That, again, is one of the things that I think helped keep our family together all those years was that we’d have dinner every night at around the time that my dad would get home. We’d talk about what we’d done that particular day.

RV: How many siblings did you have?

ES: I had one sister. She was 13 months younger than me. We were very close when we were growing up. We did almost everything together. If I was playing with boys, she would be playing with us. And if she was playing with girls, I was playing with the girls. I remember one incident when I was in Edenton, North Carolina. This was one of the few things I remember as a youth was that I was outside in the big yard that we had playing with a little airplane that I think I’d gotten for a Christmas present. And the girls were playing in the dollhouse and they wouldn’t let me in. I wanted to get inside the dollhouse, so I broke a window with my airplane trying to get in. And of course they immediately went and told my father. My father was very upset with me. I think he only whipped me twice in my life and that time I was being, I guess, a typical boy, but I had lost sight of who was in charge. I ran from my father and I crawled underneath the big, old house and my father crawled under the house with me, and of course he whipped me quite well.

RV: Under the house?

ES: Well, he started under the house but he couldn’t get enough swing on it so he brought me to the porch and whipped me some more. But I didn’t disrespect him for that, and I deserved the whipping, but I do remember it and not in a harsh way. I think the only other thing I remember Edenton, North Carolina when I was young and this is kind of related to flying, I used to like to build toys. And I built an apparatus that I could [pretend to fly], it looked kind of like a plane and I had three ropes that went up to the tree and if I
pushed on the piece that I made for the bottom part, it would kind of move the motion in
a reverse manner and you’d start moving back and forth like a swing, but you had
something that you pulled on at the top and it was made to be like an airplane. That was
the first time I really had a chance to get off the ground without falling. But that was fun.
The only other thing that I remember at Edenton, North Carolina, again, this is probably
when I was almost seven. I was in school in my first year in the first few months there. I
didn’t start school until I was seven because of my age, my birthday being in November.
We didn’t have kindergarten and we didn’t have nursery school and that sort of thing that
my grandchildren today have, but one of the things that I again remember there, we had a
fair in the local area. And I got to fly in a plane over the bay there in Edenton, North
Carolina. That was the first experience that I ever had in a fixed wing.

RV: Do you remember how you felt when you flew that first time?
ES: I felt, I was a little frightened but I liked the sights, and I wasn’t eager for him
to do any tricks in the plane. Of course he couldn’t. It was not a plane that could do
acrobats. But I did not fly again until I was a young man as a lieutenant getting my first
orientation flight in a helicopter to see if I could tolerate someone flying and not get
airsick. So those are the few experiences that I remember in Edenton. I guess I’ll jump
back to Gulfport. There I started working very young. I think I was probably 12 to 13
when I first started delivering newspapers as kind of an assistant newspaper delivery boy.
But I did that for multiple years. I started out in a bicycle. We only got five dollars, I
think, and 25 cents a month, but that really and truly built my understanding of
accountability. I think I had about 100 newspaper routes [customers] when I first started
out, but eventually I bought an old moped scooter, excuse me, a Cushman scooter that I
was able to drive, I mean navigate; I think around 15. I believe you were able to get a
license to operate a moped or a Cushman motorcycle at that age in Mississippi. But what
that did, I was able to expand into my newspaper route and I ended up taking multiple
people’s routes during the summertime and I’d have three to four hundred newspapers
that I delivered six days a week. But I know that…and I tell my grandchildren this and of
course, they say, “Yeah. And I know you walked five miles to school.” But I was able to
save 100 dollars a year for Christmas and that was one of my goals working on a paper
route so that we could have nice gifts for Christmas, or at least my parents were good to
me and my sister. I wanted to return in like kind gifts for Christmas. So 100 dollars in
those days could buy quite a bit. The other thing that Mother got me interested in, she
tried to keep both my sister and I interested in things, but she started me in art class,
formal oil painting, that I did from about the time I was 10 years old until I was 17 that I
took formal art.

RV: Did you enjoy that?
ES: Yes. I still do.
RV: Do you remember what you painted most?
ES: What I painted most was water scenes, boats on the water. I painted
landscapes. I even did a self-portrait when I was probably 12. I won quite a few contests
placing first in almost every competition that I was in. That was given out at the
community center, Gulfport community center. Mrs. Greeley was my art instructor. She
was, I thought, very, very old. She may have been as much as 60 at the time, but she was
very good with children. She had adults and children in her class, large classes. But she
spent a lot of time with me. Of course, having that kind of talent as a child kind of helped
me with the teachers. They would come to me and ask me to do things for them that were
artistic in nature that would benefit the class.

RV: What do you remember about school during these times at Gulfport?
ES: I remember three teachers immediately in elementary school. Sister Thomas
was at Long Beach at St. Thomas. She was a very loving person, very gentle. I remember
Sister Elridge only probably because my father’s name, first name was Elridge John.
Sister Elridge was, I think, my third grade teacher. She was very strict. Unfortunately I
have some times, some memories of Sister Elridge that probably were not good because I
would unfortunately have to stand in the corner with a dunce hat on multiple times. And
sometimes I would have to stand at the black board with my nose in a circle.

RV: What did you do to get this punishment?
ES: I really don’t know. At this point, I truly don’t remember. I think it was that I
did not do my homework. I know that I have written on the blackboard, words multiple
times, probably hundreds of times where that would be an indication that I was not doing
my spelling. After I would do that, I would have the opportunity of taking all the erasers
in, as I perceived it then, every classroom in the school. It was probably only that one
classroom. I’d have to take the erasers out and hit them together to get all the chalk out and bring them back in and put them back on the blackboard. Then I had the opportunity of washing the blackboards. So that encounter, I remember those incidents. I don’t remember the classrooms themselves. I do remember St. Johns having a very good merry-go-round that you pushed and I remember it quite well, not only because I liked to ride it, but I found lots of money underneath the merry-go-round where people would lose it out of their pockets and I would go there after school and pick the money up. So that was fun to me.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in school?

ES: I think social studies...I think history were my favorite subjects as a young boy. My worst subjects probably were math and in high school, maybe English. But going back to my elementary school, I had another teacher, a Mrs. Campbell. She, what I remember best about her, she would always eat an apple a day, but she would, and they were big apples, but she would take them in her hands, both hands and put her thumbs at the top where the stem was and just split the apple in half by pressure. She would always give one half of the apple to a student that was good that day. Of course, at times, I would get an apple. One thing that I truly did well was that in those days, I was very courteous. I always got very good grades on conduct. That probably answers the question about the blackboard and my nose in the circles and the dunce hat and apparently that I was not coming up to my expectations in education, but I was courteous, kind, considerate person in regards to other people. I also liked Mrs. Campbell who happened to be my fifth grade teacher very much because that’s when I first started also playing a band instrument.

RV: Which instrument did you play?

ES: I initially played clarinet. As you can see, I kind of leaned towards arts. I played clarinet until I got into high school and I did multiple instruments there. I played clarinet. I played oboe. I played percussion. I played baritone sax. During concert season, I primarily played oboe. During marching season, I would play percussions and clarinet. Then if there was a spot that needed a particular instrument, and the clarinet’s very good because you can transfer [transpose] the keys to saxophone, baritone sax, the bass sax, etc. So its not that you’re a whiz kid, it’s just that the keys are very similar. Mrs. Campbell, I think boosted my morale and her daughter was also an artist and did quite
well in the contests that I was entering into. But she and another teacher by the name of
Mrs. Stanley helped me pursue those a little bit more. I’m going to jump to junior high, I
guess. The only sport I was in was track.

RV: Was this in junior high and high school?

ES: Yes. I was pretty good as an 880 runner or in the mile runs, long distance
runs. I was typically the rabbit. I would set the pace, which means that I didn’t
necessarily have a great kick but I could run for a long, long time. The strategy that we
used was that I’d set a pace that would kind of burn people out, then we’d have some
sprinter that was good at long distance and had a good kick that could come in first. I did
win some races, but typically I was second in most of the long distance races. When I got
to high school, my band took up almost all of my time. I did a little painting, but not
much. I was beginning to get interested, obviously, in girls. But I did an awful lot in the
band. I was the student conductor at competition. I won awards for that, first place. I
would say that I was a mediocre player at my clarinet and probably the only reason that I
sat first chair was there was typically only two of us and I could typically beat the other
person out. But music helped me in discipline. Mr. Rooney was my band director. Again,
a very understanding person that gave me opportunities when I was willing to try. I did
volunteer for playing different instruments when there was no one available to play a
part, and we needed a particular instrument to be played. I was, because of that, I was
voted, I guess by the student body and the teacher’s body as most versatile in my senior
year. I did decide that when I was going to college, I was going to go into pre-dental
school, but I also wanted to help put my way through college. So I decided I’d try out for
the band and try and get a scholarship. I did.

RV: This is at Southern College?

ES: University of Southern Mississippi. At that time it was Southern College.

That was located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

RV: How did you choose to go there?

ES: It had the best band in the South. It also had a pre-dental, pre-med school,
which I was interested in.

RV: Did your parents emphasize education for you pursuing college after high
school?
ES: Yes. I had no doubt that my sister and I would go to college.  
RV: Tell me about your college experience at Southern Miss.  
ES: Okay. In my freshman year, I actually, let me talk about band because it had a very important part of my life. It helped me out an awful lot. I figured I could not play clarinet, oboe, baritone sax, all those other things because they had some real, real, top-notch music majors in college. I knew I could get away because of my showmanship and play bass drum and cymbals, that I could dazzle the professors there and possibly get a marching scholarship. That was important to get a marching scholarship in that you only had to be in the band during the marching season and you did not have to participate in the band the rest of the year. I was able to initially start up as a, I guess, a person that would be on the sidelines as a bench warmer. But I was able to march and play percussions in the first few games. There was a break. There was a drum major that was very, very good at Southern, but he decided he didn’t like it and I said, I stepped forward and said, “I’d like to try out.” I’d never been a drum major. I tried out and of course the very first game that I was at was at a professional game in the Chicago Stadium, the Soldier Stadium.  
RV: Soldier Field?  
ES: Yes. And I got a lot of excellent news, feedback, and I was able to get and lock down a scholarship for four years as a drum major. The reason probably, number one, I could do a back bend that took my hat back to the ground before I started the band coming out on the field and then I’d do high kicks for 50 yards out to the center of the field with the band following. It was very impressive. In fact, in the Sugar Bowl, I think in 1962, I have a photograph; in fact, I’m on the centerfold of Life magazine, of me in my drum major’s outfit, which is a black and gold with a very high fur felt hat, which I still have today.  
RV: What years were you there at Southern Miss.? ’58 to ’62?  
ES: Yes.  
RV: So besides band, what else were you participating in while you were in band?  
ES: Since I was going to have to be a pre-dent student and I had tried to avoid biology and chemistry and all sciences in my high school year, I was not very equipped to start out in what I was majoring in. I ended up, by the way, with a double major in
bacteriology. So I took a lot of biology, a lot of chemistry, a lot of bacteriology. I spent a lot of time doing labs. To make money, I also became an associate student teacher in labs. So I helped students in their labs. That was one way I raised money. Another thing that every year I was there, I ran for either vice-president or president of my class and I was on the Student Senate and I was also the vice-president for the student government association, which gave me, I think 100 dollars a quarter, in money to be on the student association staff. The other thing that I did other than go to school, I worked nights pulling laundry from door to door, picking up laundry at night and dropping off clean laundry that had been sent to the cleaners.

RV: Was that there on campus?

ES: Yes. So those are kind of my activities. Another thing that I was doing was I was a Yellow Jacket, which was a student group that helped raise money. It also helped harass freshmen. It was the inducting party to the Southern group. So I was very, very involved in school activities. I loved school. In fact, I basically finished a four-year degree in three years. I took my junior and senior year; I doubled up and had to have special permission because I was taking an insurmountable amount of coursework, both in chemistry and biology and ROTC in two of my quarters in my junior year so I could finish the entire college out my junior year.

RV: Now why did you join ROTC?

ES: It was mandatory. The first two years was mandatory at Southern. And when I became a junior, again, money was driving me to, and I liked it, to be in ROTC.

RV: Was this Army ROTC?

ES: Yes. I think I got paid $22 and 70 cents a month for being in junior and senior ROTC. Now, the reason I doubled up on my senior year or junior year to complete early, in my sophomore year, I married my wife. That was on the 2nd of February 1962. We had been going together for two years and we wanted to get married. Now, we wanted to get married, but we also didn’t want the financial aspects or burdens to be totally placed on us. We were concerned that our parents would cut off any money supply that we had coming to us. So for the last two quarters, we, like I said, got married on the 2nd of February, we did not tell our parents until I was about ready to graduate. Which meant
that we both lived in separate dorms, but at least we were legal in our marriage arrangement.

RV: Did you meet there at Southern Miss.?

ES: I met her in one of my jobs in Gulfport, Mississippi. In my senior year in high school and junior year in high school and then two years in college, I was also working as a deck hand on multiple boats. The last boat I worked on was the Serena II. It was an 85-foot yacht that was owned by the Offshore Oil Company. And we typically took on board the president of the company and a few guests on Friday and went out over the weekend, out into the Gulf of Mexico to fish, scuba, or whatever. I was a bartender. I was a deck hand. I was a snorkeling expert, and I knew how to clean fish very rapidly. But I was working there one day sitting on the end of the boat having a soda and these two girls were walking down the deck and they were going to try and get a job with this sailboat company that was advertising sailboats and they were going to be the girls that would attract the people to the boats. And I invited my wife now, on board, one girl I knew. I said, “Do you want to come on board and have a soda?” And of course she immediately thought that I owned the boat. I had to tell her I didn’t. But I was very impressed with her. She had a date that evening. I had asked her to go to the dance, and like I said, she had a date, but I happened to be at that particular party, or dance at the [Gulfport] community yacht club center that was a public yacht club. It wasn’t a private club or I couldn’t have been there. But I was a pretty good dancer. In fact, I was very good. She was also and I was able to get in several dances with her. And that particular night, they had a dance contest and we happened to win the dance contest. But that’s how we met. And I started seeing her and I started dating her quite regularly and obviously I went off to college and two years later, we married. But we’ve been together for over 40 years. We’ll be married 40 years this year in February, which is Groundhog Day, February 2nd. That’s the way I remember it.

RV: Let me asks you sir, in your family, had there been any military tradition in your family?

ES: No.

RV: None at all.
ES: My one uncle on my father’s side, Carlton Sylvester, had been a bombardier onboard a B-29. And that’s all he was involved in the military. Now, my father worked for CC camps during the war developing logging camps and parks, recreational parks across the southeast. So that’s what he did while he was in the military. I mean, not in the military, but while the war was going on. Now, my wife’s father, Jack Michaely, who was a combat veteran of the Korean War and the 2nd World War and had started out in the Armored Cav., excuse me, the Horse Cav., when he followed his brother in the service to make sure he took care of him when he was in the service. Now I would say that I got more support from Beth’s father as far as what I needed to do if I did go into the military. One of the things that he told me, if you go into the military, try and go into flight school so at least you’d be able to have a hot meal and sleep on the same cot each night. That was good advice.

RV: And that’s what you did basically.

ES: And that’s what I did.

RV: When you graduated, did you get your commission?

ES: Yes. In fact, that was another reason, other than we were married, Beth and I, but I graduated in March of ’63. I graduated before my class, ROTC seniors, because they were kind of behind me as far as timing. So I received my commission in March. I’m trying to remember when. But that’s in my Curriculum Vitae.

RV: March 1963.

ES: Yes. I went in as a second lieutenant in the Medical Service Corps. Now I chose Medical Service Corps because the year prior, there had been one Medical Service Corps officer chosen for a commission and he had been able to go in the flight school from Southern. So with that in mind, I applied for the Medical Service Corps. Now, I didn’t know at that time that Vietnam was even heating up. But I knew I might have a chance to go into the aviation field if I did get the Medical Service Corps and that’s exactly what happened. So I went on active duty on 4/9 of ’63. April 9, 1963. When I was in the class and we were half way through the class, they started asking for people that’d be interested in volunteering for aviation school. I did go ahead and apply for that. Could we take a break for a moment?

RV: Absolutely sir. Go ahead sir.
ES: What I’d like to do is jump back to my college days. One thing that I found when I was in college, the busier I was, the better I was in utilizing time. I had multiple jobs. I had a full load each quarter, each semester. And the more hours I took and the more jobs I had, my grades improved drastically. I was on the Dean’s list almost every quarter and semester. I was nominated to Who’s Who. I was in Omicron Delta Kappa, which is a National Honor Society. My junior/senior year, I was nominated or elected by the body as Mr. USM. Now, that typically went to a football scholar, but I was shocked that I was able to get that particular honor.

RV: That’s Mr. University of Southern Mississippi, just to clarify.

ES: Right. So I found that with my marriage and with my work schedule and with the teaching in labs and my band and the association and the ROTC, all of those activities improved my regimented way of my life, which helped build my future and how I performed later on.

RV: That’s very important.

ES: Significant impact. Now we can jump forward. As I was saying, I came on active duty on 4/9/63 and went into basic officer training.

RV: Where was that located?

ES: I went to Fort Sam Houston, Texas and I was there in April until I started, right after that, I went directly to flight school at Fort Walton Beach, excuse me, Fort Walters, Texas which is outside a little town called Mineral Wells, which is west of Fort Worth, Texas. And that’s where they had primary training in those days in small observation helicopters. There were five people from my class that got selected to go to that particular course in that particular class.

RV: How was basic training for you? Was it difficult for you?

ES: It was not difficult. I think in all of my classes or any of my schools that I was ever in in the military; I was always in the top 20%. But when I was in the basic though, I was always concerned that some of the military school students that were there had the upper hand as far as military bearing, military tactics, military things that I felt very, very ill-equipped with. But I think where, as in college, I just persevered or just with tenacity I just tried to do the job the best I could, work at it, communicate with my superiors, my teachers, my flight instructors, as much as I could.
RV: This is your second, this is the helicopter school where you went to.

ES: The second job, yes. Right. Now, when I was in the first phase of flight
school, I did have trouble in the navigational portion of the school. One thing that I
wanted to tell you, my wife stayed with her mother and dad when I went off to basic, and
then for probably about half of my initial flight training at Fort Walters, Texas, because
she was pregnant with our first son, our only son, and could not travel because she was in
her last trimester. But when she did get out to Fort Walters, Texas, she tried to do all the
things that all the wives were trying to do because they said you need to have a good
meal in the morning. Give them plenty of time for studying and all of that. And she really
and truly tried to do as much as she could, even with a young child, to make my training
as easy as it could be. I got out of the first phase of my training just before Christmas. I
had to retake a test that I had not done well on and the rest of the class had gone on that
particular day and the day that everybody was leaving, I was still there and I took a retake
on a test. That was very concerning to me because I obviously wanted to fly. But I did
pass it. We got into our Pontiac convertible, red car, and took off and went by Beth’s
parents in Gulfport, Mississippi and then drove on to Fort Rucker, Alabama.

RV: Now tell me a little bit about that training. This was early on in the era of
helicopter aviation. Tell me what kind of training they had you doing.

ES: Well, all of our pilots that trained us, had been in the military or they had
been at the school for a very long time. My first instructor’s name at the school in Texas
was Mr. F.G. Wilson. I was very fortunate to draw him. Typically, he had two students.
My stick mate was Lieutenant Randolph and then myself. I soloed on the 23rd of July
1963. The only reason I know that is I’m looking at a coffee mug on my bookcase that
I’ve never drank from. That was in an OH-23 D. You could have three people sit in the
aircraft, but typically only two would be in the 23, one on each side. The instructor would
sit in a different seat from time to time, but typically the student would sit in the left seat,
at least in my class. But Mr. Wilson, when they first start you out, they want to show you
how incompetent you really are. One of the first things they do, they take the “23” out to
a very large field. Each aircraft that was doing this maneuver would have about the same
amount of territory. But it was about as big as a football field, if you can imagine that,
and we get in the center of it. And the instructor pilot would lift the aircraft up, in other
words, pull the collective and lift it up and he’d do a pedal turn left and then do one to the right. He’d sit the aircraft down. He’d move the aircraft up in the air again, move it forward, move it backwards, showing the mobility of the helicopter. Then he would sit it down. Each instructor would do this about the same way. He’d say, “Okay, I’m going to give you the collective.” That’s the stick that’s in your left hand. He said, “Now, you’re going to have to lift up the collective, and as you lift up, you’re going to have to roll the throttle on because you need to maintain you manifold pressure at a certain RPM or at a certain pressure.” And you’ve got to maintain your RPM also. So, that sounds rather simple, but none of us really ever got it right. We would either get a, not an over rev but it would start getting beyond the point that the instructor would have to take back over and he’d slap your hand. The next thing you’d have to do is just do the pedals and he would lift the aircraft up and he said, “Okay, turn the aircraft to the left.” And you’d push the left pedal and it’d turn around. It seemed real simple. Then he said, “Hold it and point your nose at a particular tree.” You’d kind of wobble around. It’d be moving back and forth and you’re trying to keep it [aimed] right on the tree and you’d put in too much right pedal and you’d put in too much left pedal. And you’d go through that process for maybe two or three minutes. Then he would let you have the cyclic, and that’s the thing that goes between you knees that if you point the cyclic towards your nose, you’d start moving forward. If you point it to the left, you’d start moving left, right, etc. It changes the pitch in the blade angle in the air, and it operates the main rotor. So we go through that process and each event, you’d think you were beginning to get pretty good and then he would set it down. He said, “Now I want you to put all of it together.” And you’d get the aircraft maybe an inch or two off the ground if you’re lucky and he wanted it three feet and you’d go ahead and finally get it up an then all of the sudden, the ground started moving and everything in front of you and you’d start oscillating. In just a matter of moments, and this I saw with many other pilots, it wasn’t just me, you’d start moving across that darn football field, or that field that was as large as a football field and you’d wish you’d had more space because you’d go up like a swing and he’d say, “Okay, back to the right.” And you’d go back to the right and you were actually supposed to be holding the darn thing right above a certain spot on the ground. It was really comical but very dangerous, but you had to get the feel of what the aircraft would do. Now, of course,
Mr. Wilson would slap you on the forehead on your helmet and he’d take the controls and he said, “Now this is what you’re doing. “ And he just wiped the cockpit out moving the cyclic around between his knees in big arching circles and the aircraft wouldn’t even move because what he was doing is changing the plane of the pitch of the blade so quickly that it wasn’t reacting. So he was just demonstrating, if you work real hard at it, it’s not going to go anywhere, but if you hold your motion, your stick at a particular point, it’s going to go there until you change your stick direction. You really very seldom ever got that right the first time. But you also have to realize that in 12 hours, and that was your first hour, typically, you would be soloing that aircraft. So you also knew that you had some significant time restraints on you. So that’s a built in pressure that we all had because most of us were able to solo within 12 to 15 hours.

RV: How long did it take you to really pick all that up?

ES: The second time you pick up an aircraft, you begin to start getting the feel. I think controlling the collective, controlling the anti-torque pedals in the feet were the easiest part. Rolling the throttle on and off as you descended or ascended was a little bit more difficult. Controlling the cyclic, because it’s like a wet noodle that you’re holding between your legs, and if you change that just a little bit, its going to go in that direction. But the concept is, and he finally beat into me was, just think, don’t move it, just think where you want to go and it will go in that direction. So that’s the slightest motion. And by doing that, I was able to finally conquer the cockpit, I thought, on those simple maneuvers. Now taking off and landing, you had to have certain speeds and you went through that process. The thing that you always were concerned about, if you did something that was safety dangerous, you’d get a pink slip and you could only get three pink slips. I got one pink slip when he did an emergency auto rotation, another emergency engine failure. I didn’t put the collective down fast enough and I got a pink slip. If you don’t put your collective down fast enough, what happens, your blade will start capturing a lot of air in the blades and your blades will eventually slow down and stop. What you have to do is basically free wield your rotor by putting your collective all the way down and then it spins without grabbing air. You’ve taken all of your pitch out of your blades when you put your collective all the way down. But the first twelve hours, just are very, very fast. So you basically learn how to fly in two weeks.
RV: That’s a pretty short period of time.

ES: That’s a very short period of time and what you have to do on the solo, if he feels that you are capable and they’ll surprise you. He’ll sit the aircraft down, get out of the aircraft and say, “You’ve got it. Take it around three times.” We had different staging fields where people did touch and goes all the time. So you’d have to talk to the tower operator. You’d have to pick up the aircraft. Take it to the takeoff pad, take off, go around the pattern, two or three times and land and then take it back to where he’s standing and waiting on you. Of course, you had white knuckles, you have white hands because you squeeze. You probably indented the steel on the collective and the cyclic from squeezing so hard. You have cramps in your legs because you’re so stiff trying to make sure that the pedals are right. You’re sweating profusely. I don’t know how much water you lose. You were in hot weather anyway in July, June, that period of time in Texas. So it goes by very, very rapidly. But the first, even with all of those anxieties in you on your first flight by yourself, it’s a very exhilarating time. Of course after you’ve landed and you get back on to the bus to go back to the main airfield, on the way, the people that soloed that particular day had the opportunity of being thrown into the muddy, dirty pond as a part of the initiation of becoming a pilot.

RV: So you got thrown into the pond.

ES: Yes. So, that’s kind of the beginning.

RV: What did they tell you the role of the helicopter would be in the U.S. Military?

ES: Of course the talk when I first got there was where do you think we’re going to go? I think that was really the first time any of us even really knew about Vietnam because they would say that most likely your class or many of you will go to Vietnam. Now, the Medical Service Corps pilots, they didn’t necessarily sub group [place Medical Service Corps pilots] into any particular sub group. They just considered you a pilot. You’d be flying either gun ships or slick ships. Slick ships are cargo ships or evacuation helicopters or supply ships. They told us that we’d be flying a new Huey that were turbine engine driven that would be the Cadillac of the aircraft. One thing that I knew once I got into the Huey that the opportunity of flying a reciprocating engine without an automatic governor on it and having to regulate the RPM really helped you finesse a
helicopter or an aircraft and you really had to fly. In a Huey, you had all the power you
needed, typically, unless you were just a real bad pilot. You didn’t have to worry about
the takeoff other than the precautionary things that you normally learn to do to run
through it. But we knew we were all most likely going to Vietnam. That scared me. Even
though, then it was only in an advisory role supporting Special Forces people that were
there. Now, me, for example, there were probably less than 5,000 people in Vietnam,
Americans, mostly advisors that were scattered throughout Vietnam. As we went on
through the different classes, the OH-23 D in our first phase of training and then when we
went to Fort Rucker, in our class, some of us went through CH-34s. That was the aircraft
that the Marines used primarily during the initial phases of Vietnam. Then the old UH-19
which they called a “Hog”. They were utility aircraft reciprocating engines that could
carry more than two people but really became burdened down an H-19 when you had
more than six people on board. They were equipped for that but they were very, very, old
aircraft.

RV: What was your favorite copter to fly?
ES: The UH-1B. The Huey is my favorite aircraft.
RV: Why was that?
ES: It was small, sleek in comparison to other aircraft that had plenty of power.
The cruise could work in our business, much easier than the later models that we flew.
You could get patients in and out of an aircraft rapidly under fire. If you could put a
person in the aircraft, the aircraft could pick it up. It had plenty of power and the
maneuverability was very good when you had to make hot approaches, real fast
approaches, with side flares to wash all the air out from underneath the blades [on final
approach] and sit the aircraft down, it could do that without ballooning on you and
exposing you to hostile fire. But the Huey…and I’m rated in the 23D. I’m rated in the
OH-13. I’m rated in the UH-1D. I’m rated in the CH-21 and UH-1 A, B,C, H models,
Hueys. I’ve flown the Cobra, those different aircraft and I’ve been IP in the Huey quite a
bit in Vietnam and Korea and in the States here.

RV: Now when you were going through this training at Fort Walters, this was still
in 1963, is that correct?
ES: Yes.
RV: Then you went to Fort Rucker.

ES: Right.

RV: Okay. And that took you into 1964. What did you know about U.S. policy in Southeast Asia at this time?

ES: Nothing. And I must admit now, I didn’t know much about U.S. policy when I left. I did not know that people were demonstrating in the United States about Americans being in Vietnam. I did not know that. I was just happy to have been in the assignment that I was in in Vietnam on my first tour. There were senior commanders that were continuously wanting to use our medical evacuation helicopters for other missions. We fought that. That’s as close as I got to policy. They never did use our aircraft except for medical evacuation helicopters. But that is due to Major Charles Kelly who had been my commander, was killed in Vietnam on July 1, 1964 and of course Major Paul Bloomquist. They were the leaders of the five aircraft detachment that we had in Vietnam that covered all of Vietnam from the very southern shores to Quang Tri up in the I Corps area. So, with ten pilots, five aircraft, ten [five] medics, ten [five] crew chiefs, we flew all over Vietnam.

RV: And you were assigned to the 57th Medical Detachment to begin with?

ES: That’s correct. That is sometimes called the original Dustoff. It was the first detachment, medical evacuation detachment in Vietnam. It got there in 1962. So there was basically one turnover when we started getting there.

RV: Now, back at Fort Rucker, when did you finally find out that you were going to go to Vietnam?

ES: My first orders to my first aviation assignment was to go to Fort Benning, Georgia. We were preparing, Beth and I were preparing our move. The movers were coming the following day and we were in the clearing cycle of leaving school. We had not graduated yet. I want to say we graduated, I can't remember. I’d have to look that up. But Fort Benning, Georgia was a short trip from Fort Rucker. So I drove up and I got an audience with the executive officer there at the company and his name was Francis A. Copeland. He was a major.

RV: What was your rank at this time, sir?
ES: I was a 2nd Lieutenant, it seemed like all my life. So I got an appointment with him and he invited me in and I said, “I’m coming up. I want to find out what the housing situation is here. I’d like to know what I’ll be doing.” His first words out of his mouth was, “Oh, you didn’t get your change to orders?” I said, “No.” He said, “Well, you’re going to Vietnam. You should have gotten those orders before now.” So I did not stay there very long because I jumped back in my car and drove very frantically back down to Fort Rucker. I was not looking forward to telling my wife that I was going to be leaving and that I would not be there for my second child that would be born because she had just discovered that she was pregnant. I told her that I was going to Vietnam and we decided at that point in time, she would go back to her mom and dad’s in Gulfport and stay there. So we pulled stuff for her and the baby that she would be able to live on and live with in Gulfport and we changed our whole packing scheme because they were coming the next day. So that’s how I found out that I was going to Vietnam. Now that instant kind of made me angry to myself, being a 2nd Lieutenant, I didn’t know who I could be angry with other than the system. But it was… Unfortunately Beth and I had to number one, realize that that was what was going to have to happen and it was meant to be. And so we made arrangements and then when we graduated, I drove her home to Gulfport and then at that time, I prepared to get ready to go to Vietnam. I took off on my second flight on a fixed wing plane, my first flight being in Edenton, North Carolina, my second being on Southern Airways, I believe it was, out of Gulfport, Mississippi going to San Francisco, California.

RV: Now how did you feel about going into, well it wasn’t at that time a war zone, but going to a hot spot in the world? How did you feel about going into that area?

ES: When I tell you some of these things, you’re going to think that all I was ever motivated about was money. I knew that we could save money by her living with her parents. I was going to get combat pay, I think, of $55 extra a month. I was, of course, a new army aviator and I was going to have $105 [$110] extra a month. Now, base pay for me in those days was $222 and I think it was 22 cents. So base pay was not much. In those days we saved money. We were able to save our flight pay on a monthly basis in those days. Now that did not take into consideration that we did in fact get extra money for housing. So those were the first things that went through my mind. The second thing
that went through my mind because my father-in-law continued to remind me, was well, at least you’re not going to be “beat feeting” it around in the rice paddies of Vietnam. That you hopefully will be able to sleep on a good cot and be home everyday after you’ve been flying. Now, he and I never knew that I would fly as much as I did. But after a very, very long trip on multiple landings getting to Vietnam, I was number one, glad to get off the plane. I was met by people from the unit that came right on the flight line, picked me up and that made me feel good. I felt great about it. And they treated me like an aviator that had been around for a good while.

RV: Sir, if I could ask quickly, what was the mood on the flight over there? Was this a civilian flight?

ES: It was a contracted flight with all military.

RV: What was the mood on board?

ES: Very somber because I might have been the oldest person on the plane and I was probably 22 [24]. So we were a bunch of young kids. We probably didn’t think about much of anything as I recall it. I was happy to see Hawai for the first time. I was happy to see Wake for the first time, the Philippines for the first time, Guam for the first time. Those were the places that we had to land at to get to Vietnam. But the thing that I remember most of all and it’s nothing historical or significant, is that when they opened the plane, this tremendous heat came through the door and it was hot, very, very hot and it remained hot. But what I do remember is getting off the plane, having two people pick me up, taking me directly to the unit and then to chow, being able to be introduced to some of the people that were, and I didn’t know this at the time, that were actually going to the unit because we were not specifically assigned to the 57th Medical Detachment. We were assigned to a holding detachment that moved people to assignments.

RV: Where did you fly into?

ES: Tan Son Nhut.

RV: Tan Son Nhut. Okay. And you stayed there for how long?

ES: A very short period of time. I “in-processed”. I had to read some of the SOPs. The first or second day, in fact, it was the first day, I was still in khakis. They had a flight going out and said, “Would you like to see the area of operations?” I said, “Oh, sure, I’d love to.” So I jumped in the back seat. We took off.
RV: Was this in a helicopter?
ES: We went into an area and it was a hot area. So, I mean, they didn’t tell me about that. Of course, these pilots, and you do this sometimes to “newbies”, it may not have been as hot as they said it was but they really got my attention because we were getting fired at and the patients that we were picking up were wounded and had just been wounded, and we went back and took those people to the nearest health care facility, dropped them in a soccer field where they were picked up. That was my first orientation flight in Vietnam.
RV: How did you feel when you were on this flight?
ES: Excited. I would have preferred being at the controls. Ever since I’d learned how to fly, I’d rather be up front than being helpless in the back with the crew chief and medic. But that was my experience. Major Kelly and Bloomquist decided that I would go to Soc Trang. That was [“the crow flies” is] some 90 miles southwest of Saigon and that’s where I was going to stay. Now, what’s interesting is Jeff Grider, who was in my class, Bob Mock, who was in my class, Jerry Shaw, who was in my class, and myself, 40% of the pilots were there, all new to aviation and none of us really knew that we were going to the same detachment until we saw each other.
RV: Now was that a huge coincidence that this happened like this?
ES: Well, our first question is, where are all these senior season pilots and why are we having the opportunity just out of flight school to go there? That was my first reality with you have to work your way up. But there were a lot of people that knew more about what was going on in Vietnam than we did that had a choice and made decisive decisions to avoid Vietnam as much as they could. There were other pilots that had been there just a little bit longer than us that were just out of flight school, too. So over 50% [55%] of our crew, our people that were there in Vietnam were new. All of our medics were new. All of our crew chiefs were new. The senior maintenance person who happened to be Sergeant Charles Allen who lives up the road about 100 miles from here, he was an E-6. He had been around. But the ten officers, we had Major Kelly and Bloomquist that were the most senior people that had experience under their belt. Now experience means, I’ll categorize this, and they were well beyond this, is somebody that
has more than 700 hours. I’ll tell you a little bit about that. Most accidents that are cause
by aviators happen between 500 and 700 hours if they’re going to have an accident.

RV: Why is that?

ES: They become cocky. They think they know how to fly and the aircraft gets
away from them.

RV: How many hours had you had up to this point?

ES: I had 205 hours out of flight school. We were basically rated commercial
pilots in the rating scheme of things when we came out of flight school. The only thing
that some of our pilots got in our class when we were in flight school, 25 people had the
chance of taking instrument training in their 205 hours. I was not one of those. That
program, eventually, right after our class, went into full gear and everybody got, they
called them “tactical instrument tickets.” But I was not instrument qualified. I
theoretically could not get into weather. I had to fly VFR flights.

RV: Tell me how many men were in this unit in your 57th Medical Detachment.
ES: Five aircraft. 10 pilots because we had to fly two to an aircraft, a medic and a
crew chief for each aircraft, a few administrative people and there probably, and I don’t
remember the exact number, between 40 [25] and 50 [35] people in a detachment.

RV: Where were you housed there at Soc Trang?
ES: At Soc Trang, Soc Trang was French base. It had been used in the
French/Indonesian war. It had a nice runway that fairly large aircraft could get on and off.
It actually had running water in the restroom or latrines. We didn’t have cans that we had
to go to and burn our body waste. It had, our hooch, as we called it, was wood siding at
the bottom four feet. Then it had four feet of screen and then on the outside, you could lift
shudders that were tin shudders with wood frames, up and down if it was raining or not
raining. A tin roof. They were probably about 32 feet long and probably 18 feet wide.

RV: How many men to this hooch?

ES: We happened to have in that hooch, five people. And the other five officers
were up in Saigon. We had two aircraft in Soc Trang. Our aircraft were out our front door
across a very short, little ditch and then probably another 25 feet to our aircraft. When we
got an alert, we could be in our aircraft, really and truly, in less than 30 seconds, pulling pitch to go in and pick up wounded.

RV: Did you have to stay on alert during certain times of the day or was it a 24-hour deal?

ES: Since there were only two crews, basically and one person off, the fifth person kind of rotated through. We always had one that would come off duty for at least a day. We had a first up crew. So that took care of the first two pilots, the medic and the crew chief, and then we had a second crew. Both aircraft, typically always flew everyday. So that’s why some of us flew more, well, we flew a lot of hours. We flew a lot of hours in Soc Trang because we covered the largest territory where there were Americans and ARVN. In between points was great distances. The aircraft that were in Tan Son Nhat very seldom flew more than 45 minutes to an hour on a flight. We typically flew an hour and a half to two hours on each flight.

RV: Round trip.

ES: Round trip. We typically always had to refuel before we came back in. Our run in one direction flying was typically 45 minutes. Then we had to come back at least 45 minutes to 60 minutes. We had two hours and 20 minutes of fuel. We typically did not go over two hours because we needed to have a 20 minute safety factor, but we very often did go beyond that two hours to be able to make it one round robin. We flew day and night. Nighttime was very, very unusual. No one in the past had flown at night. They typically never even asked for missions at night. Our crew headed up by Major Kelly who was the commander, and also wanted to be in Soc Trang away from the flagpole in Saigon, flew with us. We basically recruited patients, initially in Vietnam. We would go out every night, Major Kelly flying, and then whoever happened to be up with him, initially would fly. I later asked to fly with him as much as I could at night because I liked to fly at night.

RV: Why was that?

ES: I felt it was safer. It was safer from the standpoint of somebody being able to see you and shoot you down because we were flying without lights. They would only shoot at the sound at night. In my first tour, my record shows that I flew 197 night hours at night. That’s fairly significant. In peacetime, you're only required to get about 20 hours
a year to make minimums. I flew with the people that have been friends ever since to include the crews. We did go throughout the area, single ship missions, flying by ourselves, typically at about 2,000 feet, sometimes a little lower if the weather would drive us down. But we would fly all over South Vietnam. We typically would go out, pick up a patient or patients, go to Can Tho, which was a center that had ARVN capabilities, that’s Army of Vietnam soldiers. Then we’d fly back into Sac Trang. Make, basically, a triangle. And we’d do that without ever getting a mission at night, initially. We’d [fly] over a Special Forces camp and call into their radio frequency and find out if they had anyone that was ill, sick [or wounded] that needed to be transported. We would typically pick up patients each and every time that we went out. We very seldom had a dry haul. I’ll tell you what I think we might need to do is possibly shut down at this point in time and continue later.

RV: Okay. Hold on just a second sir. Okay we were resuming our interview with Colonel Ernie Sylvester. Colonel, if you would, lets continue talking about your time there in 1964 in Vietnam, when you had first arrived and we were describing some of what you did there at Soc Trang. I wonder if you could describe to me the relationship you had with your crewmen. How much did you rely on each other? I’m sure that’s a lot but what kind of relationship did you form from the beginning and then as you went through these missions together, how did that relationship deepen?

ES: I’ll go ahead and start with our daily routine. In the morning, probably around 6:00 to 7:00, the aircraft, which was very close to the hooch. Obviously, if one of the pilots was not there, the crew chief or medic would surely make sure that we were aware that they were outside. But as I indicated, we had a medic, a crew chief, two pilots for each crew and we swapped aircraft depending on what day it was and if we were first up or second up. We had two aircraft there so if any aircraft went down, either first up had to take all the missions or we’d have another aircraft from Saigon be flown down to us if we had a lot of missions and they had basically, an extra aircraft there. The crew chief had the responsibility of dailying and pre-flighting the aircraft.

RV: Sir, can I interrupt for a real quick question?

ES: Sure.
RV: Regarding flying in that other helicopter, did you get used to a certain bird or was every helicopter basically handling the same way? Did you have a favorite that you wanted to fly everyday?

ES: I never got used to a particular aircraft and I also did not get an attachment, I guess, either a physical or mental attachment to any aircraft. They flew all the same and I did not have any particular quirks. A turbine engine probably eliminates some of the variances that an engine might have because of the power that it does drive. But the crew chief that had an aircraft, it was his aircraft and I say his aircraft. In today’s modern Army, it would be his or her aircraft. But in those days, we only had men in the unit. But it was specifically their aircraft, the crew chief. Normally, too, the medics stay on the same aircraft because they had their own medical bag. It was prepared the way they like their kits prepared. One medic might have a little bit more training and may in fact carry more or sometimes less material for patients. But the ships, when they come in in the evening, typically are washed down and prepared after the last flight, whatever that flight might be so that the next mission is ready. So the crew chiefs and the medics are constantly working on those aircraft to prepare them for the immediate next mission. But in the morning, the basic ceremony or process was that the pilots for the aircraft or at least the junior pilot would go and pre-flight and look at all the control elements, the mechanical control elements of the aircraft with a visual inspection and a manual, physical inspections. If their push/pull rods were supposed to move, we would move those to see if there was any difference in the play or the tolerance of the aircraft. You do that so often, you know when there’s a tolerance that’s off. Of course if you think that there is something that is slightly off, then you have your crew chief check it out to make sure that the part that you’re checking is within tolerance based on the manual for that particular part on the aircraft. You look for leaks. You look for any damage to the aircraft that might have been overlooked from the previous flight. I’m talking damage. I would typically be looking for any aircraft hits or bullet entries into the aircraft. In the Huey, you can have multiple bullets go through your aircraft and she’ll run fine, even sometimes when major components might be involved. But you have to check for leaks. You have to check for any rotor damage, if you might have a tree strike or limb strike or if you’re down in the trees trying to do low leveling under hostile conditions, it’s very
possible you can get fairly close to objects and sometime nick them. Now, that very
seldom happened, but you always had to look at insuring that it had not happened and
you had not damaged the outer skin of the blade or whatever. But you went through a
long check list for start up and you basically got the aircraft ready so that when you
actually did have a mission, you could turn on the switch, the electrical switch and turn
on the turbine and start it and get a fast start and be able to pull pitch on and off within 30
seconds from the time you get in the aircraft. Now, if you waited and only did your
preflight at the time of your missions, it wouldn’t be tolerated. People wouldn’t allow you
to take that much time. However, other aircraft and other missions, based on the
missions, the crews might have handled that slightly different, but that’s the way our
crews in Soc Trang and future crews operated. We always had the first ship inspected
very closely, second ship, second crew inspect it too. The second typically backed up the
first aircraft. So when we were in the air, however, we weren’t out scarfing missions, but
what we would try and do if the first up ship could in fact, without not much delay, get to
the next mission, we would take the next mission. So we might get the first mission,
second mission, third mission, and the second up wouldn’t have to ever fly during that
period of time because we were either closer or we could get there in the amount of time
that it would take the other aircraft. That way it left the crew, the second up crew, resting
to some degree. But there was hardly never a day that the second crew didn’t have to
crank. That was routine. The men were our eyes and ears. The enlisted people, the
crewmembers, worked harder than the pilots ever could imagine working. As I said, they
washed the aircraft down, they cleaned the aircraft. They resupplied the aircraft with
medical supplies. They resupplied the aircraft with survival gear. They resupplied the
aircraft with food. Because many times, the only time we got a chance to eat was putting
a C-ration up in the windshield, letting it warm up in the wind shield and then eating it
while we were flying because we very seldom got back to the airfield to have a regular
meal. The crews, once we got a mission, we’d tell the crews what we had, where we were
going, what the situation was on the ground, and if it was a hot mission, we’d tell them it
was hot. If it was a secure mission, we, number one, didn’t necessarily believe that. There
were very few secure missions. Sometimes the secure ones would really get us in trouble
because we were getting no information that was reliable from the ground, especially
with other forces other than American forces. But I’ve had, at times, at night, people speaking English, speaking very softly on the radio saying it was a secure area and could we see their very dimly lit flashlight, in a whisper. And they’d say it was secure. Well, obviously, it was not secure. They wanted us to get in and get out. But after a while, people just knew that if we were called, we would go in. We would pick them up. It didn’t matter how hot or how hostile the area was. We just set that as a standard. I never in all of my flying and the men that I know that flew in our first tour, refused to go into an area that was either secure or insecure.

RV: Excuse me sir. Excuse me.

ES: Now, as we were going in, typically, we had a tactical approach. We had two approaches. We could either fly in from a distance out as much as a mile at a very high speed, low level, in between the trees and whatever terrain we could find to protect us and we would again, theoretically try and go over the area that was somewhat secure. We could do that another way by coming in and doing a spiral and trying to stay over the immediate area and basically dive into the area in a spiral turn, keeping the aircraft down to a reasonable exposure above the friendlies. Both of them though were very fast approaches, almost a screaming approach, and a new pilot could probably never maneuver an aircraft and be able to stop it in the short distance that we had going at 100 miles an hour to a dead stop without ballooning up and sitting down right next to the wounded or casualties.

RV: Now how fast would you usually enter into an LZ?

ES: When it was a hot LZ in a zigzag pattern, we’d probably be in excess of 100 miles an hour.

RV: Were you ever ordered to not enter a hot LZ, to wait it out?

ES: We were told on some occasions not to go in, but we typically were able to find a way to get in. I would rather go into an LZ when they least expected us instead of them building up or setting up their position whereby they could shoot us out of the sky. Now at night, you could go into an area with a normal approach, blacked out and they’d have a very hard time seeing you. Therefore, that is one of the reasons, I, quite frankly, liked to fly at night because I felt my aircraft and crew were safer. Now, in both cases, both going into an LZ hot or at night, our crew in the back was hanging out the side,
clearing us left and right, forward and rear, of obstacles that we would be coming onto in
approach in the last few hundred feet or so. That could be a matter of five to ten seconds
where they were having to be extremely alert and if they were taking fire, to try and put
out some form of suppressive fire and tell us where we were receiving fire so we could
either continue the approach or do a go around and come in from a different area.
Typically, though, from my standpoint, I very seldom aborted a landing because of the
enemy fire or under unusual circumstances because I felt the exposure would be greater
and they only had one chance to shoot at me. Now, the crews, as soon as they hit the
ground, we tried to keep in contact with that crew with long hard lines going to their
headset so they could talk to us. But sometimes they had to unplug and go further out
away from the aircraft to either pick up the wounded or police the wounded up in the LZ
where there had been a great number of people wounded and they were trying to assist
and get the people on the aircraft before we started taking either mortars or other type of
rounds coming in on us. So, I cannot emphasize how the medics and crewmembers did
their jobs ten times over what the pilots ever did. On one or two occasions, I flew in the
back and acted as a assisting medic and picking people up when we had, especially a part
of my orientation. I wanted to know how they had to work and try and better understand
what they had to tolerate in the back so I could maybe help them in the future by knowing
what they had to put up with.

RV: I guess you saw all kinds of wounded men and all kinds of medical
circumstances. Did you think about this or were you concentrating so much on your job
where you just tried to block that kind of thing out, the suffering that was in the back
right behind your seat or how much were you involved in thinking about these things?

ES: I blocked it out. I treated the patients as cordwood, as cargo. At times when
you’d see a wounded civilian, a female or a child, your heart really kind of went out to
them. But I’ve been involved with close to 15,000 evacuations as far as patients go.
Sometimes and not too far into the year, you lose sight of them being human beings. You
have to. I’ve never lost sleep over it. I don’t think I’ve ever had any type of depression
over it. The crews, we saved so many people’s lives. If we could pick them up and I
know that our record will demonstrate this, that if we picked them up, 95% [98%] of
them would live. It’s the highest, Vietnam proved to be the highest survival rate of any
war in the past. Again, we were picking these patients up as little time as 15 to 20
minutes from the time they were wounded and they were back in the hospital within an
hour from the time the bullet hit them or the hand grenade, or the bomb, or whatever it
might be, or the napalm. Of course down south, we had longer runs, but most of our
patients in the south happened to be Vietnamese Army or Vietnamese. We had very few
Americans at that point in time and they were all Special Forces in ’64, ’65. Now,
starting with the build up in ’65 and later when I went back in ’70, ’71, we had, instead of
five aircraft, just in the I Corps, we had 55 aircraft. So, we were picking people up and
having them back to the hospital in 15 minutes. And almost all of our missions didn’t last
more than 20. That was a far cry over what I did with our crews in the first tour where my
typical flight was out in 30 minutes.

RV: Did you ever lose any of your crewmen to enemy fire?
ES: I never had anyone wounded or killed in the aircraft I was flying.
RV: That’s incredible.
ES: Now, I was wounded myself and one of the other guys, the Medal of Honor
winner, Pat Brady, on a night mission and it was the only night mission I’ve ever been hit
in, but we got to T-28’s- no, excuse me- A1-Es were shot down and Pat Brady and I took
off after them and we scrambled our back up because we knew it was going to be real hot
and we got within a mile and we started going low level. It was at night, but we had a full
moon. When we got over or close to the first aircraft that was shot down, we started
getting a quad 50 shooting at us. The .50 calibers at night, with tracers, looked like tennis
balls. They looked real big. They were just spraying the sky with one gun that was
shooting four barrels of rounds. Our cockpit got in the way of quite a few rounds. And it
blew the canopy off above my head and blew our dashboard out and 50 caliber rounds
somehow went between my legs and right in front of my chest out over my head. I got a
little bit of tracer on my flight suit which kind of caught on fire and I got some shrapnel
in my left eye and Pat Brady also had a little bit of shrapnel in his left eye. We were able
to fly that aircraft away from that sight and be able to land at a Special Forces camp not
too far from me [where we were at that time.] But that aircraft was flyable later on after it
was picked up, but at that time, that was not too long after I had picked up my
commander that had been killed. At that time, Paul Blundquist did not want me to fly the
rest of the night. But we had wanted to go back into the area. But that was the only time
that I actually got wounded.

RV: That was in your left eye.

ES: Yes.

RV: What happened when your commander was killed? How did that happen?

ES: That was on the first of July 1964. His ship was first up and he was flying
with Captain Dick Anderson. Jerry Shaw and I, right after his mission, went up [had a
mission]]. We were called to another mission and we went up and were in air at the same
time. So often, that did not occur, but it seemed like they were going to be picking up an
American that had been wounded on the ground. We knew they’d be out of pocket
because they were going to have to take the Americans to Saigon and we had to take
everybody up that were Americans up there. So we flew the mission. Right before we
were about to pick up our mission, they were over their sight [landing zone, LZ] which
was about two miles away, so we heard them talking. Major Kelly and Dick Anderson
went into the LZ. It was hot. They were told it was hot. They got down on the ground.
The soldiers on the ground were pinned down. Major Kelly, they told him to leave the
LZ. They were taking fire. Major Kelly said, “Not until I have all your wounded.” He
hovered, started hovering forward to get closer to the Americans and get closer to the tree
line that the fire was coming from and he took one round underneath his left shoulder
which entered his heart and came out the other side. At that time, he was holding the
controls, the aircraft flipped over. They had a doctor on board, Doctor Giles. Captain
Anderson was the co-pilot and Major Kelly [was the aircraft commander]. Doctor Giles
broke his leg when the aircraft flipped. Major Kelley was killed instantly. We did not
know that. As soon as he was hit and the aircraft went into the ground, the ground troops
called us and said, “There’s a dustoff down.” Of course, lots of people started scrambling.
We were the closest aircraft. We got to the area. At that time, we started getting gun ships
in the area. They tried to neutralize the target and they couldn’t neutralize the target.
They told us not to go in. Jerry Shaw and I elected to go in. We picked up Major Kelley.
Again, we thought he might still be alive. We picked up some of the crew, I mean, all of
the crew and then we started flying to Vinh Long, which was an area that had a doctor
and was about 20 miles from that location. When we got Major Kelley there, he was
pronounced dead. We had Americans on the ground, still wounded. At that time, Pat
Brady from another ship had come down. Jerry Shaw was very distressed over the
situation of Major Kelly being killed and I was too, but we had Americans on the ground,
wounded and about 20 other patients on the ground at that point in time. So I elected to
take the ship back in with Pat Brady and you may or may not know Pat Brady, but Pat
Brady was later, not in this particular incident, was awarded the Medal of Honor
sometime after that on his second tour. But we went into the area three additional times,
picked up 21 more people out at the LZ. That all happened in the early morning of July 1,
1964.

RV: About how many people could you carry in your helicopter, wounded, that
is?

ES: What we legally can carry and what we carried.

RV: Two different things.

ES: I’ve carried 12 to 15 patients on a load in a Bravo, a UH-1B, ambulatory type
patients. And again, there’s one time I did carry 21 patients. But we had to kind of skip
along the rice paddy dike to get off the ground. It was dangerously marginal. But
sometimes when a LZ is real hot and you don’t want to go back in, you do have a
tendency of probably pushing the limits. If you can pick it up, that’s why I like the B
model. It was just an absolutely forgiving ship and if you could fly halfway decently, you
could nurture it and get it off the ground.

RV: Sir, did you have a calls sign?

ES: Say again.

RV: Did you have a call sign?

ES: All of our call signs those days, we were dustoff aircraft. When we initially
started having call signs, it depended on your rank. Dustoff six, of course is the
commander. Dustoff five typically is your operations officer or your next senior person.
Since I was a junior officer in the detachment at that time, I at times went by Dustoff 10,
but it was because I was one of the junior officers. We typically used in those days,
Dustoff and our tail number. Three of the numbers, the last three of the numbers that
were on the aircraft. Later though, Dustoff was a name that we got out of a Signal
Operations Instruction that where people were assigned call numbers and a frequency to
use for a month period of time. When we got dustoff, we decided, or at least the 
commander did, lieutenants didn’t decide anything. But the commander decided that we 
wanted to keep the same call sign, the same frequency, so people, if they needed us, 
they’d get up on the frequency and start calling for us and everybody knew it. We fought 
keeping that, but people realized, even if they reassigned us a different SOI number and a 
call sign, we’d still use the other one. So we used that and that has, from that day 
forward, in ’64, that has always been any medical evacuation helicopter’s call sign. 

RV: Let me ask you a question, what was your relationship, helicopter pilots with 
the other pilots on the base?

ES: Pilots and crews are very, very close and down in Soc Trang, we had the Soc 
Trang Tigers. It was the 121st Aviation Company. We also had the Vikings, which were 
the gun ships, in gunship platoon. The gunship pilots knew our techniques, our flying 
capabilities. We knew what they could do for us and they likewise. They would, all of the 
pilots and crews protected the Dustoff people in a very jealous way. They wanted to 
make sure that we remained alive. They would take unusual procedures to protect us and 
keep us out of harm’s way. When our two crews [were on we had one other pilot that 
would] and I was only the fifth person that happened to be off any one night or day, we 
were always, I guess, sane and sober because we had to fly. Most of the Slick pilots that 
carried troops and supplies and ammo and that kind of thing on a daily basis, really 
would let their hair down a lot more than we would, being the only crews that were on 
standby continuously 24 hours a day. But there was a relationship, a close relationship. 
They said they’d never fly our missions. Of course we’d say we’d never fly their 
missions. The grass sometimes looks either more dangerous or greener on the other side. 
But the whole compound respected the medical evacuation pilots and likewise, we 
respected what he gun ships and the slick ships had to do. If our aircraft was up for 
maintenance, we got the highest priority. Our aircraft was put in front of other aircraft so 
that we’d always have two available 24 hours a day. Or they’d give us one of their ships 
so that we could fly.

RV: Did you do that often?

ES: Every now and then.
RV: Besides the incident you described to me with Major Kelly, in that first year you were there, do you have any other unusual circumstances or incidents that stand out in your mind that happened to you?

ES: There are several incidents where our aircraft, our Huey took significant abuse. I always, as I look back, I almost feel that I had a guardian angel with my aircraft. We were making a pick up one time after Major Kelley was killed, Si Simmons and I and we were on the ground, taking fire from a tree line. It was very close. Our aircraft ended up taking 21 hits. It [the enemy fire] started back at our tail boom. It shot [the incoming rounds hit] about every six inches, a new round, working its way towards the cockpit, killed one of our patients that we’d already loaded in the litter. At that time our medic [crew chief] on my side was down in the water trying to stay away from the bullets and the firing stopped within about 6 inches just above my head and we didn’t receive any more hits. We were loading the patients as quickly as we could and maybe we pulled pitch as we got to where they hit that last round. That aircraft had over four hits in the engine. Most of the hydraulics was knocked out. Our transmission light was on. We lost all the oil and transmission oil in the gearboxes. We flew that aircraft for about 30 miles, set it down. It never stopped a heartbeat. We were able to land it safely and walk away from that aircraft and save the other few patients that were not killed in the initial fire bursts that killed the one patient that was on there. That’s one instance. Shouldn’t have lived through it. Another incident, when Major Kelley and I were trying to get some patients out of a compound, our medic and crew chief and actually myself, got out of the aircraft trying to get the people to come underneath the Concertina wire and not out the main gate because that’s where the enemy was. We had taken a round in our main fuel line. We were able to get the patients out from underneath the concertina wire and get them loaded, but when I was going back to the aircraft, there was fuel just pouring out very, very rapidly. We decided we’d try and make it back to our airfield, which was 15 minutes away. We were down [on fuel]. Fuel was just gushing out. We couldn’t stop the leak. We flew low level all the way back. We sent out a mayday. We were able to, with escort, about half a mile to a mile, land the aircraft and as we touched down on the end of the runway in the sod, because that’s the closest we could get to our compound, the engine quit as we set it down. That was quite harrowing. Of course Major Kelly’s
comment to the compound commander, Major Livenson, he said, “Do you need anything, Dustoff Six?” As he was sitting in this aircraft there at the end of the runway, he said, “No. I’d just like to have a bowl of ice cream.” So the commander brought that bowl of ice cream out to us for the crew. We saved the patients. We saved the aircraft. We were able to fly it back. There were other incidents like that. Another incident that unfortunately, it was close to the compound that I remember quite well. The 57th pilots, in October of 1964, the 82nd came in and we basically swapped out pilots, mixing the pilots, 50/50. The 82nd went into Soc Trang and we had five aircraft then and the 57th remained up at Tan Son Nhut. But three of our pilots that had flown with the 57th had switched out. When the 82nd came on board, they were kind of going more by the rules of stateside and they wanted to give me a check ride and I had a check ride on December 31, 1964. In that check ride, a Dornair, a CIA fixed wing aircraft hit me, our aircraft at about 300 feet off the ground and we had a midair collision. He hit us from the [rear], came up our rear to where our tail boom fell off. It was hanging on by just two pulley wires that went to the tail rotor. Of course, we plunged, well, we had to break away. His wings were lodged in our skids. We had to break away from the aircraft with full power, which obviously when you’re pull power, your blades are going to go faster and therefore, your fuselage is going to want to go faster the other direction. Since we didn’t have any tail rotor control, we plunged to the ground and actually walked away from that aircraft uninjured. It was an unlivable accident, so again, my guardian angel, I felt was with me at that point in time. But that was an experience that I will never forget. I really and truly felt that I had bought the farm at that point in time. It was a brand new aircraft. It had 27 hours on it. But, like I say, the check pilot and myself, we were able to walk away from the aircraft.

RV: Now, you set a record for flying over 1,000 hours in that one year. That had never been done before by a pilot.

ES: That’s correct. It was done in actually less than 11 months. They tried to reduce my number of hours that I was flying. Basically, in the last few months, I did not fly that much. But I could have very easily had probably 1,200 hours in the first year.

RV: Why were they trying to reduce your hours?

ES: Multiple situations. Number one, we had, then we had 10 pilots counting myself instead of five. We had five aircraft instead of two. By just sheer numbers [of
personnel and equipment], I had my hours reduced. I really and truly loved to fly. I did have the responsibility of being the last pilot to remain there from the 57th to assist in training all the new pilots that had come in. I was one of the standardization pilots. So, to release them, as aircraft commander, I had to fly with them on the missions to make sure they were safe and understood the tactical situation. So I flew those flights showing them techniques, but the sheer numbers [pilots] reduced my hours. The other thing, they felt that I had flown enough and they wanted me to go home, [not in a box].

RV: How much contact did you have with Beth while you were over there?

ES: I wrote her quite often. I spoke to her probably about three times by a system called MARS which was a satellite communications system, very poor quality where you had to, when you spoke something, you had to say, “Over,” and then they changed it so that the other person could then transmit. So it’s somewhat awkward. I had my second child when I was there on August the 13th. So I hadn’t been there very long. My son’s birthday, his first birthday was on July 6th. So with both of those children, I was not there for their birth. My son, I was in flight school. And then my oldest daughter, Sandy, I was there [Vietnam]. I provided a part of what I had written in my diary. I’ve updated that and inserted all of the letters that I’d written home to my family. I did not insert the letters that I wrote to Beth. They were too private to have them out on the net. But I even wrote my parents probably three to four times a month. I tried to update them with a very benign or sublime comments that I’m safe and no harm was going to come to me. Totally different, in fact, I guess even in my diary that I wrote, I just kind of wrote simple statements. I didn’t elaborate on it. But I just felt that it was very important that we stayed, routinely in contact. Some people used tapes and they sent tapes back and forth. I did not do that. But we wrote long letters. Beth would respond to ours [mine]. There was about a four to five day turnaround. I mean, one-way time frame in getting letters. So we were somewhat a week behind on the activities that were going on. But I never, ever spelt out that there was major danger involved.

RV: To her or to your parents?

ES: Right. I tried to keep it somewhat simple in that I was doing fine, that I had a lot of flying going on, that it felt very safe because other people, if there was any reason
for my aircraft to come in harm’s way, that I was sure that I would be picked up and
flown out safely.

RV: What can you tell me about your impressions of Vietnam the country that
first year you were there?

ES: I thought it was a very beautiful place above from the air and also the people,
when I was able to go to one or two of the shops- I got my photographs developed quite
often downtown in Soc Trang. And the people were educated. They spoke French and
English and they were very industrious, proud, but humble people that truly did not
understand why their land was being torn up the way it was. I’ve seen many occasions
where mama san and papa san would be in the fields planting rice [seedlings] in the
paddies with gun ships over them shooting at the enemy and they would just continue on
as if they were in downtown San Francisco. They were very industrious people. They
were a poor people. But I think they enjoyed what life they could with their family. They
were very family oriented. They did live in fear, though, at times because if they lived in
a hamlet that was siding with anyone other than the Viet Cong, they’d be annihilated.
And they would find their family or loved one’s head on a stake outside the compound if
they survived themselves.

RV: Did you ever have contact yourself, personally, with the Viet Cong or the
NVA?

ES: Yes.

RV: Can you describe that for me?

ES: I’ve had Viet Cong call a medevac in and we have picked up their wounded.
They called it in as if they were ARVN soldiers, real close to the Cambodian border in an
area called the Plain of Reeds, late in the day. But when we got over there, we got the
signal to, we talked to them. We learned how to say throw your smoke and say toi la bac
si, I am a doctor. Then they threw the smoke and we fluttered right in there and when we
got there, there were a lot of people in black pajamas and they were not Vietnamese
soldiers, South Vietnamese soldiers. They were Viet Cong and we took those people and
told the hospital that we felt that they were Viet Cong when we dropped them off.

RV: So you loaded their wounded onto your helicopter.

ES: Yes.
RV: Did you do that because... when you landed, did you realize they were Viet Cong?

ES: We were concerned. But if we took off, we would have gotten shot down. We were literally in their nest. So obviously the best thing to do was pick up their wounded and leave, not go back and get the patients. To me, it did not truly matter. Some people would probably argue this point. I had an obligation to try and save a life. So to me, it didn’t matter if they were Viet Cong or Vietnamese or civilian.

RV: Do you remember how many you picked up that day?

ES: We probably picked up three that day. We probably only picked up three because we realized the situation we were in. They didn’t necessarily know other than they’d probably seen on many occasions, a load of three litters. They were seriously wounded and we loaded them on litters and evacuated them. Our crew knew it. We didn’t, the other thing was, the danger that we had was that they could have brought us in and gotten patients on board and they could have pulled a hand grenade in the aircraft. It would have eliminated us all and they could have done that just to get the aircraft down. We thought about that. All of those kinds of things, all the alternatives, all the bad thoughts rushed through your mind at nanosecond time warp. But we did what we thought was appropriate at the time and it worked.

RV: Did they know that you knew that they were Viet Cong?

ES: No. We tried to treat them, our crew chiefs and medics were prepared to try and eliminate them if they did something funny.

RV: Did your crewmen carry a side arm with them?

ES: They carried carbines. I said, now, we, up front, could carry anything that we could get on our body. I had a .45 strapped to my left chest with a shoulder harness. I had a Berretta on my right hip. I had a modified shotgun that we had over our seat and then I had a paratrooper carbine folding stock that we carried. I had a machete underneath my right armpit that was more like a meat cleaver that I used to try and cut into a helicopter if we could when we were trying to get the crews out which I’d had to use in the past.

RV: So you were fairly well armed, it’s safe to say.

ES: We were fairly well armed. Could I have used it at the time? Probably so. But I think it was just more of a mental thing that we felt protected and we probably weren’t.
RV: Okay, sir, if you could continue. Colonel Sylvester?

ES: Yes

RV: If you could continue sir.

ES: One thing that I wanted to touch on about flying, I feel that I was very fortunate and our crews were very fortunate in that some pilots and some crews experienced less damage to the aircraft and to themselves as they became more seasoned. I feel that if you could read the terrain, read the enemy on the ground, know your crew and you could fly the terrain at your highest capacity of flying with experience, you were inclined to have a better success rate in going into an area and coming out of the area uninjured. Now some of the very best pilots in the world have been killed using good techniques, but I do feel that if an experienced combat pilot could get into LZs with less damage to their aircraft than others that had less experience. You might have to push the aircraft a little bit more, but you understood, what the aircraft could do. The Huey is almost like a glove on a pilot that understands the aircraft. I think many of our Dustoff pilots and crews knew how to do that. And they would feel the aircraft and they could get lower in the trees and not get one blade strike. They could fly faster and sometimes almost sideways and back out of LZs that they couldn’t get out any other way other than taking off backwards. Those though are techniques that have developed for combat flying.

RV: Did you know the exact date of when you would return home that first tour?

ES: No. I didn’t. I think we found out about two months out from the time that we were supposed to. I believe I left on the 22nd of February. I would have to look that up. We did count the days. We were obviously concerned about the type of missions we were flying. I mean, we all had short timer’s calendars. Many people did not want to push their luck. There were some people we know that had rocket attacks when they were sleeping in the compound in Saigon ready to get on the big bird the following morning after they had spent a year out in the boondocks, in the jungles, not getting injured. But the last day in a secure compound they were killed. That’s unfortunate, but their time was meant to be.
RV: Sir, how did you function in your own words, how did you function with the knowledge that any day you could die; any day you could really have significant trouble? And you really had no control over that.

ES: No. And some of us probably thought that we could not be killed. But I think that some people were willing to face danger more than others and did not consider a situation dangerous where other folks might look at the situation and say, “You’re absolutely crazy for doing that and why did you do it? And be questioned. I think there’s levels of confidence. There’s levels of endurance. There’s levels of understanding what your crews are capable of. I think that only one time I thought, no, two times that I thought of death. I really, truly thought that when the .50 caliber rounds were coming through my cockpit and in between my legs, that I was dead. I was frightened and scared to death. The other time was because I knew the probability of having a mid-air collision and walking away from it was very low. I thought I was dead at that time. Those are the two times that I truly was very, very frightened and probably will remember them to this [my last] day. But both times, again, typical. Everything is going by very, very slow. It’s because the adrenaline that’s going through your body is making your mind think and react very rapidly, which is a protective mechanism that gives you an extra edge. I think in both cases, experience at the controls helped both times, get out of those situations and get the aircraft, except for the one that crashed safely to the ground.

RV: How did you feel when you were able to leave Vietnam the first time?

ES: Say again.

RV: I’m sorry. How did you feel when you were able to leave Vietnam for the first time in 1965?

ES: I hoped that I never had to go back. That was the main thought that was running through my mind. I could not wait to see my wife who was meeting me in New Orleans. Our plans were to stay there in New Orleans. We ended up spending just a few hours there because we wanted to both let me see the children. I was saddened that there were other people that had remained in Vietnam and I was getting to go home safe. I was very naïve and very proud of what I had accomplished with the troops and the men that I flew with. I was proud of the unit that I was in, the 57th and the confidence that it had given me over a year’s period of time.
RV: Why do you say you were naïve?

ES: I guess I was naïve in that I did not realize what was going on in America. I was going home proud of what I was doing, but I didn’t know, that people, when I got home, would hate what I was doing.

RV: Now, was this the first tour?

ES: Yes.

RV: In ’65 you felt this when you came home.

ES: Right.

RV: How aware were you of American policy and what we were doing? This was right when the build up is starting to happen in the United States.

ES: Right. And we felt that there needed to be a build up and we felt that the American people were behind us. And we felt that if all the troops came in, we would end the war rapidly. It could have, in fact, ended the war rapidly if the soldiers and the men and the troops that were put there would be allowed to fight and do what they were trained to do instead of having policies dictated or held back at the time. Now I didn’t know that was going to happen. We all thought that we were committing ourselves and we were going to be protecting our forces with more forces because we didn’t have adequate forces at that time. We were just paper-thin there and could have been overcome at any time with the Viet Cong. In ’65, they were truly moving into South Vietnam. We were beginning to get kicked.

RV: What did you think of President Johnson?

ES: He did not know what he needed to do. Johnson, obviously, was a political animal. I really cannot make an educational answer to that. I have no comment. It’s not for any political reason. I just don’t think he understood the significance of what needed to be done. That might have been the fault of the military advisors that he had. I just do not think at that time, the ambassador was giving him adequate information out of Saigon. They were not committed. Then again, I think that in hindsight, I guess I could answer that in a different way. But from that standpoint at that time, I did not know how the American public didn’t want to hear and thought we were the killer and we were there because we wanted to be there. We were just there because we were directed to be there.
RV: Now when you got back, you were relocated to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, correct?
ES: Right.
RV: And you were there for about six months or so.
ES: Right. I was there for a very short period of time with the 498th, when I got there, I discovered that that unit was going to be going to Vietnam in September and so I had the opportunity of helping train that unit. We had a lot of senior ranked people there. We had 25 captains at the time that were on the Majors list to make Major. Obviously, having a company with 25 majors in it was crazy. They were eventually moved to other units so the dispersion would be a little bit better. The reason I say it’s crazy, they had been in the service for a long period of time. Almost every one of them had not flown a Huey and we had to give them check rides in the helicopter because they’d flown older aircraft. So we were sending people that were good aviators in other aircraft, but not necessarily great aviators in the Huey. That could have been done better. When you get up into age, a little bit older, you just have a different perspective on things and you probably don’t want to take as many chances as some fat, dumb lieutenant is eager to whatever he’s supposed to do. But he does it because he has not experienced life as much as a senior person. So its kind of, its unfortunate that that type of thing happened on the assignments, because I think that hurt us in the long run when all those pilots were getting there with the same amount of years in service that had done other things and were more concerned about their life than some fat, dumb lieutenant.
RV: How much were you talking about your experiences in Vietnam with your wife and with your family?
ES: I told them it was very dangerous. At that time, obviously, I had come home fairly decorated but I didn’t known all the decorations I was going to get, so they knew that I didn’t get these things handed out to me. So I had to talk about those things. They did not want me to go back, but obviously the 498th wanted me to go over with them. I said no to that and then was relocated to Fort Polk, Louisiana. There was two of us that had come back; Bob Mock who had been evacuated because of some medical condition midway through his tour, and myself. And what we did, we did set up an extensive training program for the medics and crew chiefs in water environments. We tried to find
areas where medics and crew chiefs would actually have to get into the water, load
patients, try and simulate the conditions that we had in Vietnam. I tried to set up training
programs so that we could do night flying into LZs without lights, using minimum types
of equipment. That was an interesting experience. Wild Bill Harris, General Harris, who
was the compound commander or post commander at that time, I had talked to him at
length about some of our flying experiences and I told him, “You know, we need to set
up ranges where our crews could at least fire from an aircraft and not be in a static
condition on the ground firing, because it was totally different.” So he really and truly
tried to help 498th. We had all the ranges available to us so that we could fly down the
range, shoot from the aircraft and the crew chiefs medics would be able to have that
experience and not experience it once they had to get to Vietnam. So there were some
interesting training programs that were developed with me coming back to the unit and
Bob Mock and myself were able to head that up. Now, there were a lot of people, though,
that were senior that said, “Y’all are just hot rodding. Y’all are not flying well. Y’all are
being reckless.” Well, we never tried to be reckless. What we were trying to demonstrate
was that the aircraft could tolerate conditions that they were not used to flying in and that
you could never make a normal approach into a hot LZ, which they were used to making.
So if we came barreling into an LZ, did a side flare by kicking in right pedal, washing out
the air under the blades and settling to the ground, they had never experienced that. In
fact, they probably thought we were trying to kill them. But those kinds of techniques
that they had to learn and did learn, especially after they got there, they realized that there
were some of us that had come back that were really and truly telling the truth. But it’s
easy to tell a pilot that has 200 hours under his belt to do it because he thinks it can be
done if somebody’s telling him it can be done. You tell somebody with 2,000 hours under
the belt that it could be done and they say, “Isn’t the tail rotor going to fall off?” So
there’s a difference of how your perspective is on things. It’s just unfortunate that many
of the senior pilots went over later into the Vietnam War than sooner so that they could
express that at all levels of command that they had later on.

RV: What did you do at Fort Polk that was different from at Fort Sam Houston?

ES: Well, I got to fly the UH-19 “Hog”, the UH-19 reciprocating engine that flew
at about 60 miles and hour versus the flight time [100mph] that we did have [I had been
flying]. It helped me get back into perspective some of the things of hard flying was with
the reciprocating engine. But we basically backhauled or carried [transported] patients
from hospital to hospital. People that were in automobile accidents, in someplace within
that region’s responsibility, we’d go and pick them up from a civilian hospital and get
them back to the nearest military installation. So it was really a kind of a hospital
transport [unit] and we were a TO&E unit, a tactical operational unit that was ready for
deployment. We would have not deployed with the H-19s. We would have deployed with
new aircraft, but we had to fly the H-19s because all the good stuff was going to
Vietnam. Now, one of the things that I had the opportunity of doing while I was there, for
several months, I was TDY to Bell Helicopter plant and I was able to pick up, every three
days, a new aircraft out of Fort Worth, Texas and fly it to Stockton, California, which
was about 10 hours and 40 minutes on one of our flight routes. They gave us three days,
pick up an aircraft, test fly it, and fly it out to the depot in Stockton, California. And we
did that every three days. We’d drop the aircraft in Stockton, go to San Francisco, fly
back into Fort Worth, pick up a new one, and fly out. We did that, low level, single pilot,
sometimes in flights of three, sometimes in flights of five. Sometimes single ship. So it
was one of the most exciting ways to see America. I enjoyed it. I’ve flown low level
across the Death Valley. I’ve flown over San Burnadina pass. I’ve spent the night in
Yosemite National Park. I’ve fished and slept in the aircraft overnight and RON,
basically closed my flight plan out. Took off the next day. But in the ‘60s, you could do
that. That was fun. Totally different than our flying in Vietnam. After a short period of
time in Fort Polk, then they wanted me to go back to Vietnam. I think I’d been back over
a year and a half, maybe two years. My concern at that point in time was, “Hey, where
are all these guys that haven’t gone to Vietnam and why are the pilots that have already
been going back again?” There was some concern there. I did volunteer to go to short
tour. I went to Korea instead, from ’67 to ’68, came back, went the career course and then
I went to the Medical Supply [Material Management] course and I was beginning to set a
pattern of wanting to be able to eventually get off flight status and become a health care
administrator.

RV: How did you just decide to go career?

ES: When did I decide to go career [Army]?
RV: Yes, sir and why did you decide to do so?

ES: I’m not sure about your question. I decided to go regular Army when I was in Vietnam my first tour.

RV: Okay. That’s what I mean. Just decide to stay in the Army and do that.

ES: I liked what I was doing. I liked saving lives, I liked being in the Army and I was proud of it. Of course, that’s before I came back to the States.

RV: Did your view change when you came back to the States?

ES: No. Absolutely not. I was a cocky little lieutenant that felt like I was on top of the world. I was proud of what I’d done and I talked about it and I probably bragged about it. But I did go to Korea. Came back, went to the career course, I took the Medical supply [Material Management] course, then I went to a place called Hunter Stewart in Savannah, Georgia. I was there from around March, I think, of ’68, I think.

RV: March of ’69.

ES: March of ’69. Thank you. I stayed there until ’70. Its important, I met a gentleman by the name of Bill Bentley. He was a hospital administrator at the time. Bill and I had met originally in the 498th. He had already been to Vietnam. He was a terrific hospital administrator. I went to Vietnam in ’70 and several months after that, probably six or seven months after that, he became my battalion commander and was a great battalion commander. I had been a unit commander, of two unit commanders when I first got there on July 1st, I think, of ’70. At that time, Francis A. Copeland had been the battalion commander. I became second in charge of the battalion that had 55 aircraft. Francis A. Copeland was a piece of workmanship. But Bill Bentley came and shortly thereafter, we had a crisis up in the northern part of South Vietnam where there were some aviation unit commanders that were being relieved for not doing the appropriate thing in dustoff units. I, because of my background experience, was sent to Phu Bai and I had three detachments up there, which would have made five units that I was the commander of which meant that I had been commander of 5 units since I arrived in July 1970. That’s when Lam Son 719 began.

RV: Right. If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to ask you, before you went back to Vietnam- now you’re in the States from the spring of ’65 all the way until the summer of
1970. You got to see the process unfold here Stateside, the reaction to Vietnam. Can you
talk a little bit about what you saw and how that made you feel?

ES: Politically, I felt that the government wanted to get out of Vietnam and did
not want to support the people that were there. They could not deal with the American
public and the opinions that were being generated in the United States. I think that what I
did not like were people that were leaving the United States, trying to get away from the
draft and trying to just get away from responsibilities. I don’t think we did a good job of
policing that. None of us wanted to fight, but we also wanted freedom of America. And
the American public at the time, the consensus was that they did not want any part of it.
But if policy is to support something, I’m going to be a strict soldier when I say this, if
the decision is made to do something, then we should go ahead and do it. If a decision is
to pull out, we should do that wisely. But if people are in fact violating the law, they
should be held accountable to that. I do not feel that hardly anyone was held accountable.
I also feel that our POWs and many people on the ground lost their lives unnecessarily
because of indecision that was made by our government. I was also disenchanted, at some
point in time with our Medical Service Corps, because there was favoritism being
displayed by people within our ranks. They, too, were not being appropriately disciplined
by not taking responsibilities in their jobs. I’m saying they were avoiding assignments
and they were not put out of the Army and they should have been. There are people that
retired about the same time I did that never had the opportunity of serving their country in
a wartime situation in the zone. Now, if you’re MOS or your [military] occupation
specialty code disallows you to have to do that, and that’s okay. If you’re supposed to be
in CONUS doing your job and that’s the only assignment there is, that’s okay. They were
smart in getting that type of assignment. But when you put some other people and you're
in a position whereby you can put other people in front of you in going in a rotation cycle
to a hazardous area, shame on you. I can't make any other comments that are probably
intelligent.

RV: How did your family feel about you going back to Vietnam in 1970?

ES: Their first question was, “Ernie, why are you going back? Are you
volunteering?” Absolutely not. I’m not volunteering. They couldn’t understand it and to
this day they don’t understand. Thank God I wasn’t killed. But unfortunately, I know people that went to Vietnam that were killed and it wasn’t their time to go.

RV: It wasn’t their time to be killed or it wasn’t their time to go to Vietnam?

ES: It was not their time to go to Vietnam. They had to go because their assignment was there and they didn’t have the clout to avoid the assignment, nor did they want to avoid the assignment. If I’d been assigned a third and forth time, I would have gone. Many, 90% of everybody that had assignments, they went. I’m not saying that this was a big group of people. Probably, if I really thought about it, maybe it was only 2% of the total officers. I must admit it was officer ranks that did the manipulation. I’m not going to get into the civilian population and what they did or did not do. Thank God America gives you the opportunity of expressing your concerns and freedom of speech will reign. I mean, that’s what we were there for. I would never fault someone for saying their opinion. I think, though, if they start avoiding things, then I would fault them.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnam veterans who were part of the antiwar movement?

ES: What did I think of the Vietnam veterans in the antiwar movements?

RV: Yes, sir.

ES: They were out of service. They had made it home. They were trying to speak their peace. I do not begrudge a veteran speaking what he feels because he lived the experience and came home. Many of the veterans that were against war had been maimed, wounded, did not have a normal life. And that’s one bad thing about saving about 95% of all the people you pick up in a war zone and evacuate them and they’re saved and they’re quadriplegic and they’re amputees, double amputees, et cetera and are mentally incapacitated to some degree because of the war. I think they earned the right to speak about not being in war and being against the war. Many of them were speaking because they felt that they had not gotten adequate support while they were there and therefore, they were speaking out loudly about that.

RV: What did you think of President Nixon’s plan of Vietnamization, of turning the war over to the Vietnamese?

ES: It would have been fine if we had won the war, but we weren’t even close. We were not able to go into Laos officially. We were not officially able to go into
Cambodia. We had not softened the enemy so that there could be a Vietnamization program.

RV: Did you think the South Vietnamese Army or South Vietnamese military was capable of defending itself?

ES: Yes. They were but there were a lot of Vietnamese rebels and there a lot of Viet Cong sympathizers and I truly feel that they were organized in such a way that they would overcome any Vietnamese, South Vietnamese Army or Air Force that they had. You also have to understand, which you do, how long they had been at war. After a while, the old ladies and the old men that were in the rice fields, they accepted it as a way of life. They did not think that there could be change. And if you don’t have hope, you will not have a good outcome. You have to have faith in what you're doing or hope in your nation. I don’t think the government of Vietnam could nurture that feeling.

RV: When you went back in 1970, how had Vietnam changed for you?

ES: We were then in heavy contact with Viet Cong and regular North Vietnamese soldiers. The weaponry was very sophisticated. The enemy was very sophisticated and there was very few rebel soldiers at that time especially in I Corps and throughout Vietnam. We’d already had the offensives. We were getting far more Americans wounded. My first tour I probably only evacuated, maybe at most, 100 Americans [in my first tour]. My unit up in Can Tho evacuated in four months, 10,000 Americans. That was just two dustoff detachments. That was with the Americal Division. There was a lot of activity up there. I mean, a lot of history was made in the Americal [Division] area. But there were many, many, many Americans killed and wounded. Of course when we started making a major push to try and stop the supply lines in Laos in early ’70, that’s when we really saw destruction. I mean, we had our very best crews of Americans. We couldn’t get on the ground officially, but we had the strongest [Army] military [Aviation] flight hour, Air Force, Marines, Navy, and Army trying to support that operation and we were just getting shot out of the sky. I mean, we had Sams being fired at us. We’d get in an LZ; we had direct armor tanks firing at us with direct [fire]. We had 105s firing at us and other artillery, direct, with huge mortar barrages in LZs. We had to fly, truly on the deck and we just had nothing but small arms bullets coming up at us constantly with Sams if
we got any higher that would be fired at us and home in on us. And we had to get in the
trees to try and get away from Sam missiles.

RV: Are you talking about this is Lam Son 719, or is this in general, when you
went back, you were making a lot of flights into Laos and Cambodia.

ES: I’m mixing 719 but the biggest fire demonstrations were obviously in Lam
Son 719. But the missions in the other parts of Vietnam, South Vietnam, were more
intense. We had lots of hours flown. I was the commander at that time in Chu Lai and I
was flying quite a bit. I think I ended up with over 300 hours flying. I was taking a lot of
nighttime because I again continued trying to show people that it was safer flying at night
than during the daytime. So I tried to take any night flight that would fly, I mean, that we
had a mission on at night.

RV: Was it normal for commanders to take to the air and fly?

ES: It normally was, but some commanders flew more than others.

RV: Why did you choose to fly more?

ES: I felt that our men needed that type of mentorship. The reason the
commanders were relieved during the Lam Son operation was that they would not
demonstrate to their pilots that you could in fact fly in a hostile environment and get out
without being blown away. But I flew Lam Son 719 myself. I never took a round in my
aircraft or my crew. Now, unfortunately, we flew 1,231 missions. We had hoist missions
in there. We had 53. We had close to 2,500, 2,382 Sorties into Laos. We evacuated 4,139
patients out. 1,007 were U.S. We, in a short period of time, did a lot. Now, unfortunately,
I lost some pilots and crew. We had 6 KIA, nine wounded, but almost all of our aircraft;
we had 69 hits in our aircraft. But we still had high availability because as soon as one
got shot down, they’d give us a new one. But that was the most intense, again Lam Son
719, the most intense flying under hazardous conditions, that I have ever seen.

RV: Do you remember any specific incidents that happened during that
operation?

ES: No. I was scared all the time. I wasn’t scared. I think if you’re scared, you get
killed. I knew what I was doing. I knew that my crews were competent. I never let my
guard down and our crews never let their guards down. People didn’t mind flying with
me as a crew. My track record was okay. I mean, I stepped out of the aircraft every time I
went out. There were many crews that were just absolutely superb. We had, when we’d
go into the LZs, we had three seconds. We’d count to three and we’d pull pitch. We had
lots of people on board and they surely, even when they were injured, did not need
assistance when we were on the ground because they were getting on board the aircraft.
Because they knew that if they got on they might live. If they stayed there they would
die.

RV: You evacuated a significant number of Americans on the ground in Laos.
Were these Special Forces or regular Army?

ES: Most of them were aircraft crews. There was nothing in those days, published
about certain units that were well inside Laos and Cambodia. More is being written today
and has been written in the last ten years. We typically did not know about those long
range patrols even though we did sometimes go a long way out into an area that we
typically never flew and we typically did it on a hoist mission when they chopped out a
hole for us to get a jungle penetrator in to get people out. But they normally never told us
where they were at. But the Americans that we evacuated were typically crews that had
been wounded or their aircraft was shot down and we were picking them up.

RV: Did you think the United States was doing the right thing by going into Laos
and trying to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail there with this operation Lam Son 719?

ES: They should have done it a lot sooner. Again, they tried to be very secretive
about it. There’s stuff that I have in there on the articles that I’ve put together, that I don’t
think we were logistically ready to go in. But I think the pilots and the people that were
on the ground in Vietnam tried their level best to do what they could with what they had.

RV: How did you find the morale in your unit and the people under your
command?

ES: In every unit that I was in, the morale was very high. And it’s still high today.
I mean, our Dustoff Association meetings that we have, I think we have a little over 1500
people that meet every year at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. It was high then
and they still talk about how good they liked, how much they liked being in those units.
I’m going to have to take a break.

RV: Okay, we’ll end it for today then sir.
This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with
Colonel Ernie Sylvester. I am in Lubbock, Texas, again, in the Special Collections
Library interview room. It is now November 19th at 8:35 am Central Standard Time. 9:35
am Eastern Time. Colonel Sylvester, we had left off, we had begun talking about Lam
Son 719, but before we jump to 1970, ’71, let’s talk about the spring of 1965. You had
helped train the 82nd Medical Detachment there at Soc Trang and you were getting ready
to rotate back to the United States, back at Fort Sam Houston. So, what was happening
there for you in March 1965 in Vietnam?

ES: Good morning.

RV: Good morning.

ES: One of the things that I really remember, obviously, once the new pilots had
come on board, we had 10 active pilots. We still were using commission officers at that
point in time in the Vietnam effort. That’s a key point because, again, we had very few
Medical Service Corps pilots on that could take on the mission of flying in Vietnam and
we were beginning to see ourselves coming and going at that point in time. There had been
some discussion of the warrant officers setting with at least a commission officer in
flying medical evacuation choppers. Later, obviously, we were able to get quite a number
of warrant officers to fly and there was not a requirement to have a commission officer
flying with the warrant officers. And the warrant officer had done a wonderful job. That’s a little side bar in regards to the ending of my first tour. But after January and February, I had entered into the February month; I had really started not to fly as much as I had been for several reasons. People and myself, I wanted to make sure that I did make it home. But my last few days with the unit was giving instructor pilot training to the new officers that had been there since October at that point in time, but there were still other officers that were coming in to take some of our places with the people on rotation, such as Si Simmons that had departed, Bruce Zink who had been a pilot during that period of time and myself. So there were at least three replacements that had to occur prior to our departure. So I had that opportunity training those new pilots and ensuring that they could fly safely, eventually giving then aircraft commander flying time and initiating a write off if they could in fact meet those qualifications.

RV: Sir, when you trained these pilots, would you take them actually into LZs or would you train them there near the base?

ES: We did very little training at the base at Soc Trang. We might do a few auto rotations, simulated auto rotations, but the training that I was trying to instill in any of the older pilots that had been there as far as longevity goes, was to ensure that they understood the true meaning of tactical flying, being able to use the terrain to meet the needs of cover and be able to extract patients out of a LZ without getting your aircraft or your crew shot up. Again, one of my goals were to not to have anyone wounded on board my aircraft even though I might have been at a junior pilot at that time, I had probably the most experience flying combat in those days. So that was my goal. There were some pilots that would go into an LZ and come out looking like Swiss cheese. Other pilots might be able to go into that same LZ, could come out of a hot LZ without receiving any rounds. Now, I don’t know if that was luck or just coincidence. I really would not want to challenge anyone why, but it seemed to me that if a pilot’s technique was developed, that they had, number one, they spend less time on the ground, therefore his crew was thoroughly familiar with what to do on the ground with very little hesitation. Also, the crew knew how to give you descriptions of where the enemy was at and critical points of getting into a tight LZ, therefore there’s not any type of damage on the aircraft. So I do feel that experience could in fact help in a situation and save your life. For a long period
of time, in fact in my second tour, I was considered a cherry because I never really took any hits.

RV: Sir, if I could ask, to you, what made a good dustoff pilot, helicopter pilot? Or in other words, when you say experience really helped a lot which is very logical, would it vary from pilot to pilot if you knew how much experience this particular pilot would need, or was there a set number of missions he would go on, say after ten, you would consider this person experienced? Or did it really vary person to person?

ES: I think it varies person to person. I think, number one, if a pilot had common sense and was able to take in all the information that he may receive from the ground unit and interpret that in such a way that his flying would be tailored to that particular LZ. To go into an LZ exactly the same way as we had been taught in school as far as landing, in a controlled landing and in a combat zone was absolutely and totally different. You may have to be on a straight and level, for example, going into an LZ and then immediately take some very erratic movements to maneuver yourself into an area whereby you would not come in danger of hostile fire. I think knowing your aircraft…being able to…it’s like driving a sport’s car, a racer knows exactly where his body of his race car is and can get very, very close to the environment around him without putting him [his car] into a spin. Likewise, you know exactly when you’re sitting a helicopter [down] and you're experienced, you know exactly where the skids are at. You know exactly where the rotor blades are hitting a path of circle and therefore you can get your aircraft down into the surrounding vegetation and have very good covering, concealment. And you also have to fly well out in front of your aircraft. You can't fly just beyond your windshield. You have to know what you’re going to have to do well enough to, number one give your crew an alert, because when you're going into an LZ, you're talking to the crew. You’re telling them what you’re doing and the reason you do that is so that they’re not fearful of what is going to take place. They understand what is going to take place. I think the unknown is what is the scariest thing about combat.

RV: Would you tell them like, when we go into this LZ, I’m going to do such and such maneuvers or when you figured out when you were approaching an LZ, which maneuvers would work for you, would you tell them what you’re going to be doing so they knew the pitch of the bird?
ES: They are normally, a good crew, the pilots are talking to the crew and talking to the stick mate. And the pilot and the AC are on the controls together so that if one of the pilots are wounded or maybe even both of them are wounded but one is less severe than the other, that the other pilot can immediately take over the aircraft and either continue the flight or abort the flight to try and save the crew. But by telling the crew what is occurring, they can give you better information about the LZ and the surrounding terrain. They can also say, “We’re picking fire up at 3:00 and that might have been the way that we were in fact going to go after so many hundred feet of flying over the terrain.” So I think what really made Dustoff crews as effective as they were, were the people that were sitting without any controls, behind them and behind the pilots and that was the medic and crew chief. They were always exposed. They said we sat in a fish bowl by having all the glass up front, but they were sitting in a fishbowl, too. They were hanging out the doors. They were very, very much aware of the capability of the aircraft. They were very aware of the pilots that were flying. I don’t think anyone ever refused a mission because they didn’t want to fly with someone. I think we had enough rapport with each other that we trusted each other’s talents or capabilities.

RV: Now, how did you get transferred back to Fort Sam Houston in Texas?

ES: We were getting, in those days, orders about 60 to 90 days from departure from Vietnam. So we knew where we were going. I was excited, one, that because Fort Sam Houston, we always kind of called it the country club of the Army because that’s where all the physicians and nurses and other MSCs were in the basic training, et cetera. So it was not like a Fort Benning or Fort Knox or Fort Hood. People really and truly kind of enjoyed themselves while learning their skills. But I was excited. I know that Beth was very excited about going because she had not been there when I was in the basic course and I had told her so much about the parks and the zoos and the little train rides and the sunken gardens and the beautiful flowers and all the nice things that were there in San Antonio, Texas. So we were real excited about going there. But before I got there and on my way home, Beth and I had decided that we’d meet in New Orleans. Before I talk about New Orleans, Paul Bloomquist, who was the Executive Officer of the 57th Medical detachment that I had been with initially along with Tom Christie who was then the Executive Officer of the 57th and a guy by the name of Spec 4 Bill Hughes, took me to
the plane to get on it to go home. Paul Bloomquist was just a very dynamic, wonderful person that had spent, he was working on his second tour, continuous tour in Vietnam and had an awful lot to offer. His nickname was Bear and then of course, Tom Christie was a nice gentleman also. But it was good to have [them there on my departure]. I was finally a first lieutenant at that time, but to have a major and a captain, senior captain about ready to make major, take the time to escort their youngest officer that they had had with the detachment before I had transferred to 82nd to the airport. Because we couldn’t spare that kind of people just doing those kinds of things. To me it was an honor or a privilege to have soldiers like that take the time. I know that that same type of effort or esprit is not necessarily developed in peacetime units. I think the esprit that’s developed in a wartime situation far outlasts anything that would occur in a peacetime situation.

RV: I’ve heard that very much from other veterans.

ES: In fact, pilots that I knew, Si Simmons, Bruce Zink, Pat Brady, Paul Bloomquist, Tom Christie- Paul unfortunately was killed at Frankfort when he was walking up to the officer’s club in a terrorist bombing several years after that. But he was a great man. He’s being inducted into the Hall of Fame this year also. Tom Christie, Si Simmons, Bruce Zink, Bob Mott, Jerry Shaw- all of us that were there some 40 years ago still write on a daily basis to each other by email now days. Other people like Jay McGowan, Jeff Grider, Sergeant Allan and Specialist Hughes, still communicate. And we communicate as equals today. We didn’t break the officer/enlisted ranks in those days. We understood what a crew was there for and they did an excellent job, but we always kept that separation, even though we would stick our lives out on a stick if it was necessary to save their lives. But today they're equals and we talk about things that have occurred in those days. But Beth and I had decided that we’d meet in New Orleans. Of course, since I’d been gone, I had had a baby daughter and my son had turned a year old. So my daughter had been born on November [August] 13th, so she was almost six months, I guess, when I went home, or at least to New Orleans. We had planned on, Beth and I, to number one, meet at the hotel, spend four days there away from her family because she had spent the time with her mom and dad when I was in Vietnam at their home. After we had met at the hotel and talked and shared memories together, after
probably about four or five hours, we decided that we did not want to stay in a hotel. We really wanted to get home to see the kids. That’s what we did. We jumped into our car and we drove back to Gulfport, Mississippi so I could share the children.

RV: How long did you have off until you had to report to Fort Sam Houston?

ES: We had, I took the full 30 days and that was good. Now, you never had that opportunity other than in the military, being able to take that many days off, but it’s nice to recoup. Now, one of the things that very few people knew of folks that were in Vietnam, and coming home to Gulfport, Mississippi, where I basically grew up, it was in a way, quite a deal even though there was great deal of anxiety apparently being generated. Again, I didn’t know that at that time. But I had an opportunity of going on T.V. I thought that was quite an experience for a local guy coming home and talking about my experiences in Vietnam. At that point in time I had received some awards that our crew had performed in certain rescue missions. But I talked about, I think the qualities of the Vietnamese, the good qualities of the country. I talked about the few [soldiers] we had, about 5,000 soldiers in air aviation people there in Vietnam at the time when I was there. Very small contingent. Therefore, people were interested in what was occurring and they wanted to see if I was telling a story that was different from the story that was beginning to unfold across the United States about why we shouldn’t be in Vietnam. So in a way, that little bit of touch of the public in Mississippi and in Louisiana was somewhat good from my perspective. They did not personally mistreat me as a professional soldier. Now, that did change a little bit in other parts of the country later on, especially when I went back for my second tour. Now, after spending a lot of time with my family, Joe, my son, he’s a junior and Sandy, our oldest daughter, and Beth’s family and my family, my mother, my father, my sister, all in Gulfport, Mississippi at that time and also Beth’s grandmother. Now, Beth’s father and mom, he had been in the service, the Second World War and also the Korean War. He, I think, understood, obviously, me returning from Vietnam and I think that softened the blow. We really didn’t necessarily talk about Vietnam. We just talked about being together as a family and we shared good experiences. I ate plenty of food. I ate almost anything that I liked in the past because everybody was trying to welcome me home. But my family’s standpoint, there were one or two articles that appeared in the newspaper because of, I guess, it’s such a short period
of time of me being away from Gulfport, Mississippi and Hattiesburg, Mississippi. So both of those newspapers ran articles about my return. For some reason, one of the things that had been misreported at the time that I had actually been killed at Vietnam and there were some misunderstandings in regards to that. So obviously people were shocked to see me in some cases because they thought I had been killed.

RV: How did that happen? How did they report that you had been killed?

ES: The only thing that I could figure out at the time was that there had been one report of my mid-air collision, December 31, 1964, that was reported. Because one or two people that I had talked to had seen [an article]. Now, I never saw the article. I tried to find the article, but I never saw the article. But I think that was the misreport that they had seen that I had been in a mid-air collision with a fixed wing and they had just maybe assumed that even though it wasn’t reported that I walked away from it, that I was dead. It may have been an assumption versus a statement of fact. Now, as we spent time, we spent time fishing, we spent time walking on the beach, we spent time playing with the two children, both, obviously at one and a half years old and six months old. Then we started preparing what few things that Beth had at Gulfport with her mom and dad and her grandmother and her brother Michael. We prepared to go to San Antonio, Texas. We were able to…we traveled at night going to San Antonio. San Antonio in those days was well over twelve hours. There was not Interstate 10, but old Highway 90 that used to go across country. And we traveled at night because that way the children could sleep and we didn’t have safety belts in those days. We had a baby crib mattress in the back end of my red Pontiac Catalina Convertible [our new Plymouth Valiant station wagon] and they slept on that and then we had one cat, Piewacket, a Siamese, and we drove across country. And I did it over the nighttime and arrived in San Antonio, Texas the following morning and reported to Fort Sam Houston. The 498th was just beginning to receive a lot of people. In fact, in that unit as I may have mentioned before, there were 25, no, excuse me; there were 50 officers that flew as pilots. There were 25 aircraft. A company of 498th could in fact break in to four platoons, a headquarters and headquarters platoon and three other platoons each with six aircraft. There was one additional aircraft, the 25th aircraft which was basically a command and control aircraft for the commander. At least that was my perception of how it would be broken out.
RV: Now, what were your duties there at Fort Sam Houston?

ES: Since I was a first lieutenant and I was just getting back, I didn’t really have any major duties. I think one of the duties, unfortunately that many people with low rank get would be, you’d have to have an officer of the day, which is a temporary type assignment. You’d have to pull some duties as the group inventory control officer doing property inventory, that kind of thing. But obviously there were two pilots that had just returned from Vietnam; Bob Mock, Lieutenant Bob Mock. He had been in my flight class, had gone over to Vietnam with me, had been evacuated out of Vietnam after about four months of being in Vietnam and been evacuated to Japan and later to the United States. And he hit the Untied States about the same time I was arriving back after a completed tour. But at that time, Lieutenant Colonel Joe Mondrano knew or had been given an alert that his unit would be going over in August, September, October time frame, from San Antonio. That was the sole purpose of it being formed at Fort Sam Houston and that they were being equipped with brand new UH-1Ds, the latest model of Huey to come out from Bell helicopter plant. One of the things that I had responsibility of doing, since very few people were trained in a turbine engine Huey, or in the Huey model at all, may it be the A, B, or now D, they had to be trained and have an orientation flight, have a check ride made and all of that had to be done. So, one of my tasks was, go to Fort Worth at Bell helicopter plant and start picking up aircraft. So, Bob Mock and I were the only two pilots at that time that were rated in the Huey. So we did that. We’d make one ferry ride, say in a day, get the aircraft, they’d be checked out at the unit, and then we started training pilots to be able to fly the Huey. And we gave them transitional training, IP training, and signed off on them [their flying ability]. Now, they didn’t get the 25 hours that we had gotten in flight school in a Huey as a part of our training. Most of them probably got four hours of training. The Huey was very forgiving. If you used the manual to start your engine and do your pre-flight, et cetera, any good pilot could do that. These were seasoned pilots that had been flying reciprocating engines for a long period of time, so they knew an aircraft. They knew helicopters. They knew the requirements that we had to go through, the procedures on any helicopter, may it be a turbine engine, reciprocating engine, tandem rotor [?] or whatever [two main rotor head, without an anti-tork rotor].

So, as we got the pilots trained, then more of us would ferry the aircraft from Fort Worth
down to Fort Sam Houston. And that wasn’t a long flight. It was probably, at the most, 
three hours. I can't remember the time it took us, but it’s not a long flight from Fort 
Worth, Texas to San Anton., TX in a Huey. We were able to get full compliment at 25 
aircraft in place. Many of the people that were aircraft mechanics had not even had 
formal training as in a Huey. They were being trained as the aircraft arrived. We did have 
new people that had just come out of aircraft mechanic school that had been trained at 
Fort Rucker, Alabama and those were the crew chiefs that were being put on board these 
aircraft. So we had, the basic load [number] of crew chiefs, there is one crew chief per 
aircraft. And then the basic load [number] of medics is one medic per aircraft. So we had 
that many basic mechanics and medics. Then we had senior sergeants that were in charge, 
technicians that were in charge of each of those groups. We did a lot of link training. We 
did a lot of flying, putting aircraft time, training time on the aircraft. I knew that the 
people needed to learn tactical training. Lieutenant Colonel Joe Mandrano was keenly 
aware that that experience had to be passed on to the pilots and Bob Mock and I had 
primarily that responsibility to give them tactical training.

RV: How receptive were these younger pilots to you and Bob who had been in 
Vietnam?

ES: It all depended in the personality. Let me start there. There are some pilots 
that are just really cocky. Most pilots are cocky. But there are some that feel that they 
already know as much as they need to know and they don’t need some greenhorn to train 
or try and show them techniques that they’d prefer not doing because they might at times 
think its hot rodding. However, they really didn’t have a choice. They never told me that 
to my face or Bob Mock. They probably talked amongst themselves about the techniques 
that we were trying to demonstrate to them. But I know that the pilots that had, maybe 
not a thousand hours under their belt, were much more approachable, they wanted to 
learn the aircraft. They were having, in some cases, enough trouble just understanding the 
turbine engine and how much power it had and how many patients could be picked up 
and the capabilities. I talk about capabilities. Sometimes, if you really don’t understand a 
machine, you will not use the capability to its built capacity. Therefore, you underutilize 
an aircraft. If you only put four patients on board an aircraft, because that’s the way
you’re used to flying an aircraft, then there’s problems there. There’s problems in some
guys moving forward with changes in technology.

RV: Did you ever have a problem adapting to the changing technology yourself?
ES: No. I personally don’t think so. I was very interested in flying. Most of the
people that are pilots…and I guess I have to kind of clarify what I’ve said. All the pilots
that I knew in that particular company, almost without exception, loved to fly. They
wanted to fly and they were eager to fly and they didn’t care what aircraft they flew.
Now, there are some pilots though, that would prefer not flying at night, for example and
would express that because they had not had the requirement to fly at night [other than
the minimum night annual requirement]. They’d prefer postponing a flight until daylight
if they could get that type of approval for a delay. Now, it’s not a criticism on their part
as far as being an aviator, a good aviator. It might be a criticism on the system never
requiring them to do that type of flying. The Huey was a fully instrumented aircraft. You
could fly under some pretty bad weather conditions if you had instrument rated pilots on
board the aircraft. Now, I must say though, there were very few pilots, other than the
people that had gone to fixed wing school and had fixed wing training, that had
instrument flying experience other than in a link trainer because the OH-23 and the H-13
surely were not instrument type aircraft. Now, the UH-34 and the UH-19 were instrument
rated aircraft, but flying in weather conditions was probably not preferred in those
aircraft. Now, some of the things that we trained in…

RV: Is this the same kind of thing that you would do at Fort Polk as well?
ES: Yes. But at Fort Sam, we trained at night. We trained going into very small,
tight landing zones at night. In those days we didn’t have night vision goggles, so we
tried to teach the pilots how to read the signs, read the shadows, read the light, know
when you were going below the horizon. If it was dark out in front of you, all of the
sudden gone below the tree horizon and you need to climb. Understanding how to read
your radio for homing signals, refreshing on those types of techniques and what you had
in your aircraft that you’d be using in Vietnam. Learning how to shoot a flare out the side
door and do a circle in mountainous terrain and not be blinded by the flare, but use the
flare to fly a little bit further into an area that was unknown to you. Those techniques
were learned. Learning how to load litters on board aircraft in water surroundings.
Knowing how to even tie rope to your skids to try and pick up aircraft that had been crashed and you’re trying to get patients out of the aircraft, techniques that were common sense kind of things that you would learn by experience. We started experimenting with the hoist in those days. We did not have a hoist when I first was in Vietnam in the aircraft. Hoist missions are very, very dangerous. Hoist missions at night are beyond very, very dangerous. Number one, you’re trying to put a jungle penetrator into an area with trees that you could get tangled up in and you can in fact get some form of vertigo and be pulled into the trees if you started moving left to right, backwards with the aircraft. Very, very difficult to do at night. During the daytime, you’re a sitting duck while you’re just above the trees for small arms rounds, rockets. We’ve had several ships shot down because of rockets going through the aircraft and unfortunately killing our crews later on in Vietnam. But we learned those type of techniques. We also had a general that was the post commander at that time. He was a one star that I had the opportunity of meeting when I first got back because he had given me some, either the second or third DFC that I’d earned and I think a purple heart and some other ribbons. His name was “Wild Bill Harris” and number one, he wanted me to be his pilot for his Huey as a [general] aid and pilot for the commanding general. I was fortunate enough not to do that, but he did say, “Anything that you want or your company wants for training, just let me know and I’ll make sure that we get you ready to go to Vietnam.” And he told that to my commander and to myself. But we used the range to fly crews and at this point in time, we had enough crews to fill an aircraft and we trained on the range, firing, using four or five ranges side by side to be able to target practice, letting our crews understand how the trajectory of the rounds go if you’re moving forward yourself and they basically make an arch that is 90 degrees, eventually when they come out of your weapon. The arch into a target. So you have to learn how to fire with tracers from a moving aircraft to understand how to hit a target. Now, why target practice, we were under the Geneva Convention, why should we even have weapons? I’ll say that the weapons that we had primarily were to protect the patients. But we did have our crews, if we were receiving fire, to shoot suppressive fire, if nothing else, make noise in the back of the aircraft, making the enemy feel like we were at least firing back. But, now, there were other units
like the 101st that did put M-60s on their aircraft later. But I personally was not for that. I
felt that our weapons should only be there for the protection of patients.

RV: Did you get to choose how you would outfit the weapons on you helicopter?

ES: If you were a divisional unit, you had that choice. And they typically armed
the aircraft. But in our smaller detachments, the six aircraft and our detachment
commanders, we were attached to divisions or whatever and we chose not to put larger
weaponry on our aircraft. It was just across the board.

RV: Tell me about what you did at Fort Polk. You go there in August of ’65 and
you’re there for almost two and a half years and you transfer the 50th Medical
Detachment.

ES: Let me tell you a little sidebar to that though. When I got my orders to go to
Fort Polk, Beth and I were getting ready and the day before, just like my very first tour to
Vietnam, I got a request for orders to go to Okinawa for a short period of time. Of course,
the problem was, and it was an urgent requirement for me to go to Okinawa, we were
moving that day. The movers were there and my wife was going to be stranded either
going to Fort Polk by herself or whatever, but we decided she should go home because I
didn’t know how many days I would be in Okinawa and that my shipment would just go
ahead to Fort Polk without us. I went to Okinawa for a general court martial of a doctor,
Doctor Wolf, that had refused certain things in Vietnam in Soc Trang. He was one of the
doctors with the 1st Surgical Unit or Surgical Hospital that went into Vietnam. Doctor
Wolf had refused numerous things and was getting a court martial that I was supposed to
be a defense witness for. The problem is, unfortunately, they realized that I was actually a
hostile witness and I could not substantiate what they wanted me to substantiate in
regards to his actions. They were trying to indicate that he was really a brave doctor and
was just refusing to do certain things and it was not because of his lack of bravery. What
he was trying to prove, he and I, from time to time would go into Soc Trang and I was
kind of driving for him and he would treat patients downtown in Soc Trang. He was
trying to say that if he did that downtown he was not afraid to be in combat and that was
not the reason that he was shirking duties on the compound. I don’t recall the outcome. I
think he did not receive the general court martial, but he ended up getting out of the
service shortly thereafter. That took about five days, I think. I was in Okinawa and then I
went back to Gulfport. I picked up my wife and children and we drove to Fort Polk, Louisiana.

RV: What were your main duties there at Fort Polk?

ES: My main duty, my first duty was to fly UH-119s. George A. Mayers was the commander at that time. George A. Mayers happened to be a pilot but he was grounded because he had continued vertigo. He was one of the pilots that did not go to Vietnam because of medical conditions. Dick Anderson was a pilot, myself, and a few other pilots [Doug Knapton, Ernie Collins] that I can't remember at the time. I'll fill that in later for you. [There was one other pilot when I arrived, but I cannot remember his name. He got out of the service and moved back to his home in Oklahoma and became an Auctioneer.] But my primary duty was to fly patients throughout Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, to recover the patients that were either military sponsors or family members of military or retired that were either in auto accidents or became ill while they were away from the installation, for example, Fort Polk. So, we would get a mission from the hospital where the regulator, the medical regulator was to go and pick up, say, patients that were in an automobile accident while on leave in the New Orleans area. And we’d fly the old H-19 down to that particular area, “round robin”, bring the patient back to the closest medical military facility. Now, if he happened to be Air Force, we would try to get that patient back into an Air Force medical facility and obviously if it was Army, then we would fly him [those patients] back into Fort Polk. But that was one of our basic missions. We were a TO&E unit and we were on a high category of alertness for any uprising that might occur in the world. If for example, in today’s time, if a unit had to move out to Iran or Iraq, that unit would be tagged and would be airlifted or air railed to port and on loaded onto the ships to go to that particular point. So we had to be in a very high alert status of readiness. So we were always preparing our unit, making sure our equipment was ready. And we would use those H-19s, even though they were reciprocating engines, for a period of time until they probably would get Hueys to us. But we had boxes already prefabbad that we would put TO&E equipment into, tents, parts, all of that would be prepared, numbered, tagged, et cetera. And we would go through training exercises of loading up on the rail for movement. The years that we were there, we got the outstanding ratings each time we were rated. One of my first jobs that I really and truly
had to do for the military other than fly was be a property management officer. So I had
to keep, or they called in those days property book officer- I had to know and make sure
that everybody was accountable for the equipment. And we’d have the old hand receipts
and we’d have all the equipment going out and being signed for by each individual in the
unit that had responsibility, direct responsibility for that equipment. I basically
maintained a property book insuring that that documentation was accurate. That was
checked and we had annual, general inspections by the Inspector General of the post or
by the Army Inspector General. These were not notified inspections. We would get a call
at 4:00 in the morning that our unit was being inspected. So we never knew when that
would occur. But each time we truly were at the best rating on the installation. And we
always were one of the few units that ever got outstanding ratings each time they
reviewed us. In addition to that, we would support or help train or be a reviewer for the
National Guard to train. So if for example, the National Guard that was for Louisiana
National Guard or the Arkansas National Guard, whoever was in that Army area, if they
had an exercise, a field exercise, one of our officers, and I did it on many occasions,
number one because I was one of the junior officers, we would go out and oversee the
actions that took place with that medical unit and we would typically review medical
units and sometimes aviation units. In addition to that, our cadre or our unit would be the
opposing force where we would simulate attacks, air attacks, chemical attacks, all those
types of things there. Now, another thing that occurred during that period of time in the
years that I was stationed there, the expert medics badge was first introduced during that
period of time. Now, the expert medics badge is equivalent to the expert infantry badge
that the combat arms had had in existence for years. But the medical department had
never had that as a part, never had that badge as an item that could be sought after. We, at
Fort Polk, were part of a pilot program to test for that and try and qualify or pass the test.
I was one of the first five that qualified for that particular award. In fact, I had, all of us,
the five that got it, had a difficult time even getting a badge [to wear] because they hadn’t
made the badge yet. The only thing that they did have was a combat medics badge that
some of us went ahead and fabricated and cut off the wreath off the combat medics badge
and make the expert medics badge that we knew it was going to be fabricated in the same
design. So that’s how we were able to wear our expert medics badge before it was ever
fabricated by the sources that have that contract for the Army. But I got very good
training, flying training there. One of my other assignments that our unit had
responsibility for was the [supporting] England Air Force Base, [located at Alexandria,
LA.] I’m not sure about the name of the Air Force Base. I believe it’s pronounced
Eggland.

RV: That’s right.

ES: It was just north of Fort Polk. We went to Mena, Arkansas crew and we
would be on standby and this went on for probably six months on standby everyday while
the Air Force did low navigational bombing run practices from the Air Force base in
Alexandria, Louisiana up to Fort Smith, Arkansas. It was a fighter [bomber] they would
run or fly at around 200 feet around the terrain from Louisiana all the way up to Fort
Smith and then turn around and go back. Now, luckily, we never had an accident because
in the razorback country of Arkansas, our H-19, we could probably find the crash site, we
could direct people into the crash site and we might could land on a highway, but the
sheer fact of us trying to land an H-19 into rugged terrain like that would probably be
very close to being impossible. So we talked about the rationale behind that, but we never
got off the mission. It was just a requirement that we had to be there. But Mena,
Arkansas’s airstrip was a dirt strip and we had a crew chief, a medic, and a pilot sitting
there on that dirt runway from around 7:00 in the morning until around three or four in
the afternoon everyday, seven days a week. We did rotate that [crews]. But that was very
boring.

RV: Sounds like it.

ES: But that was one of our duties and responsibilities there.

RV: Now had you decided at this time to make a career out of your Army
appointment?

ES: In fact, going back to ’64, when Colonel Hamerick, who then was the Corps
Chief, had come over to visit us in October of ’64. I talked to him about becoming a
regular Army officer. And I applied for that at that time. Shortly after returning to Fort
Sam Houston, I received my regular Army commission. I was very happy and never
unhappy with any assignment that I ever received as long as I was in the service.
RV: How much did you follow what was happening in Vietnam while you were at Fort Sam Houston and Fort Polk, and then in Korea?

ES: I probably, again, was probably very shallow in my thought process about what was going on from a national standpoint. What the pilots and the different people that were at Fort Polk, for example, were concerned about that we were, some of us that were back less than a year, had already been asked to go back to Vietnam. I would say that there was a concern before the pilots that were first there that senior people that were in the medical service corps, and I’m going to put a number on this, of about 300 pilots in the Corps at it’s greatest capacity, we were going to be chosen to go back when there were many, many people that had not even been looked at or had reasons not to go. That was disenchanting to us that had experienced Vietnam. And the longer you stayed away, when you’re young and foolish, I think wars, unfortunately are better fought with young people because they feel non destructible. They have not developed strong ties with their families. That concerned us. What concerned us at Fort Polk, for example, we had a senior officer, the commander that had an illness that was preventing him to be considered to go to Vietnam. It also puzzled us that a senior aviator would be filling a position of leadership when he could not fly in the unit he was in. We always felt that another person with equal rank should be filling that position. That was my opinion. There were others that had the same opinion and we felt that that was unjust. Now, right at the end of my tour in Fort Polk, you know, and Fort Polk was a hellhole. People that were going to Fort Polk were not the people that had been in for a long period of time. They were a younger people going to that place and Fort Polk had just become a fort. It had been a camp prior to that. There was no housing on post. We all lived off post except for a few enlisted people and the support there was lousy.

RV: You spent quite a long period of time there.

ES: Right. So that concerned us, but we joked about it and we made the very best of it. Our families enjoyed our home and we enjoyed being with our families. The group, the unit, had a great time. There’s a great deal of esprit there, too. Every one of us, except for one pilot, had just returned or had been in Vietnam in their last assignment. Now, there were other pilots, again, that were in assignments of long duration in areas that were sought after by many people and they could not get it. Well, my choice, my first choice in
life with the military is when they called me, well it was the second time. They asked me
if I wanted to go when I was in the 498th, back to Vietnam with the 498th. I said no.
That’s when I went to Fort Polk. Then they asked when I was at Fort Polk. And they did
ask, “Are you ready to go back to Vietnam?” I said, “No, I’m not ready to go back to
Vietnam. If you want me to go on a short tour, I’ll go to Korea.” That satisfied them.
What I was really doing, I was avoiding, I wanted to avoid ever having to go back to
Vietnam again. As I look back at it, while I was there, it wasn’t so bad. But when I look
back at it, I knew that I had experienced something and for some reason came home
safely and I was fearful that if I went back I wouldn’t make it back. So I made that
choice. I went to the 377th Medical Company in Korea. We had three pilots in Korea at
that time. All of us had been to Vietnam. Tom Jackson was the commander at that time.
He had been over in Vietnam the first tour in ’62-’63. He had been one of the officers
that had brought the 57th Medical Detachment over to Vietnam with Captain Temporelli
who was his commander in those days. But Tom Jackson was there. Another pilot was
Charlie Clark. Charlie Clark had been to Vietnam with me and had come in with the 82nd
and had been shot in the ankle and returned to CONUS, America, when he was wounded
in Vietnam. Then myself. So again, each one of us had been in the States a short period
of time and had been asked, had we wanted to go back to Vietnam? We basically made
the choice to go to Korea.

RV: Just for the record, you went in January 1967 and were there until March
1968. Tell me what your basic duties were there in Korea.

ES: Since there were so few pilots, we did have one non-rated pilot or person
there who was an administrative officer. Tom Jackson was the commander. Charlie Clark
was the maintenance officer and I was the operations officer. I had responsibility over
running the airfield and we had another company there. So I was Airfield Operations
Officer overseeing the flights of both units there. We had our own operations people that
regulated our own flights, but I was kind of the overseer of the airfield. That meant many
things. When you’re operations officer, you number one, have to make sure that your
pilots get all their training, their flying time, their minimum requirements. We had no
problems meeting minimum because we flew a lot at night and we flew a lot during the
daytime.
RV: What city were you based in?

ES: We were in a complex called Alpha 102 and the A stood for airfield and the 102 just happened to be a number that was tagged for that particular complex during the Korean War. Now, there was a hospital that was very close on a separate compound and ASCOMM city, ASCOMM stands for Army Command Support and it has all the logistics to support the Army that was assigned to Korea. So if there were big pieces of equipment to repair equipment, it was stored there. They had other storage sights, but the hospital was there and we were located fairly close so that we would fly all of our patients into that one particular hospital.

RV: Sir, were you serving civilian or military patients or both?

ES: We primarily in Korea served all military, both American and Korean forces. Now, the one thing that was unusual, again we didn’t have very many aircraft. As you remember the 498th had 25 aircraft and that was the company. Now, here in Korea, we only had three aircraft. We had very few pilots, three as I’ve indicated. We had one Huey and its tail number was 0920 and we had two 23s and that was it. We had a back up CH-21, which is the old banana ship that we became rated in. They are tandem rotor rated aircraft that we learned to fly in case our Huey was down or one of our 23s were down. Now, we flew night missions with the small aircraft, which was observation aircraft and we flew patients on the outside of the aircraft in litters that they introduced during the Korean War. Now, this was almost into the ‘70s. So we had those, number one, flying very, very bad terrain under snow conditions in aircraft that were not rated for instrumentation and those observation aircraft really weren’t, with one pilot and a medic. The Huey was a good aircraft. We flew it all over. We were the only pilots that could fly along the DMZ. In other words, we had special check rides to fly into the deep Demilitarization zone, which was a very small airspace at night under weather conditions. In fact, I was the only IP that could take the other Army pilots that happened to be there and train for night flying in that area for a period of time [that were new pilots and had the need to fly into the DMZ].

RV: Did you ever have any incidents along the DMZ while you were flying there?

ES: No. There have been other pilots that have been fired upon in that area, but I would say that, I would speculate that if we were fired upon, it was that the pilot had
gotten really too close to the barbed wire, I mean, to the line, and was not necessarily
totally in the South Korean soil. The other thing that I did that I really enjoyed, the South
Korean Air Force started getting UH1-Hs, the most advanced helicopter at that time, into
Korea. Now, their pilots had 7, 8, 9,000 hours, lots of hours. And they had flown H-19s. I
was selected to develop a training program for them and I flew with the Korean Air Force
training those pilots for quite a long time. Probably over three months during my period
of stay there.

RV: How did you find the Koreans?

ES: Koreans are much like Vietnamese or Asiatic people. They’re very humble
people. They are willing to do what you ask them to do. You have to be reasonable with
them. They do not like flying at night just like most people don’t like flying at night. It’s
just because they haven’t been trained to fly at night. So, I found that they were superb
pilots and respected you as an individual especially if you had special talents and you
were helping their people. I got a very nice beautiful plaque from them from the President
of South Korea for doing that for that short period of time. But it developed a good
relationship between, I felt, the Air Force there and us. The reason we were trying and
wanted to, we were picking up lots of Korean wounded. We called them article 15
injured. If they were punished by their leaders, they might get sometimes, the butt end of
a weapon. But they would have a lot of training accidents in tanks, etc. We were having
to pick up all of their patients and fly them in. At times, we had to make decisions based
on the type of patient we had to pick up. We had some conflict of picking up Americans
versus Koreans. Obviously, we always, our primary mission was to support Americans,
but we tried to do both. That’s hard when you have very few assets to do the job.

RV: Let me ask you a question, while you were there, the Tet Offensive occurred
in Vietnam. What did you hear about that? This is in early 1968.

ES: We, again, heard that they were continuing to build up the amount of forces
that were in Vietnam and our feeling was that the American soldiers or the American
leaders were not allowed to do battle as they had been trained to do battle, and that they
did not have adequate support or resources to do battle as they needed to do battle. So, we
felt that the American government was not adequately supporting the American fighting
forces. Now, again, from a selfish standpoint, the people that were in Korea were already
getting queried about going back to Vietnam as soon as we finished the Korean tour. So
that continued to raise its ugly head. Obviously, what I wanted to do was go to the career
course. It was time for me to do that and I wanted to get additional training in medical
supply or logistics. I was interested in doing that. But all of the pilots, again, I must
emphasize that we’re going to Korea at the time, had been to Vietnam or they were
getting a short tour right out of flight school. My replacements, there was one pilot had
just come out of flight school, went to Korea. So it was the young pilots that were trying
to make their name that were having to go on these hardship tours.

RV: Now did your refusal or your not wanting to go to Vietnam and
communicating that to your superior officers, was that something that was looked down
upon? Was that a matter of controversy or did they treat it as, “okay, we understand why
you don’t want to do that and since you’re one of the more senior pilots, we’ll send the
young ones first”?

ES: I think we were bold enough to say why we didn’t want to go. We wanted to
wait our turn. And the people that was in this assignment branch did not hold that against
us. The record spoke for itself. I’m truly glad that my front end was stacked with all those
juicy assignments, because that paid off from my personal standpoint, not the military
necessarily, but from a personal standpoint, I was able to get promoted much quicker, in
fact, two times below the zone and it was because I had those assignments on the front
end and not on the back end of my career.

RV: You had intense military combat experience there for the first year of your
tour, first year of your career.

ES: Of course, after Korea, I did return to Fort Sam Houston.

RV: This is in March 1968.

ES: I went to the career course and I finished that in December, I think, of that
year. And I was able to convince them since I was at Fort Sam and there was a school
starting in the material logistics division that I would like to be able to go to and since all
of my short tours, or the two short tours that I had, they said, “Well, if that’s what you
want to do, you can do it.” So I went to the material management course after the
advanced course. There were people in our, let me just tell you a little bit more about
Medical Service Corps. It was a small corps anyway. Medical Service Corps though, in
the career course that I went to, there were very few officers other than I think we had
about 8 aviators in my class. We had three sections and I think they tried to separate us
and they put about two or three in each section, the pilots. Number one, so we could give
them a different experience of what was happening from the air standpoint versus the
ground. But most of our classmates had not gone to Vietnam. They were already going to
the career course, I mean, just like us. They got there, some of them quicker than we did
because they were in an assignment where they could rotate right into the career course.
So there were people that were captains at that point in time in ’68 and the war had been
going on for six years, at that point, since ’62, that had never been to Vietnam. So, again,
I’m talking more about assignments, but that caused some dissention, or some conflict,
with our own corps, I think. But, we looked at it, I guess, from this standpoint. We were
getting a hundred dollars more a month. We were getting a lot of glamour. If you went to
the bar at night on happy hour, probably more people talked to you than some of the other
folks about experiences and that kind of thing. So you were able to, I guess, gloat in your
success.

RV: Why do you think the U.S. government was not sending the younger pilots
over? It appears as though you and your older pilot friends thought that they should be
doing that.

ES: I think there wasn’t truly yet a commitment and around ’67 or ’68 is when we
really started putting an awful lot, I mean we put everything we had there. Up until that
time, they just didn’t feel that we were going to be there that duration. I guess, I don’t
know. There’s just a lack of resources being placed there. We were in a particular
specialty that demanded a great deal. I have to look at it this way. If you join an aviation
outfit, you are going to either benefit or have some hard assignments that other people are
not going to share because of your training. If I were a Special Forces officer, I’d do that
same type of assignment in a different way, but there would be very few people doing
that particular job. What we had, we had quite a few specialists of long-range patrol
people that were doing certain jobs that were staying there a lot or rotating very quickly.
Now, there was the other issue, too, for example, the Marines, they were rotating their
units in at six-month intervals. So, what they were trying to do, they were trying to get
everybody over to share in the experience, also get the people back so they could rest and
recoup. But they were rotating entire units and then bringing them out and replacing them
with new units. And that was working quite well. It gave them a break, because, truly, if
you could get a two-week break, you felt better. The tour didn’t seem as long, you were
able to recoup, see loved ones, and that kind of thing. Now, that’s just a different branch
of the service, though, and we did it a different way. It was mostly in Vietnam, the first
part of the tour, a special forces operation, trying to train the Armies and the Air Force of
Vietnam, who to support themselves without American forces. That phase did not work.
So we had to change phases or tactics on what we would do. Then we decided, and again,
I don’t know when it was exactly, say during the ’67, ’68 time frame, that we could not
do it just with Vietnamese forces doing their own thing. We had to go in and do battle
ourselves with our own forces and with our own capabilities. The second step of that
phase never totally happened because the second part was let the services do their job as
they were trained with no limitations. We had limitations on engagement. We had
limitations on bombing missions. We had limitations on encountering the enemy. We had
limitations on tactics. So if we could have moved into that second phase, we might have
been able to do better. Now, in the meantime, with our procrastination, the North
Vietnamese Army became very strong, and they had lots of people that they could throw
at the war, and they did.

RV: Do you think the United States should have taken ground troops in to North
Vietnam?
ES: Yes.

RV: What about the threat of Chinese intervention?
ES: It could have happened.

RV: I’m sorry.
ES: I said that could have happened.

RV: Just like Korea.
ES: Right. We had to pull back in Korea, too. We had to pull back in Desert
Storm. I know we’re not supposed to talk about the future or past, but those are three
incidents where we did not kill the enemy or we did not complete the action. We did not
take over.
RV: Do you think the United States should have used all means necessary to win such as using atomic weaponry and invading, say, Cambodia and Laos?

ES: Nuclear weaponry is not a good avenue. I would never say that that would be an appropriate action. I cannot support that. But I can support the other capabilities that the forces had. We could not legally go into Laos. We could not legally go into Cambodia. Now, we had long range LRPs doing things, snoop s doing things, but not really anything that would take care of the enemy. Can I take a break?

RV: Absolutely sir. Okay, sir, from Korea, you were transferred back to Fort Sam Houston. And I’m sure this was a much better assignment than being back at Fort Polk.

ES: Yes. It was. It was also a good assignment, again from a personal standpoint and career standpoint because I was having the opportunity to go to the advanced career course, which is the second phase, basically for young officers, after their basic training, then going to advance course. If you don’t have the opportunity of going to that, typically you’re not going to progress through the military at all. It was also a time that I could be with my family on a good installation with the friends that I’d started out in the basic course with and other pilots and their wives and families. And we truly were there,

number one, to, I guess, get our ticket punched, as they say it, but also to experience and share what each one of us had been through in the different assignments. And that is one good thing about the career course and the format that they had. They wanted active participation from the students to talk about what the trend was in the units wherever they might be located in Europe, or Asia, or in Latin America, or whatever. From that much of our doctrine could, in fact, be changed based on feedback that they were receiving from students in the career course. So it was a very engaging active participation both from the instructor standpoint, but from the student standpoint. We were able to clearly voice our opinions on typically what was happening in our specific training as officers, may it be logistics, registrar personnel, hospital administration, whatever it might be. The other good thing about the advanced course, many, as I saw in ’68, one of the assignments that the non aviators were able to get is go back to the school and become instructors in the training classes on the platform. That gave a good perspective because many of these officers were lieutenants or first lieutenants when they went to Vietnam and they experienced both the ground activity and the air activity and had a great appreciation of
what was happening at the time. So, I think almost all the thoughts that were being expressed in that particular school were helpful to some of the students that had never been to a combat assignment, being able to hear what experiences they had encountered in performing their duties and responsibilities and what the current doctrine might say in the text book and what we had revolved to in the real world, yet it hadn’t been written yet in the text. So that whole six month period of time, training, I think was excellent from the military standpoint, understanding what was going on, and possibly even touching upon what the people on the platform felt that the government or the political establishment fell and was trying to do with the services. Now, they obviously had a specific script they had to talk from. But I think at least we were hearing what was being published from a governmental standpoint of what was occurring and what would occur in the future.

RV: How much did that training come into play when you went back to Vietnam in 1970?

ES: I think all training helps from a common sense standpoint and also giving you the material or the knowledge to look for things once something happened. Did you change your way of doing things? You probably changed your way of how you looked at things more so than how you made changes to what you were doing, specifically in the unit. It gave you more confidence to deal with issues. From a flying standpoint, I felt it had no effect because it was not geared towards aviation training. Now, there was a course, though, shortly after the advanced course, that was built for pilots and senior medical people to go through. And one of the things that we had felt, as pilots in the first tour and others had seen in Korea, was that we, as pilots, were not specifically trained well enough to give direction and guidance to our medics if they needed help on medication or treatment. So, again, I participated in a pilot program of number one, giving feedback to the instructors that were going to teach the course, and then participating in a pilot training program, which continued through out the Vietnam era. Giving more pharmacology to pilots, giving more emergency rescuer treatment to pilots, giving many other things that related to medical care of patients under emergency situations and how to cope with those emergency situations with the available equipment that you had in the aircraft. Now, that was a short two-week program. I think it was two
weeks. It was very compact, very intense with a lot of requirements, just about flying medical evacuation helicopters. Now, some of that training extended well beyond the military for me, that I’ve used in emergency situations later on. So it was more like an emergency medical technician training, CPR, emergency tracheotomy, those kinds of things that I later used. I thought that was a school that was adapted very quickly of the need and executed to all pilots that were going into a short tour in Vietnam.

RV: Both of these training courses came before you were assigned to Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia, is that correct.

ES: Right. Then I had the third course, which was a material management logistics course that was a four-month course before I was assigned to Hunter Stewart. And the reason I was assigned to Hunter Stewart was because I went to the material management course at the first part of that year before being assigned. And my reason then was, I knew the writing on the wall that I could not be a pilot forever and I wanted to move in the direction so I could go into a health care hospital installation setting and eventually become a hospital administrator. That was my thought at that time, and again, I insisted that I go to the course. I was a pain in their butt wanting advanced training so that I could sort of start a parallel track. By doing that, I was kind of resisting the establishment, because at that time they wanted only one parallel track and that happened to be aviation. That’s where they had put their money and they wanted me to continue that road. But at Hunter Stewart, Hunter Stewart was one of the aviation training installations that helped supplement Rucker. That’s where all the Cobra training was going on for the new aircraft. And it was all aviation units at Hunter Stewart. So when I went there, I was going to, number one, a material management hospital position as an associate administrator, but I was also in a flying slot. So I was able to get both worlds and had both opportunities to continue my flying and keeping my profession and also being a material management officer. I was able to use the aircraft to fly along with two other pilots that happened to be on that staff, evacuation of patients, again like Fort Polk, moving patients from one civilian hospital to a military hospital. I did that quite a bit. Now, the person that was in charge of that hospital happened to be William Bentley, Lieutenant Colonel William Bentley, that I had first run across when I was training at the 498th and he was one of the assistant operations officers. So this was my second
assignment with a particular person that I had a great deal of admiration for. After
spending a very exciting tour where I really felt that I was doing more than just flying a
helicopter, I was doing skills as an administrator at that particular hospital. Colonel
Bentley gave me a lot of opportunities where I guess I could have failed or succeeded and
I had a successful tour there. Unfortunately, what I hoped that I would avoid by going to
Korea, an assignment officer called me one day and said, “It’s your time to go to
Vietnam.” Of course my first question to him was, “Who has not been to Vietnam yet?”
Of course there was still some scalawags that were avoiding it somehow or other, either
because of medical reasons or rotation of assignments or a critically needed person in a
particular position that they couldn’t afford to move. But I went ahead and took the
assignment, obviously, and I’ve always taken all of the assignments, I think, with a very
positive attitude, because I always benefited from each one of them. So on the 4th of July,
I arrived in Vietnam for my second tour.

RV: How did you feel coming back in the country for the second time? Coming
back into a much, much, different situation on the ground from March 1964 when you
first arrived to July 1970.

ES: Well, the first thing was when I went the first time, I was the second
lieutenant. I had just been promoted to major about four months prior to going to
Vietnam my second tour. So, my anxiety was that number one, I most likely was going to
be a commander. Many flashbacks of the commander that I had that was killed in
Vietnam my first tour. Even if I was an executive officer as a young major, if I got there
and the assignment was that all of them were filled, I wasn’t going to be the commander,
but the executive officer. That position weighed an awful lot on every soldier, every pilot,
every person in the unit and it also effected the image of Dustoff with all the support
units that we had. I had a great deal of anxiety that I had the Dustoff reputation that I had
to live up to which I probably created part of that reputation in the previous tour. I got
there, it was surely not the fan fare of my first assignment when Major Kelly and Paul
Bloomquist met me at the airfield and escorted me from the aircraft to their jeep while it
was parked on the runway and whisked me off to my unit. I arrived in Vietnam the
second tour, they had no idea where they were going to put me. They had no idea which
unit I would go to. I basically was in the holding detachment for assignment for at least a
day before they finally decided where I would go.

RV: Where did you fly into?

ES: I flew into Tan Son Nhut or Saigon, initially. That was, again, where most
everyone came in the country at. Once I got an assignment, I got an assignment to Chu
Lai and I was told that I would be the commander of a detachment there. I didn’t realize
and I don’t think they realized until I got there that the arrangement was that the senior
pilot or the commander would not only be the detachment commander for the assignment
I was going to, but I’d also be a detachment commander for the other detachment, too. So
I assumed command of the 54th detachment and the 68th Med Detachment located in Chu
Lai on or about July the 5th or somewhere like that.

RV: How would you gauge the morale of the men when you arrived?

ES: Well, first off, the first thing I noticed right away was, number one, we had
twelve aircraft. They had an absolutely wonderful compound by themselves. They all had
separate and independent living quarters. My living quarters was on a bluff over the Red
China Sea with about a 90 foot drop off to the sand below and I had a living room, a
master bedroom and a guest room with full kitchen and bar.

RV: Wow. That’s a huge difference.

ES: So it surely was not like my first tour where I had about an 8 by 10 space with
one cot and a desk and a closet. I found out that Chu Lai, the people that had been there
before really knew how to live it up and they had a wonderful compound. We had great
support. The people that were there still were some of them on their first tour. I did go
there and replace the commander that had been there and had been moved for one reason
or another. I knew right away that I needed to fly at night because there was very little
flying being performed at night. That immediately changed. I put myself up every night
so that I could fly with the pilots and crews and number one, initiate some loyalty or
esprit with the pilots because they had felt that flying was not a shared duty or
responsibility with some of their leaders.

RV: Were you expected as the commander to do your time flying or was that
unusual?
ES: No. From my viewpoint, all commanders should be willing to fly just like any other pilot. Now, that is not necessarily the way that some people viewed that position. But in a combat situation, you’ve got to lead by example. We had a lot of warrant officers. We had very few officers that had other responsibilities like supply and logistics. One thing that I noticed also that unfortunately was occurring then in Vietnam that wasn’t occurring in the first tour, that they were getting inspected just like units in the United States were, IG inspections, maintenance inspections, all of those kinds of distracters that I personally did not feel were appropriate in a combat zone. But we had to do them and we did well. The people did absolutely fantastic. We did well on the CMMIs. We got the highest scores in the division. We had to do well in the IGs and we did that and we were flying and awful lot with young warrant and young officers. And I say young, I was the major and one of my commanders of the 68th was a 1st lieutenant and he was the next senior person in both units. Then everybody else was either second lieutenants or warrant officers. Now, you’d wonder where those other 300 officers were in the Medical Service Corps, but again opinion statement.

RV: Which helicopter were you flying at this point?

ES: We were flying then the H model. It had more power. We were flying quite a few missions. In fact, when I was at Chu Lai, just in a short period of time and I think I was there from July 4th until November 7th, November 1970, our unit, with 12 aircraft, flew almost 4,300 missions and we flew a little over 10,000, it was 10, 163 patients with the 54th and 68th. And they were almost every one of them Americans. That was a big difference. Our first tour, when I flew 750 missions, just myself and 2,248 patients, almost every one of those were ARVN. I’m mixing unit statistics and individual statistics. But without a question, we were evacuated and we had not two ships up during the day time, but three and fours ships and we were flying, our missions had changed from and hour and 30 minutes to tour hours, to 15 minutes to 30 minutes at the longest duration for any of our pickups. So I mean, we were flying hot, quick turnaround missions. The 54th and the 68th did have a good reputation as far as not losing any aircraft or people.

RV: How did transferring Americans this time, evacuate Americans, affect you or did it affect you versus airlifting our ARVN troops earlier?
ES: I kept the same basic, I guess, mindset that the people I was [evacuating], I
turned them into cordwood or wood or just supplies, I really avoided identity of people. I
just did not think of it. The only thing, the only time I lost one crew at least a crew was
killed when I was the commander there. Unfortunately, it was a freak accident. One of
those observation helicopters, a LOH they call them, was doing low level terrain, trying
to snoop out the enemy to draw fire, we had just, this particular crew, had made a pick up
in an LZ and was coming out of the LZ and this LOH hit their aircraft from the back side
and they both fell and our crew was decapitated from the LOH’s blades coming inside the
cockpit in the back of the aircraft. And that accident shouldn’t have occurred, but it did.
And when I had to go and identify the lieutenant and the warrant officer and the medic
and the crew chief, I remember that extremely well because it truly was personal. The
only other time that that had occurred was when I picked up my commander in ’64. That
broke through my shell and I hated it. I guess because the bodies were maimed so badly. I
hated to open up the body bag and identify the lieutenant.

RV: How much did that affect the rest of the unit there?

ES: It’s a devastating loss and just going through the process of the memorial
service and the closeness of the unit is truly like taking a brother or sister from you and
you didn’t get to say goodbye. So it’s a devastating thing. I think, though, if you're a
loose unit, you don’t survive those incidents as well. I think if your men are dedicated to
the mission and the esprit and the history of dustoff or the unit, then they have a stronger
desire to continue on and do a better job. It wasn’t due to a lack of skill of the crew that
came to create their demise. It was just two aircraft meeting in the air where they didn’t
expect it. During that period of time, all of our crews demonstrated how we could fly and
did fly and many of the tactics that I learned in my first tour, I tried to share with and I
did. It was my responsibility to share the flying techniques that had not been used in
those two units when I first arrived.

RV: Were those tactics still applicable?

ES: Absolutely, even though the terrain was different. We had triple canopy up in
Chu Lai. We were using the hoist a lot more and we were experiencing greater firepower
in the Chu Lai area. Now, Chu Lai, the Americal division, that’s where the My Lai
incident occurred prior to my time there. That was always a discussion of contact with the
forces on the ground. They tried never…The Americal Division, encountering the enemy,
tried to go through the rules of engagement on everything that they did. And by going
through the rules of engagement, they may have lost soldiers because they had to be fired
upon before they could return fire. Our ships had to be fired upon before we could return
fire. Whoever pulls the trigger first has an advantage. You still with me?
RV: Yes, sir. Why do you think those rules of engagement were so prevalent there
in Vietnam? Do you think the United States had simply not learned from its previous
five, six, seven years there? Or were we trying to get out and be cautious?
ES: When we go through the rules of engagement, what we’re trying to do is
insure that we do not have political embarrassment or review of the action after the action
has occurred, which would generate criticism to the commanders and the people on the
ground. So the rules of engagement were truly a hindrance in my opinion in proving the
life expectancy of people on the ground. The gun ships that, and we did trickery I guess.
We would send the LOH out, the sniff ship, the little one-man helicopter to draw fire
from the enemy so that we could unleash the gun ships on who fired at us. If we were
going into a hot LZ and we knew it was hot, we could not get fire suppression until the
gun ships heard ground fire or the ground people said we were being fired upon. Now
typically, when you're being fired upon, you know it because you hear the bullet or
bullets breaking the sound barrier when they're in close proximity of you. So that’s
typically the only way you know you're getting fired upon unless its showing evidence of
something breaking inside the aircraft. But I think I’ve said all I need to say about rules
of engagement. I may not have answered your question. I’m not trying to avoid it, I just
don’t know what else to say about it.
RV: I understand your answer very clearly. I’ve heard that from a number of
veterans of complaint, and I’m wondering, you're there again in 1970-71, what was the
climate in country among American troops like? I guess, you know, you’ve commented
on your unit, but what about the other units you had contact with?
ES: Well, they were, for example, if we were on a compound and the Americal
Division in Chu Lai had a huge, enormous complex to handle and aviation unit, all the
combat forces of a division, 25,000 people. The perimeter is huge. Much of the perimeter
was by a sea perimeter and there was no real protection by sea. But, yes, we had outpost
guards that were on 24 hours a day. We had ships running the perimeter with lights on at
night. But if they weren’t fired upon, they couldn’t fire at anything and we’d get rocket
attacks that they could launch 25 rockets in a matter of a few minutes and be out of there
before we could respond because we were more in a defensive posture than an offensive
posture. If we were in an offensive posture, we could have probably beat them to the
punch and eliminated the enemy. I’m talking way out of my realm of expertise because I
really had never had to fire at anybody that often. I don’t think I ever killed anybody. So
I’m saying it from a different perspective than a ground force. But I felt that they were
hampered immensely by encountering the enemy.

RV: Did you hear this complaint a lot?

ES: Yes. All the time. The soldiers, I felt, the troops, were frightened of that. That
was an unknown out there that was always waiting. Of course that’s a type of battle we
were in. When you were in the jungle, you didn’t know what was in front of you. But
nobody liked to be point.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamization policy that was going on at the
time you were there?

ES: I don’t think it was effective at all. I think the anti-vietnamization program
was lip service. I think that the people that were trying to do the Vietnamization program
did not have enough faith in the people to do it and they may not have had that capability.
They may have deduced that themselves by working with them. But standing from the
peripheral side of things, I don’t think they had the will, the people did not have the will.
They had been fighting so long that it had compromised their will to live.

RV: Had your opinion changed, Vietnam itself and the Vietnamese civilian
population when you went back?

ES: First off, I never felt, the people I came encountered with, the people that
were wounded, the people that were taking care of the wounded, I think they were doing
as much as they could. I don’t think American forces could have done a better job other
than they were trained better and they had more resources to use. So I didn’t have a
disrespect for the Vietnamese people.

RV: Were you able to get off base any?

ES: Yes.
RV: What would you do when you would go off base?

ES: In Soc Trang, the only thing I would do is go and get some photographs developed and talk to a few merchants in downtown Soc Trang. They were always, obviously I was a customer and they always tried to treat me with respect and they always did a good job at whatever they were doing. They were a very artistic, kind, humble, gracious people. And if they were having dinner or lunch, they’d want me to sit down and eat with them. So they’d give the shirt off their back to you as a people. Now, if you want to talk about the government and how third world countries are and how they had a personal agenda and not necessarily a country agenda to protect their people, I think that’s two different groups of people. You had the government officials and then you had the poor and needy. There were two classes of people. One class was a very powerful, small class of selected few. Then you had the masses. The masses suffered.

RV: Do you think the masses cared either way which way their government would go?

ES: No. They just wanted to be at peace. They wanted to have their family survive. They wanted to be left alone. They were caught up in battle.

RV: What do you think of the media coverage of the war?

ES: I’m going only relate to one person, Jim Lucas, who was a noted author. He reported for the Associated Press. He wrote one book by the name of *Vietnam Dateline* and he published numerous daily articles of what was going on in the field with American soldiers. He did a very good job because he was there on the ground flying with or walking with or seeing and experiencing and smelling and feeling the daily war. He was a prizewinner in the Korean War. I don’t know what his publishing accomplishments were in the Vietnam War. But I knew him personally, so that’s a personal opinion of the gentleman that reported factual information and did not distort the facts. The rest of the media, I don’t feel reported the true happenings that were occurring in Vietnam. They only wrote in line with how to sell the newspapers or how to sell the magazines, which is their job. They have to sell news. But different motive. That’s all I have to say about the newspaper or media.

RV: Did you see a lot of drug or alcohol use on your second tour?
ES: No. Not in aviation units. Not in our units because we had random tests. We were, our crews could not be on flying on status or be with our unit if they were caught. Did we have some drug use in our unit? Yes. I know of one incident with an enlisted person that was in to coke pretty heavy. But it was a strict abiding by requirement with aviation units that we had. Now, after I finished Chu Lai, I was summoned to the 61st Med Battalion for one reason or another, probably because I kept giving my battalion commander of the 61st Med Battalion trouble by not listening to him sometimes and having telephone difficulty and obviously not hearing what he was telling me. But I did have the opportunity of moving down Qui Neon with the 61st Med Battalion. I became the operations officer for the battalion. That was quite a coup because I was a junior major and we had multiple other detachments and companies that had senior people over me. So, I did take over that responsibility. I had responsibility of overseeing 55 medical helicopters in six geographic areas. And we also had the ground evacuation assets for I Corps and Northern military region two. I did that and we covered the area all the way up to the DMZ down to Tuy Hoa south of Quin Nhon. And I stayed in that position up until February working for Francis A. Copeland. Just before Francis A. Copeland left, I had took over as the executive officer, the number two guy in the corps for aviation.

RV: This is February 1971, right?

ES: Yes. 1971. Of course, right before Francis A. Copeland left, Francis A. Copeland I had met for the first time. He was then a lieutenant colonel in ’71. I had met him as a major when he came in the country with the 82nd and he was one of the old timers, but he had certain thoughts and ideas that he preferred that everybody do. So I really, truly had to keep my mouth shut as much as I could and do what I needed to do to be the executive officer and also the operations officer for that battalion. But things ended up well and actually I was rated quite well there. But the guy that came in to my life again for the third time was William Bentley, Colonel Bentley. He had been at the 498th and then at Tuttle Community Hospital at Hunter Stewart and he was my battalion commander. And I worked with him for some time, continued, actually it was only a short period of time, about two months, and on February 25th, 1971, Bill Bentley came in. He first told me, he said, “Ernie, your wife Beth is just absolutely going to hate me for what I have to ask you to do.” I realized what he was going to tell me at the time because
up in Phu Bai and Quang Tri, we had been having a lot of feedback from the ground
general officer and the group commander, which was over us, that pilots were refusing to fly and that we were into a very, very large operation. And he asked that I go up there and take over the three units there. The 236th, the 237th and the 571st Medical detachments, aviation detachments and make sure that we change the opinion of the dustoff support with the 5th Mechanized division; at least it was a brigade up there that was supporting Lam Son 719. What was occurring, again, the two commanders that were there had been relieved by the group commander and I basically was able to select from the 55 different aircraft or actually the 110 pilots that we had in our battalion, I could handpick any pilot that I wanted to assist in that operation, which I did. And I took the people that probably had more brass on their body than some and were willing to fly in the hot missions and liked to fly. So I basically reestablished the personnel strap that we had there in Phu Bai and Quang Tri. What I discovered was that many of the just simple things on a daily basis were not happening which had always happened in dustoff units, typically that I’ve known. And that was, for example, first thing, getting up, early break in the morning and pre-flighting your aircraft and getting it ready for the very first mission. And I found that there were people, pilots, that were not doing that and didn’t see any need in it. It really was an unfortunate situation in that there had been total lack of leadership and guidance and leading by example in those three detachments. And we were getting people killed because of that. We had probably, unfortunately, the hottest, largest mission ever to take place in Vietnam. That was in Lam Son 719. We had to go deep into Laos. We had to fly with gun ships and fixed wing Air Force jets on almost all of our missions. The intensity of the fire in Lam Son 719 far exceeded anything that I’d ever seen in my lifetime as far as fire on rescue ships. If you flew too high, you would have SAM missiles being fired at you. If you flew on the deck, which we were trained to do, and we had plenty of mountains there, we would get fired from above, the mountains above and a layer of lead would be being fired up from below of small arms fire. If we got into the LZ, the compounds that were 30 miles from the border, we could not stay on the ground but about three seconds. We’d count to three and pull pitch if we got into the compound. If we stayed longer than that, we would be barraged with mortars and be nailed while we were on the ground.
RV: How many times was your aircraft hit? Every time?

ES: My aircraft was never hit, but the aircraft that were hit, we lost, lets see. I forgot something here that can help me.

RV: Did you take small arms fire every time?

ES: We took small arms fire. I need to take a break real quick. It won’t take me but just a moment.

RV: Go ahead sir.

ES: I wanted to continue on about the type of environment that we were flying in. I want to express, also, a feeling that I had in that I wanted, when I picked the individual soldiers and pilots and crew even, they had to be, number one, all volunteers. After I chose them, I asked them if they wanted to do the job. I knew full well that they would. But what I also knew that these pilots typically were able to get into LZs and get out of LZs with the best probability of success. I picked some pilots that had been there the second time and they had great deal of experience of flying. The ones that I brought up from Chu Lai, just absolutely did not concern themselves with what was around them as far as hostility and were able to keep presence of mind with themselves at all times and were able to take care of the crew and the evacuation people at all times. I was looking for success. We supported Lam Son 719 from two locations; from Quang Tri, which is right up on the DMZ, and from Phu Bai. Now, Phu Bai was where our detachments typically were at. I had to move all my aircraft forward, though, to Quang Tri and then I had aircraft field sighted right within five miles of the border. Let me talk about the package that we had to use and went into Laos. We were required by the 5th Mechanized that we would always have a gun package go in with us. That was two Cobras going in with each aircraft that we went in with. The second thing that we did, that we had never done in my history other than with the 82nd when the 82nd had come in and they wanted to fly an additional ship which we stopped because we felt there was too much flying. But due to the hostilities, we wanted to be able to have a cover dustoff aircraft above the primary dustoff that was going in to pick up the patients in case we were shot down. They would be able to swoop in, hopefully within moments, pick us up and get us out before the enemy overwhelmed our position. Later into the event of Lam Son 719, when all the compounds were being overrun and any ARVNs that were being put into these
compounds out in Laos were being annihilated by direct contact with tanks and huge numbers of North Vietnamese. It first created the dilemma that we knew that they were all surrounding. We also knew that when we put our ship down on the ground, that everybody that was in that compound that could walk would want to come out. So when we go into these sights, we would have 20 to 30 people trying to get on the aircraft. We had to use force on many occasions to push the patients or the people that were on the ground, away from the aircraft to pull off. We had to do that or we would be overloaded and unable to pull out of the LZ. They were overcrowding the ships and in the three seconds that we were on the ground, in mass numbers. We did have a lot of missions. In the missions we had, we had 1,231 missions in the Lam Son 719 operation. 735 of them were deep into Laos. What really makes it bad is we had 53 hoist missions in hot, hot LZs where people had rockets being launched at them. They had small arms fire. They had quad 50s. They had radar control weapons being fired at them. We classified that out of the 735 missions in Laos, we had 147 bad missions. That’s where the pilots and the crew really did not think they would make it out. Now, I don’t know what the criteria in those days were other than our ships were taking a lot of fire, not necessarily hits. But in Lam Son 719, we had 2,382 sorties. Of those, 1,460 sorties were into Laos. We had a total 1,126 flying hours, 687 of those were in Laos. Now, patients evacuated, we evacuated 1,007 Americans. The Americans weren’t supposed to be on the ground, so what that is are crews that we picked up that had been shot down. Total patients evacuated out of there were 4,139 patients. Of that, 3,133 were ARVN patients. So that gives you a feel for that. Now, what did it cost with our aircraft? We lost almost 24% of our aircraft.

RV: Are these the dustoff losses or in general U.S. losses?

ES: No. That’s just dustoff. That’s out of 18 aircraft that we had and actually 12 aircraft that were in direct support of Lam Son 719. We had six aircraft that were just backhauling and they were fairly safe. But nine aircraft were individually hit. Eight aircraft were lost out of those nine individual aircraft that were hit. But we still were able to maintain a 76% availability of the aircraft that we had. We unfortunately had six KIAs of crews and nine wounded during this intense fire. We had 69 hits, which is not very many because one of the few times I was hit in another year, I got as many as 21 hits. So, it could be a significant first. But the evacuation, at the end of Lam Son 719 was so bad
that we would have the aircraft going in, the dustoff. We had a platoon or company worth
of gun ships on either side of us. We’d let them go out in front of us. And in front of them
we had fighter jets napalming and bombing the areas around the compound before we got
there and laying down significant fire. And we’d fly down the corridor down between the
gun ships on either side of us laying down fire and we were still taking intense fire. To
have this many aircraft survive was significant in itself. But I just cannot express how
intense this operation was even to lose the crew that we did lose. We did have one medic.
His crew was down in the compound because too many people were climbing on board
aircraft. They couldn’t get the aircraft out. Mortars hit the aircraft. It took us several days
to get him out. His name was spec [Specialist] 4 Fuji. He was a medic. He was
eventually, right after, awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for saving all kinds of
ARVN’s lives and Americans’ lives while he was on the ground. And he even directed
artillery on his position so that he’d keep the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese off of them.
So there were quite a few outstanding crews that flew and kept the aircraft flying during
all types of conditions, fog, rain, and heavy fire. We were evacuating to multiple
locations. The 1st of the 5th Infantry Mechanized had a hundred bed facility we were
evacuating into. Then we had three ARVN hospitals at the 1st Division TAC, one was the
712th Medical Company. It was 50 beds. Then we had the 1st Infantry Division, 30 beds
and then the 1st Airborne Division, 20 beds. I have a list of the number of combat
divisions that we were up against in Laos from the North Vietnamese standpoint. They’re
a part of my notes that I have provided. You might want to review those or I can attach
those another time.

RV: How did this mission affect you personally? What kind of toll did it take
upon you?

ES: I think I was most concerned about the crews and trying to keep them alert
and willing to fly. They were taking, initially, when I got there, they were taking a lot of
abuse, verbal abuse from the commanding general of the 1st of the 5th because the 1st of
the 5th had seen us waiver. In my opinion, we had, in my experience, had never wavered
in doing the dustoff mission. And we surely had fallen short of what standards I had been
taught in my first year of Vietnam with Major Kelly and Pat Brady and many other brave
people that I had the opportunity of flying with. But it was, you just have to instill
confidence in every person that’s in your unit. And you have to spend personal time with
them and you have to also spend personal time in the cockpit. If you’re an aviator and a
leader, you’ve just got to do that.

RV: It seems that one constant theme in your service in Vietnam and really in
your career is that you led by example.

ES: I hope that that’s what I’ve done. I hope it ended up being positive. I preach
that theme. I just hope that what I said is what I did. I think, overall, people would say
that’s what it was. I just don’t know any other way to do it.

RV: After Lam Son 719 was completed, you were then sent to Da Nang. Is that
correct?

ES: Right. And Bill Bentley did that. At that point in time, we were beginning to
consider consolidating the resources that we had. He was also probably wanting to get me
out of the field. He made me at that time, aviation staff officer for the group. He just
didn’t want me to get in harm’s way. I guess he had an obligation to my wife, Beth, to
make sure I got home. So I spent a little bit of time there and I brought basically what we
had done at the 61st Med Battalion and instituted it at the group and I worked for,
directly, Colonel Bathea who was the group commander who actually had relieved the
people in the operation prior to me arriving to support the units in Phu Bai and Quang
Tri. So, I think, overall, they could appreciate what had been accomplished in a short
period of time when we were there. But if you do, I really would like for you take an
opportunity of going to several of the chapters leading up to this that I’ve written.
Chapter 23 and Chapter 24 and Chapter 25 of my notes that I’ve broken out by month,
basically, or periods in my diary that you have there at the school, would be, I guess,
worth reviewing in more detail.

RV: Of course. I’ll definitely do that, sir. Did you know in July ’71 that that was
your date to leave Vietnam?

ES: Yes.

RV: I can assume, I’m sure that you were quite happy to get out of country at that
point.

ES: I was very happy and I was apprehensive, as I’ve said before, when I went
over because I was older and you view things differently when you’re a little bit older.
Now, in ’71, I was at that time, 31 years old. In ’70, I was 30. I was seasoned, though, and I felt that my experience would keep me out of harm’s way, but I also knew that I had an obligation to lead, as you say, by example and I knew that I was going to do that and I knew I was going to put myself in the position whereby the probability of being injured was higher.

RV: Did you keep the level of danger that you were in, especially on the second tour, away from Beth and your family?

ES: I never, ever told them the experience. Even in my diary I did not keep that. I kept events and I kept flying hours, but I did not add the personal feelings or the personal concerns I had about my well being. I never wrote that. I didn’t think it was necessary.

RV: Let’s talk a little bit about that, about your overall experience in Vietnam. What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned while there?

ES: I think the most significant, and again, this is from a shallow viewpoint, was that communications was absolutely, unequivocally the most important thing that a person could generate between parties, not only from an officer’s standpoint, but from the enlisted standpoint. I’ve used that traditionally throughout my entire career both as a business owner and in the military of communicating at all levels with every person within an organization and also trying to communicate with every contact that could affect or influence the mission that my people had. Now, to me, that is what it was all about. Now, I don’t necessarily have a strong opinion about Vietnam other than I feel that many people have returned from Vietnam and their effects were far greater than I could understand how they returned and how they were unable to cope with life. Even as recent as I was involved in a filming that’s taking place, “In the Shadow of the Blade”, that’s a documentary that will be coming out, in I think, this spring, the people that were shooting the film and the directors were trying to find out, how did I deal with people when I came home. I think that’s what they had seen or heard about most of, that may vets were unable to cope with life when they came home. I personally never saw that. I personally used it as a growing experience to try and understand people better. I look at it as far as the lessons learned, as a positive side of my life. It helped me in every opportunity that I’ve had in life. But I must say that my attitude about life is that if you get up in the morning and you look in the mirror and say, “I’m going to have a bad day,” that’s exactly what
you’re going to have. I think we all need to get up with a positive attitude and see how we can influence people in a positive way, not in a negative way. People that we are talking to are like mirrors. They respond to the attitude that you are demonstrating. And if you are going to have a bad day, you have, many times created that bad day yourself by the attitude that you’ve displayed and people reacted to you in a negative way.

RV: How do you feel after all the thousands of wounded soldiers that you evacuated out of these LZs? How do you deal with all those images? How do you deal with the intensity of combat, today? How do you deal with that?

ES: Just recently, again, I had people that actually, my crew or other crews that dustoff had picked up and many of them were seriously injured and wounded. But to have people say thank you and they’re crying is very rewarding. Again, it’s selfish but with our record of saving probably 95% [98%] -that’s what is published- 95% [98%] of every person that was evacuated in Vietnam, lived. That’s saying a lot.

RV: Absolutely.

ES: I mean, the 200 and some odd thousand people that died surely could have been half a million had we not done our jobs.

RV: Looking back at your Vietnam experience, do you consider that your most important contribution?

ES: Well, I’ll take [a stab at] it; again, I’ll say it this way. My most important contribution to society would be that I was able to be a part of a new family being born, husbands going home to their loved ones, businesses being run by very competent leaders in American society today. I would say that’s my contribution or dustoff’s contribution or my crew’s contribution. I would say my crew had more affect on that than I did. I just set up the aircraft and pushed the stick. The crew saved the lives.

RV: But you had to get that aircraft in there and out of there safely.

ES: And that was a crew responsibility. Yeah. The pilot does have to take it in, but the good pilots will do that and the good crews will come out alive and some crews did not make it and they were good crews. Nothing that they could do could change that.

RV: How did you feel in April 1975 when you saw the South Vietnamese government collapse finally?
ES: I was relieved that no one else would have to go. My first few thoughts would be, why did we waste so many men and women’s lives when we did not want to finish what we started? I still believe that. I believe that on any encounter that we go into and that’s basically, if you want to get involved, complete the involvement and then withdraw.

RV: Do you think that’s the great lesson of the Vietnam War for the United States government?
ES: Yes.
RV: Do you think the government’s learned that lesson?
ES: No. I also think the government will fabricate and build a stage for war. In the military, we don’t want war. We’re there to prevent war; we’re not there to fight wars if you can understand what I said.
RV: Yes, sir. I do.
ES: We will follow the leadership and we will do that to the best of our ability. I think we do have the opportunity to engage in discussion about the overall strategy or the outcomes that might prevail if we get involved. I don’t want us to be an isolationist nation. I want us to be free. I want us to be able to fight for freedom and protect America, but I think we can protect America without going to war.

RV: Have you ever been to The Wall in Washington?
ES: Yes.
RV: What was your experience like there?
ES: The Wall is a spiritual experience. I think that is the most common denominator in most people that see it. When I was working as an Army Inspector General in ’79 through ’81, I was able to get by there when it was finished. I don’t recall when it was finished, but I’ve been by there on two occasions. Right after the soldiers that are standing close to the wall was the last time right after that was dedicated. Its just, it’s a chilling experience. It’s an electrifying experience. Your hair on your body will almost lift up and stand on end. That’s my physical experience of it. It’s a saddening experience, but the positive side, from our business, we saved more lives in the Vietnam War and we had the best success of any war ever fought, and that was good. I think people like Dr. Dean, John Buessler, the previous dean of your medical school there and
him flying with me in Vietnam and working on behalf of the governor of the state of Texas to trying to determine the value of using helicopters in evacuation and rescue missions in the United States was significant because we have that all over the United States of America now. I think your institution there was one of the pioneers that did that. That’s another positive aspect. I tell my grandchildren, when I see a helicopter flying patients, “That’s what your granddad used to do.”

RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

ES: Yes. I’ve asked Jim that I be one of the members of the team that goes to Vietnam, Can Tho, wherever, and I would jump at the opportunity of going to Vietnam and assisting your school. I’m always trying to campaign here and do that and especially to Can Tho where your medical school affiliation is and that’s where I evacuated almost every patient that I evacuated on my first tour. And probably some of the children or grandchildren or great grandchildren that are there in that school today are there because I flew them and our crew flew them.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam the country, today?

ES: It’s still a suppressed country. I’m glad that there are some innovative business people there trying to help the country recover. I think it would be a wonderful tourist place. Again, I think the people could support that quite well, and they’d do a very good job. Vietnam was a beautiful country. I’ve been in places where probably no American’s been. One place I, on several occasions when I was the Executive Officer for the 61st Med Battalion, I’d carry scrounge medical supplies down to a leprosarium right on the edge of the Red China Sea south of Qui Nhon and visit a nunnery there that had a leprosarium and they were very industrious and built absolutely beautiful tile flooring. I wish I could have gotten crates and crates of that stuff home. Just gorgeous artwork that they performed there in their final stages of being a leper. There are other places, small community villages, compounds that I’ve walked in after disasters have occurred and again, how needy those people were, but how resilient they were because you’d go there the next week and they looked like they were back to a normal schedule trying to do the best they could even though they were being beat around the head and shoulders that they were ever supported by the American government. I would love to go back and maybe even find some people that were there that I saw on a daily basis.
RV: For young people today, what would you teach them about the Vietnam War? What would you tell them about Vietnam?

ES: Don’t allow the American government to stage unnecessary war. That’s the only thing that I could say that would probably be repeated by many people.

RV: It has been. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our discussions?

ES: No.

RV: We’ll end the interview now. Thank you very much, Colonel Sylvester.