Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Curt Knapp on the 14th of May 2001 at approximately 1:30. We are in the interview room at the Special Collections Library at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Sir, thanks for being here. Why don’t we go ahead and begin with a brief discussion of your early life? If you would tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Curtis Knapp: Alright, Steve. I was born in Logan, Ohio, southeastern part of Ohio. I grew up in Michigan. In Fenton, Michigan, another small town. Then I went to college at Ohio State for two years.

SM: How long did you live in Logan, Ohio before you left?

CK: Not very apparently. I don’t remember when we left there. When my parents left it was probably only a year or so. We moved to Columbus, Ohio. That’s where my dad worked. My grandparents and their family were still in Logan. I go back to Logan every winter, every Christmas and every summer. It was great.

SM: You mentioned you dad worked in Columbus, what did he do?

CK: He worked for B&O railroad as a clerk.

SM: How about your mom?

CK: She was a housewife.

SM: No employment except a lot of work.

CK: Not then she didn’t. When they got divorced of course, she did work yes.
SM: Did your father have any military experiences?

CK: They both met in the military in WWII. They met in Maryland. There was a big Army base there. They were both in the band. He was the band director. She was the only one that wanted to play the bass drum apparently. That’s the WWII experience they had was at this base in Maryland.

SM: Did they play with any of the big band features of the time? Glenn Miller Band of the Air Corps of course, Benny Goodman and a bunch of others were involved in band playing during the war. Do you know if they were ever able to meet with and play with any of the big names?

CK: I don’t recall that. They were in more of a marching band, like a post ceremonial band. It wasn’t much of a dance band.

SM: Mostly marching music.

CK: Right.

SM: Parades and stuff. Ok. Did they encourage music and musical interest for you?

CK: Yes. So, therefore I became a drummer because my dad was. That really helped me out I think getting through high school and getting to know everybody in the high school. I ended up being a class president in high school because I knew a lot of people. I was outgoing. Being a drummer helped that. I really enjoyed that. I’m glad that he turned me on to music like that. I still like music today.

SM: Do you still play?

CK: Nope.

SM: What else did you enjoy about school? In particular perhaps high school?

CK: Well, I liked sciences mostly, rather than humanities. Sciences you could actually see something happen. The only thing I liked about English or French maybe would be the teachers. I didn't like history at all until I became part of it. I also was athletic. I was a football player and a little bit of a basketball player. Being a class president helped me get a really rounded education I thought because saw a little bit of everything and knew a lot of different people.
SM: Was there anything during your high school experience that attracted you to flying? Or what was it that attracted you to flying?

CK: Good question. My mother bought me a penny a pound ride when I was about eight at the local airport. I think that’s when I was hooked was about then. That’s when you start remembering things anyway. I liked flying; I liked being in the air. I could build model airplanes and almost have the airplane and be able to fly it so to speak. SO, I built a lot of plastic models, I got that from my mother. So, I started very early wanting to fly.

SM: The penny a pound flight, do you remember what kind of airplane you flew in?

CK: We have a picture of it and I believe it is a Piper Tri-pacer. Do you know what that is?

SM: Nuh-huh.

CK: NO. Ok. It’s a pretty old airplane now. It’s fabric covered and it’s got a single high wing, tricycle landing gear. You see very few of them around now.

SM: Canvas, tricycle?

CK: Yes. Tricycle. It’s one of the first ones that was like that.

SM: Ok. Wow. Did you have any brothers and sisters growing up?

CK: I have a half sister. She’s eight years younger than I. We’ve split up I don’t see much of her now.

SM: So, you kind of grew up as an only child for a few years?

CK: Yes, a few years. I kind of consider myself an only child. Although I did live with that family grouping for a while where there were actually two children yes.

SM: Did your parents foster your interest at all in flying? You mentioned they of course bought the penny a pound flight for you. They must have of course helped you with your model airplane purchases.

CK: It was mostly my mother that did that. Dad was a musical influence on me. My mom was really an airplane nut. She liked airplanes too. I don’t know that she flew much, but she knew Jackie Cochran for some reason. She’s some kind of a big name in pioneer women’s aviation. I don’t know how she knew her. My mother was a nut anyway. Just loved to do stuff like that.
SM: Well, what year did you graduate from high school?


SM: So, just after your high school graduation, probably the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred.

CK: I believe it did. Yes.

SM: Were you very aware of political events when you were in high school and just after?

CK: I believe I was aware, but I still was pretty naive about it. I still believed everything that the government told us. I was really straight. So, yeah I believed at that time that, that ship was attacked in the Gulf and we had a right to be there. So, the North Vietnamese were bad guys doing that. That’s what I believed at that time yeah.

SM: Well, how about some of the more tumultuous events just prior to your graduation?

CK: JFK’s assassination was the one yeah.

SM: Kennedy was assassinated in November of ’63. How did that affect you as a young person and how did it affect your school? What happened?

CK: Well, we just couldn’t believe something like that would happen. We all, even if you didn’t like that guy you just couldn’t believe that would happen. That’s not the way dissent gets taken care of in this country. Naturally we were all glued to the TV and we were all mourning for a while. It cut everything. Everything gets cut right there. Everything. It’s before and after JFK’s assassination. Things got different then. Things got real serious. We were pretty happy go lucky I would think growing up then. Then things changed. That’s how it affected me. It was that we got a little more serious and down to Earth I guess.

SM: That was a tenor that changed in your school as well, amongst your fellow students?

CK: I felt that, yes.

SM: Interesting. How would you break down student support or like or dislike of Kennedy? You mentioned whether you liked him or not. Did you know students that didn’t like Jack Kennedy as President?

CK: Did I know students that didn’t like him?
SM: Was he a popular president amongst your student body?
CK: Yes. He was popular among the student body. He was.
SM: How about what was going on in Vietnam? Was that much discussed in high school say in you civics class or political science and social science classes? Of course we had an on-going advisory effort all the way through the Kennedy administration. Was Vietnam even a topic of discussion in high school for you?
CK: It must not have been that much; because I don’t remember it being discussed that much. I somehow knew that I was going to go over there. I don’t recall it being discussed that much. You would think that it would.
SM: Well, maybe not. Again it’s pretty early ’63-’64. When did you get an idea that you might be going to Vietnam?
CK: Because I was going to be a pilot and that’s where pilots went. In fact, I wanted to go there because that’s how you get flying experience really. Really intense flying experience anyway versus just doing circles in the sky over here. I wanted to go. I just wanted to be a jet pilot.
SM: Did they have Junior ROTC at your high school?
CK: Not at the high school. No. Civil Air Patrol was all we had. Certainly I did join that. Although we didn’t fly very much, we’d at least learn military jargon and discipline etc.
SM: What were your plans upon graduation from high school? Did you know yet what you were going to do?
CK: I was living in Michigan, but my father was still in Columbus, Ohio. I was going to go to Ohio State for four years and get a degree and therefore join the Air Force and become a pilot. Either that or I would get into the Air Force Academy. It turns out I didn’t quite make it. I wasn’t as physical as some of the other guys that did make it. So, that was my plan to be the hottest pilot in the Air Force.
SM: When you started school the next semester did you know what you wanted to have as a major?
CK: Oh, yes. I was aeronautical and astronautical engineering was my major for at least two or three semesters until I found out that was really tough. My problem in high school was that I was not straight A’s but at least B+. I could do that without
studying so much. We had a study hall so I could catch up on all my homework and I
had to have that because I would have band practice or sports after school. So,
fortunately I picked up on stuff very easily in high school and I didn’t study much.
Therefore I didn’t have study habits. Well, you get into college folks, its study habits is
what you’ve got to have. They overload you with a lot of stuff. They have to. Well, sure
fine. That was my problem was that I didn’t really know what I was getting into. I only
lasted two years at Ohio State.

   SM: When did you realize you weren’t going to be able to continue with college?
   CK: That was probably about the middle of the second year that I realized that it
   wasn’t going to happen. It’s too bad. It’s too bad.
   SM: At what point did you start looking at the military services and what options
   were available to you getting out of college with just two years?
   CK: Yeah, that was about that same time. About the middle of my second year
   when I realized that I might not make a career in the Air Force. I only wanted to fly. I
didn’t want to do anything else. I didn’t want to be a typist, didn’t want to be a
mechanic. I just wanted to be a pilot. About the second year was when I realized that I
was going to have to do it a different way. I was going to have to learn how to fly a
different way.

   SM: While you were in school, let’s see this was ’64-’65 and ’65-’66, what kind
   of activities were going on at the campus concerning Vietnam?
   CK: There were some protests then. I don’t think Kent State happened until
   afterward. That was in ’70 I think. Anyway, we’ll have to look that one up. There were
   some protests on the campus. I do know that I was wearing my ROTC uniform a lot. So
   therefore, even though I was curious about how they saw those things, because these
   people were real passionate about it. I couldn’t participate because I had already
   committed myself to being on the other side, I suppose. So, I could see that it was getting
   more intense, but I had to stand back from it.
   SM: When you say protest, what were they protesting at that point?
   CK: They were protesting not so much military involvement I think, but the
   establishment is what they called it. The administration of the University itself and how
   it interacted with the military so to speak. I guess there were research grants of some
kind taking place in the University that were somehow tied with the military. I remember that they took over the administration building at least once while I was there. I guess that was the rage at the time. If you wanted to get yourself heard, you went up there and sat down. That certainly beat killing somebody over it. I do remember those things happening but I had to stand back.

SM: What about teach-ins? Did you live on campus?
CK: No. Lived off campus. That was another reason that I could go there because I could afford to live with my father in his apartment. Yeah, I didn’t live on campus.

SM: Did you ever go to a teach-in?
CK: No. After a while I wasn’t even going to my own classes (laughs).
SM: What about the draft issue? Was that discussed much? Were there draft card burnings and things like that?
CK: I suppose there were. I don’t recall the actual, physical burning. I didn’t care because I knew I wasn’t going to get drafted, I was going to join. I was 2-A at the time, 2-S. Even if I had gotten 1-A, which I did eventually didn’t matter. Were there draft card burnings? Probably, but I don’t recall seeing any.
SM: They weren’t as prominent. What did you think about the anti-war activity? You’re the same age as these people and you’ve made a conscious choice. I’m going to join the service and I’m going to go over there. What did you think about the stuff that these people were doing back here?
CK: They made a conscious choice too. I’m sure they looked at both sides. They probably grew up not in a military type of a setting that I had, but they made a conscious choice too. They certainly had to look at it from both sides and what did I think about it? Well, I thought they must have had a lot of fun. It looked like they were the type of people that had fun anyway. Even thought the people that were actually leading any of these things were very serious. These people weren’t dressed as smartly and sharply. Therefore they looked a little different. Does that answer your question?
SM: Yeah, it does. Let’s see what were your thoughts when you were leaving? I guess you should describe for us how you came upon the Army and basically made the decision that yeah, that’s the place you’ve got to go.
CK: That one was a decision I didn’t really want to make because it had always been Air Force for me. When I realized that I couldn’t have the Air Force, then I guess I had to make the best of whatever I could do. I knew I would probably be a pretty good helicopter pilot. I knew that’s what it would be. Sure, they gave some of us fixed-wing chances. I didn’t think I’d get that. There weren’t very many. I thought well, I’ll do as well as I can in the Army. My poor dad. They didn’t want me to go. The whole family didn’t want me to go. You know they were shooting down four or five helicopters a day and you’d see it on the news. I felt confident that I would be a good pilot. Turns out a little differently.

SM: Well, that’s an interesting question and point you make. You had heard about pilots getting shot down in the news. How much had you kept up with what was going on? Events in Vietnam in Southeast Asia for the two years you were in college?

CK: I kept up only with the practical nuts and bolts of it. Like how many were shot down, what kind of equipment we had over there. Whether we were increasing, etc. What units were over there. I didn’t really look at the political aspect of it so much, because when you’re in the military it doesn’t really matter that much. They tell you to go, you go. They tell you how to fight the war, that’s the way you do it. You may not be happy about it. I didn’t think that seriously about it.

SM: When you were looking at the news what did you think about that constant reiteration, the body count?

CK: What did I think about body count? Well, I suppose that was all they had because in WWII you had to take over territory and hold on to it. Whereas, we were fighting Vietnam a little bit differently. They would take a territory and give it back so therefore the only thing leftover was body count. I thought that if North Vietnam being the smaller country would be the worst for a body count type of thing. I thought well, gee that must be the way they want to do it. That must be the best way to do it. I’m sure, eventually they’re going to run out of guys. We weren’t fighting China because they don’t run out of guys. That’s what I thought. I guess, body count, the purpose of war was to kill the other guy, so let’s kill more of them than they kill of us. That’s the way I thought about it.
SM: Of course, there’s two sides to the body count. There’s the enemy side and eventually they’ve got to run out of bodies, but there’s also the friendly side. Did it ever bring into stark relief the fact that those are Americans and I might be one of them one day if I go over there?

CK: No. I didn’t think that because I was young and dumb. I didn’t think they’d get me. If they did it would be over like that anyway, that’s what I would think. So, no I didn’t think of it that way. I didn’t think that gee, that could be me. No. Not until I got over there, did I realize that there’s two sides of it.

SM: What did your parents say, your mom and your dad both when you made the conscious decision to stop going to college and into the Army as an aviator?

CK: I don’t remember exactly the words they said, but I know they were real disappointed. Not so much that I wanted to be an aviator because they knew I was going to be that anyway, but the fact that I wasn’t going to get a college education. I think they were real disappointed about that. Of course, they didn’t like the fact that I was going into a war zone. I could be a pilot somewhere else. I could understand how they felt, but I don’t remember exactly what they said about it.

SM: At that point, you’re making your own decisions.

CK: Well, pretty much considering that it looked like I wasn’t going to get a college degree or I wasn’t going to work that hard to get one.

SM: What kind of promises were you made when you went to see the Army? What did the recruiter or whoever tell you?

CK: The recruiter of course, promised me that I would get flight school. Assuming that I passed some rudimentary tests and passed basic training, which I knew I could do. And I did. That was all I was promised that I would get flight training. I was also told that if I did flunk out of flight training I’d be a ground pounder for the rest of that duration. It would only be three years I think, two or three years.

SM: Is that what your obligation was signing up to be a pilot? Was just two or three year obligation?

CK: When I originally signed up, you do it in two parts. The first part is when you sign up, when you join, you sign up for three years. But once they train you to be a
pilot, your total obligation is four years, that’s the total. That’s why they have to
discharge you and then you re-enlist.
SM: So, you weren’t promised anything that the Army didn’t make good on?
You got everything the Army promised you?
CK: I believe I got everything the Army promised me. Yeah.
SM: When did you enter the active Army and where did you go to basic training?
CK: Ft. Polk, Louisiana was where I was sent. Ok. Sure, it’s also called Ft. Puke, Louisiana and diseaseville. So that’s where most of the pilots to be from the mid-west were sent.
SM: When was that?
CK: That was September of ’66.
SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe your first experience on active duty?
Getting down there?
CK: The first real experience is you walk into the office down there and plop
your paperwork on there and already they get on your butt about don’t lean on the desk
and don’t do this and that. You’re going, ‘Oh man, what have I gotten myself into?’
These guys are just corporals. My initial reaction was, hey guys I’ve already been
through all this with Civil Air Patrol and I know all this stuff. Let’s just go play the
game. No. One of the things about the Army is they treat you as the lowest common
denominator. So, therefore I was one of the lowest also. I had to play along with that.
That lowering really shocked me and I wasn’t real happy about that.
SM: What were some of your more memorable experiences from basic?
CK: I don’t know about memorable. There wasn’t really much. Sure I
remember it, there wasn’t really that much memorable about it other than I was again
picked out to be a type of a leader. Because I had had two years in college. They make
you a student leader type of thing. They call it platoon guide. The drill sergeant if he,
anything just minor things, he would go to you first rather than the whole group. So I
was a platoon guide and I had my own room and I thought that was pretty good.
Considering everybody else was out in the squad bay. I didn’t have KP, which was fine
because I’d never heard any good things about KP. That part was memorable. After a
while the drill sergeant had trust in me. I felt good about that. I said Ok. now let’s just
get through this.

SM: The fact that you had two years of college give you any additional rank?

Did you go in as like a PV2 or PFC?

CK: No everybody was private E-1.

SM: What were you trained on in terms of weapons out at the basic training?

CK: In basic training, the only thing we got were M-14. They qualified us in
grenades but I missed that day. I don’t know. I never threw a grenade. Basic training
was M-14 only.

SM: When did you get introduced to the M-16?

CK: That was in flight school. They introduced us to that. It was a fairly brief
introduction and live firing. Yeah. I’m pretty sure it was flight school they did all that. I
don’t know why. You would think they would do that in basic huh?

SM: Well, it’s still kind of early. ’66 is still kind of early.

CK: I remember firing it, but now I don’t know whether it was basic or flight
school.

SM: But you did eventually get introduced to it?

CK: Yes, I did. It was mostly an introduction. I knew I wasn’t going to have to
carry one. In fact, they told us not to fire it on full automatic. Well, rrrr. We did.

SM: Of course.

CK: Because we could.

SM: What did you think about the two weapons and which one did you prefer?

CK: I certainly would prefer the M-16, because I’ve never had the problems with
it like I have heard that soldiers did. I never had the problems with it and it was certainly
a lot lighter than carrying an M-14. That’s how I felt. I knew I wasn’t going to carry one
so, I’ll put up with whatever it is.

SM: Did you feel that your basic training in particular was effective? Did you
feel like this was the best they could do with the time they had?

CK: Yes, I was looking past it anyway. It was just something I had to get
through. Everybody should go through that and have a basic understanding of what the
Army’s about and what we’re going to have to do. Later on is AIT and I didn’t go through that. Certainly I could see that AIT would have been better than basic camp.

SM: How did the instructors in basic training enforce discipline if someone got out of line?

CK: Well, it was intimidation mostly. It’s funny how, you would think that a human being if he doesn’t want to be in a certain place he’ll just get up and walk away. But you couldn’t do that there. Therefore, there was a lot of yelling. There wasn’t much physical contact. I didn’t really see people get slapped around or kicked or hit. It was mostly yelling.

SM: For actual physical punishment just push-ups and that kind of stuff?

CK: Yes, make you feel miserable.

SM: Nobody had to be taken back behind the barracks and taught a lesson?

CK: I never saw that. Maybe there was. I don’t know. I never saw it.

SM: What was the most challenging aspect of basic training for you?

CK: Challenging, well, I was physically out of shape. That was a challenging aspect. Physically being able to go through all these exercises that they had. Fortunately I made it.

SM: When did you get orders for flight training? Was it just after you were finished?

CK: I suppose it was just before. When they could see I was actually going to make it through basic. I don’t know when the actual orders came through because I do know that I did sit at Ft. Polk for at least two or three weeks after I got through with basic training.

SM: After you finished your basic training, where did you go for your warrant officer training?

CK: Ok. That was Ft. Wolters, Texas. It was just before Christmas. In the Army it’s funny this way. They have to send you some place even though they don’t need you right there. There were about two busses that went from Ft. Polk to Ft. Wolters, Texas. We piled out of the buses. They sit us up there and harass us there for a while and then they said get out of here and you’re off for Christmas is what it was. Then we
had to back to where we were going. I think we went to Dallas and we all got on airplanes whereas we could have just as easily done that someplace else.

SM: So you went on Christmas Break before you actually started your training?
CK: Yes. I believe we started training in January of ’67.
SM: How long did your warrant officer training last?
CK: We had a month of pre-flight there. Where we learned mostly warrant officer stuff. Although there was also ground school training. We learned how to become a warrant officer that first month. They also kept giving us warrant officer stuff throughout flight training.

SM: Had you ever flown an aircraft yourself?
CK: I was never at the controls of an aircraft until that time. So, yeah could I even do it? Well I only knew I could.
SM: Or they could train you to do it?
CK: They could train me to do it. It turns out they do. They train 19 year old kids how to fly a helicopter.

SM: What did you find most difficult in that initial experience in your warrant officer and ground school training? Anything in particular?
CK: Again it was the B.S. that they forced upon us. I suppose they were trying to weed out the weaklings. I knew I was going to make it. So the hard part was to keep from saying come on come on let’s just go. Let’s just do it. Come on.
SM: Because you’d already gone through that in basic?
CK: Yeah. I knew I was going to fly. My whole life I was going to fly.
SM: After that first 30 days that’s when you went into the initial flight school?
CK: Yes. After that it’s called moving up to the hill. Where we physically went into our barracks up there. We were called primary. That was called primary when we moved up there.
SM: What were you trained on in primary flight?
CK: What was I trained on? You mean the type of helicopter?
SM: Yes.
CK: Well, there were two kinds there. Mine was in answer to your question; the OH23D model probably was the one they had there. It was made by Hiller. It’s a three
seater, but normally only two people would fly in it. A bubble type of a canopy. It’s a fairly old helicopter. Piston powered. The other kind they had there was called the TH-55. In civilian terms it’s the Hughes 300. They were just getting those in. I didn’t fly those.

SM: Was this a higher speed aircraft, the H300?
CK: Not really. It was just cheaper. It was lightweight and the Army could get a bunch of them because they got a deal. It wasn’t that much faster I don’t think.

SM: How long were you in that primary flight before you actually got to sit in an aircraft and do something?
CK: Not very. I think we were flying the first week we got up there. Well, yeah we’d been sitting down on the bottom of that hill for a month in pre-flight watching them go over. So we were jazzed. I think we started flying pretty much right away when we got up to primary.

SM: What was your first flight like? What do you remember most?
CK: I do remember that I was very tense. Flying a helicopter is harder than an airplane. There are actually three sets of controls you have to maneuver. I do know that I was over controlling a lot. It’s called wiping out a cockpit because you’re moving your controls all around. I did that a lot. Fortunately, the instructors were civilians for that first few weeks there. They were getting paid to do that. They put up with a lot. They were pretty laid back anyway. I remember being tense and way over controlling, which is the norm.

SM: When you actually got into the flying aspects of your training what was the most challenging thing about flying a helicopter? Learning to fly a helicopter?
CK: Certainly the most challenging part, anybody will tell you this, is learning how to hover. You can fly a helicopter. You can jump in and fly a helicopter, you could. Hovering is a little bit different. You are moving all three controls at once. Once you move one, in order to stay in that place you’ve got to move the other two. You’re thinking a lot. A lot of things are going on all at once. That’s the most challenging thing is learning how to hover.

SM: Do you remember how long? What was that experience the hover training?
What was that experience like for you?
CK: It got better and better. I know that I was tense. You would grab the stick with your right hand so hard it felt like you were holding the helicopter up. That was the funny part. After a while you get good enough to where you can fly with your fingertips. I remember that and I remember being real tense. Of course, when you first solo, then that’s insane. You wonder how that instructor would know that you could actually fly that thing by yourself. At least you’re always looking forward to it. It’s almost a competition. You’ve got 30 guys in this class that are out there flying together. You want to be the first one. You’re trying real hard even though what it takes is experience. It just takes to get out there and keep doing it. It’s not so much how hard you try. It’s how much experience you’ve got.

SM: Do you remember how long it took you to hover on your own?

CK: I don’t remember how long I took to hover. It took me about 12 hours to solo. I had learned how to hover by then. Pretty much I could keep it within a 20-foot area I guess (laughs).

SM: You soloed on your 12th hour?

CK: About 12th, yeah. They told us it would be about 10. Guys were starting to solo at 10. That’s when you knew, ‘All right, it’s coming up.’

SM: What was that like? Your first solo flight?

CK: Oh, man. That was really super. Really super. First of all, that’s the exciting thing of, ‘Ok, he’s unbuckling and he’s getting out. This is it. Oh boy.’ Then you’ve just got to remember to do all they tell you to do. And it works and I’m real stiff. I’m afraid to look around. You look one way and then you lose reference of where you were. I remember that I was pretty tense. I was also thinking that hey, I’m going to do this. Let’s just do it. The training they give you is pretty good. My solo was exciting and successful. And they threw you in the pool afterwards, which is one of the traditions.

SM: Do you get wings at that point?

CK: You get solo wings they called them. They’re an unofficial type of cloth wing that you sew on your hat. Yes, I still have mine.

SM: How long was primary flight?

CK: Let me think here, I would say three, three and a half months.
SM: While you were one word that training, you mentioned that the first instructors were civilian; did you eventually get military instructors?
CK: Yes, we did.
SM: Were they Vietnam Veterans?
CK: Yes they were.
SM: Did they talk about their experience?
CK: Yes, they did talk about it. Yes, we were in awe of them because they had done it and come back to tell us about it. Their flight suits were faded. They had camaraderie among them. That’s what we wanted to be. It was a little hard to talk with them about it because there was this rank difference between us. We were supposed to be warrant officer candidates, lowly warrant officer candidates. It was a military rank type of thing. I didn’t talk with mine much about hey, what was it like. They did tell us look, you’ve go to be real smooth on the controls. That was the big thing that they put over on us. You’re going to have to be real smooth on these controls. Because of what they learned in Vietnam.
SM: How about special hazards in Vietnam? Specific things that as a helicopter pilot, you’ve got to be careful of these things when you’re flying over there. Did they ever talk about that kind of stuff?
CK: There were certain techniques that they would tell us about. Such as what I said in and also how the performance of the helicopter is going to be degraded from what it is over here because the air is going to be thinner and more humid. Plus, you’re going to be overweight and somebody’s going to be shooting at you. I suppose that would be hazards. That’s about the only hazards that I can think of.
SM: How about safety training and autorotations and stuff like that? How did that go for you? What did you think of that kind of stuff?
CK: Well, they train and train, and train you on safety and autorotations. After a while I got really tired of it. We all did. We just got tired of it because they did it all the time. Of course, it was for a reason because the engine quits a lot. Yeah, it saved my butt once when my engine quit over there because you don’t have time to think about it when this happens. There’s this certain procedure you’ve got to do. You’re looking for places to land and you’re not thinking about what controls you’re doing. So, yes. They
did this over and over again. They’ll chop the throttle on you, surprisingly, a lot. I think it was good training, looking back on it. We just got tired of it then. And sure that could be scary. I can’t imagine being an instructor and having this kid over here landing a helicopter with no engine. He’s only done it a couple times and he’s got your life in his hands. They did a good job.

SM: Could you discuss quickly the procedures you were taught to deal with that when you were going throughout that training? Because you didn’t go through simulator?

CK: No. There was no simulator. That’s right. Interesting point huh? Well, Ok. They taught you how to do this on the ground as far as paperwork I guess. I don’t know what you call that. The blackboard. In the air, the deal is that when the engine quits there’s a clutch in the transmission that lets go. The engine can stop completely but the blades will keep going and that’s the main point. Yes, you’re falling like a coke machine. But the blades are still going around and there’s a way to manipulate the controls to keep the RPM up on the blades. The blades have to keep a certain RPM up. If they slow down then they’ll overload and they fold up like this. In order to do that you drop what they call the collective. Which is the one control on your left that controls all the pitch in all the blades at the same time. So, now you’re falling and you’re picking out a spot and you’re keeping your air speed up. Once you’ve picked your spot you get one chance. The chance is you have to pull back on the cyclic stick, the stick in between your knees, to slow down your forward air speed. At the same time, you’re kicking in a right pedal. It’s hard to remember because you just do it automatically after a while. Then after you flare, it’s called a flare and just before you fall out of that flare, you start pulling in the pitch on the collective. You start pulling in whatever pitch you have. The blades are going to slow down but that’s ok. You’ve only got about two or three feet left to go anyway.

SM: Hopefully.

CK: So, you just cushion it down.

SM: Hopefully, you only have two or three feet.

CK: Hopefully, that’s all you do.

SM: But the timing of the flare is what’s important though?
CK: That’s pretty important. The timing of the flare and the timing of the pitch pull is too, although you could survive if you mess this up. Yeah, the flares a good one.

SM: Do you remember about how many times they nailed you on autorotation during your primary?

CK: In primary. Probably wasn’t that many. It was probably only maybe 40 or 50. It was probably only 40 or 50. That was a full altitude autorotations. You also have to do hovering autorotations where you’re just hovering at three feet and the engine quits. You have to do that a little bit differently. It’s just a little bit different. That one they probably do only 20 times.

SM: But if you’re three feet off the ground how can you do anything?

CK: Well, you can. For one thing, when the engine quits there’s torque in that helicopter. When the engine quits now you’re going to start spinning around. You’ve got to stop that. Then, once you do that you’ve got to pull up on all the pitch right away, just about. The difference between that is that in a full altitude autorotation…I think you remember that when I said your engine quits at full altitude you’ve got to drop the collective, right. When you’re [doing a] hovering autorotation you can’t do that. You have to know what the difference is. If you drop the collective in a hovering autorotation you would definitely fall and spread the skids and probably mess up the helicopter and yourself real bad. If the engine quits while you’re hovering and you hold onto that for just about a quarter of a second or so and then start pulling up on the collective, you’ll be all right.

SM: Interesting.

CK: That was fun.

SM: Reliving some old memories. Were there any accidents?

CK: Well, yeah I’m sure there were.

SM: For your class?

CK: I don’t recall any in my class.

SM: No one screwed up the autorotation at three feet?

CK: I’ve got pictures of helicopters being towed in or a picture anyway, that somebody did. I think it was in another class. I don’t recall anyone in our class doing it. There were over a hundred guys in our class. I don’t remember it.
SM: You said they’d do surprises where they’d just cut your engine. The first
time did they at least give you a warning? ‘Ok. We’re going to do it this time and this is
what you’re going to do, I’m going to cut the engine, you’re either going to either drop
the collective if you’re at altitude or pull up on the collective if you’re three feet up,’?

CK: The first couple three times they told you they were going to do it. After
you got to be fairly good at doing it and they trusted you that you probably would not
crash the airplane then they started pulling surprises.

SM: Was there anything else that was real memorable about your primary flight
experience?

CK: Got in a car wreck once. It wasn’t my car of course. It was a Corvette. We
had the two warrant officer candidates and the two girls sitting our lap. Let’s see
memorable. Oh, ok, I’ll tell you one. Grundy Day. General Grundy takes over charge of
the troops one day. I think you and I were talking about it once how they can’t kick us all
out because they needed warm bodies in the cockpit. As long as we all stuck together,
the whole class stuck together we could do some pretty outrageous stuff. Well, Grundy
Day was one day where the candidates took over. We would all dress uniformly, but in a
weird uniform. Like our flight jackets were inside out, so the orange side was out. We
wore a left boot, right sneaker. We had our boxer shorts on the outside. Our tie was over
our shoulder, Roy Roger’s style. There was a whole thing about it. We just would do
crazy things for about a half a day. As long as we all did them together. It wasn’t
destructive, they put up with it about a half a day. They being administration. That we
could get away with. That was interesting to see us assert ourselves for once. Of course
nobody got passes that weekend, but hey, we got away with it. Grundy Day was a big
tradition at that time. I understand that our class was the last one to do it, because the
administration just got tired of it.

SM: So, they don’t have any more Grundy Days?

CK: That’s the way I understand it now. That was when we were first there.
Classes that were coming in per month after that didn’t have Grundy Days. After we left
I don’t know what happened, but I think ours was the last Grundy Day. Class 67-15.
SM: 67-15? Last Grundy Day. Was it a pre-arranged day that in the training it
was supposed to happen or you guys just collectively said, ‘Let’s do it today,’?
CK: It was pre-arranged at least a couple of weeks in advance because we had heard about it from other classes ahead of us. That much of it was pre-arranged. Of course, administration was not supposed to know about it ahead of time. It was a surprise to them.

SM: The whole time you were in primary, no one screwed up, no one broke an aircraft? No one crashed? No one got killed?

CK: Not that I know of. Not that I recall. People got kicked out for doing things that were apparently unsafe or instructors could see that they weren’t going to be a good pilot.

SM: What kind of things do you remember?

CK: Not progressing satisfactorily. I don’t know if it was anything specific. Maybe not picking up this autorotative technique soon enough. I had also heard rumors. There were three students to each instructor. I had heard rumors that some instructors that was a lot of work, so they just wash one of them out. Then they only have two guys to work with, see? It kind of makes sense in a way, but hey that poor guy that got washed out was probably an ok pilot. I had a buddy of mine tell me that happened to him. He fortunately wasn’t washed out; he was just set back a class. People were set back a class maybe 10 or 12 percent of our original class would be set back. Then maybe only 5 percent would actually wash out. I’m just grabbing those numbers out of my head, but it’s close.

SM: How many people were in your original class about?

CK: That’s a good question. A hundred and some in my original class.

SM: What did you do after you finished primary?

CK: We had about a week or so off, then we reported to Ft. Rucker, Alabama for advanced helicopter training.

SM: What did you do there?

CK: There were basically two things we did there. First of all, we had to learn how to fly on instruments. We had to learn how to trust the instruments. Again, saved my butt. We hated the training as you can imagine. You can’t peek outside the helicopter. You have to only focus on the instruments. They make it physically impossible to look outside the helicopter. So, that was tough training to do. Plus you had
to learn how to fly a different kind of helicopter. It was called an H-13 Sioux. S-O-U-I-X. You see those on the TV show *M*A*S*H*. That’s the kind they taught us how to fly instruments in. That was a double whammy. Instruments and a new helicopter. We did that for at least a month, but we got a tactical instrument ticket out of it and confidence to be able to fly in instrument conditions. Which was really worth it when I look back on it. The second thing we did was learn how to fly the Huey. Once you transition into the Huey and learn how to fly that, then it carried on to military training or aviation training that you were going to use supposedly in Vietnam. Combat training I guess you would call it. Those were the things we did in advanced.

SM: In the instrument-training phase did you ever actually fly into weather?

CK: Not during the training part, no. We were always dual. We were always with another instructor. You’re always with an instructor. The point wasn’t to fly into weather. The point was to learn how to do it. We also by the way did have Link trainers. Ground trainers. We took ground training for that. A Link trainer, which is kind of fun to me to see that now. It had been modified to fly like a helicopter. That was a lot cheaper. We did have some mid-air collisions at that time. The problem was that the instructor pilot sitting on the left couldn’t really see off to the right because of the way they had everything blocked off. The student pilot sitting on the right wasn’t looking out for other helicopters. Even though they had them supposedly separated in blocks of air space, we did have at least, one mid-air at that time and I’m not sure if it was our class or not. I remember hearing that the poor guys got killed because of that while I was there.

SM: Were those the only training deaths?

CK: That I know of, yes. In my class, yes.

SM: Through out your whole training experience?

CK: Yes, yes. Pretty lucky.

SM: For instance, did you do any night training where you relied pretty much on instruments?

CK: Yes. Both in instrument training and in Huey transition.

SM: What was most difficult about transitioning? First, you transitioned to the Sioux and then to the Huey. What were the kind of idiosyncratic aspects of those two aircraft that made them a challenge for you?
CK: Well, I didn’t like the Sioux personally, because it had a shorter collective and it was an older type of a helicopter. I didn’t feel comfortable in it. However, transitioning to the Huey was completely different because it was twice as big. It had a turbine engine. It had hydraulics in the controls. That was quite a big step. I didn’t care because that was what we had been pointing for all this time anyway. Alright! We finally got to fly a Huey, and it didn’t matter what it flew like, I was going to fly it. Those were the big hurdles we had to go over. It’s almost a completely different helicopter.

SM: The hydraulic aspects of the Huey, when you first got into that aircraft, did you again get into that over controlling situation because you’ve got more sensitive controls?

CK: Pretty much we did. Although there was a little trick that I had. Where you lay your right hand on your right leg and grab the cyclic with your right [hand fingertips]. Therefore, you’re really only moving your wrist versus your whole arm. You had to do that because of the hydraulics. It felt like you were holding up a wet noodle when you were holding on to the cyclic. It felt like if you let go, it would just go, ‘Whee!’ It almost would. If you let go of the cyclic while you’re flying it would start moving around and the helicopter would move around also like that. So, yes. There was a lot of over controlling. Plus it was such a much bigger helicopter. Your radius of swinging the tail was more.

SM: During your Huey training, again anything in particular that was brought up by instructors concerning flying in Vietnam? I imagine a lot of your pilots again were Vietnam Veterans.

CK: Yes, they were. They were mostly Vietnam Veterans. I suppose that’s where we learned that we would be mostly over gross weight wise. I don’t recall them giving us much individual attention. I’m sure they did. I don’t remember it.

SM: When did you know where you were going, in terms of when you were finished with flight school? With secondary and your transitions?

CK: We got our orders to our units; we were looking forward to this, what units we were going to get. This was right near the end. Maybe within two or three weeks of graduation. They can’t actually cut your orders until you’ve graduated, but you pretty much knew. They give you some kind of an indication which outfits you were going to.
I was assigned before I graduated to the 101st Airborne Division. At the time, it was based at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Some guys were, it seems to me that they were actually assigned units in Vietnam, but most of them were assigned to some kind of replacement depot in Vietnam. I think it was called 90th repel was what they called it. They suspected that they were going to; most of them were going to 1st Air Cav. I think I have a list at home somewhere were we were originally assigned. I understand that once you get to Vietnam, it could be changed by then or you could change it if you knew somebody. I was too dumb to change it. 101st? Ok.

SM: What had you heard about the unit up to that point?
CK: Only what I knew from WWII and from guys who had gone through flight training who were already NCOs. They had been in the 101st or Special Forces or real strac units, like that. They said, yeah it’s real gung ho. Real infantry oriented. So, that’s what I d’ heard about it.

SM: When your orders were cut, you were given your unit of assignment, how much time did you have between the time you graduated, to the time you reported?
CK: I don’t know, a couple of weeks anyway. I don’t know if it was a month. I think it was only a couple of weeks.

SM: How was the unit organized when you arrived there? Did you arrive with other pilots that you had trained with?
CK: We arrived on our own. It turns out I was assigned to the 2nd brigade aviation section. That was being staffed completely with people from my flight class, 6715. Even though there were only three of us. At least these guys had gone through flight training with me. I barely knew them because they were in the S’s. I was a K and they were two S’s. I barely knew them, but anyway they were just as young as I was.

SM: Was there anything else that was, I guess important from any of your training that you remember was particularly useful when you arrived in Vietnam? When you were flying in Vietnam? Was there anything special or anything that an instructor said to you? Or anything an instructor taught you?
CK: Well, that would be really neat if there was, huh? Nope. Just what I’ve already said, not to over control.
SM: When you arrived at the 101st. What were they doing at that point, the unit you were assigned to? What kind of training did you go through? How much time did you spend with them before you actually went to Vietnam together?

CK: They were building up, getting ready to go to Vietnam. Therefore, they were understaffed and they didn’t have the equipment they needed. That stuff was coming in anyway. The training we had was mostly simulating what we would do in Vietnam; in the constraints of you’re doing it in the United States. Ft. Campbell was a fairly big base because they dropped paratroopers out. You had to get out beyond that, out into the farmers fields to really get a taste of scope I guess. Of a bigger area of operation. Some of the training we did was flying out beyond the base. All I did was fly the colonel out there. Fly her around in a circle then drop him off and wait for him to talk. I don’t recall doing much really training you get your teeth into. Certainly no live fire.

SM: You were flying Command and Control, went you first arrived and that’s what you eventually flew in Vietnam? Was Command and Control aircraft?

CK: Yes. In an H-23, I must admit.

SM: An H-23?

CK: Yes. Certainly I’m sure they wanted Hueys, but all they had was H-23s. So, that’s what we did command and control in. Here in the States and when I first got over there, but we’ll get to that.

SM: How long did you spend with the 101st before you had to go to Vietnam?

CK: Let’s see, October, November, December. We went in December, so it was about two and a half, three months.

SM: What did you think about the War at that point? Had your outlook changed at all? Were you just really gung ho about getting there and doing your job?

CK: Yep. I wanted to get it over with. I’d been training for this; I’d been looking forward to it almost, all my life. Yeah, I wanted to go. I wanted to get going. I was disappointed that I had to wait here three months after all my buddies from flight school had really gotten shipped over, right out of flight school. They had a three-month jump on me.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe your trip over from the United States to Vietnam? What that was like, the atmosphere. You went by plane is that correct?
CK: Yes.

SM: So, the atmosphere on board the aircraft and your first impression upon landing and arriving in Vietnam?

CK: That’s always one that gets you huh? Everybody will tell you about the same thing, I think. Anyway, the two brigades that were still left in the United States of the 101st Airborne were the second and the third brigades. The first was already in Vietnam and it had been for a while. There was going to be some kind of a show of strength, a military exercise to show how quickly the United States could send combat troops in to a place like Southeast Asia. I’m sure this had been worked out ahead of time, but most of our equipment was boxed up and sent over there either in a ship or by other airplanes. My particular part of it was, in a C-141A cargo aircraft. We took a ¾ ton truck, a jeep and at least one trailer with some equipment in it. Also 13 personnel. There were no seats in this aircraft except for nylon web seats along the side. It was an uncomfortable flight from Pope Air Force Base, which was on the ground at Ft, Campbell, Kentucky. We flew from there to, I think we landed in Alaska, first. We got out and threw snowballs while they refueled the airplane. I don’t know if they changed crews there. Now, this is one of these places where we could back up. We actually flew from Ft. Campbell to Washington State. McCord Air Force was the name of the place we first went. When we landed there, there was no on base housing for us for some reason. They put us overnight in a motel somewhere on the outskirts of town. Thirteen GIs and we had no idea what was going on, but at least it was being paid for, that night. They dropped us off and said they’d come pick us up the next day. For some reason, I don’t know if it was a mechanical problem with the C-141 or they just needed crew rest, but anyway we spent the night at McCord Air Force Base in Washington. The next night of course, the bus didn’t show up. People at the hotel had only been guaranteed one night’s lodging, so me being in charge, so to speak. I was the ranking officer of these 13 GIs. I was a warrant officer and everybody else was enlisted. I took them all into my room. I paid cash; it was a hundred bucks out of my own pocket, just so that we could have a place to stay that night. Nobody else knew what was going on. It was kind of typical in a way. Well, you’ll get reimbursed, no problem. Well, I never did get the money back for that. Anyway the bus did come for us the second day. Took us back to McCord and we
got back on the airplane, then we went to Alaska. That was it. Got out, threw snowballs, got back in. Flew over to Japan. We did get off the aircraft there and I think we went into some kind of a terminal. We weren’t there very long, maybe a couple of hours. Got back on the airplane then we get to Vietnam. Here’s the one everybody tells you about. When they open up the door of that airplane in Vietnam, boom. It’s hot and humid and it stinks and it’s noisy because the Air Force pilot gets paid combat pay whether he sits there for two minutes or two hours. He was going to be there two minutes. He says unass the airplane, he left his engines running. Just get out. So, we got out. Here we are. I think it was Tan Son Nhut, actually where we were. It was either Tan Son Nhut or Bien Hoa, now I don’t recall where because we weren’t there very long. Anyway, it was Vietnam and I had no idea where we were. Certainly that’s the first thing that hits you. Heat, humidity, smell, noise, confusion. Welcome to Vietnam Kiddo.

SM: What did you do?

CK: What did I do? Well, fortunately there were other people there in the same boat. Somebody apparently who knew what was going on. They formed us into a convoy. We went to I think 90th Repo, 90th Replacement Depo for one night I think. I remember being there one night. Then we drove in a convoy from Bien Hoa through Saigon, to our first base which was Cu Chi, which was just north of Saigon, ten or fifteen miles. Hard to remember exactly where it was, but it was near there. That’s what we did. Certainly it was confusing and not knowing what was going on. Not knowing whether we were going to get shot right away or mortared right away or something. We didn’t even know where we were going. It was really confusing and I wasn’t wild about that.

SM: When did you arrive? What month and year?

CK: Let’s see. I probably have it right there somewhere. I’m pretty sure it was December of ’67. I might be able to give you a day, might not. We’re real close. Let’s say the first week of December ’67. Ok?

SM: Ok. December ’67. When you got there did you know where your unit was, the 101st, where the brigade was going to be stationed, headquartered whatever?

CK: We didn’t know where it was going to be headquartered I didn’t know. They did of course. All I knew was that these airplanes were coming in, maybe one every hour or so and there was supposedly somebody there meeting us who knew what
was going on. Somebody from our advanced party, they called it. I wasn’t really
arriving at the unit, but I was arriving at a place where my unit was coming in piece by
piece. It wasn’t like I was completely among strangers.

SM: How long was it until you were actually set up in your base area and flying
missions?

CK: We go to our base area at Cu Chi within a couple of days, within a day or so. But, we didn’t have any helicopters. I wasn’t flying missions for at least a week. The
only reason I got to fly those, is because I got tired of sitting around waiting for a
helicopter. I went to another unit on the base at Cu Chi. It was called the 269th Combat
Aviation Battalion. They were the headquarters unit of a couple of assault helicopter
companies. I think one of them was the 188 Assault Helicopter Company. That will
come into play later alright? Anyway, they were the Black Widows. This 269th, had a
helicopter, it was called a smoke ship. They needed a pilot. Here I was right out of flight
school and I needed to fly. They needed a pilot. Well… I got the ok from my
commander that I could temporarily go fly with these guys, the 269th. I was flying with
those guys after about a week and a half or two weeks. What was the answer to your
question, how long it took me to start flying.

SM: But you were flying for another unit?

CK: Yes (laughs).

SM: You were flying a smoke ship. What was that like?

CK: That was real interesting. First of all it was a Huey and not an H-23, which I
was going to get at my headquarters unit. It was interesting because it was a one of a
kind aircraft. We would pump oil into the hot exhaust and make a smoke screen. You
would fly a circle around the landing zone where the troops were going to be dropped off
and make a smoke screen. It was interesting that we got to fly low and slow. More or
less sticking your neck out. That was all I was trained to do, I guess. Hey, this is great.
This is what it’s all about. It was scary and it was exciting. That’s what I had joined the
Army to do. To be scared and to fly low and stuff.

SM: When you say slow, how slow would you have to fly those missions?
CK: If you fly it at 60 knots, if you do then the smoke screen on this particular
Huey was just the right consistency. If you go faster than that then the screen gets
thinned out and it’s kind of a waste of your time. We flew about 60 or 70 knots.

SM: Slow moving target?
CK: Pretty slow, yeah.

SM: How many missions in the smoke ship did you fly? Do you remember?
CK: We didn’t really count missions so much, it was hours. I probably only flew
six separate days spread out over maybe three weeks of this. Like I say, we keep track
more of hours.

SM: Did you ever get shot at while you were flying those missions?
CK: Probably. At the time, I wouldn’t have known the difference if they were
shooting at me or we were shooting at them. Certainly there was shooting going on, not
only from my helicopter but from the guys on the ground. Plus the gun ships roaring
overhead were shooting. Sometimes they would be hitting close to where we were

SM: No aircraft punctures?
CK: No punctures. No aircraft punctures while I was flying ever in Vietnam by
the way. Every helicopter I ever flew never got punctured by a bullet in Vietnam. That’s
why I say I was a lucky pilot, not a really good one.

SM: That’s is lucky. Wow. What was most different about flying in Vietnam
compared to what you had received in flight school?
CK: In flight school they set up the scenario for you, so that you would get the
most out of it I guess. It would be a controlled environment. Vietnam seemed totally out
of control to me, even though we were supposedly in control of the air, the situation was
changing all the time. Me, being a new guy I really didn’t see the big picture and I didn’t
know what was going on. Fortunately, the Huey had another pilot and the guy I had there
was experienced. He knew. That’s the big thing to me was real confusing. The situation
was constantly in flux and you had to be monitoring two or three different radio
frequencies at the same time also.

SM: What kind of radio traffic did you have to monitor during flight school?
CK: Only the tower frequency if you were going to be landing or taking off.
Other than that we didn’t listen to anything over there. I mean in flight school, yeah.
SM: That added to the confusion somewhat?
CK: Definitely.
SM: When you arrived in Vietnam very shortly after you arrived in Vietnam, TET Offensive ’68. What happened in your area when TET hit?
CK: The interesting part was, when we were sent to Cu Chi that was apparently to protect Saigon. Well, just before TET, like about near the end of January. Maybe the third week in January, they, being the headquarters MACV or wherever sent us up north to I Corps. Which is the northern most area of South Vietnam. Around the city of Hue and we were apparently supposed to protect Hue. They must have known something was going on up there. Also I think we were suppose to help the Marines at Khe Sahn was what it was. So, that’s where we were when TET hit. We were more or less in the middle of a move. Most of the unit was up north, but it was kind of scattered around. We had been in temporary places. That’s when we got hit up there. We had no idea. We didn’t know the area very well because we had only been there about a week or so.
SM: During your first month or so, what kind of interactions did you have with the Vietnamese people?
CK: During the first month or so, very, very little. I tended to stay away from them because I couldn’t tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys at that time. Maybe there wasn’t that much. The only interaction I had was during the convoy from Bien Hoa through Saigon up to Cu Chi we were told to keep the distance between the vehicles very close. Unfortunately the convoy snaked a little bit and it ended up breaking right in front of me. So, the other guys took off and I was in charge of the second half of the convoy by default. Now, I wasn’t so much interacting with those people, but I had to do something with them. I was in their country. I didn’t speak their language. I felt lost at that point. Lost mentally. I felt frustrated that I couldn’t communicate with them. Fortunately an MP came along and took us where we had to go. That’s the only interaction I had with the local populace and it wasn’t much. I was pretty standoffish only because I wasn’t familiar.
SM: Did you receive any kind of briefings when you arrived in country? Just before you left on things you can and can’t do, things you should and shouldn’t do? How well were you prepared to deal with things on the ground when you arrived in Vietnam?

CK: It must not have been very well because I don’t recall those briefings. You would think that there would have been some. I don’t remember.

SM: You mentioned earlier that it was a good thing you had a pilot with you when you were flying those smoke missions because he was aware of the bigger picture and what was going on in the bigger sense of the operations, what about the bigger picture politically and strategically? When you arrived in Vietnam what did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in that country?

CK: Boy, that’s a good question. That’s one that you’d like to see an answer to and I don’t know. The only thing I can think of is that we would have wanted the South Vietnamese to see that democracy is probably the best way to run a relatively developed country. Freedom of expression etc. Make it kind of a model of America, I suppose. We would want them to see that’s the best way of doing things that’s it. It wasn’t very much. I didn’t see much, just that.

SM: When TET hit and you’re in the middle of that move, what changed in terms of the tempo of your operations and your activities with the 101st, anything?

CK: There was an operational type of a change in that just the time TET hit was also the time the overcast hit. It was overcast all of a sudden. The ceilings were maybe 1,000 feet. You can’t safely fly at 1,000 feet because small arms fire will get you around there and lower. Therefore, we did a lot of low-level flying. Not knowing the area of operations, that was kind of hard to do. Being that low it was hard to get your bearings. So, that was one thing. We were flying a lot of course and we were getting shot at a lot. We were finally getting into contact. I hadn’t seen that much contact down in Cu Chi. Contact with the enemy. Now we were getting it because they were all over the place up there right after TET. So, the tempo picked up. We were flying a lot and it was more intense.

SM: Still, you never got a hit?

CK: No, I never did. Isn’t that amazing?
SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe some of the command and control missions that you did fly? Who would you typically fly around in the brigade scheme of things?

CK: My basic job was to fly the brigade commander. At the time, it was Colonel John Cushman. He was the one in charge when we went over. He was the brigade commander. He had usually a radiotelephone operator with him, but that was kind of hard to do with three people in an OH-23. Sometimes, usually when I did command control with him, it was just him and me. We would just throw the other FM radios in the helicopter. I would describe it as, he would have some kind of a briefing and he would know where he wanted to go. All he would tell me as, he would get in the helicopter strap in and he’d say, ‘Let’s go over there. Let’s go over to his place or let’s get airborne and I’ll show you where I want to go.’ He did a lot of that. Sometimes he would tell me specific places that I knew of. Like a certain area a certain little hamlet or something. Or a certain location of one of our units that I knew of. A lot of it was him directing me where to go, because he knew the place, but I didn’t. All we would do was we’d either go and and sit down on the ground and he would get out and talk to the commanders there on the ground or we would orbit the area and he could see what was happening. He would talk with commanders on the radio. He would either give suggestions or he would maybe try to get them some help. He’d call back for some support. That was about it during TET.

SM: Was that the norm in terms of your C&C activity?

CK: Mm-Hmm.

SM: How long did you fly for Cushman?

CK: He was there until about July.

SM: Then who did you fly for?

CK: His relief was Colonel John Hoefling. Poor Colonel Cushman. When he left was when we started getting the good helicopters. We got a LOH and we got a Huey and we got to get rid of our H-23s. So, we got some more lift capability. It was pretty much the same thing except that we would take more staff along with us in the Huey because we had room for more people back there. It was pretty much the same mission.
SM: You mentioned that you just tossed the radios in. Were those radios powered by batteries or did you hook them up to the helicopter’s power? Do you remember?

CK: The ones we threw in there the PRC 25s, P-R-C-25s were operated by batteries. There was at least one FM radio in the helicopter that was part of the system. So, it went both ways.

SM: During TET when you were flying Colonel Cushman around, the engagements or when he would go and fly around, were a lot of these ground engagements where a unit was fighting an enemy unit?

CK: Yes.

SM: Do you know who they were fighting against? Were they PAVN or were the NVA or Viet Cong?

CK: Well, it was a little bit of all of them. When we were fighting a unit I wouldn’t know exactly what unit was down there. I knew they were bad guys. Sometimes when you could see them I figured the guys in the black pajamas were VC. I don’t recall seeing NVA in such a mass that they looked like green uniforms or something. I don’t recall that. I think mostly we fought against VC, although there were a lot of NVA in the area right after TET.

SM: During those operations or subsequent operations with Colonel Cushman, did you ever have to use the C&C ship for other purposes? Medivac or things like that?

CK: Yes. Part of the C&C mission is what I had described. The other part is when the Colonel would get out at our base camp, which was called LZ-Sally. He would take care of things on the ground however he would loan me out to some of this subordinate commanders. We had three infantry battalions underneath us in the brigade. He would maybe loan me out for the rest of the day and I would do whatever this Lieutenant Colonel wanted me to do. Sometimes he would loan me out to some of their companies or whatever along down the line until I run out of people to get loaned out to. In that case I would do not only maybe a little C&C action like that, but I’d also haul ammunition or mail or something. As much as that little H-23 could do, which wasn’t much. I remember hauling at least a squad, maybe a platoon of guys off of a hill, down to the bottom of a hill across a stream so they wouldn’t have to hump all the way down...
there and get wet and all that. I did that for half a day, two guys at a time. That was an
interesting little mission that I did there. Took them across the stream and into an LZ that
they’d hacked out of the jungle on the other side. It was probably twice as big as this
room. It was just enough to get me in there and I had to back out and go get two more
guys. That was a fun mission kind of in a way because I was helping those guys out and
I know they really appreciated it.

SM: Did you ever fly ARVN soldiers around? South Vietnamese allied soldiers?
CK: Not in the H-23.
SM: How about later?
CK: Probably in the Huey we did. Although, the thing about the Huey was it had
a big radio console in the back. So, there wasn’t really a lot of room for the troops
maybe. I could haul maybe four or five guys in there. It wasn’t really a utility mission
like that.
SM: How about medevacs? Did you fly medevac very much?
CK: I wasn’t assigned to do medivacs, no. However, I did do one once. It was
really interesting because, I don’t know if we get to laugh on this or not. I don’t know
how she types HeeHee.
SM: She’ll type laughing.
CK: She’ll type laughing? Ok.
SM: Now she will.
CK: Now she will that we’re talking about it. Ok. Colonel Hoefting we were on
the ground and Colonel Hoefting was inside talking to a battalion commander somewhere
out in the field. I heard over the radios, I was sitting in the Huey. I heard one of our
units needed a medivac. Now, I never did this. My job was not to be a medivac, but the
things about this call was they had called in a medivac and he couldn’t find the place.
They had wounded guys out there, the medivac couldn’t find the place and we had just
been there. That was the key. We had just been there; I knew right where this place was.
So, I stole the helicopter (laughs). I did. It wasn’t my helicopter, it was the colonel’s
helicopter. My mind changed in that instant where you’ve go to make a decision. I could
have run in and lost 10 minutes. Well, I just cranked it up and took off. Went back and
found this place where the guy was. All I really wanted to do was drop a smoke grenade
for the medivac who was still in the area. Well, I did that but he still couldn’t get in for
some reason. I guess they were shooting or something. They’re always shooting.
Alright, I can understand. That’s his decision. If he doesn’t want to go in there, fine. I
felt bad that we had come all this way. There were wounded down there, so I landed.
Turns out they put three guys in. Three wounded GIs in the helicopter and a dog. This is
where it got my attention now. They put this dog in there. Now, I’m afraid that the dog
is going to go nuts because his handler is unconscious. He might think we’re trying to
hurt his handler or something. Well, of course, the dog did just fine. They’re trained to
do that, I guess. That was the only medivac that I pulled in Vietnam was the dog handler
and the dog.
SM: Where’d you take them?
CK: I took them to 22nd Surge at Phu Bai, which was about less than 10 minutes
away. I find out now, 33 years later that the handler died. I felt bad about that. The dog
made it and that’s unusual. Apparently they dumped a lot of dogs over there.
SM: What changed most when Colonel Cushman changed beside the aircraft?
When he left?
CK: When he left I guess it was around June or July. Well, certainly the two
commanders had different styles. Colonel Cushman was a hard charging old
infantryman. Colonel Hoefling was a little more laid back. We still got things done. I
suppose that’s what changed. I wasn’t so much on my toes. Now I can’t think of the
word that I’m trying to think of. Well, Hoefling was a little bit more laid back and yet he
still got the job done. It sure helped to have a Huey to do it.
SM: You flew again pretty much exclusively C&C missions?
CK: Pretty much exclusively, yes.
SM: Was there any difference in their leadership styles? I guess an important
question would be, how much of the radio traffic between Cushman and the ground
commanders were you privy to? Did you hear all the exchanges or just one side or none?
CK: That’s a good question. I was allowed to hear any of the transmissions that I
wanted to. I could physically do that by either manipulating switches like in the H-23 or
when we got the Huey, I could plug into the radio in the back also. I had like a Y-
adapter so that I could hear both aircraft radios and one in the back. So, yes I could hear
them. I paid attention mostly to the intercom and what the Colonel would say to me. Not so much what he would say to the troops down there.

SM: Do you recall anything from those exchanges; say from Cushman to his ground commanders anything that caught your attention? Any difficulties that they might have been having on a particular engagement? Or later on, under the second commander?

CK: No. Cushman was a pretty tough guy. He told them to get it done, to get the job done or maybe sometimes he’d tell me to land and he’d jump out and go tell them to get the job done. Whereas, Hoefting seemed to be more of, ‘Can I get some artillery for you or something like that?’ Both ways worked the way I saw it.

SM: So, the success rate of the unit under Cushman or Hoefting didn’t change?

CK: I don’t see that it changed, no.

SM: Interesting. How about the morale in the unit? How was the morale under Cushman? Did the morale change at all under Hoefting?

CK: The morale of the unit. Well, we were getting more experienced and more seasoned. We could see the end coming for us. We knew our DEROS day. We could see our date to get out was getting sooner. No, I didn’t see the morale change that much.

SM: You said your base camp pretty much stayed LZ Sally the whole time you were there?

CK: Yes.

SM: How often would you guys get mortared? What was base camp life like?

CK: I don’t recall getting mortared at LZ Sally although I’m sure we probably did. I just don’t recall it. Base camp life was pretty boring. It wasn’t so small that there was nothing to do. It wasn’t so big that you could do, like there wasn’t even a PX there until right near the end. You couldn’t really go off base unless you were on a job.

SM: Did they have Army services, libraries and that kind of stuff?

CK: Nope. LZ Sally was your podunk little backwater place at that time.

SM: How about Vietnamese people, were they allowed to do things for you guys? Hooch maids, that kind of stuff?
CK: No. In fact, I don’t recall them being allowed on the base. As close as they got were what we called the sand pits where they would fill sand bags for us. I think that was right out on the perimeter. Also, I remember at the dump, which was kind of outside the perimeter where we could back up the truck and they would unload they truck so they could get first pick of whatever we were throwing away. I don’t recall them being on the base, especially hooch maids. At this base.

SM: Any accidents or anything happen while you were there? Guys hurt, injured on the base?

CK: Doesn’t jump out at me. I think I told you in the questionnaire where I think I tripped over a tent stake one night. That’s my war wound right there on my leg. That’s it. I don’t really recall any ammunition going off or jeeps crashing or helicopters crashing anything like that on the base while I was there.

SM: How about race relations? Things like that was the base camp unit fairly cohesive? Was it showing signs of strain like going on back in the U.S. between some of the different races and what not?

CK: I didn’t see it. Although I’m sure there must have been some there. This was an airborne unit that had trained together in the States and then gone over there. They had been trained to be cohesive. I’m sure that’s the way that an infantry unit makes it and lives to tell about it is to be that way. I don’t really recall any race problems. We had a mixed aviation section. I got along with everybody. I didn’t care. W were all brothers there.

SM: In terms of recreation, did you at least get your ration of alcohol and things like that?

CK: Yes and no. Certainly we never got enough of it. You had to buy the ice from the Vietnamese. It wasn’t potable ice, so you couldn’t put it in a drink. You could only cool something around the container you had. You could buy it on the black market, but I didn’t drink that much over there. I drank a little bit. Certainly more than I do now.

SM: Any drug use that you were aware of while you were there?

CK: Yeah, there was drug use that I was aware of while I was there.

SM: What were the more popular drugs used?
CK: The popular one was marijuana. I suppose an unpopular one was heroin, but I never saw that. I only heard about it. I certainly stayed away from any little places where that was going on.

SM: What was the unit’s policy on marijuana use?

CK: You weren’t supposed to do it. You got an Article 15 for it if you got caught doing it. What could they do? Send you to Vietnam? The higher ups did not like it.

SM: Do you know if people were caught, but they weren’t necessarily punished?

CK: I know that people were caught and punished. If you were caught you were punished just about every time.

SM: Oh, really. So there wasn’t the very lax attitude towards it?

CK: Not really. If you got caught. If you didn’t get caught you could say that’s a lax attitude because it was known that there was marijuana smoking going on at that time.

SM: But there wasn’t a whole lot of looking for it perhaps?

CK: Right.

SM: Did you notice any kind of we talked about the race issue and how that was a conflict back in the States and at time was a conflict in units? How about the draft versus careerist? The draftee versus the lifer? Did you witness any concerns or issues about that?

CK: It was more of a joke. Yeah, he’s a lifer they would say. It was us versus them. See when I went into it, I was going to be a lifer. Well, then I turned myself a little bit or got turned around. So, now I was one of us I guess. It wasn’t real serious that I saw.

SM: What caused that transition for you to become a lifer?

CK: I was disappointed with the Army and the games that had to play, there was politics involved and I wasn’t a politician. I just wanted to fly. And if I stayed in the Army I’d have to go back to Vietnam I‘ll tell you that. I wasn’t going to go back. That’s another reason I would get out.

SM: You mentioned that dog on your aircraft earlier. Were there pets and stuff in the base camp? Did you have other interactions with any wild animals or anything while you were in Vietnam?
CK: Not really wilds animals. First of all, the Vietnamese considered those animals a source of protein so you didn’t see pets so much out in the populace. If you did find one, you tried to keep it because you were rescuing it. We found a kitten and so we brought it back in. I don’t know what happened to it after a couple of weeks. It probably just wandered around the base camp. We didn’t ourselves have a mascot so to speak. There was a dog platoon on LZ Sally. They had not only their own business type dogs, but they had a couple mascots too.

SM: How about snakes, spiders, scorpions?

CK: I didn’t come up with one. You know they sprayed the LZ every once in a while with some DDT or something whatever it was. We didn’t have any on the LZ that I noticed except for mosquitoes. You always have mosquitoes and flies. I wasn’t on the ground that much outside the base. So, I couldn’t tell you about snakes and spiders and tigers and stuff like that.

SM: How long did you fly up to your DEROS date? At what point did you stop flying?

CK: Probably a week and a half, two weeks. You kind of wandered around. You were lost. You were in a no man’s land. You weren’t going to fly, but you weren’t out of Vietnam either. That was kind of a weird couple of weeks, you just kind of wandered around.

SM: Was that typical for most pilots; they’d stop, that you know?

CK: It was for the ones I heard. You also hear stories where the guys flew right up until their DEROS date. I certainly didn’t want to get shot down within two weeks of leaving.

SM: Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about with regard to your in country experience?

CK: That’s a good question. Geez, I should have seen this one coming. Ok. I’m glad I went over there to see it with my own eyes. I wouldn’t go back. I hopefully learned some lessons killing people is not the way to settle differences even on a national scale. That’s the biggest thing I learned and I leaned how to fly a helicopter, that’s for sure. If I hadn’t gone over there it would have been point A to point B. Real boring stuff. So, for that I was grateful also.
SM: How long did you fly? When you came back to the U.S. This was late ’68?
What was that trip like back for you coming back to the U.S.?
CK: It was certainly strange. It was different from when we left. I saw things a
lot differently. I tended to step back and go geez, you people are just getting all upset
over nothing or you’re going about things the wrong way folks. I saw things a lot
differently when I got back over here. Also the flying was different. It was back to point
A, point B, follow all the rules. That’s when I decided to quit flying all together. It
wasn’t fun anymore. So, I haven’t flown much, less than an hour at the controls in the 33
years that I’ve been back. Now, that’s quite a big step. All the way up until then,
through my whole life I wanted to fly. I was going to be a pilot all my life. Then, once I
did it and realized that I’d had the high, I guess. Flying in Vietnam where really nothing
could be better than that. So I quit.
SM: When you got back to the U.S. what kind of reception was there waiting for
you? Especially for instance, your first arrival in an American airport?
CK: That was neat. We flew into San Francisco International on a commercial
airliner. We had been told not to take anything illegal back in our duffle bags. They
really made a point of that. I didn’t bring anything illegal back in my duffle bag. Sure
enough, your going through customs and they just open it up. Oh, well nothing there.
Merry Christmas. Thanks a lot. Oh, well. That’s ok. I felt ok about that. I didn’t bring
any guns back or something like that. I wasn’t a gun person by then. It felt good to be
back. Again it felt weird. I felt separate from the rest of the country. I felt different. I
felt almost like I was an alien kind of a thing. Not so much that I was scorned or
anything. I just felt different. Almost like I didn’t belong. That’s a strange feeling.
Yeah, it is.
SM: Did you get that feeling from anything in particular, the way you would
interact with people? They way they would respond to the fact that you were obviously
in the military with a short haircut and if you were in uniform or what not. Was that a
vibe you picked up?
CK: Well, no.
SM: Did someone say something to you specifically?
CK: No derogatory statements that I recall were made to me. It’s just that I felt that the country had changed also. Not only had I changed 180 degrees, but the country had changed. When I went over there, there was a little bit of protest and unrest, but the country was still pretty much behind us. Now, when I came back a year later, it wasn’t. I could see that. It wasn’t anything actually said to me. It was a vibe. Half of it was me looking at things differently.

SM: What was the transition like for you going from wartime Vietnam to peacetime America again?

CK: Of course, they didn’t train us to make the transition did they? What was it like? Well, fortunately I had a year left in the Army to kind of wind down. Peacetime Army or Stateside Army is a lot different. So, I was able to wind down. I went to Woodstock. That was a nice welcome home kind of a thing. I just slowly acclimated back to what we had in country.

SM: You didn’t have any difficulties?

CK: I don’t recall any difficulties.

SM: What would you say is maybe the most important way that your war experience impacted your life?

CK: The most important thing was that killing is not the way to settle your differences. There are other ways. There are two, three, four different ways to look at thing and they could all be valid. That’s one of the things that I remember.

SM: Has your outlook or did your outlook change when you got back concerning Vietnam and what we were doing there?

CK: Well, in a way not so much why we were there but why were still there and not winning it. I felt bad for those guys that were still going over there. I could see that the country’s heart wasn’t in it anymore. So, why were we still going over? That’s the way I felt about it then. It was useless at that time if they were not going to decide to go ahead and win it by whatever means it took.

SM: When the United States finally did withdraw in 1973 and then when Saigon fell in 1975, what went through your head at those points?

CK: In one way, I was thinking, ‘Finally!’ The other instance was, geez what was it all about? Why did we go over there and not win? I was feeling really sad that we
were pulling out and not being the victor. We weren’t withdrawing with honor or
whatever Nixon said. We were bugging out. We were leaving our buddies over there.
Those last few days, those scenes of us pulling out of there really, really tore at me. Not
only the human aspect of it, but we were dumping those helicopters off the edge of those
aircraft carriers. That just killed me too. So, yeah I was very sad.
SM: Is there anything else you want to discuss with regard to your experiences?
CK: Other than I’m lucky to make it back. I was not a good pilot; I was a lucky
pilot. I’m glad I got the opportunity to see it first hand and to prove to myself that I could
fly. There’s probably going to be a million other things after we turn this off that I’ll
think about. That was pretty close.
SM: Well, thank you very much. This will end the interview with Mr. Curt
Knapp.