Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with
Mr. Douglas Womack on the sixth of May, the year 2000, at approximately 9:10AM in
Las Vegas, Nevada. My clock is fast, nine o’clock AM. All right, Mr. Womack, please
begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself.

Douglas Womack: I’m Douglas Murl Francis Womack. I live at 711 Longpoint
Road in Grasonville, Maryland. I’m a retired Army aviator with service in the Active
Army and the Army Reserve. I was born at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, on 22
October 1948. I grew up in a military family and lived all over the world—Virginia,
France, New Jersey, briefly in Oklahoma while we waited for quarters in Germany,
Kansas, Alaska, Virginia again, and then Maryland after my father separated from the
service.

SM: When did you decide to go into the Army?

DW: Well, my father had tried to talk me into going into the Army in 1967 when
I graduated from [high] school. He had been a frustrated pilot himself. He had enlisted
in World War II and tried to get into the Army Air Corps, but his eyes were too bad.
Some parents try and live through their children. For me, in 1967, that was the last thing
in my mind, but I was the oldest of eight children. I had five younger brothers. I was in
college in 1968 and as my brothers rapidly reached what we called “military aged male;”
I felt a need to act for their protection. I enlisted in 15 April 1969 with the intention of
 going to flight school. After spending one more night at home I got on a plane and flew
to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for basic training. Then after basic training went immediately to
Fort Wolters, Texas, for Primary Army Helicopter School. Then a leave around Thanksgiving of 1969, returned then or went then to Fort Rucker, turned around and had to leave for Christmas. Sixteen April 1970 I got my warrant officer rank and seventeen April received my wings and went home for about fifty-one days casual en route to Vietnam. I spent time with my family before I deployed.

SM: What was the basic training like at Fort Polk?

DW: Well, Fort Polk was the primary infantry training center. It was pretty rugged. It was hot. There were poisonous snakes, scorpions, fairly tough conditions. Shortly after arriving we found out that there’d been an outbreak of meningitis. Two or three trainees had lost their lives to meningitis. We were concerned about that. Most of our drill instructors, well, all of our drill instructors that were permanent cadre at Fort Polk were all Vietnam veterans. They were fairly effective in their training. We did have, I in particular, had a little experience with a reserve drill sergeant who, I guess he was doing his two weeks active duty. He was screwing with trainees as, I guess, he felt the need to. I was going through a low-crawl course and somebody stepped on my helmet and pushed my face in the dirt, in the mud. When I looked up to see who did that, he did it again and that was it for me. I threw my rifle down and jumped up. He ran away and got a real drill sergeant and hid behind him. They made me go through the low-crawl course again and didn’t take any action against him. That was shortly after the Army had changed their policy to restrict them from putting their hands on trainees. They were always pretty verbal, but I never knew of a case where they put their hands on a trainee while I was there but that had happened to me. During the Vietnam War, and I’m sure from his reaction when he ran away, he’s one of those people that joined the Reserves to hide from the draft, hide from the war. I think he was an embarrassment to the uniform and shouldn’t be in a position where he was training people.

SM: So you felt that the Vietnam veteran instructors that you had, the DIs (drill instructors), they did a good job of, I guess, invoking some of their lessons from Vietnam, some of the important things you’d have to remember to survive in Vietnam? This was good training?

DW: Yeah, exactly. Generally, with the exception of those National Guard and enlisted Reserve troops that were going through basic training with us, they understood
that just about everybody going through basic training at Fort Polk was probably going to end up in Vietnam. It was, I think, their heartfelt duty to give us the best training that they could. They took their job seriously. They were hard, and sometimes they couldn’t get along with themselves. There was a fight one time between two drill sergeants.

SM: What was that over?

DW: Okay.

SM: What was the fight about between the two drill instructors?

DW: Nobody ever knew. I hope it wasn’t racial. One was black and one was white, but they had both had some martial arts training. It was a fight in earnest. Nobody knew why. That’s just the way things were. These were hard men. They took their responsibilities to heart. They were expressing themselves.

SM: What about the training at Fort Wolters and Fort Rucker? Was it similar in its effects as far as far as instilling lessons from Vietnam?

DW: Yeah. Our instructors, the military instructors, were all Vietnam veterans. The civilian instructors, some of them were Vietnam veterans. Some of them were veterans of Korea, some of World War II. Some had no military experience, but they had a wealth of aviation experience and they took their jobs seriously. We had excellent training, I think.

SM: So when you graduated 17 April, you took leave. This was 1970. Did you know at that point where you were going to be going in Vietnam?

DW: No. No.

SM: When did you find that out?

DW: I went in through—I forget the designation. It might have been 90th or 97th Replacement Center at Long Binh, I think is where it was. They bring you in-country at an airport. They transport you in a bus with chain link fence over the windows to keep people from throwing grenades in. It’s a real interesting introduction to the country. They put you in a large, secure compound and start issuing you equipment and uniforms for your tour. They, I guess, arbitrarily decide who goes where. I think they would entertain requests if it was a specific unit. If there were vacancies they’d send you. About half of my class went to I Corps, the northernmost military region. There were
actually five people in my company from my class. There were several more in the other companies in the 16th Combat Aviation Group.

SM: So your arrival then in Vietnam was summer of ’70?

DW: It was around Memorial Day of 1970 and went home around Memorial Day in ’71. Kind of prophetic—glad not to be memorialized.

SM: When did you actually get to the 71st?

DW: I can’t remember the exact day that I signed in company, but it was near the end of May or maybe the first of June.

SM: What were your first impressions of the unit?

DW: Well, it’s probably hard to describe. When we first pulled up the company area was deserted. They had taken us from the combat center where they give us local orientation, put us on a three-quarter-ton truck, and drove us to the company area. It appeared to be deserted. The driver found some young troop stumbling away from the beach and asked him a question. He motioned over towards the ocean. Well, the driver comes back, gets in the truck, drives out onto the beach. They drag us out of the back of the truck and throw us into the ocean and say, “Welcome to the Rattlers!” They were having a change of command party. We were having steaks and beer on the beach. For my first four months I lived on the beach. I thought, “This is going to be a real tough war.” Then, of course, the next morning and for a while after that we were getting rockets regular around six or seven in the morning. So I’m thinking, “Well, maybe it’s not going to be such a wonderful war.” The people impressed me for the most part as professional. There were the kind of political attitudes, you know, the Mom-and-apple-pie and “My country right or wrong.” Warrant officers generally tended to be a little more irreverent than the commissioned officers. Some of the commissioned officers took themselves a little too seriously. The enlisted people, there was kind of a division among them between lifers and draftees. That extended to their socializing and their recreational use of drugs. For the lifers, the drug of choice was hard liquor, for the draftees, marijuana.

SM: Those were both prevalent in the unit, the use of those?

DW: Yeah, yeah. They were not to extremes. I never saw anybody that was incapable. There might have been a rare occurrence, people were incapable after entirely
too much to drink. But for the most part, people went out and did their job, the best job
they could. I was glad for that.

SM: So how was morale in the unit?

DW: Well, there’s a Major James, Tommy James was the commander the day I
got there and that’s the day the party was. He was being replaced—give me a minute to
think of his name. Myron Davis took over shortly thereafter and morale—well, one of
the things that they did the day of that party on the beach was while everybody was
preoccupied with the party they did a sweep through the barracks. The next morning at
formation the first sergeant was a mountain of a man named Pine. He has most of the
company in formation. There’s a fifty-gallon drum in front of everybody. There’s a little
fire going in there. He comes out with his arms wrapped around the biggest bundle of
either kilos of marijuana or what they call decks of—well, they called them Nuoc Mam
One Hundreds. The one-hundred-millimeter cigarettes were popular in the States. Well,
these marijuana joints were about five-six inches long. They called them Nuoc Mam One
Hundreds. Nuoc Mam is a fish sauce. He comes up with this huge pile of drugs held by
these massive arms and dumps it all in the burning fifty-gallon drum and addressed his
troops and dismissed them. People liked their commander. They liked both of those
commanders. Later on when Major Davis was relieved after a warrant officer almost hit a
colonel coming out of the O Club on New Year’s Eve, he popped a flare and almost hit
this guy. Davis was relieved and replaced by Cpt. Edwin M. Frazier.

SM: Did the morale of the unit change after that?

DW: It did somewhat. He was less well liked because he wore his Airborne
wings over the top of his aviator wings. It was a violation of Army policy, Army uniform
policy. As a company commander he’s supposed to set an example. He’s going to jump
on people for haircuts or uniform infractions, yet he’s going to violate uniform policy
himself just as a personal preference for his Airborne experience.

SM: Did you get a sense that perhaps he preferred being someplace else or
wanted to be someplace else because of that?

DW: I don’t know if he actually wanted to be somewhere else, but I’ve been to
jump school myself and unfortunately I broke my leg when I was forty-one years old
going through jump school. I was assigned to the 11th Special Forces in the Reserves, but
they have a tremendous spirit, Airborne troops. They’re generally highly motivated. It
takes a great deal of courage to jump out of an airplane. I know. I’ve done it. They hold
them self a cut above, but when you’re in an aviation unit, it’s bad form to insult people
that you serve with, insult their profession by wearing the wings in an improper
precedence.

SM: Now describe your first combat operation, your first time flying.

DW: Well, the earliest experience that I remember was, aside from an in-country
checkout by an instructor pilot, was the, I think it was the last assault, last combat assault
to clean up an uprising that they had in the Hiep Duc Valley. It was a, I think there were
aircraft from all three lift companies from the 14th Battalion. It was the 71st, the 174th
from Duc Pho, and the 176th that were based at Chu Lai with the 71st. We were on the,
well, north or central, probably central part of the coast there at Chu Lai. The 176th was
the company down at the southern end of the perimeter also on the water. We were the
Rattlers, they, the 176th, were the Minutemen, and the 174th were the Dolphins.

SM: Your first contact with the enemy, what was that like?

DW: Well, I don’t recall much coming at us. There was a—you heard a lot of
gunfire, but a lot of that was outgoing so I don’t know how much resistance we
experienced. You know, the whole idea behind the air mobile concept is vertical
envelopment and that’s what we were doing, but I saw them. One of the things that was
disturbing is I saw them throwing white phosphorous smoke grenades. Now, you can
lawfully do that to mark a target because white phosphorous burns and leaves a heavy
trail of white smoke so that you could find a target, but you’re not supposed to use it
against troops. So what they were throwing these smokes was to identify the positions of
enemy troops. They could have thrown colored smoke and not used a weapon that could
horribly burn and disfigure. I was a little disturbed by that. Ultimately, I guess the first
real experience that brought home that, “Yeah, I am in Vietnam and, yeah, I can get
killed,” is shortly after that I was flying resupply just beyond LZ (landing zone) Maryann.
The pilot that I was with, his name was Randy Colton, we had an LZ where we could
only rest one skid against the ground, enough to hold the helicopter stable while we
kicked out the rations and the ammunition to the unit. As we picked up and continued
across the ridgeline we were engaged by, I think, a single soldier with an AK-47. At the
sound of the first round this guy Colton laid the aircraft over on its side to change our course. It probably saved his life because the burst that we took, one round came up through the lip of the cargo deck and buried itself in a large ammunition can that protected the crew chief from getting hit. Another round came up through Randy’s door, cut the strap, a leather handle on the door and continued up through the greenhouse. Then another round went up through the main rotor blade. Now that round just missed his head. If he had not rolled that thing over the instant he heard the first round, he may not have been with us today.

SM: Were there other examples of that kind of instinctual response that obviously probably saved a person’s life that you recall?

DW: Well, yeah actually, when he—when that happened, it was kind of a lesson that I attribute to probably saving my life later when we were in Lam Son 719 in Laos. I had just come back from R&R (rest and recuperation). This was the end of February. There were landing zones north of QL-9 in Laos that were being overrun by the North Vietnamese. They actually had tanks in the perimeter and tanks and troops in the perimeter. I was flight lead for our company and I was holding the flight at seven thousand feet. A green basketball came up past my window on the left side of the helicopter where my door is. I laid that thing on its side to change my flight direction because anything that powerful—I didn’t know if it was 12.75 or .51 cal machine gun or whether it was thirty-seven millimeter antiaircraft weaponry, but all I know is the tracer looked like the size of a basketball when it came by. You can’t wait. I mean, if you just sit there you may fly right into the path of the fire that’s being put up against you.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and discuss Lam Son 719, then? What was the concept of the operation as you understood it and where did the 71st Assault Helicopter Company fit into that concept and execution?

DW: Well, basically it was not necessarily designed to be a test of the Vietnamization concept, but it was in fact that. We were to support the South Vietnamese and their incursion in Laos. They were going to try and interdict supplies and fuel stores along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. There were to be no US troops on the ground. We were specifically tasked, the 71st, with support of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Marines. They had the 146th or 147th Brigade of the
ARVN Marines. There was a Maj. Fred Tolleson, US Marine major, who later retired as a colonel, who was the senior advisor with those individuals. He would give us our missions, we’d go out and fly them. We also flew support for American troops in and around Khe Sanh. Our first real involvement in a major assault came on the third of March when the 71st led an assault into Landing Zone Lolo. We were the lead element. There were ten aircraft from our company. There were also ten aircraft from the 174th, a sister company in our battalion that also came up for Lam Son 719. We were attached to the 101st Airborne—not attached, we were OPCON (operational control) to the 101st Airborne Division and specifically to the 158th Battalion for us. Also, in the assault were ten aircraft from the 158th Battalion and ten aircraft from the 101st Battalion. There was supposed to be three lifts for a total of 120-ship lift, forty aircraft times three. You pick up your packs, you go in, and then you go get another sortie. That’s how you get the 120. The unit had been briefed the night before that it was supposed to be cold. It had been recon’ed by Air Cavalry. Unfortunately, it had also been prepped the night before which basically telegraphed the punch to the enemy. When we went in, it was also unfortunate, when we went in we had no gun cover. The fire was taken at the pick up zone. They were taking fire at the pick up zone. So the gun cover that we had was there. When we went into Lolo there was no gun cover. The flight was led by Dan Grigsby. He was chalk one. When he went in he took a tremendous amount of fire. The troops that he had onboard were either killed as he approached because he took a lot of hits through the cargo floor, or they were cut down immediately as they jumped from the aircraft. He climbed out. He made a radio call for them to stop the assault because they obviously needed to prep the LZ. At that point there weren’t any living South Vietnamese troops in the LZ. It was still doable at that time. What he wasn’t aware of is as he was making that call, the aircraft behind him occupied by Gary Arnie was the aircraft commander, as a warrant officer. His aircraft was slow in its approach waiting for the first aircraft to clear the LZ. When he was slow like that the enemy gunners shot him up pretty bad and he lost first his tail rotor and his hydraulics and the aircraft started to spin and the ARVN soldiers were falling out from about two or three hundred feet above the ground. I heard the call for them to cut the assault off and started a 360-degree turn because I wasn’t going to go in there if I didn’t have to. As I’m about 270 degrees into the turn I get a call
from Lieutenant McMann in the aircraft behind me asking if I was going in. At that point I had not heard the response. I asked him if they still wanted us to go in and he said, “Yeah.” So I did go in and I went screaming for the ground and did a deceleration and came to a hover. It was a really bad LZ. There were a lot of stumps. You couldn’t really set the aircraft down. As I was hovering in the LZ the aircraft is rocking back and forth. This was for me personally, this was the most frightening experience that I’d ever had. So much so that the time-space continuum slowed down and it was like I could count the revolutions of the rotor blades as they passed before me. The aircraft is rocking from side to side and I’m thinking, “Okay, that’s not a problem.” The ARVN’s are jumping off and changing my CG (center of gravity), but that’s not what it was. I was taking hits in hard points of the aircraft from a spider hole, a covered fighting position. To our right rear we took at least two if not three bursts at close range from an AK-47. We were also subjected to fire from an RPG, rocket propelled grenade, but thank God it hit a stump before it got to the aircraft. There was shrapnel around all on the right side of the aircraft around the fuel filler. The AK fire first bursts started out low around went through the skid. Another round went up through the saddle fitting for the skid mount. That round later retired the aircraft. We hadn’t found it immediately, but later on an inspection they found it. It had gone through. It had bent the I beam. There’s two I beams in the frame of the helicopter. That burst continued diagonally across the aircraft and went past me. The next burst started at the crew chief. It hit the gun post from the XM-23 system. I said crew chief—it hit the gunner’s gun mount post, stopped him from getting killed. The rest of that burst passed behind my head diagonally as it passed through the aircraft. The last burst just missed his head and went into the main transmission and then continued up into the rotor system. The entry and the exit hole when we checked it out later, the entry and the exit hole were about a foot-and-a-half apart. So there’s no doubt in my mind that we didn’t take any hits until we were in the LZ. I’d been successful in avoiding the fire that had got Arnie shot down, but once in the LZ they were everywhere in the LZ. There was fighting positions in the LZ. There was a trench dug around much of the LZ and bunkers. I got a thumbs-up from the crew chief that everybody was out. At this point I’m not using the instruments because I’ve got a—it was probably a bad idea, but I had a co-pilot from battalion, somebody who was not used to flying in the AO
(area of operations). Crew coordination wasn’t the best because he’s not somebody who routinely flew with us. Although you would expect some kind of continuity or similarity in the way people were trained, because we were all in the same battalion, he in Headquarters Company and me in a unit under the battalion, it was still a problem. That crew coordination wasn’t there. I’m flying by the seat of my pants because my eyes are outside. That phrase, literally, means that anything that the aircraft does, I’m trying to gauge what’s happened by the physical sensation that I can feel or hear. When you get close to fifty pounds of torque in a Huey, the aircraft starts talking to you. What it is, you hear a cyclical groan like, “Uh, uh, uh.” That’s because the components are all straining against each other to keep this thing flying. They even have that programmed into the flight simulators, the same noise. As you get close to fifty pounds of torque, you hear it. So to get out of the LZ I pull until I hear that. I hold what I’ve got until I clear the trees. I lowered the collective a bit and lowered the nose to gain some air speed. That’s when I brought my eyes in the cockpit for the first time during the approach and landing. We used to turn our gauges. You adjust the face of the gauge in the instrument panel so that when everything’s operating normally, the needle indicates straight up. That way you can just glance at the instrument panel and you recognize immediately that everything’s working. In this particular case, when I glanced at it, everything was okay except for the transmission oil pressure and that was fluctuating wildly. At that instant I knew I had to break left and go back to Khe Sanh as opposed to break right and try to find where the other ship went down. Later when I saw a picture of the LZ, to me, in my mind, it’s clear that the pilot that I was flying with could have seen that outside his door as we cleared the trees. If he did, I don’t know. Maybe he was still on the instruments. But Gary Arnie had fought to regain control of the aircraft and instead of going over the face of the escarpment and down another five hundred feet like I thought he had, he managed to get back near the LZ and actually crashed down slope from the LZ on the north side of it or northwest side of it. As I’m flying back I’m trying to make as straight a line as I can to Khe Sanh. As I lower the collective, the transmission oil pressure goes to zero which means I absolutely have to land now. I did a power-on approach to the ground. My aircraft was damaged beyond use. You could not fly it. I have the battalion operations log from that period. We left two aircraft on the hill. McMann came in behind me and
was shot down and the aircraft burned. Most of the ships that came in behind us were
damaged by enemy fire. Some of them got troops in, some of them didn’t. After taking
the hits, they turned away from the LZ. The ship that Grigsby was flying in—this comes
from me talking with him and also from him being interviewed for both the ’94 edition of
the VHPA (Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association) directory and also the book, The
Price of Exit. As he was going back he tried to light a cigarette and was having a hard
time because his hands were shaking so bad. He went to decelerate the aircraft once they
got away from the LZ and found that he had no aft cyclic. He couldn’t slow the aircraft
down the way he wanted to. He was also losing fuel because his fuel cells had been hit.
When he called back in to Khe Sanh tower to call his emergency for landing, Khe Sanh
tower comes back and said, “Roger, two-six, you’ll be emergency number three behind
the aircraft burning on short final.” That’s how bad it was in terms of the number of
aircraft being shot down and shot up. I personally heard rescue aircraft, you know, when
an aircraft crew is in trouble you hear, “Mayday, mayday.” That’s a carry over from
when French was the international language. “M’aidez,” “Help me.” We’ve kind of
screwed it around to mayday, but I heard rescue aircraft telling, aircraft calling with
emergencies, aircraft calling “Mayday, wait one,” because there were so many aircraft
being shot down at the same time that they couldn’t deal with all of them.

SM: You mentioned AK-47s and RPGs. How about heavier antiaircraft
weapons—the 12.7s?

DW: I think somebody later said that they had identified a .51 cal out there or at
least one. I know once the series of firebases had been established by the ARVNs, the
NVA (North Vietnamese Army) began their assaults. A lot of times it would be
incoming, rockets or mortars, sometimes it was artillery. They would, under cover of
those barrages, they would move their troops in close to the LZ. They called it a hugging
tactic where they could get in close enough to engage the aircraft they were trying to get
in. My personal experience with that was on the eighteenth of March. My company was
flying for the Marines again and I was the high ship. I was flying with Jim Fulbrook, a
flight school classmate of mine. Quite often the aircraft commanders could fly with
whoever they wanted to in terms of their peers because we weren’t getting replacement
pilots. The unit was slated to stand down and we weren’t aware of it. We hadn’t been
informed, but we were not being sent key personnel for an aviation unit; maintenance
personnel and pilots. It was kind of tough to operate like that. Well, we were flying as
high ship on this mission while four of our aircraft attempted to resupply different field
units, the Fire Base Delta and Hotel. We had the advantage of an empty aircraft, but at
the end of every sortie Major Tolleson asked if we could go into Delta and pick up
wounded. The first approach in, Jim Fulbrook flew. He made a high overhead. We took
a little bit of small arms, but once we were in the LZ they started throwing mortars at us.
Thank God for us, but when the—twice when the mortars fell there were like cuts in the
ground where rain, the runoff would cut a little channel down the side of the hill. As we
were coming out a round went off outside my door just outside the diameter of the rotor
blades. When it blew up, instead of a hemisphere of shrapnel there was like a fan shape
that didn’t really do any damage to the aircraft and because of the problem that we had
had with that approach I flew the next approach in. It was like a modified straight in. I’d
fly towards—there were two landing pads on Delta. I’d fly toward one and I’d change
course like I was going to the other. It looked like I was terminating my approach at the
northernmost pad, but at the last minute I dog-legged down into this small saddle to the
other pad and it threw the mortars off. We still took small arms, which was
inconsequential, but making those heading changes kept the North Vietnamese mortar
crew cranking the tube around to different locations. It gave us a little extra time. The
aircraft that we had in our flight, three of them had taken hits trying to get into Delta.
They weren’t able to maneuver the way we could because they were heavy with resupply,
ammunition and food. We had one aircraft that was in a place called Hotel. It was like
the highest point in the escarpment. Geographically it’s located where QL-9 comes out of
Vietnam and continues into Laos. It makes a turn where it meets the river and runs
westward there. That point on that LZ is like the highest promontory in the area. We
watched a mortar round explode, and from where it exploded it had to pass through the
rotor system to explode almost under the tail boom as the aircraft was shuffling forward
on takeoff. It lifted the aircraft up off the ground. Then he started to settle back and
about that time hit the edge of the escarpment. The winds coming off of that just picked
it straight up and it was like getting on an elevator, express elevator, going up when you
came out of there. I was flying. I immediately landed to pick up the wounded from
there. Lucky for us, I’m assuming on my part that they had used the last bit of
ammunition that they had on the tube that was bombing the LZ at that time. Before they
could react and get more ammunition to the position, we had already snatched the
wounded and gone on. Later towards dusk, Tolleson asked us if we could do it one more
time and he said—I mean, it was voluntary all along, but he knew it was getting worse
and worse. He was giving us an out. When he came over the radio and asked I
immediately turned the aircraft toward the LZ. Jim Fulbrook, we were flying his ship.
We were alternating duties as aircraft commander and since it was his ship he says, “All
right, but I want to control the approach.” We were both on the controls because we were
expecting a lot of problems. There were a number of .51-caliber machine guns that had
been moved into the area to ring the fire base. As we approached the landing zone, Jim
had them pop a smoke at the wrong LZ. The two landing pads, he had them pop a smoke
on the northernmost pad. We weren’t going there. We were going in the saddle. That
was to get the gunners to crank their tubes around. We were telegraphing our punch, but
it was misinformation. They cranked the tubes around to the smoke, which gives us more
time on the ground. As we started toward the LZ in a high overhead approach they
opened up with our flight path changing. There were no less than three .51-caliber
machine guns with tracers working out on us at any one time and any one position. I
think it was Grigsby in the other helicopter with the major. He was screaming, “Break
left! No, break right! No, break left!” All we could do, I mean, he was trying to steer us
away from the fire, but all we could do was just continue the approach because if we
changed course, we were already flying a spiral which is not as easy to track as a straight-
in approach. Had we changed the approach, if we could have missed where it works out
so you terminate right where you need to. Then as soon as we got on the ground the
mortars started again and this rush of wounded Marines, one of them being carried by a
litter, approaches the aircraft. They just kind of crash into the aircraft trying to scramble
on board. We waited as long as we could and then the pilot in the C&C (command and
control) ship was yelling at us to get out, that we were bracketed, and we could hear it.
We could see the mortars impacting in front of us and we could hear the ones behind us.
We still stayed until we thought we had the last man on board. Then we took off through
the machine gun fire again. Then at a certain point in the approach they just stopped
firing. It was like, I don’t know what it was. Maybe it was just a sign of respect because of what we’d done. Later I talked to then Colonel Tolleson who is retired. He told me one of the most macabre war stories I’d ever heard. Because of our success in getting in and pulling the people out, he had the C&C ship try. They never actually landed, but what had happened when the ARVNs, when the Marines hit the helicopter, the scramble, they had knocked the one injured person off the litter. He was actually under the helicopter. We didn’t know it. We hadn’t seen it. This time, instead of bringing him down on a litter they were running him down the trail from the upper area in the landing zone. They had gone out and retrieved him and gone to a position of cover until the other aircraft could come in. As they’re running down, the helicopter hasn’t landed. He’s about to touch down and they look over. They can see the three soldiers running down. A mortar impacts on the wounded man’s head and vaporized his head and the two Marines on either side of him fall away dead. The headless body continues to run toward the helicopter until it stumbled and fell. When they saw that, and they had never touched down, they just kind of rolled into take off and got out of there. No other helicopter got in there until the twenty-first of March when a kid named Ed Albrick who had been with me for the second part of my flight on the third of March. He got in, kicked off his resupply. Prior to that they’d been making high passes and kicking out ammunition and food because they couldn’t land. Well, he got in, took a tremendous amount of fire going in, and got four wounded on board and took off through machine gun and mortar fire, but this time he was hit and hit bad. The aircraft was burning. He was having trouble controlling the aircraft because his crew and the wounded ARVN were all huddled up toward the front of the aircraft changing the CG as they were trying to get away from the fire. He made it down to a clearing. Gary Arnie who had been awarded the Silver Star for the action on the third of March when he was shot down and he and his crew spent time on the ground. He got a second Silver Star for going in and picking the crew and the wounded ARVNs up. A pilot had managed to put the aircraft down in an area that was close enough to a little clearing. It was real tall elephant grass so that when Albrick and I think his co-pilot was Markiewicz, a big captain, they as a crew picked up and carried the wounded ARVNs to Arnie’s aircraft. As they were doing that our firebird gunships and also some Cobras from the 101st were trying to suppress the area. One of our Firebirds
followed Arnie or followed Albrick down trying to lay a base of fire on either side of
their aircraft to suppress any enemy fire. Arnie, I spoke with his co-pilot who told me
that they were still subject to fire from above. They couldn’t actually see the crew
coming to the helicopter because of the grass being as high as it was, but the Firebird
circling overhead, one of our Charlie model gunships, that pilot could see the crew
making their way carrying the wounded Marines making their way to the rescue
helicopter. They got them out. Three days later, Ed Albrick was shot down again in
flames in the tri-border area, the corner between North and South Vietnam and the
Laotian border. An Air Cav recon element from the 1st of the 5th Mech had [an OH-58]
Bell Jet Ranger shot down. A second Bell Jet Ranger maneuvered to check his condition.
That aircraft was immediately shot down. A team of blues on the Huey that they had on
station, they went to try and insert them to recover the crews that were down. That
aircraft was immediately shot down. One of the Cobras that they had covering them was
almost destroyed in the air. Major Tommy Stiner was the brigade aviation officer for the
1st of the 5th Mech. He issued an alert call on UHF (ultra high frequency), our company
UHF. Our crews were flying several different resupply missions. We were called to a
rally point, an assembly point, and given the mission to insert troops on the ground to
help recover the wounded and assist in preparing an LZ for extraction. They did that.
Several aircraft were hit by enemy fire. Ron Markiewicz, the pilot who was with Albrick
the first time he got shot down in flames, he had a pedal on the helicopter shot out from
under his foot. His gunner had been hit in the chest with a round that knocked him over
and he had been—the guy had been injured by some shrapnel as well. We later had to
reinforce another US ground element that was about to be overrun. Then we had to
extract from the tri-border area the crews and everybody that had been put down on the
ground. That was accomplished under heavy fire. That was—I had just gone in and
pulled out my troops, but on approach I’m trying to call the fire. I told them I was taking
fire from twelve and from three o’clock. It was a crossfire. So in the LZ I turned the tail
of my aircraft ninety degrees and I took off slightly downwind to avoid flying directly
overhead the gun positioned at twelve o’clock. The air mission commander kind of
yelled at me for it because it was harder for him to keep of track of where all the aircraft
were. Ed Albrick was the next crew in. He got his troops onboard and went straight out
after my lecture and was immediately shot down. The aircraft started like a slow turn. I
think he’d lost some control over his tail rotor as well as being on fire, but his aircraft
was doing a slow spin while smoke was coming out the right side of the aircraft. He got
it back into the LZ and instead of abandoning the burning aircraft, recognized that if he
left it there the rest of the ships couldn’t come in. So he picked it back up and put it in a
stream bed to clear the LZ for the fallen ships. He and his crew scrambled back up into
the LZ and they put them on the next lift ship that went in. We got everybody out. Major
Stiner recommended an impact award for all the crew members involved to receive
Distinguished Flying Crosses. That effort didn’t meet with much success. I have
uncovered records where there were actually orders that were cut to demonstrate that the
awards that were proposed were submitted, but they were submitted in a fragmented
manner. One group of awards had one date on it and another group had another date.
Some of the awards were apparently lost. One of the things that happened is those
awards were approved in the middle of September. Well, the 71st had already stood
down at that point. There was no company to send the awards to for distribution. Shortly
after that in October there was a typhoon that struck that wiped out most of the buildings
in Chu Lai. The Awards and Decorations branch in the Americal Division was a sea hut
that just blew off the face of the earth. So any record of those submissions was gone.

SM: So would you please discuss your evaluation of the operations in support of
ARVN during Lam Son 719 and how that reflected or how that affected your opinion of
the Vietnamization program?

DW: Well, some of the problems that were evident, the cause wasn’t evident to
us. It was later revealed that there were senior officers of the ARVN that were not really
capable. They were afraid to commit additional troops to reinforce the operation. So
instead of the operation being as successful as it could have been, I mean, they were
obviously able to interdict a great deal in terms of supplies and fuel, things like that. But,
when it came to the actual waging of war, the combat, the North Vietnamese had
responded with as much force as they could possibly muster. When they engaged the
ARVN, they pretty much beat them at every turn and drove them out. It was really sad.
The perfect example would be the Marines. Now they were, I think, probably a little less
prone to turn and run with the wounded that we had been able to get off the hill. Ed
Albrick—they were able to fight their way off of Delta and move to a point where they could be extracted. Toward the end of the operation we were picking up hundreds of South Vietnamese troops. There was a lot of panic. A lot of them didn’t have their weapons. They’d thrown them down and run. They were hanging off the skids trying to get as many people on board the aircraft. You had to knock some of them off because you didn’t have the power to lift the aircraft with as many people that tried to get on. It was really sad to see that kind of panic and lack of will to fight, but again it was a different war for them than it was for us. If one of our people was a conscript, a draftee, he had two years to serve. They were drafted and they were in it for the duration and they got very little in terms of pay or benefits. Their religious beliefs, a lot of the South Vietnamese were Catholics, but among those who were Buddhists, it was very important for them to bury and honor their dead and for them to be buried where they lived. The fact that their bodies could be left in another country was a big psychological issue with them. Ultimately the senior commanders of the ARVN never committed the assets to successfully engage the north. It was almost like a rout. They were driven from Laos and it didn’t have to be that way I don’t think. Not with the amount of support that the Americans were there to give them, bombing and air support for troop movement.

SM: Okay. Well, this will conclude the first interview with Mr. Douglas Womack.
Interview with Douglas Womack
Date: January 25, 2001

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Douglas Womack. It is the twenty-fifth of January 2001 at approximately 4:10 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Womack is in Grasonville, Maryland. All right, why don’t we go ahead and begin our discussion with the support operations that you were involved in concerning CCN (Command and Control North) and SOG (Studies and Observations Group).

Douglas Womack: The 71st, I guess long before I got there and then after until the end of these MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) SOG, I think they were the Prairie Fire missions that crossed the border in Laos. We would be tasked to provide lift ships for them. The 5th Special Forces had a letter of authorization from MACV that said that they could draw assets from many unit in country that they wanted. They would use that authority to draw lift ships from us, occasionally gun ships, and lift ships and gun ships from sister companies from our battalion, the 14th Battalion. I’m sure they took units from the 123rd Battalion which was also part of the 16th Group at Chu Lai. When we flew these missions we would attend briefings and we were given disclaimers. We had to sign a statement that we would not divulge the nature or location of the missions that we flew because of their classified nature. What would happen is either an insertion or an extraction would involve a high ship, one or two insertion or extraction ships. There would generally be a team of gun ships. In our case we had Charlie model gun ships. There would also be some kind of an Air Force FAC, either the Cessna Skymaster or I think they were called O-2 or the OV-1 Bronco and then a variety of weapons platforms either the old A-1E Skyraidors or maybe Fox-4s, some F-4s. I never crossed the border myself. I went out, it was either two or three missions where I did cross the border—let me go back to that. I did cross the border, but I was never an insertion or an extraction ship on any mission across the border. I was high ship two or three times across the border. Another time I was the high ship on a mission in-country where we inserted two US and two ARVN soldiers, all in NVA uniforms and because the crew that inserted them was not flying that day, we had to extract them three days later. I was on the
extraction ship for that mission. It was kind of scary. We had no LZ to pick them up. They had
unfortunately made contact the first day they were put on the ground. They had
eaten all of the speed, the amphetamines, in their survival meds just to keep going, to
keep running from the NVA because they had been inserted in like an NVA base camp
area. So there was a small hole through the canopy of the jungle where we dropped ropes
to pick them up. A lot of time on special missions they wore a McGuire rig, a harness,
where you could just hook onto the line and be extracted. Well, they didn’t have that.
They just had open loops, four open loops dropped through the hole in the canopy. While
we were hovering there, there was a tremendous amount of fire both incoming and
outgoing. We were hovering alongside a rocky ridgeline, over the top of this jungle
canopy, and the gunship’s support was suppressing ridgeline. The fire below us, I don’t
think they could actually see the helicopter. I don’t think anything ever reached us from
below, but the people on the ropes, one of them had their rope cut off into two by a
round. Another one had his pack shot through and through, another one had a round
through his canteen and I think right at the end their radio, the FM radio that they had,
was hit. When we got the word from the crew chief that everybody was on the line, we
lifted straight up up—let me backtrack. We did end up taking a hit and luckily it was four
inches higher than what would’ve been terrible. It was a large piece of shrapnel from the
close gunship support had punched through the side of the engine cowling and got into
the collector box for the bleed air and had it been four inches lower it would’ve hit the
turbine section. We would’ve been shot down and probably come straight down on the
people on the ropes. As we’re lifting them up and then they’re clearing the vegetation
coming into the light, the crew chief could see that one of the ARVN’s was not all the way
in the loop. They were supposed to put their shoulders up through the loop, lay their arms
down, and then grab the knot and ride the rope out of the trees. So what we had to do was
just find a clearing where we could put down because this one ARVN was almost
hanging himself. The loop was around, was under one arm and around the upside of the
neck. It was just squeezing the life out of him. We did find a clearing and as we were
descending to make an approach the aircraft commander that I was flying with was
looking out through the left side of the aircraft and he could see what looked like a
barrack in his plane of vision through the canopy and, of course, there were hardcore
NVA in uniforms streaming out the building and running away. We were able to get to the ground all right. I passed my survival knife to the gunner and he went out and cut all the ropes and picked up the ARVN that was hanging himself because he was now too weak and too injured to move. The gunner went out and picked him up and brought him back to the aircraft. Then we low-leveled out of there and climbed up to altitude and once we were clear of being in any danger and then actually flew back, flew formation, on the Cessna Skymaster as we were going back to Chu Lai. That incident, for me, was probably one of the most compelling incidents that I had been through because what it did is it showed me the absolute power that we had and it instilled in me the sense of duty because of that power. As an aviator we were there to support the ground troops. When we got away from the LZ and everybody was safe the two ARVNs were huddled up against the transmission all hugging each other and crying. The two Special Forces troops were behind our seats crying and reaching up and clutching our sleeves thanking us for getting them out of there. It’s hard for me to this day. It’s hard for me to talk about it without getting a lump in my throat. I waited twenty-eight years to have a Silver Star pinned on me and the thanks that I got from those two guys far exceeded what I felt when I had a general pin a Silver Star on me. We never got anything for pulling those guys out, but the thanks of the men that we did it for, to me it was more compelling than standing in front of my family and two or three hundred people to be decorated.

SM: Do you still have contact with the two Americans you saved?

DW: No because they would, I think they were headquartered out of Da Nang and we were stationed at Chu Lai. So we never saw them unless there was some kind of ongoing mission. It was over a period of two months that we flew support for them. We actually lost one crew, I believe it was the fifteenth of August, it was the fourteenth or fifteenth of August and I had originally been slated to be on the flight. I had seen the board the night before. I went on to bed and when I got up the next morning to get the CEOI (communications-electronic operating instructions), you know, the codebook and radios somebody else was on the mission. They were extracting a team under fire. At some point it appeared that they lost power and when the aircraft was moving forward the team had been climbing up an aluminum ladder. That aluminum ladder hooked into the trees and at that point the aircraft was just lost. It was tethered down to the ground and it
just arced over nose first and crashed in Laos. It came down on its nose and right side and
the aircraft commander and the crew chief were able to get out and the copilot, the peter
pilot and the door gunner never made it. They were trapped in the wreckage. According
to the reports the crewmen that were involved, they appeared to be dead. The pilot on that
aircraft was, the aircraft commander on that aircraft was a guy named Henderson. He was
injured. His face was cut up. He was battered and bruised. He was recovered. I think he
was one of the 176th—a sister company of our battalion—actually went in and recovered
now.

SM: Have you had contacts with Henderson in any of the project’s or
association’s meetings that you’ve been to?

DW: I’ve not had any contact with Anderson. The 71st has a really strong
association and I’ve made contact with a number of people in the unit. I’m gonna drag
my directory out just try and go over some of the names. The association, though, is very
strong and probably one of the most organized units among those units that are veterans.
You were at Las Vegas and you saw the level of the organization with enough equipment
and souvenirs.

SM: Yeah. Those displays were phenomenal.

DW: We have our own traveling road show and war museum.

SM: It is really amazing. About that extraction where you saved those American
and Vietnamese personnel, that team, do you know how many were lost?

DW: Well, they were put in as a team of four. They didn’t lose any, to my
knowledge. The other team that was hooked on the ladder, from what I understand, a lot
of those guys were killed cause the aircraft kept going forward and they were drug
through the trees and banged up fairly badly. Trying to think of the name of the pilot that
I was flying with. That’s funny because early on in my career there was a place called
Cam Duc that was a Special Forces camp. It was overrun in ’68. In fact, there was an Air
Force pilot who received the Medal of Honor for going into the C-123 and picking up the
last people on the ground were the Air Force controllers. They didn’t realize that they had
missed them. So he went in in a C-123. Didn’t take a single hit, mind you, but he went in
in a C-123 to pick them up. The Air Force gave him the Medal of Honor. Not to take
anything away from performance or achievements, but the Air Force generally didn’t
work near as hard as we did for what we got. That’s just the way it is.

SM: The award systems for all the branches are quite different. I mean, the
Bronze Star for the Marine Corps was very difficult to achieve.

DW: Well, you know if you look at it to this day, there was just a conflict, a pilot
recovered by the Air Force pilot, but with US Special Forces on the ground, the Air Force
pilot, the aircraft commander, who picked him up, got a Silver Star. All of the other Air
Force crewmen, air crewmen involved, got Air Medals with V. The Special Forces troops
that were put on the ground and actually recovered the pilot were put in for Bronze Stars
and they were all turned down. So you know, you’re hard pressed to justify the difference
in levels of performance that are required but just—that’s just the way it is.

SM: Do you recall about how many CCN and SOG operations you supported?
DW: For me it was four, at least four. Well, later on when we came back from the
incursion in Laos there was another time where, because I had flown those missions I was
among the few remaining pilots who had, I took one more mission where we made
several fake drops in an area and then dropped a recon team in to do some scouting. The
operation wasn’t conducted at the same level of coordination as other services that the
CCN missions were.

SM: Well, you raise a really interesting issue. What kind of tactics would you
employ to—when these guys were going on these operations they were trying to insert in
areas and not be detected. Now that’s pretty difficult to do when you’re in a helicopter,
but there are techniques you can employ as faints. What would you guys do when you
were working on this—?

DW: There’s several things that you can do in terms of trying to obscure or fool
the enemy into your intended landing point. One method would be to do a high overhead
approach to get down to the ground, but then low-level to another position. Another thing
that you could do is you could drop smokes in several different locations and then once
you got below a tree line the people that your trying to put in, unless you happen to put
them down right on top of the enemy, they won’t have a clue where they are. The other
thing that you can do is, if you’ve got more than one aircraft, you can have two aircraft in
an area and go down like they’re both dropping somebody off. Then it becomes a
crapshoot, you know, for the NVA, what direction do they want to chase, chase after?

SM: Okay. These were things that you would do just for those operations or in
general, as well?

DW: You’d use them with that or with any kind of recon mission. If it was just an
out-and-out combat assault they might scout the area first with a Loach (LOH or light
observation helicopter) or with an Air Cav team and then depending on the area and the
expected resistance they might put in an artillery barrage. We had a smoke ship. It was
equipped with a smoke generator, extra crew on board to man the machine guns so that it
could lay down a self-supporting base of fire. The smoke ship would come in and try and
mask the area on one side so that the crews could come in and land in formation and drop
off the maximum number of troops on time and then take off again into the cover of the
smoke, with generally at least a light fire team with the two Charlie model gunships, in
some cases a heavy team, three gun ships.

SM: Were there any other activities with the CCN and or SOG that you want to
talk about?

DW: Those are pretty much the only ones that I was involved with. Again, that
was not a—in the 101st area, since they were based out of Da Nang and you had both
North Vietnam and Laos as considerations. They, some of the units from the 158th, the
101st battalions probably did more of those kinds of missions than we did. But again, that
was because they had two target areas to deal with as opposed to just the Laotian border.

SM: What did you do after you worked with CCN and SOG?

DW: Business as usual. A mix of the resupply, occasionally fly a—well, it’s not
quite a VIP mission—you’d fly a brigade battalion commander around to the different
firebases. We’d fly combat assaults. We’d pretty much do anything that was required of
us.

SM: Did you train at all with South Vietnamese helicopter pilots?

DW: Well, I actually flew with them. I actually flew in a combat assault in a
South Vietnamese Huey with a VNAF, a Vietnamese Air Force, major. It was while I
was still fairly new in country and we were supposed to have had an interpreter show up
at the briefing and he never did. So I think some of the old guys on the flight thought it
would be funny to send the new guy into the LZ with this Vietnamese major. So, I did
and unfortunately this guy wanted to conduct a recon of the LZ before the flight came in.
I’m doing my best. I don’t speak but a few words of Vietnamese. I’m doing my best to
make him understand it’s time to leave the LZ now because they want to do their rocket
prep in anticipation of a flight coming in in a few minutes. I’m trying my best to make
him understand and he’s not understanding and then all of a sudden the first pair of
rockets went off in the landing zone. Amazingly he understood. As I was talking to him
when we climbed out and we’re flying back to the PZ after it was all over. As best as he
could explain, he indicated he was gonna see that I got something and, of course, I could
never figure out whether he was talking about Vietnamese wings or they had like an air
service medal. I guess it would be comparable to our air medal. In any event, I never got
anything from him. If he sent anything, it might’ve been trapped by one of the people in
the admin section because some of that stuff is rare to come by. I’m one of the few
people that can say that they actually flew a combat assault in a South Vietnamese
aircraft.

SM: He was the aircraft commander?
DW: Yeah. He was actually the air mission commander as well. He was the
major. He was the senior officer in charge of the assault. He was the one that wanted to
go down and check it out close up which, of course, was kind of risky.
SM: What was the overall purpose of the assault? Was it just a known enemy
position?
DW: Probably. We would not get the best of briefings. We generally were given
enough and more than how many packs that we would be carrying in. How many troops
and where the pick up zone was, where the landing zone was, and we would get intel if
there were any shot-at reports. The TOCs, the tactical operation centers, always had a
large map and every time anybody took fire they would try and plot the location and the
type of fire that they took just so that they kept a pretty good idea where any heavy
weapons might be. Anyway, we would get a time to pick them up, a time to be putting
them on the ground, and then they would be kind of flexible when it came time to pick
them back up. Sometimes they would be smart and pick them up somewhere other than
where they were put in because particularly for the South Vietnamese it was the only way
you could get them to move from point A to point B on the ground.

SM: Yeah. Otherwise they’d just stick around the LZ.

DW: If they were reluctant warriors, they weren’t gonna walk home. They would
maneuver to the pick-up zone and hopefully in that maneuver they would encounter and
eliminate any enemy resistance.

SM: Interesting. This will end the interview with Mr. Womack on the 25th of
January.
Interview with Douglas Womack
Date: February 6, 2006

Steve Maxner: All right, this is Steven Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Douglas Womack on the 6th of February 2001 at approximately four twenty Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Womack is in Grasonville, Maryland. So we left off last time, we were gonna discuss your work after your VNAF flight and after SOG CCN. You mentioned that things were business as usual and I was wondering if you could go ahead and describe what that means. What was business as usual when you were flying in Vietnam for that particular time?

Douglas Womack: Those events were both earlier in my tour. The VNAF, the flight with the VNAF pilot on the air assault and the majority of my SOG experience, so that would have probably been after August of 1970 when that was—the majority of the SOG stuff was done. While the SOG was ongoing, the South Vietnamese were operating in the area around Cam Duc that was overrun in ’68. Once the operations across the borders ceased then they whipped through from Cam Duc because it was a really tough place to secure. It was in a remote valley, probably about eight miles from the Laotian border. At night, it was completely covered over with clouds and completely socked in. It was down in a little valley subject to incoming direct and indirect fire from higher ground around it. Anyway, we left there. We would do whatever was on the schedule, whether combat assaults or resupply to units in the field, the occasional emergency Medevac. I know sometime after that with the monsoons they had flooding. We had to do a lot in terms of relocating civilians, rescue, searching for bodies. Unfortunately there was some GIs that had been washed away in some of the flooding. I remember a couple of times going out and looking for the bodies. It was your basic tour as a helicopter pilot. That utility helicopter is tasked with basic support missions for other resupply or combat assault. Whatever they need that’s what we’d do.

SM: OK. Were there any other particular missions that stood out or particular events that stand out in your memory?

DW: Well, there were psychological operations. Those we generally flew at night. At night the coast would almost seem to transform because the coast where all the city or
the villages and areas that you would expect to be lit up at night, they were all dark. Then
the water along the coast was what was lit up with all of the fishing boats going out at
night. It was like the geography would reverse itself. We’d go out, put a bank of speakers
in the aircraft, and pick up a PSYOPs (psychological operations) officer. Go out to the
target that they had identified. We’d drop Chieu Hoi leaflets. We’d play messages. We’d
generally try and cover the areas as well as we could. Sometimes it was a little tough to
pick out our targets just because the darkness and lack of any precise navigation
instruments. We didn’t have the kinds of equipment that are available now. There was no
GPS or anything like that. We could try and shoot radials to known navaids (navigational
aids) like an AFVN (Armed Forces Radio, Vietnam) station or something like that to get
a fairly good idea where we were. I guess a couple different missions stand out for doing
PSYOPs. One was I was down in the southern part of I Corps and we were coming North
along the coast toward a place called Duc Pho where the 174th Assault Helicopter
Company was based. They were a sister company in the 14th Battalion. One of the
companies went with us up to Khe Sanh or Quang Tri for the incursion in Laos. Anyway,
as I’m going north up the coast we have low clouds swirling around and just about a mile
or so from this mountain just south of the base, everything disappeared in the clouds. I
was briefly disoriented. I’d roll into a right turn to go out over the water before I’d begin
my descent and I’d immediately roll out of the turn and end up heading in the same
direction. It took me my third try before I was able to make sure that what I—the control
inputs that I’d made stayed in and generally in that kind of condition you have one person
flying as a visual and then the other person tries to stay on the instruments. My copilot,
he was ready to take over on instruments, but at that point it’s not like the aircraft was out
of control. It’s just that when you’re so used to flying by the seat of your pants, all of the
motion that occurs is exaggerated in your mind without the visual reference to the
horizon. Anyway, we just headed out towards the ocean and began a slow descent and
came out well clear of the mountains and well clear of any kind of hazard. There was
another night that we actually flew from official nighttime to official daytime. We flew
from sunset to sunrise. It was about fifteen hours. We hot refueled. We never shut down
the whole night. We were coming back in and we had been trading off on the controls
and letting each other get a little shut-eye. The guy that I was flying with thought he was
gonna let me rest as we’re landing. Of course, that was probably a bad idea. When I sensed the change in the attitude of the aircraft and probably the change in the rotor noise when you change the attitude of the aircraft you get a little increase in the noise generated by the rotor system. As I look up across the instrument panel, we’re shooting an approach through the tail boom of another helicopter. I took the controls real quick and made a turn away from it. That’s the kind of thing that can occur when you’re flying those kinds of hours without sufficient crew rest.

SM: Yes sir. Were there any other PSYOPs missions that you remember, that stand out in your mind?

DW: Well, there was the—there’s a couple other things, I guess, that stand out. I don’t think anybody was hurt because we didn’t hear any repercussions. On one night when we were distributing the leaflets, one of our door gunners was helping the PSYOPs officer in the back of the aircraft. Unfortunately, he dropped an entire box of leaflets that hadn’t been uncrated and opened up. That could’ve come down and torn somebody’s hooch up if there was anybody underneath it. Like I said, we never heard any repercussions. There was another occasion when, I told you we had a big bank of speakers in the back. Along with that they had a tape deck to play the recorded messages. I played Jimi Hendrix’s version of “The Star Spangled Banner” over Americal Headquarters at midnight one night. I don’t know how well that was received, but we didn’t get any complaints. That was the good thing. I guess they thought it was okay if it was patriotic.

SM: Oh that’s funny. Any other usurpations of the equipment, use of the equipment?

DW: Usurpation, that’s (laughs)—well, there’s probably a lot of stuff that went on where man’s ingenuity puts things to other uses than God intended; God or Igor Sikorsky intended. But there was—when I first came into country we were still flying support for Australians. The little rocket boxes that, I think, it’s the 2.75 folding-fin rocket the helicopters used to suppress enemy fire and destroy targets. They came packed with Styrofoam. Styrofoam was like a perfect size to fit down between two-by-fours and things like that to insulate your hooches and your rooftop areas and try to keep some of the heat down. The best use that I ever heard to put to was these Australians were in
heavy contact along with the ARVN units that they were advising. They called on our
company to bring them resupply. Along with the bullets they took these—they’re
basically foam, white closed-cell foam insulated Styrofoam packing pieces for these
rocket pods or well, the rocket itself, but it’s a perfect size to put cold beer and submarine
sandwiches in. Our mess hall made them up an emergency ration kit that they’d put in
those boxes and then tape them up and then drop those along with the ammunition. When
we had a change of command ceremony, change of command party at our O Club, the
Australians were among the people who give our outgoing commander a send off and
thank him for the cold beer and the sandwiches in that firefight.

SM: Wow. Did you provide support for Australians frequently?
DW: Until they stopped operating in Vietnam, yeah. That was a regular mission
for my company, but again, that was early in my tour. They pulled out sometime after
that.

SM: Just out of curiosity, was it easy for you guys to get cold beer?
DW: Well, unfortunately it was easier to get hot beer. Sometimes even a hot beer
is not a bad thing, you know?

SM: Sure. Now, I can’t recall from our last interview how much we talked about
your support for ARVN soldiers. Now, of course, a lot of support was provided during
Lam Son 719, which we already discussed in our first interview, but I was curious about
other support missions and support operations that you conducted that were specific to
ARVN.

DW: I think it was the 2nd ARVN Division, which had the 5th and 6th ARVN
Infantry Regiments that we supported in our area of operation. We actually, out of a place
called Tam Ky had a regular support mission for them. It was like support for US troops
at a certain point. It’d all depend on what the mission requests were as to what we would
do. Again, it was a little bit of everything. The Tam Ky mission was generally “ash and
trash” is what they would call it. In fact, they would put a little sign, you know the sign
that they put on the side of a VIP helicopter or a general’s car?

SM: Mm-hmm.
DW: You know, a little star plate to go along side the door. Well, they would put
a little plate there that said Tam Ky Taxi and that was when they were taking chickens
and rice out to remote sites for different units.
SM: What was your evaluation of those ARVN units that you supported there?
DW: Well, there were probably very few that were real impressive and I don’t
necessarily fault them for it. There was probably enough in the way of corruption where
the soldiers in their army—their conscription was “You’re in until we’re through with
you.” Not a two-year tour like our GIs had it. They were drafted. It seemed like they
never really had the support that they needed. It didn’t seem like they had the fire to take
a fight to somebody, either. Sometimes the only way you could assure that they would
sweep an area is to have a landing zone in one location and then you put the pick up zone
somewhere else rather than have them sweep and then go back. Because that way you’ve
guaranteed that they went somewhere as opposed to just being put in and set up a
perimeter and stay put until it’s time to go back to where it’s safe.
SM: Okay. Real quick, sir, real quick question back to the PSYOP operations that
you were a part of, especially the Chieu Hoi leaflet drops and the Chieu Hoi speaker
missions, I guess you’d call them, loudspeaker missions. Did you ever receive reports
back to how effective those activities were at Chieu Hoi? There were more Chieu Hoi
that showed up—
DW: Hoi Chan.
SM: Hoi Chan, excuse me, Hoi Chan that more people did take you up on that
offer as a result of those activities?
DW: We never really got the reports. Where you would get that kind of
information is if you flew the brigade commander. Sometimes we would get there early
enough and we would go in and listen to the briefings and they would have the latest
intel. They’d have casualty figures for friendly and enemy troops. They’d have shot-at
reports. Every aircraft that took fire was supposed to call their operations with the
location and type of fire that was received and then all of that information would be
plotted on maps to try and do two things. One, make sure you knew what areas to avoid if
you had a mission that was gonna have you low enough to be vulnerable, and two, try
and get some idea where heavy weapons or troop concentrations might be. So, if that
information was to be had about the effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi program, it wasn’t
gonna come to us directly. Maybe indirectly by monitoring what went on in the
commander’s briefing and then taking that back to our operations.

SM: So you never did receive word one way or the other?

DW: No.

SM: Now, did you keep track of—in your flight log when you look at it now, does
it say explicitly when you were flying on a particular night or particular day or mission,
that this was the type of mission it was or loud speaker or PSYOP or whatever?

DW: No. They’re basically either listed as combat or direct combat support. Most
of my time was listed as combat time and then it might be further broken down by
whether it was first pilot or second pilot, I think, whether or not you were an aircraft
commander or not. Occasionally we—well, it was always recorded if it was nighttime or
not. Occasionally if you had to travel somewhere, say you had to go up to Da Nang for
some kind of support mission or take somebody up to a briefing or something like that
you might log a little cross-country, but unless you kept a daily log yourself or some kind
of a diary you wouldn’t have that information recorded. I tried briefly to keep up with
something like that, but we actually flew so much that it got old real quick trying to keep
up. In hindsight it would’ve been a great thing to do. I remember listening to a pilot when
I first joined the Reserves. We went through Fort Bragg for our summer camp. I
remember listening to a pilot there who had been shot down and more than anything else
he regretted the loss of the journal that he kept because he had all of his flight time in it
and he had in some cases who flew on what missions with him and what they did, if they
were shot at, whether they took hits or not, you know, if anybody was wounded. It was a
day-to-day journal of his tour and he really regretted its loss when he was shot down.

SM: That is a shame. When he was shot down, was he captured or did he get
away?

SM: No. No. He got away. He wasn’t captured, but they had to leave the aircraft
in a hurry or probably would’ve been captured. When you go down to pick somebody up,
you’re as vulnerable as you can be to ground fire because you’re a sitting duck. I had the
great misfortune to be loaned out one day toward the end of my tour. There was a pilot
from the 116th. They were the Hornets and Stingers. They had joined our battalion in July
or August of 1970. One of their pilots was killed by a sniper and the day after he was killed they were a pilot short for missions. So I was loaned out to their company and they had me in the same aircraft on the same mission sitting on the same side of the aircraft and they had not even cleaned the blood and brains out of the aircraft when he had been killed. He was hit with a head shot by a sniper because they were sitting stationary on a resupply pad. They didn’t have the decency to clean that aircraft up before they put somebody else out in it.

SM: That’s horrible.

DW: It was real uneasy sitting in that seat.

SM: Yes, sir. How long did you stay with them?

DW: It was just for that day. It’s just the kind of thing you don’t ever want to have to do.

SM: Did you talk to the copilot about it, your copilot about it?

DW: No, actually, he wasn’t on the mission the day before. It would’ve been their maintenance section that screwed up. I told our operations about it and I went back. I think they relayed it to their operations, who in turn told their maintenance. It was inexcusable.

SM: Yes, sir. Let’s see here. Was there anything else that you wanted to add about your time at CCN?

DW: Just the name of the pilot that I flew with on the rope extraction, Thomas V. Pratt. He is a lawyer out in California now. He was a pretty gutsy pilot. When he flew there was no panic. There were no missteps. I think he was involved in a rescue that was published in the American newspaper. It might’ve—I don’t know if it made it to Stars and Stripes or not, but—there were people who were being pulled out of a crash site from a helicopter. I think he was down there hovering trying to keep the fire back from them so they could be rescued. He was funny, too. He’d get frustrated to a point when he was trying to speak with some of the Vietnamese that didn’t have any real command of the English language. He’d get frustrated and at that point being from California his only experience with foreign language was Spanish. He’d break into Spanish trying to make them understand something. It probably wasn’t real effective, although there was one time when I was on—my mother’s Puerto Rican, so when I was in Vietnam I was pretty
dark and looked like I could’ve come from any place in South America. I was in a, well, one of the bathhouses that they put up for the GIs, kind of like a recreational facility. One of the Vietnamese girls, I guess some Spanish, some Puerto Rican soldiers had taught her some Spanish. She started speaking to me in Spanish when I walked into a room. It was kind of funny.

SM: Did you come across many Spanish speakers there?

DW: Well, there were just the one Vietnamese. There were plenty of Spanish people in my unit.

SM: What was the ethnic composition of your unit as you recall it?

DW: Well, the officer ranks were mostly white. We some Asian—I think there were two Asians at different times that were maintenance officers. We had a black pilot for a while that came from another unit. Our enlisted people were, they were probably mostly white. Then blacks and then Hispanics, one or two Native Americans, you know, pretty much a mix, a cross-section of our society back here in the States. I don’t think there was any one minority that was over-represented. A lot of times the opportunities that are available, or the opportunities, rather, that you avail yourself of, you’re gonna be limited to your aptitude and your aptitude quite often is limited more by your economic background rather than your ethnic background. If you come from an area that’s poor, not a lot of money and not a lot of advancements, you’re probably gonna end up in the same cultural status in the military as you were on the outside world. It was actually by executive order years before I ever joined the Army. It was an integrated army and that’s just the way it was. There were plenty of people that may have had attitudes that you wouldn’t be proud of, but in terms of overt actions I know of very little that you could call overt racist acts by the white majority. In fact, the whole time I was in the Army the only time there was ever a real racial problem was when I was in basic training we had another company farther down in the line from ours that had a motivation platoon and most of the soldiers in that motivation platoon were black. They were having beer brought in by cab drivers from off post. They were all restricted to their quarters. So the cab drivers would bring them this beer. After they got a little drunk they were picking fights with guys from my—actually with anybody that would come walking by from the PX going back to the company areas. We had a young kid that had got his parents to sign
so he could enlist when he was seventeen, a young white kid who was being harassed by these guys. A black soldier from our company, his name is Swazer, happened by and told them to leave him alone. What they told him was, “We don’t want you. We want whitey.” He said, “No, man. I can’t let you do it.” They said, “All right.” They let the young white kid go and they beat the hell out of Swazer. The white kid, the young seventeen year old, comes running up to our barracks and at that point he hadn’t said anything about color. All he said is, “They got Swazer.” All we said was, “Where?” The kid was crying. He was young and he was scared. He’d been pounded on a little bit. As far as we were concerned at that point, color wasn’t an issue. What was at issue is somebody had one of our people. So we go pouring out of the barracks and running where he’s telling us to go. When we get there, or halfway back, Swazer’s walking up and they’ve really pounded the hell out of him. He’s got blood running down his face. When we go down there, there’s nobody on the street. It’s just gotten dark and you’ve got the old wooden two-story barracks with one naked lamp bulb on the porch. One of our squad leaders knew the platoon leader from that platoon. So he held everybody back and went to go see this platoon leader and see if he could iron out what happened. As he’s approaching the porch steps, three black soldiers came out. He couldn’t see what was in their hands because of the shadow against the contrast between the naked light bulb and the dark shadows. As he’s starting up the steps, they’re coming down and one of them swings out with an entrenching tool, the shovel folded up and hits him in the side of the head with it. Then it was just like a brawl. I ended up grabbing some guy that was about a head taller than me and probably had me by thirty or forty pounds. I only weighed—I came out of basic weighing 155. I think I weighed 135 when I joined the Army. Then they put twenty pounds on me. This guy was actually—I had his head tucked under my arm and was swinging at him trying to hit him in the face. He actually picked me up and was walking around with me, the whole time I’m swinging and hitting. Then I hear him talking about going in his pocket and I kept swinging until I saw his hand go in his pocket and then as he was bringing his hand out he had a shiv that folded up. It looked like it was about seven inches. At that point I let go of his head and put my hands on his shoulders and just pushed away. About that time somebody hollered that the MPs were coming. I was in my khakis. Most of the guys were in their fatigues. I was trying to go to
the movies when all this happened. I’m looking for my hat and there’s my hat in the middle of this angry crowd from that barrack. There was no way I was going to retrieve my hat. So we all took off and I went to the movies. Next morning my squad leader comes up to me and he’s got that hat in his hand smacking it on his open palm. He says, “You missing something?” I said, “Well, I might be missing my hat.” He looked at me ‘cause he was purposefully making me feel uncomfortable. He says, “Where were you last night?” I said, “I went to the movies.” He started laughing and he threw the hat on the bed. He said, “Don’t worry. Everything’s all right. It was explained what happened and you guys, everybody in our company is okay. The people that are in trouble are in the other barracks.” Beyond that, there was tension maybe. There were black officers sometimes—or not officers, black soldiers who felt they weren’t getting a fair shake. It’s entirely possible that some of that was true, but you couldn’t put your—without being involved at their level, you couldn’t swear to it. I always got along with everybody. In fact, when I had a problem with my heart in ’96, one of the people that came to see me was a crew chief. His name was Helms. I called him Fat Albert. Light-skinned black guy, but he was a wonderful human being. He was always so funny to be around. One time we answered a mayday call. You remember I told you the change of command ceremony we had?

SM: Mm-hmm.

DW: Well, the commander that we got had been relieved when one of our warrant officers almost hit a bird colonel coming out of the O Club on New Year’s Eve. He almost hit him with a flare. He was still in our battalion, but he was no longer our company commander. When we deployed to Quang Tri to go out and fly in Laos, this commander of ours, everybody really cared for him. His name war Myron Davis. He went by the call sign of Banjo, God knows why. Like so many officers he was a good ol’ Southern boy. He was having some kind of a malfunction at a place called A Luoi. It was one of the road intersections when QL-9, the highway that starts on the coast below the DMZ winds its way through the valleys to Khe Sanh and picks up the Laotian border and goes into Laos. This place, A Luoi, who was on his way down—in fact I think he said, “Look out A Luoi. Here we come.” The ship that we were in was close by so we went down to pick him up in case they couldn’t make it out. This guy, Alan Helms, was so
concerned about the commander, our former commander, that he just leaped from the aircraft and went charging across the ground to get to his aircraft. He forgot to unhook his monkey strap. (Laughs) He comes completely off of his feet and crashes down on his back. This was a big guy. He was about 220 pounds, probably. Thank God he had his helmet on because that probably saved him from cracking his skull open. He was bound and determined to make sure that his—well, at that point that was his favorite CO. He was bound and determined to make sure that he was taken care of. That’s not the kind of thing that reflects divisiveness. That’s the kind of thing that reflects the camaraderie that soldiers have. You know, for my tour, that’s mostly what it was. It was camaraderie regardless of race.

SM: Okay. Did you witness any drug or alcohol? Alcohol, you say yes. You already talked about beer. Any significant or even minimum drug use?

DW: When we first came in-country we were riding on a three-quarter-ton truck to the company area. It was deserted. The driver went wandering over to the orderly room. Nobody was in there. He finally sees a guy coming up from the beach and says something to him, the guy motions him towards the beach. That was where our company was, that part of the celebration of ushering in a new commander and saying goodbye to the last one was a beer bust on the beach. We had cold beer and steaks about an inch-and-a-half thick. They took the opportunity when everybody was there on the beach to do a drug sweep. Actually they were looking for any kind of contraband. The next morning—I think I may have told this story. They had First Sergeant Pine come out and he’s got the company in formation. This is a huge guy and he’s got his arms full of the drugs that they found. He throws them all into the barrel and burns them. As far as it went, I didn’t have any grave concerns about drug use until we got up around Quang Tri and then there were reports of some of the soldiers snorting heroin which, of course, over there was a much more purer form of the drug and probably absolutely possible for them to become addicted just through snorting the heroin rather than having to inject it. For the most part, it was just recreational use the same way guys would drink. I had beyond—one occasion when I got really drunk when I was first there and the going away party when I was leaving. I was blitzed those two times. Any other time I might have two or three beers or wine, but never drank to the point where I was incapacitated beyond those two occasions.
SM: After Lam Son 719 what did you do? What happened?

DW: We went back down to the old area of operations. Well, it was actually a little farther north than where we had been because as the Marine combat troops pulled out, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, they took over combat operations around the Da Nang area. We pretty much doing the same kind of things. We’d go out and do resupply or combat assaults. I remember one of the assaults. I can’t remember if it was the battalion commander or the brigade commander, I’m thinking the battalion commander. He went in on the first lift ship, was on the ground with the first troops and I think there were three or four lifts of about ten ships. It was a fairly large-scale operation. He stayed on the ground and got things organized and moving. Then when we came in with the last lift, he jumped onto one of the lift ships and was taken out and flew above the operation just to make sure that everything continued to go as planned. We had a place in Da Nang that was called Gunfighter Village. It was one of the Air Force compounds for the fighters that they had at Da Nang. Sometimes when we busted our butts and work in resupply and got everything done as absolutely quickly as possible, we’d have enough time to go over to the Vietnamese Air Force, the VNAF, parking and jump over the fence and we’d be inside the Air Force compound. They lived a whole lot differently than we did. They had air-conditioned billets. They had what looked like a stateside PX. They had a massage parlor in there that looked like a doctor’s office. It was just a different world from the one of the Army aviators lived in. They actually had a Chinese restaurant in there. If we got everything done we could go over there and land, jump that fence, and go in and have a nice Chinese meal like we went downtown in any major city in the States to a nice Chinese restaurant. Have a meal, maybe split a bottle of wine and, you know, just have a nice time. When it’s all over with, kick the tire and light the fire and go home.

SM: How much longer did you spend in Vietnam after Lam Son?

DW: It was two months, maybe, two-and-a-half to three months, maybe. It was a little bit of an adjustment coming back from there. I think my nerves were just about shot. I think a lot of people’s nerves were just about shot. I remember thinking that I didn’t have a lot of time left on my tour and one of the things that had I noted is I guess that the tension that would build up in anticipation of going out in that AO. If I ate a big breakfast I would just throw it up. If I ate just a little bit that wouldn’t be a problem and then now I
can go out in the AO and get into things. After that everything was fine. Didn’t really
matter what happened after that. Once I got past that dread of going out in it, I was fine.
Unfortunately, when we got back that persisted. I’d already found out that I’d be going
home, getting out, when I DEROS’ed (date eligible for return from overseas), when I left
country. I went to the flight surgeon and what would really piss me off is he acted like I
was already—he acted like I was trying to get out of flying. I think what he didn’t realize
is that—and I have a perfect example of this. I don’t think he realized what a relief it was
to be away from where I’d been for two months and how, relatively speaking, how safe
that I was back in the old AO. I say perfect example because I was talking to a friend of
mine, Scott Reed, we were doing a combined lift. It was my company, the 71st, and his
company, the 176th. He was a Musket, one of their Charlie-model gunship pilots. He and
I had been to flight school together. He had come up a couple times in Laos picking up
the major lifts. They sent the 176th up. They were part of our battalion. They sent them up
with the major lifts so he knew what kind of an environment that was. We’re making
small talk on the radio while this assault is ongoing. You know, we were wrong to do it,
because they did have an ongoing operation and somebody made a point of telling us
that we shouldn’t. We didn’t argue. We just shut up. A little later on, I think it was the
second lift, somebody’s screaming about “They’ve got a .51-cal. They’ve got a .51 cal.”
I’m thinking, “What? Just one?” Because where I had come from, you’ve gotta remember
this is like a month, maybe a month-and-a-half after Lam Son. I can remember on the
eighteenth of March when I was pulling wounded Marines, wounded ARVN Marines
from Delta. There were no fewer than three .51-caliber machine guns working out on us
at any given time as we were going down. The place was ringed with them. As we would
fly out of the field of fire of one, another one would pick up. It was like a completely
different world. Going back down to Chu Lai for the last few months of my tour was like
going to heaven. It was a familiar place. There were some new terrain to cover in the Da
Nang area, but for the most part we were home. That was our backyard. It was probably
dangerous as wars can be, but in relative terms there was just this feeling of bliss. “We’re
back.” I don’t know. I truly resented somebody taking that tack with me because all I was
concerned about is this something that’s gonna follow me. I thought maybe I’ve got an
ulcer or something. I had flown over 1,200 hours in my tour and that’s not the mark of
somebody who’s afraid to fly. That’s the mark of somebody who generally flew unless it
was damn near impossible. I was there. I did my job. I was happy. I was proud to do the
job.
SM: Well, I’m curious. What did you think about the leadership generally of
American forces and especially your units when you were serving with the 71st in
Vietnam, generally?
DW: Well, the first commander that I had was only my commander for probably a
week. People in that unit dearly loved him. The next commander, people came to love
him. The last commander, people absolutely disliked. I don’t think they understood him.
He was a soldier that had probably joined during the Korean War and he was a captain at
the time. I think he’d been passed over and so this command was make or break for him.
He upset everybody. He would wear his jump wings over top of his aviator wings. We
had a battalion commander, as far as his effectiveness goes overall, I couldn’t really rate
him. The story is that he and my company commander that was disliked sent one of the
crews from the 174th, part of the 14th Battalion, to their death after they identified the
wrong smoke in Laos. Something like that doesn’t sit well with the men. We had a group
commander named Benjamin Silver who was overall really bad for morale. When he took
over the 16th Group that the 14th Battalion fell under, one of the things he had people do
was ripped down their pinups. For some guys that’s like no big deal. For others it was
like, “Wait a minute this is our respite from the war. We don’t want to be here. Why are
you now making it less pleasant for us, this place that we call home?” He was, I don’t
think, ever respected by anybody at the unit level. I couldn’t tell you how battalion felt
about it, but no one in the unit would give you a dime for him. I think probably the
biggest thing that I didn’t like beyond that kind of intrusion into everybody’s lives is
when we had to move away from the coast. We had originally, the first four months of
my tour we lived on the beach. It was a real tough life at first. If you weren’t going out
and flying and getting shot at, you could go have a beer and fall in the ocean and, you
know, basically just relax. Once the Marines, MAG (Marine Air Group) 12 and MAG 13
moved out, we ended up going into their old AO and the rear area was not as pleasant. It
wasn’t as much fun to be back at your hooch as it used to be. I think the story that I got is
we had our own club. We had our own enlisted club. We had our own officer’s club. We
had our own theater. The story I got was the ice machine that the officer’s club had ended
up in his personal quarters. So what kind of a commander does that kind of thing, you
know?

SM: Yeah. Well, he’s not gonna be liked by his men.

DW: No.

SM: For taking their ice away. Well, I’m just curious in terms of time period.
Which one of these was the commander during Lam Son? The one that was loved, liked,
disliked?

DW: The one that was hated.

SM: Okay.

DW: He was not well liked at all. I think we might’ve spoken off the record in
Las Vegas about him.

SM: Yes, sir.

DW: When he was at the reunion he insisted that he led the assault on the third of
March when we went into Landing Zone Lolo. He did not.

SM: This is part of Lam Son?

DW: Yeah. It was the third of March. We were opcon’ed (placed under the
operational control of) to the 158th battalion. Well, during Lam Son the 158th battalion
from 8 February to about 24 March or thereabouts, got a presidential unit citation because
we were opcon’ed and not attached we did not share in that award. To add insult to
injury, the 101st Aviation Battalion, they receive a valorous unit award. Their citation
period started on the third of March. The third of March was the day that the 71st led that
assault. A total of forty ships, it’s supposed to be three lifts for a total of a hundred and
twenty lifts into Lolo. Every one of our aircraft were hit. Four of the first ten were shot
down. Two that, well, one burned in the LZ. One never made it to the LZ, lost it’s tail
rudder and hydraulics and ended up down slope on the far side of the LZ. My platoon
leader, who actually led the assault, his aircraft had to be abandoned. He got it back to
Khe Sanh. One of the most compelling lines in the book *The Price of Exit* written by Tom
Marshall that recounts what occurred that day is this guy Dan Grigsby, my platoon
leader, he was Rattler 2-6, calling into Khe Sanh tower declaring his emergency. He had
no aft-cyclic and he was leaking fuel so he was gonna have to make a running landing on
their hard-surface runway while he’s got JP-4 spilling out of his engine, spilling out of his fuel cell. This is like a measure of just how bad things were. The line is, he calls Khe Sanh tower with his emergency and Khe Sanh tower says, “Roger, 2-6. You’ll be emergency number three following the aircraft burning on short final.”

SM: Oh, my goodness.

DW: So that’s the kind of environment that was, you know. There was another time. This was on the fifth of March where there were so many aircraft getting shot down and the Air Force rescue people trying to keep track of everybody. There were so many people going down at one time you heard “Mayday, wait one.” Somebody with a mayday doesn’t have time to wait for nothing. Also on the fifth of March, I think it was the fifth of March, I heard a crew going down and it was almost like they were pleading, “Can anybody see us?” because they didn’t even have a map. They just know where they were. They’d become separated from their flight and had been shot at, hit, and were going down. They couldn’t give a position to anybody. They didn’t know where they were.

SM: Oh, goodness. Do you know if they were recovered eventually?

DW: Not to my knowledge.

SM: I’m curious. During the time you were flying over Laos for Lam Son, that very hectic period where some of the aircraft were going down and needed search and rescue, do you know if any Air America pilots came into assist with that SAR (search and rescue) mission?

DW: No. I never heard of any Air America pilots when we were up in Lam Son.

SM: Okay. Anywhere else, did you—?

DW: The only time I heard of Air America—I mean, we saw them routinely when we were down in Chu Lai. They would come in now and then with people, drop them off, get gas, and stuff like that. There was one night, I think, when I was on a flare standby that we were gonna have to scramble and go pick up an Air America helicopter that had been shot down, but before we could get there one of their crews picked them up. But, no, I never heard of an Air America rescue during Lam Son.

SM: What was your impression of Air America based on what little interaction you had with them?
DW: Well, as a warrant officer who made about $8,500 for the year that I spent in Vietnam, I was real close to not coming home because back then they were starting at $21,000. That was almost three times what I was making as a warrant officer.

SM: So you were thinking about going over and flying with Air America?

DW: Yeah. Not even going home. I was told that we would not be allowed to separate from the service in Vietnam.

SM: Okay. Obviously, based on that, they were an outfit you were willing to work with?

DW: Oh, yeah.

SM: Okay.

DW: But again, that was purely from monetary standpoint. I’d already been to Vietnam at that point. I’d already been shot at. It wasn’t necessarily worth getting shot at for $8,500 a year. I don’t know if it would’ve been worth it at twenty-one, but it sounded better than eighty five hundred.

SM: Yes sir. Absolutely. Let me think. Is there anything else you want to talk about with regard to your time in Vietnam?

DW: I don’t know. We’ve stretched this out over about six—it’s actually been longer than six or seven months. It’s actually, was it ’99?

SM: No, no, no. It was last year.

DW: Was it 2000?

SM: Yes, sir. It was last year.

DW: Okay. I’m getting confused.

SM: The unfortunate thing is that even though that time does make it more difficult to make sure we’ve talked about everything. If there’s anything else that comes to mind right now that you can think of.

DW: It’s real tough to keep track. I don’t know. I have so many good memories that as opposed to so many bad.

SM: What are some of your good memories or your better memories?

DW: Well, probably the most powerful memory I’ve already discussed. That was pulling those guys out on ropes, recognizing the awesome power and responsibility that we had as a pilot. Probably one of the most pleasurable moments of my life is low-
leveling down the side of a mountain, like racing a waterfall down the hill. Listening to
“Ten Years After” on the AFVM station, seeing these small deer from the jungle
bounding away from the aircraft as we’re falling down the side of the mountain. Going
feet-wet up the coast, looking at the clear South China Sea. Probably the most beautiful
sunsets in the world. You know, just some amazing sights. They might all mean nothing
if I was banged up real bad or seriously injured or perhaps rendered disabled in some
way, but I wasn’t. All I have to measure the experience by is how I came away from it. I
was happy to have done it. I was proud that I did it. I know I made my father proud of
me. I think my mother was—I think my dad was scared, but I think my mother was more
so. I think my father probably was living vicariously through his oldest son. He had been
a frustrated pilot all of his life. He had originally enlisted trying to get into the Army Air
Corps and was unable to because of his eyes. I’m proud of what I did. It was kind of
lonely coming home because there was this sense of isolation. There was so much
distrust and dislike in the military and unfortunately that’s kind of like killing the
messenger. We didn’t make policy. It was our job to follow the orders of national
authorities. It was Congress and the president that determined what we did and didn’t do
and not the individual soldiers. I don’t think people realized what this country would be if
people weren’t willing to stand up and take their place in the ranks when they’re called. I
don’t think combat service is an acid test as to whether somebody should be president or
not, but I think if somebody did what a coward would do to avoid service, I think it
should probably disqualify them, but unfortunately it’s not up to me.

SM: Well, what was the trip like back when you left Vietnam and came into the
United States?

DW: I’ll tell you, it was mixed emotions. I knew my tour was over and I put off
packing and I ended up, we had different survival rations and meds and I ended up taking
some of the stay-awake pills just trying to get my stuff packed. I couldn’t bring myself to
pack to leave there. It’s almost like you feel guilty about leaving everybody else there
‘cause you know it’s not over. When I came home it was like this tremendous weight had
been lifted off of me. When I got in it was still dark when we landed at Fort Lewis to out-
process. We drug our bags around and got this sham exit physical. I don’t think there was
even a doctor there. It was just a corpsman that examined us and took us down to the Sea-
Tac, Seattle Tacoma, and that was like being in the twilight zone. There were all these
people that wouldn’t look at you, it was like they looked past you. Nobody made eye
contact with you ‘cause we’re GIs and we’re in uniform. To us they looked far more
strange than we did because their climate’s kind of like England’s. The overcast and
rainy and all these people had these pasty white complexions. Where we had just come
from the only people we saw pasty white were dead. It was an ethereal kind of
experience. I got on the plane with this buddy of mine and we went all the way to
Chicago before we took different planes. He went to Philly and I went to DC National.
My family was waiting there. I got in about ten thirty in the morning. My old man, he
had—one of the worst days of my life was when I was going to Vietnam. He had insisted
we get there like an hour early. He had taken all these pictures of all my brothers and
sisters and me. It was like every time I looked at one of them they burst into tears. Here
I’m getting ready to embark on what could be my greatest adventure or my impending
doom and I’ve got to console all my family instead of just get it over with and be gone.
When I got to the airport, my dad was there with his camera in his hand. He tried, but he
got off one blurry picture and he couldn’t shoot anymore ‘cause he was crying. I don’t
know. Like I said, it was such a weight that was lifted off. I went home, went around the
neighborhood and said hello to people. Probably about eight o’clock that night I just
couldn’t take it anymore. I got jet lag and lack of sleep. I had a sleep deficit with all the
packing and being jerked around here and there. I hit the rack and didn’t wake up until
about three thirty the next afternoon. I don’t think I’d slept that long since I was a tiny
baby. I think there was one occasion where a loud noise startled me. Once I was home I
knew I was home. I was just keenly aware of it. The only problem was that I felt so
isolated because I’d just been to some amazing places, seen some amazing things, and
done amazing things, and there was nobody that was really comfortable talking about it.
It wasn’t politically acceptable back then. It was something that you kept from people
rather than told people about. That’s not a good thing.

SM: No. Just out of curiosity, did you try to join the VFW or American Legion
near you?

DW: No. No. Actually, when I went down to visit my grandparents in Oklahoma,
my grandfather dragged me down to the American Legion. He had enlisted in World War
I. My father had enlisted in World War II and myself and two of my younger brothers had enlisted during Vietnam. If there was somebody who was more proud of his family at that point, I don’t know who. I wasn’t there. One of my younger brothers that was stationed at Fort Hood with the 1st Cav, he was up there at the legion hall one night with my dad and my grandfather. My grandfather stood up with tears in his eyes bragging about—well, not so much bragging, proud to say that there were three generations in his legion hall. What he was most proud of, I think, was that none of us were drafted. He was so proud of that he just couldn’t bring up the subject when he would start dragging out pictures, stuff like that. He’s, uh—the little town where he’s from, Marietta, Oklahoma. They have a military museum and some of my dad’s surviving relatives that are still in town are involved with the museum. My grandfather’s represented in the museum. My father is and the three brothers are, along with all of my dad’s cousins that joined the Army with him and my great uncle, my grandfather’s brother-in-law, who enlisted in World War II with him. I don’t think his son served, but his grandson was in the Navy during Vietnam. I don’t know if he went overseas. There’s not many families, I guess, that can brag about three generations of service. He was proud and I think he had reason to be. My old man is buried in Arlington. So is my wife’s father. I’m gonna be, and probably my wife as well. There’s a few of them, not many, but there are fathers and sons, successive generations buried in Arlington. To me, if we’ve got hollowed ground in our country that it’s probably there and maybe the battlefield of Gettysburg, places that just evoke really strong emotion about what it is to serve regardless of the nature of the conflict. Some of it’s powerful stuff.

SM: Yes, sir. This will end the interview with Mr. Womack on Tuesday, February 6.