Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m beginning an oral history interview with Lt. Col. Steven Vermillion of the U.S. Army. Today’s date is the ninth of February 2004. I’m in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech. Colonel Vermillion is in Fort Lewis, Washington. Good morning, sir.

Steve Vermillion: Good morning.

LC: How are you?

SV: I’m doing fine.

LC: Very good. First of all, sir, I’d like to ask you about some just basic biographical information. Where were you born, sir, and when?

SV: I was born in August of 1948. I was born in Altadena, California.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What did your dad do?

SV: My dad was a former Marine, served in World War II. At the time of my birth he was a police officer for the Los Angeles County police department. He subsequently died when I was a year old. That was attributed to a disease that he had picked up on Guadalcanal. Now it’s completely curable. At that time it wasn’t. My mother was also a Marine from World War II. At the time of my birth she was a housewife. Both she and my dad met in the Marine Corps.

LC: Your dad served in the Pacific then. How long was he in the service?

SV: I think probably about six years.

LC: What about your mom? Do you know why she joined the Marines?
SV: I think the reason she joined is, you know it was a time of war. It’s a means of employment, but it’s also a means of serving one’s country. She found that as a rewarding point in her life. I really didn’t ever press her on that, but it’s to serve the country and obviously a means of survival so to speak from an economic standpoint.

LC: What was your mother’s name?
SV: My mother’s name was Dolores.
LC: And her maiden name?
SV: Jacobs.
LC: What about your father? What was his name?
SV: His first name was Henry. Last name is Wickman.
LC: How do you spell that?
LC: Having had both parents serve in the war and I know you lost your father when you were very, very young, but did that have any influence on you in later years thinking about what they had done and your own pursuit of a military career?
SV: No, I don’t think they influenced me either by service or by my mom’s presence and her background, the Marine Corps. I think as I aged and the Vietnam War came around, she wasn’t really in favor of me joining the Army so to speak, not that she didn’t want me to serve in the country. It was the risk factor. I certainly could have exercised the sole surviving son option if I wanted to since I was the only son of my father.

LC: Yes, sir. Just out of curiosity can you say where your mom was stationed during the war and what kind of service did she perform? Do you know?
SV: She was stationed primarily at the El Toro Marine, I think it was the Naval Air Station at that time. It’s just north of San Diego. She was in Marine Corps supply.
LC: Okay. Sir, where did you grow up?
SV: My step dad was with the Federal Aviation Agency. He was a radar/control tower operator. That made us kind of transient, almost like being in the military. I started out in California. We moved to Utah, Montana, Alaska, and Oregon.
LC: Where did you go to high school?
SV: In Oregon. Eastern Oregon.
LC: Eastern Oregon. How were you as a student or was academics your thing or not really?

SV: You know, so so. One of my drawbacks I think in school and it also kind of hit my son is our birth date kind of put us into school a little earlier then what we were prepared for. So my maturity level in high school was about a year behind. Academics were fine. I was probably a B+ student. There were some subjects that were more challenging then others.

LC: What were you especially happy to be studying?

SV: Oh, I liked the subjects one might call soft subjects. I liked sociology, history, things of that nature. Math was difficult, both in high school, when I got into college, and for my master’s degree. You know you had to take all the math, even when I was in flight school. I got straight A’s in college, both undergraduate and in my master’s degree. Math is one of those where I’ve got to keep hitting my head against the side of the wall in order for it to sink in.

LC: Yes, sir, I do actually know that. What kind of jobs did you have growing up? Did you work outside the house at all?

SV: Yeah. I bucked bails during the summer. Where I was going to school it was kind of a farming, logging community in Eastern Oregon. So there was plenty of work and bucking bails. I think the labor rate at that time was about $1.25. You were doing good if it was $2 an hour. I worked in a gas station for a couple of years, just pumping gas, changing oil. I think that labor rate was about a $1.50. Then gas was 28¢ a gallon too.

LC: That’s right. Did you play sports at all in high school?

SV: I did. My forte I think in high school was baseball. I lettered for four years. Was the team captain the last year and we went to the state playoffs. Finished second, but yeah. That was my objective was to be a professional baseball player.

LC: At what point did you think that might not pan out?

SV: When I didn’t get drafted out of high school. Scouts were looking at us at the playoffs. They had watched us as we progressed. Nobody knocked on my door. So I assumed that probably wasn’t going to happen.
LC: Had most of your thinking been pointed toward that outcome that you would be drafted and that would be what you would do?
SV: No, that was just one of the things on the agenda.
LC: Had you been giving thought to college as well?
SV: I did. Like most kids I think you’re kind of undecided as to what you want to be when you grow up. So rather than going off to a four-year school I went to a junior college, one just to get to know the flow of academics. To test the water and really trying to see what the worst might be open out there. I still wanted to play college baseball in hopes that somebody else would knock on my door, but that didn’t happen either.

LC: Where did you go to junior college?
SV: It’s a college in Pendleton Oregon called Blue Mountain Community College.
LC: Is it still there?
SV: It is, yes.
LC: How long were you there?
SV: I was there just a year.
LC: What happened after that?
SV: At the end of the year I was in a motorcycle accident. That kept me from working for about three months of the summer. Without having money to go to school I had to start looking around at whether or not I was going to go to school and/or how I was going to finance it in totality, where I was going to go. So my folks had moved back to California. I went down there to kind of recuperate so to speak. I decided that I would just go ahead and join the Army. I had heard about the warrant officer flight school program. I had read an article on a dust off pilot. I don’t know who that was. When I wrote my book I attributed it to Charles Kelly. I said you know I would really like to be a dust off pilot. That was a good opportunity for me to learn how to fly. The Army at that time did not require a college degree for the warrant officers. So I went down and talked to a recruiter. At that time in 1967 they were more than happy to accommodate my needs.

LC: About what point in the year of ’67 was this?
SV: You know I think it was around August, September. I opted to go in. They had a class date for me and I opted to go in in November of ’67.
LC: Where were you actually living with your folks?

SV: Monrovia, California.

LC: Can you just describe generally where that is in relation to any of the big cities?

SV: It’s a suburb in Los Angeles County.

LC: Were you paying much attention to the at that time just growing opposition to the war and the student age population, people your age, protesting against the war?

SV: There was kind of two factions. Of course in Eastern Oregon where I lived anti-war protest were nil to zero, since it was more of a conservative kind of environment. Obviously we followed the Vietnam conflict in our history and social studies types of classes. I was exposed to the anti-war kind of environment down in California, but I really didn’t pay much attention to it. It wasn’t a theme that I followed and felt one with so. It was there. There again in 1967 I don’t know that it was that rampant as it developed you know in ’69, ’70, ’71.

LC: Yes, sir. Do you remember the trip to the recruiter’s office?

SV: Yeah, it was a sunny warm day. I drove myself down and I talked to the guy. We kind of negotiated the assurance that I could take the test. There were a couple of different tests that you had to take before you could even get a slot into flight school. Plus you had to take a flight physical. He had guaranteed the fact that we could take those tests and then have a flight school course assigned to us. He followed through on that commitment.

LC: Steve, had you been thinking about flying for any amount of time before this set of opportunities in the military came up? Was it something that you had long-term interest in?

SV: I did with my dad being with, or my step dad being with the Federal Aviation Agency. I was exposed to aviation and flying. I would hang around the airport and get free rides. I would wash airplanes and things like that when I had time. So yeah there was an active aviation desire in my part.

LC: We talked briefly about your mom. Did she know that you were going to go see a recruiter? Was she consulted in that?
SV: You know she did. My step dad kind of pushed me towards the military option. His intent was maybe to follow suit with what he had done. His service experience was in air traffic control. That built a career for him. For me, that wasn’t of interest nor was being an infantry grunt of any interest to me. Had I not gotten into flight school I would not have joined the military. They were a little concerned when I came back from the recruiters and told them that I planned on going to flight school. My mom was just stressed, I think, once reality hit that I had in fact had taken the exams and passed and had a flight school allocation.

LC: Yes, sir. I can image that she probably was concerned. Had your step dad been in the U.S. Army or another branch?
SV: He was in the Air Force.
LC: He was in the Air force, okay. Your mom of course had been in the Marines and you didn’t do either of those. Did you consider the Marines at all?
SV: I didn’t because they didn’t have an aviation program. I looked at the Air Force. They were looking at a four-year degree. The Navy had that option for flight school if you had a two-year degree. So I was kind of caught in between there. If I wanted to fly it was going to be in the Army. That looked to be a possible role. I thought flying helicopters would be challenging. Here again I got kind of a mind set and a focus on becoming a dust off pilot. It was like hey that’s what I want to do if I can get that far.

LC: Now to make the system to make it happen for you.
SV: Right.
LC: Yeah. Sir, do you remember reporting for basic training?
SV: I do. I’m not sure what our initial landing point was, but we flew from there and I’m assuming it was probably Dallas to Ft. Polk, Louisiana, what we called tree top airlines. It was, I think, Trans Texas Airlines. It was a DC-3. We landed at Ft. Polk Airfield. It wasn’t like there was a whole bunch of us on the airplane. They picked us up in a bus and took us over to the barracks and kind of treated us like human beings for the first couple of hours. Then it went down hill from there.

LC: You mentioned something about that, to that affect on the form that you filled in. That the instructors really got right up in your face pretty quickly.
SV: Yeah, they did.
LC: How did that make you feel, sir?

SV: You know it wasn’t a negative feeling. I mean you realize that E-5 or that
staff sergeant is kind of like God running around. He controls when you eat and when
you sleep and what you do and if you’re going to get a pass. It’s all a function of
changing your mind set and trying to think as a team and get me out of that civilian mode
and building discipline and respect and things like that. So yeah there was a little
intimidation because you didn’t know what to expect. I mean this is a new experience.
They had all the cards and you had none. So it wasn’t fair. There was intimidation going
on, but—are you getting any feedback from the office here?

LC: Just a little bit, but I think it’s okay. So the adjustment was one that you
recognized and one that you made. Is that fair?

SV: Right.

LC: Can you describe any reminisces you have of your time at basic? Anything
special happen that you recall?

SV: No. One of the things is we had a Christmas break so they sent us home for
two weeks. That’s one of those where they’re shutting the post down basically. They’re
locking your billets so you really don’t have a choice. You can go to Leesville and get a
motel if they have a motel there or you can depart the post. The break in two weeks was
kind of a downer because you knew you’d have to go back. But it was cold and it was
wet. I was an assistance or a squad leader, one of those acting squad leaders for a while.
So I got a little leadership experience. The cadre looked at people that were destined to
go to flight school. They viewed them differently and we caught a lot more harassment.

LC: Why was that?

SV: You know I think they were just trying to break us or maybe it was a
jealousy factor because we were going someplace where they didn’t. They had served as
grunts or were going to be deployed as infantry guys and here we were the slickly boy fly
guys.

LC: Right, so they wanted to kind of take the mickey a little bit while they were
there.

SV: Yeah, they just evened the score with us a little bit, which was fine. We
knew that it was a collective effort versus an individual issue. I had some real good drill
sergeants. They were professional, dedicated and they did their best to convert civilians
into soldiers in the amount of time they had us. I ran into one guy that was in my squad.
He was an all American football player in high school. He was a black kid. I don’t know
how he didn’t get drafted or get into college. I am assuming it’s just one of those where
he didn’t get a scholarship or something, but anyway he ended up in the military. I ran
into him in Vietnam. He was a POL (petroleum, oils and lubricants) specialist, which I
was glad to see.

LC: For someone who didn’t understand that reference, what did that mean?
SV: He refueled airplanes. I ran into him there and when did I see him? ’68, just
right after I got there, or ’69. I got there in ’69 so I saw him the end of January
sometime,’69. So he was about ready to come home.

LC: What was that like? Did he recognize you?
SV: Oh, yeah. We threw our arms around each other like we are old buds.
LC: Totally, yeah.
SV: He was a spec-4 and I was a W-1. The captain I was with at that time—and I
had been in-country a week or so—thought that was kind of weird, but he was a special
guy.

LC: Why did he think it was weird?
SV: Well, there is this hierarchy in the military where officers don’t associate
with the enlisted guys per say. But here again I was a warrant officer and I was still a
young kid. That guy was special to me and rank didn’t have any bearing on our
friendship.

LC: What was this young man’s name? Do you remember?
SV: Yeah, it was Alvin Williams.
LC: How do you spell his first name?
LC: Mm-hmm, Alvin. Did the captain or commander you were with that day give
you to believe that he had an issue because this young man was black?
SV: No, no. It was just that we saw each other in the PX (Post Exchange). We
saw each other about the same time and it’s, “Alvin!” “Steve!” Not like, “Hey Mr.
Vermillion,” or anything else. It was first name. We’re buds and we’re talking about where we’ve been and life in general.

LC: When did you get your orders for advanced training, do you recall?
SV: Well, out of—we went from Fort Polk to a flight school down in Mineral Wells, Texas, initial training. So we were there for sixteen weeks. I think that was the time frame. Then we got orders to follow on advanced training either at Ft. Rucker or Hunter Army Airfield. We had a choice. They were asking for volunteers to go to Hunter Army Airfield. They had such of a flood of training cadets at Rucker they wanted people to—they set up a satellite school at Hunter Army Airfield. I opted to go to Hunter Army Airfield instead of flying the TH-13 T, which is a reciprocating engine type trainer. For instruments we flew UH-1s. I knew I was going to fly a UH-1 in Vietnam. That just gave me twenty-five more hours in the airfield.

LC: So it felt like an advantage to you actually.
SV: Yes.

LC: What do you remember about initial training? How did you do with it and what was the general content of the course?
SV: Well, once again coming out of basic training we were all feeling good about ourselves. We had achieved something. We’re now E-2s I think in the rank system. They loaded us on buses. We traveled most of the night to Ft. Walters, Texas. Got there, some God awful hour in the morning, you know like three in the morning. The tack officers were there to meet us and striped us of humanity one more time. Once again to get us back in the mindset that this is flight school, this is the way they’re going to do business. We were the lowest people on the system of life or the life chain.

LC: How did they reinforce that with you?
SV: Up front and in your face. Everywhere you went, you ran. You stood at parade rest if one of them came into the building. You brace the wall at attention. It was chin back, chest out, yes sir, and no sir. Yes, sir I am stupid. I agree sir, yes sir. There was no independent opinion allowed to be generated. It was whatever they said that’s what you were. That went on for about four weeks in what they call pre-flight. Here they, it was a concerted effort to make you quit. They wanted to weed out the people that weren’t
mentally tough by their standards. We also did some academics. It was half a day academics, half a day harassment kind of thing.

LC: Did some people bail out?
SV: Oh, yes.
LC: Could you give an estimate as to a percentage say of your group?
SV: Probably twenty percent.
LC: Really?
SV: Yeah.
LC: How did you cope with this renewed barrage of abuse for lack of a better word?
SV: Just trying to keep it in perspective. You know what they’re doing. You know the mind game and you just try not to take it personal. You just keep looking at what’s the future objective, what’s my goal. This is everything in between that needs to take place.
LC: So getting through it in order to get on.
SV: Just surviving it.
LC: How about the academics? What kinds of things were you supposed to be studying at this point in pre-flight?
SV: You know they taught us rules of war, I think. Code of conduct, you know some basic flight things, some real basic aerodynamics. You know just general topics. Nothing real stringent or anything like that.
LC: About how long were you there in Texas?
SV: Well, we spent four weeks doing that. Then we spent another I think sixteen weeks actually doing flying and academics. So we would fly half a day and do academics half a day. Then one week we’d fly mornings and then we’d switch the next week and fly afternoons. So we just reversed our cycles, you know for academics and flying. Here again the longer we were there the better it became. We became senior candidates. There was less harassment. Now we can harass the junior candidates. You know how that is, kind of like the freshmen class and senior class kind of environment. As we advanced in flying and our skills got more proficient then we didn’t take as much grief from the flight instructor cadre and things like that.
LC: Now were you falling into the flight training fairly easily?
SV: Yeah, I think I was. There were some issues that—I had an instructor, initially who was civilian. We started out; we started flight head civilian flight instructors. Here again he wanted to make sure I knew he was the boss. So we start over again. You’re the lowest thing on the food chain. I don’t know why you’re here. You’re from California. The last student I had from California I washed out. It’s the mind game kind of thing. He used to take me, we flew out of stage fields. Those were six mini runways if you might where the first three they make right hand traffic and the other three on the other side of the stage field, they make left hand traffic so they could have a continual flow of a lot of helicopters coming and landing and taking off and stuff like that. You know for the most part I didn’t see the stage field my first four or five hours. He had me out in some farmers’ field. Hovering a helicopter is a real challenge when you first get your hands on it. There’s four controls that you have to worry about. They all influence the input and output of the other controls. So it’s like doing a little dance with your feet and your hands trying to keep this thing stationary over one spot. Kind of when you start out you see that spot pass by every once in a while as you’re kind of wandering around. We started out in the farmers’ field and he’d make me hover over a bush or a dirt spot or something like that. Every once in a while I would see that dirt spot come by and he’d be yelling at me. It was kind of trials and tribulations. Then once I learned how to hover he would have me take off and fly to another little spot over there and land again. I just thought that was kind of weird. But I was the third one to solo in my class. The two guys before me had fixed wing experience.

LC: I was going to ask you if you had had any fixed wing experience?
SV: No, not really, just riding along. The other two were rated fixed wing pilots that preceded me.

LC: So you, with no flight experience in fixed wing, soloed right after two guys who had experience in that?
SV: Right.

LC: What was this instructor’s name, do you know, Steve? Do you remember?
SV: Yeah, it was Kenneth Haake. H-A-A-K-E

LC: Okay. What was his rank at that time?
SV: Well, he was the DA (Department of the Army) civilian
LC: Okay. Oh, I’m sorry, yes, you said that.
SV: In the Reserves he was a CW-3 I think, chief warrant officer 3.
LC: You thought it was kind of strange that he was taking you out and putting you through all this stuff, but you figured out why he was doing it?
SV: Right.
LC: His background had been in both fixed wing and helicopter, do you know?
SV: I think he was fixed wing qualified, to the best of my knowledge. I know I ran into him at an airport one time. He and another instructor had flown in and they were in their Reserve uniforms, which caught us by surprise because we weren’t supposed to be at airfields on our days off. In they come. So we had to pretend we were looking for resources or something like that.
LC: When did you actually solo then? Do you remember that?
SV: The date of it?
LC: Yeah, or the month or the time frame generally.
SV: Oh, gosh, let me see. You know I don’t. It’s on the mug that I got at the house.
LC: That’s okay. This is all still at Ft. Walters, correct?
SV: It is, yes.
LC: When did you transfer over to Georgia at Hunter?
SV: I think we left the end of June and got to Hunter Army Airfield right after the fourth of July so somewhere right around there.
LC: I want to ask you about a couple of things that happened that spring and if you have any recollections around them. The first one is the assassination of Dr. King. I wonder if you remember that.
SV: Ah, we do, yeah.
LC: Where were you when you found out about it?
SV: Well, it’s like we didn’t find out about it immediately. As a candidate you’re pretty isolated. We didn’t have TVs. You didn’t have a radio. You didn’t have a newspaper.
LC: What was the purpose of all that, that kind of isolation?
SV: I think to keep you in your environment and not let you be distracted by what was going on in the civilian and the general world. They wanted you to think about only aerodynamics and how to fly helicopters and things like that. I think we found out about it word of mouth. I think that it came from one of our students that was black, that he had heard about it. Obviously he was distressed. Then the word kind of filtered out. There wasn’t any announcement or anything like that.

LC: Did you have any particular feelings one way or the other when you heard about it?

SV: No, not really. At that time I don’t know that I was aware enough to really understand the impact of his death and what he was trying to do. I grew up with kids of color whether it be black or Hispanic or Eskimo or Native American. The trials and tribulations just didn’t seem to impact them or us. So there was kind of the geographic removal from that source if you may. We noticed it when we got to Georgia. You’d go to someplace and there would be the white’s and the black’s restroom. Just by being exposed, the segregation idea was driven home just by being more in that geographic area at the time when Dr. King was assassinated.

LC: Didn’t really hit you too much?

SV: No, not really.

LC: What about just a couple of months later when Robert Kennedy was shot. How did you find out about that?

SV: That was announced in formation, yeah.

LC: Was that, do you think because he was actively seeking office of the presidency at that point or do you have any idea why they would do that?

SV: It could have been because he was a presidential candidate and that he had been the attorney general. He had served his country in that capacity.

LC: Did you have any reaction to that news at all or anyone that you saw have a reaction to it?

SV: Boy, that’s going back quite a ways. You know I can’t recall it caused any emotional concern. You start wondering what’s going on as a society as a whole. Here we’re getting ready to go off to combat. Here again your world is so constrained and
focused. A lot of what happens outside in the world is just not, you just don’t find out about it.

LC: There seems to be distance between what you’re doing and what everyone else is up to.

SV: Right.

LC: How long were you actually in training at Hunter?

SV: I think I was there for sixteen weeks. I got out of there in November.

LC: Of ’68?

SV: Yeah. November fifth was my graduation.

LC: Did you get to start training in the Huey right away?

SV: Yes. Our first phase was instruments. So we started training right then and there. As we had hoped our instructor—we were there just to fly instruments, but he taught us the starting procedures for the Huey. He would let us hover it and obviously for take offs and landings. He would let us fly that particular airplane even though we weren’t checked out in it. So when we went to our transition for the Huey we already knew how it started. We knew how to hover it so that was a bunch easier. So I kind of owe that one to forethought of going there and secondly to the instructor.

LC: Who was that? Do you remember his name?

SV: Brady Birch. TB Birch.

LC: Sir, were there any accidents during you training time that you recall?

SV: There was I think two at Ft. Walters. Both were catastrophic.

LC: Do you know or can you say anything about either of those incidents?

SV: One was a kid on a solo flight I believe, had an engine failure and just didn’t do the proper emergency procedure and ended up, at the bottom of the rotation, ended up crashing. I don’t know what happened to the other one. It had an instructor and a student on board.

LC: At Hunter there basically weren’t any mishaps that you recall?

SV: Not that I recall.

LC: Was it clear to you that you were going to get an assignment as a Medevac helicopter pilot? Was that clear to you from the Army’s end of things?
SV: No, it wasn’t. You’re just one of X number of flight candidates going through the school. When we got to Hunter Army Airfield they had you fill out your dream sheet. That’s where what unit of assignment you would like to go to. If you would like a transition or if you want to be a cobra pilot or a CH-47 pilot or something like that, you can put that down on your dream sheet. Obviously their guidance was in your geographic destination just go ahead and put Vietnam for all three of your choices because that’s where you’re going. If you put Hawaii down, you’re just taking up space, unless you were a second tour guy. One of our guys was a Special Forces soldier his previous tour and then came back and went to flight school. They did send him to Hawaii instead of Vietnam but deservedly so. On that you had the opportunity to declare whether you wanted to be a dust off pilot, like I said a Chinook pilot or something like that. I put dust off pilot as all three of my choices.

LC: You were pretty committed.

SV: Yeah, I was. We found out about, let’s see, we went to advanced training, what they call tactics. That was our last four weeks. We found out what our assignments were going to be. People were putting on—they knew they were going to the 1st Cav. So they would put a 1st Cav patch on their uniform. Those of us that knew we were going to a dust off unit, we could put the AMED (Army Medical Department) patch and so forth and so on. Some of us knew that we were going to school right after flight school again. Some knew that they were going to Cobra school and things like that.

LC: Can you describe the tactics section of the training?

SV: They taught us to fly in formation, taught us how to fly with an internal load. What they did is they had, oh, it almost looks like a big fifty-five gallon drum, but it’s bigger. It’s actually an ox fuel system. It was a big aluminum barrel they had installed in the cargo compartment. They would fill that full of water to simulate having a load of troops or other cargo. They taught us how to do swing loads. Then we got to go out to the gunnery range. They taught us some real basic orientation on gunnery. You know things like that.

LC: Were you weapons qualified at this point?

SV: No, that was part of the orientation. At that time I had taken my flight helmet. I had painted a 44th Med Brigade patch on the back of it, which I mixed all the
paint colors and got an almost exact replica of the patch. The gunnery instructor saw that and said, “What patch is that?” I said, “Well, I’m going to go be a dust off pilot.” Then we started all over where I ranked on the food chain of life from his perspective.

LC: Why did he take a bite out of you for that?

SV: Oh, gun pilots are pretty macho guys. There is one focus in life and that’s flying guns and shooting people. If I’m going to be a dust off pilot, which is unarmed, you know, why is he flying me around. Then I proceeded to put some tracers short of a target and catch the range on the fire. He just flew the rest of the period. He demonstrated how a macho gun pilot flies.

LC: Did you learn anything from this particular incident that you didn’t already know or was it confirmatory of impressions you’d been compiling?

SV: Oh, just standard impressions. I just thought it was kind of humorous. Here again I was still a warrant officer candidate. You don’t voice your opinion, but you can just kind of snicker inside and understand where they’re coming from. You know where you’re going and you know what your mission is and why you’re there.

LC: In the course of your training at Hunter or in fact anytime before you actually deployed over to Vietnam did you get any escape and evasion training?

SV: Yes.

LC: Where did that happen?

SV: That happened at Hunter Army Airfield.

LC: Can you describe that training? What was it that you were put through at that point?

SV: They gave us orientations on POW (prisoner of war) camps. There was no harassment per say. They taught us what we were supposed to do if we were shot down, how we were supposed to react if we were captured. Then they paired us up. They gave us some vegetables. There was three of us I think in our group, maybe there was two of us. They gave us a chicken and we were supposed to make a stew. They would have aggressors and we were supposed to get from point A to point B through the swamps of Georgia at night.

LC: Was that up north in Georgia?
SV: No, that was down in the Savannah area. They just found a patch of woods out there. It was part of the Ft. Stewart training facility. We were supposed to escape and evade and get from point A to point B.

LC: How did your group do with that?

SV: Well, fortunately I was assigned to a Marine Corps lieutenant. When I got to Hunter there were more candidates than were officers, in other words guys that were already commissioned. So they took the guys at the last end of the alphabet. They assigned us to the officer class for flying and stuff like that. So we hung out with the captains and lieutenants, albeit we were still the lower end of the food chain. It some time helped because they knew the ropes of the military. Like I said I had a first lieutenant Marine. So with his assistance we got through escape and evasion just fine.

LC: Did any of the briefings that you received during that training segment rattle you at all?

SV: No, not really.

LC: Sir, when did you complete the course at Hunter?

SV: We got our wings on the fourth of November. I’m sorry, we got our bars on the fourth of November and our wings on the fifth of November.

LC: Was there a ceremony?

SV: Yes.

LC: Do you remember that?

SV: Yes I do.

LC: Can you describe it at all?

SV: They got us into a great big theatre. They had a guest speaker and he told us about doing all the foolish things in Vietnam as a pilot, how well we’re trained. They gave us the oath. Everybody in unison, all a hundred and some of us raised our hands and took the oath. Then if you had a family member there they could pin your bars on. If not you found the nearest other candidate who was by himself. Ya’ll pin each other’s bars on. The next day it was just an informal ceremony on a small air base to get your wings.

LC: Did you have a sense of accomplishment that day?

SV: Oh, I did, yeah.
LC: Can you describe something about that, what you thought you had come through and what you were looking forward to?

SV: Well, we had survived just about a year’s worth of harassment and training and learning to fly and building up new skills. I won’t say so much as an officer but aviation skills. We felt like we had, or at least I felt like we had the aviation world where we wanted it, that we were well trained and ready to launch off and do our thing.

LC: Were you sort of anxiously looking forward to deploying and getting to work?

SV: Yes. We did a follow on for one of the dust off pilots to an AMED course down at San Antonio.

LC: How long did that last?

SV: It was four weeks.

LC: Okay.

SV: They taught us to be kind of glorified EMTs (emergency medical technician), showed us a lot of films of actual sucking chest wounds, maxial and facial injuries. More so to—I mean we’re not going to treat those things. There’s nothing we can do for a gunshot wound to the head. But I think it was to kind of condition us to what we were going to see.

LC: As you looked back on it later was that helpful to you?

SV: Yeah, I think it was better to get the shock over with when you weren’t flying the helicopter versus seeing it first hand.

LC: You must have finished that course sometime around the last few weeks of December.

SV: We did.

LC: Did you have some time off before you were actually required to report?

SV: We had a couple of weeks before we shipped out.

LC: What did you do with that break time?

SV: I went home to California because my departure point was Oakland, California.

LC: You saw your folks I guess.
SV: I did. I spent some time with them. I tried to pack my stuff. You know they gave us a list of what we were supposed to take and tried to get that organized and ready to go.

LC: Did you have any fun?

SV: No. I was more focused on where I was going. We had set up joint bank accounts and made arrangements for other things.

LC: Had the Army instructed you that it would be a good idea to do some of those things?

SV: They had different programs where you could route your money to or you could set it up on a joint account. They just said you need to have somebody that had power of attorney or you had a will, things of that nature.

LC: You were then to report, am I correct in thinking, in early January to your point of departure?

SV: Right.

LC: I’m sorry, where did you say that was?

SV: We flew out of Oakland, San Francisco.

LC: Okay. Would that be Travis or another base?

SV: Yeah, I think we went out of Travis.

LC: What was your flight over to Vietnam like? Where did you stop if anywhere?

SV: Let me see. They had us all stuffed into a DC-8. I think our first stop and only stop was Guam.

LC: Did you get off the plane?

SV: I don’t think so.

LC: Do you remember arriving in Vietnam?

SV: Yes.

LC: Where did you fly into, sir?

SV: We flew into Tan Son Nhut. That’s right there in Saigon.

LC: Yes, sir. Steve, what were your first early impressions when you got off the plane? What time of day did you arrive and what did you see?
SV: We got there during daylight. I’m going to say we got around eleven in the morning to one in the afternoon, somewhere in that area. Obviously we’re sitting on an airplane. As we begin our descent you can start seeing the countryside. You can look down and see bomb craters that are now full of water. Then the closer you get you can see the city of Saigon. What we didn’t know was Long Binh and other areas like that. You could see fighters in the area. You could see artillery or air strikes going on in the distance. There was that reality or that touch of reality that just kind of strikes like, “Oh, well, I’m here now. The game has started and it’s now time for you to play.” The aircrafts got the aircraft smell to it and it’s air-conditioned. As soon as they opened the door to the cabin to let us out you could feel that hot humidity and kind of the stench in the air of what that country smelled like. So it was kind of a culture shock.

LC: Yeah, getting off the plane where were you supposed to go? Were you with anyone that you were kind of traveling with or just by yourself?

SV: There was about three or four of us that had gone through the AMED course that were on that same flight. So they were taking us to the 90th Replacement Battalion. We had orders to specific units. They transport you by bus from Saigon to the 90th Replacement Battalion in Long Binh. From there the unit comes and picks you up.

LC: About how long did you have to wait before your unit sent someone to it?

SV: They picked us up the next day. We stayed at the 90th Replacement Battalion that night and the next morning. Matter of fact the 90th Replacement Battalion is just off the end of our runway at Long Binh where I was stationed.

LC: Where you were stationed later on, is that right?

SV: Yes.

LC: Okay. What unit were you actually assigned to and who picked you up?

SV: They picked us up in a three quarter ton truck. It’s one of these they call your name over the loud speaker, “Grab your stuff, your unit rep’s here.” I forgot who picked us up, the sergeant and a driver. They threw our stuff in the back. They threw us and our stuff in the back of this three quarter ton truck. We bounced on over to the 45th Med Company, which was about a thirty minute drive away. Then we had to meet with the company commander, in our case that was a lieutenant colonel. He told us what units or platoons we were going to. There were sub units under the 45th. So we could have been
going to the 2-47’s or the 82nd or the 57th, God there was another one in there too I think.

As it was two of us went to the 4th platoon at Lai Khe. So the next day they had sent a Huey down to come pick us up and flew us back to Lai Khe.

LC: About how far was that away from Saigon?
SV: Probably a forty-five minute flight.

LC: Who was the other guy, if you recall, who you were going out to the 4th Platoon with?
SV: Tom Barfuth.

LC: Was he also a pilot?
SV: Yes.

LC: Was that someone you had known earlier?
SV: Yes. He and I had gone through flight school and AMED’s course.

LC: Where was Tom from?
SV: He was a military brat so I’m not sure.

LC: All over the place.
SV: All over the place, yeah.

LC: Was he somebody who was kind of at that point sort of a buddy of yours?
SV: Yeah. Matter of fact, we roomed together. Both at Lai Khe and then when they moved our platoon back to Long Binh. So we were roommates for the year.

LC: Tell me about Lai Khe. What did you see when you first got there?
SV: On our approach to Lai Khe, it’s a cut out. Our helo pad kind of is a wide cut out in the trees. Probably a 160-acre cut out. Then it was cleared of trees out to the berm line where they had wire and guard towers and stuff. Off to one side was the second surgical hospital, which was one of those must units, the inflatable kind of portable hospitals. On the other side of the wooded line was where we lived. We lived in GP (general purpose) medium tents and just had a regular spring mattress kind of bed to sleep on.

LC: Was it, to you, comfortable enough or was it—did it seem like a little bit of deprivation going on there in terms of your own living conditions?
SV: Well, we had wall locker room, a bed. It was dry. It was comfortable, nothing to complain about. It’s not like living in an apartment or anything. We had an ops
building and things like that. It’s living on the fringes, but we had a shower. Of course it
was gravity feed out of a jet auxiliary fuel tank. So the temperature was driven by—the
temperature of the water was driven by the outside air temperature.

LC: Sir, what was the relationship between the surgical hospital and your
platoon? Was there administratively any relationship?
SV: No.

LC: Was that the primary locus to which you would fly back seriously injured
people? Was that the point?
SV: It was, yeah.

LC: How many aircraft were assigned to your platoon?
SV: There were five flight helicopters assigned to the platoon.

LC: And how many pilots?
SV: Gosh, probably twelve.

LC: Where were the helicopters in relation to your billet, your tent?
SV: Probably 150 meters from where we slept.

LC: Can you describe the course of that 150 meters? Was there an ops or a
briefing station along the way that you would stop at when you were called out? Was
there any kind of obstacle or anything that you had to get through in order to get over to
the helicopters? About how long would it take you?
SV: Well, the procedure for being called out is you’ve got a four-man crew. We
kept our weapons—well, at Lai Khe we could carry weapons with us, but we typically
left them in the ops room. If the call went out to launch the helicopter everybody focused
right on into the ops building. We grabbed our weapons. Three of us ran to the helicopter
and the three that ran out there obviously were the crew chief, medic, and the co-pilot. It
was the co-pilot’s job to get the helicopter started and brought up to operating speed. The
aircraft commander found out where we’re going, a general situation and how many
patients we had. I mean the tactical situation would be, your briefing would be, here’s a
coordinate you’re going to. This is the unit that you’re going to support. This is their call
sign and frequency. They got X number of wounded, whether they’re litter or ambulatory
and maybe what kind of wounds, fragmentation or gun shot wounds and whether the LZ
(landing zone) is hot.
LC: About how long did it take for the pilot to get that information on board?
SV: That was handed to him on a piece of paper. That was no more then a minute or two.
LC: Right. While the pilot was getting that information, the crew chief and the co-pilot are making sure the aircraft, double checking things making sure it’s ready to go?
SV: No, it’s already preflighted. The only thing that we had to do was take the tie down off the rotor. We always swung it ninety degrees so that you physically saw that the blade was untied. If you left it parallel to the fuselage it was real easy for somebody to forget to untie it. Then you try to start it with the rotor tied down. It kind of has a hissy fit when you do that.
LC: It’s a disaster, right. You talked in general about supporting other units and being called out to support units. Were there particular field configurations that you knew you were in support of or did it vary by operational experience of where it was in the field and then taking causalities?
SV: Well, the Big Red One, or the 1st Division was based in Lai Khe. So their battalions pretty much were the main focus in that geographic area, but we supported anybody that was operating. We knew that Big Red One was there, it may be the 1st of the 23rd Infantry or something but whoever had the wounded people is where we went to. It was insignificant. We were in general support is I guess the correct military term. You know if you were in this area of operations and you had a wounded person whether you were Special Forces, ranger, a military advisor, you had civilians that were injured, or you were a part of the Big Red One, or you were an aviation unit, we went.
LC: Do you remember your first flight in-country?
SV: Yes.
LC: Can you describe it? About how long did it take place after your arrival at Lai Khe?
SV: Well, we were all itching to fly. You have to do an in-country orientation first. So we had to get brought into the unit and processed. Then we did our in-country orientation both day and night before we could actually fly. It’s trying to stay orientated. It’s like somebody taking you and flying over Los Angeles or something like that and
say, “Oh, here’s Orange County and yadda, yadda, yadda, and you’re flying around. You remember all that.

LC: Yeah, it just went past so fast.

SV: Yeah. You’re just trying to figure out, “What is a fire support base?”

LC: Right.

SV: Then it’s at night and it looks different. See, there are no major highways or lights. It’s dark. There are no nav aids that you can use for your instruments and things like that. This was navigation by map and dead reckoning so to speak. So it was like, “Here I am. I don’t feel very comfortable knowing where I’m going. These names are all unfamiliar with me. The lay of the land just doesn’t seem right.” In Kansas all the roads are north and south, east and west. You can tailgate up those roads. Here they’re just kind of off in different directions and there are cart trails and it’s jungle and it’s cut out. You’re hearing all the stories about the Battle of An Loc and Phuc Vinh and places like that. This is just not even sticking in your brain. It’s information overload.

LC: You just had to pick up as much as you could and keep going?

SV: Right. This is on the job training.

LC: Right. In a way a whole new ball game from—

SV: It was. My first combat mission was a hoist mission with Jerry Forester as the aircraft commander. We took fire and took a couple of hits I think on that particular mission.

LC: Would that have been yet in January?

SV: Yes. That was within about a week and a half of being in-country.

LC: Can you describe the call out? What were you supposed to do?

SV: Well, we were the hoist bird. That means that we had a breeze hoist that actually sat right behind the co-pilot’s seat and operated by the crew chief, about 256 feet of cable on it. You could lower that down into the jungle and bring back wounded patients. So it was used in landing zones where you couldn’t physically land the helicopter, but you had to extract them either off a boat or out of the jungle or someplace where you just couldn’t get the aircraft in there. So that was my first mission. I was flying with Captain Forester, or Lieutenant Forester at the time. He told me what we were going to do. It was more of a demonstration. Of course it was a demonstration under fire.
You know here I was the new guy so I got to fly going out and to fly coming back in, but the approach and the actual hoist itself was flown by Lieutenant Forester. He had me back him up on the controls in case he was incapacitated. I’m not sure what I would have done with it, but in case he was incapacitated I would be able to fly the helicopter out of there.

LC: Did that turn out to be standard operating, that the pilot and the co-pilot were both watching every thing especially if you were under fire such that if one of you was hit the other one could just in theory, seamlessly just take on the flight controls?

SV: Yes. The approach into and the departure from the landing zone at least in the helicopters where I was an aircraft commander it was standard practice to do that. Now in a hoist mission after you’d flown with a pilot for a while and you were confident in his abilities one of you flew the helicopter and the other one worked the radios. So there wasn’t really that back-up on that. Flying a hoist mission, especially if you are going to hoist more then one or two people, it was pretty demanding. So it took some integral crew coordination in order to do that.

LC: You were expected to do that on this first mission?

SV: I wasn’t expected to do that. I mean, they knew that I was the new guy. Obviously I was capable of flying the helicopter, but I don’t know what I’d say to them on the radio. That’s the learning process that you have to go through. After that mission Forester was all excited about us. Well, he was the one that took me out and so to speak lost your cherry. That’s always kind of the step to manhood or something. Here’s the step, now you’re an official combat pilot. I’m sitting over there saying, “Geez, I don’t even know if I—I didn’t do anything. I just kind of wondered if I had the right stuff to really do this. We felt, or at least I felt fully prepared coming out of flight school. I had 220 hours of helicopter time. I graduated in the top ten percent of my class. I thought this was really—I was the king of the helicopters. Then I got into combat and realized that I didn’t know anything. It was going to be another learning phase all over again.

LC: Sir, did you get one or more wounded men out that day?

SV: Yes, we always took two guys out that day.

LC: Okay. When you did that and let’s just stay with this particular day, did you fly them back to the surgical hospital at Lai Khe?
SV: We did, yes.

LC: Did you make a practice at all, Steve, of keeping track of men that you brought in or was it just—did it get to be too many?

SV: It got to be too many. You’d bring them into the second surgical hospital and really if they were severely wounded they would get him stabilized. They’d fly him back to one of the other field hospitals.

LC: Yes, sir.

SV: Here again you don’t know the guy’s name. I don’t ever recall going to the hospital and trying to look up somebody that we had evacuated.

LC: Okay, Steve, let’s take a break.

SV: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing my oral history interview this morning with Lt. Col. Stephen Vermillion of the U.S. Army. Today’s date is the tenth of February 2004. Again I’m in the interview room of the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech and Steve is in Fort Lewis, Washington. Good morning, Steve.

Steve Vermillion: Good morning.

LC: Steve, I would just like to confirm your rank when you arrived in country.

SV: I was a W-1, warrant officer 1.

LC: For people who weren’t clear on the distinctions between warrant officer and commissioned officer, could you just go over that in general?

SV: Sure. A warrant officer is kind of a mid-rank between non-commissioned officers and commissioned officers. It’s an appointment versus a commission.

LC: What privileges do you have and what restrictions are there that govern a warrant officer as opposed to a commissioned officer?

SV: There is actually none that I’m aware of. Things that we don’t have are like non-judicial punishment abilities. So if we were in a leadership position we wouldn’t have the authority, to the best of my knowledge, to oppose any kind of punishment or judification under uniform code and military justice. Warrant officers were viewed more as technicians and it’s still that way today. It’s kind of a hands-on, more advanced, technical kinds of people.

LC: Steve, was there ever a time when you were in-country, I know later on you were commissioned, but when you were in-country as a warrant officer that you needed to be a commissioned officer for some situation and wished that you were? It would have been helpful.

SV: No.

LC: Sir, I want to ask you about the equipment on the aircraft that you were flying and also the other aircraft in the platoon. In general did you have any defensive weapons on a dust off at all?
SV: No, just our personal side arms.

LC: What kind of side arm did you carry if any?

SV: Well, we were initially issued a .38 revolver, which has six rounds in it plus whatever else you can carry with you.

LC: That’s not very many rounds really.

SV: No. The .38 is actually a pretty ineffective weapon against anything. Police forces don’t even carry them any longer. They’ve gone to the 9 millimeter. There’s no distance. If we’re done and we have to defend ourselves chances are it’s a 38-caliber pistol against an automatic weapon. So we’re going to come up on the losing end of the stick. Now they did issue M-16’s to us, if we desired to carry those. Some pilots chose to carry them, but they’re pretty cumbersome inside the cockpit.

LC: Did you ever carry any supplementary arms beside the .38?

SV: You know after I got shot down I carried the .38 and also a M-79 grenade launcher. We tried to balance kind of a weapon’s mix in the crew so that if we were shot down we had enough M-16 ammunitions and M-79 and obviously some .38 ammunition to where we could put up a little bit of a skirmish or at least break contact so we could escape and evade from the area.

LC: Did you coordinate this with your co-pilot or when you were co-pilot was it kind of told to you what you ought to carry and kind of coordinate that in advance?

SV: No. When I was a co-pilot I just showed up with what I had. There wasn’t a whole lot of structure on that. Like I said when I was shot down, although we went down in a secure area, you’re sitting there looking at this .38. You’re realizing that this isn’t going to get it. It’s just like that volt of reality out of the sky blue. From that point on as an aircraft commander I started orchestrating to see what was available on the aircraft.

LC: What about other supplies on the aircraft? Presumably there was some kind of medical kit on board because I gather that you carried the medical officer or a medic. Can you talk about that?

SV: Yeah. We carried a medic and he had a relatively complete aid bag. We had IV fluids on board. I’ve read some stories about people carrying plasma and oxygen. Our unit never carried whole blood because that’s something that you have to refrigerate. We didn’t carry oxygen on board because if you took a round through an oxygen bottle that’s
under pressure it’s just going to explode. We carried ambu bags. Are you familiar with an
ambu bag?
LC: No, go ahead and describe that.
SV: Well, if you watch any emergency room kind of show on TV you will see a
patient with at mask over their face and somebody pressing on it like a big balloon.
That’s just a means of forcing air at a prescribed rate into their lungs in order to keep
them breathing if you can or at least get the oxygen circulating in their system. So we had
those. We had cut a way kits so that if need be they could start an IV that was difficult.
Then the rest of it was just emergency supplies. Things to open airways, items to stop the
bleeding pressure bandages, things of that nature.
LC: Were there—well, actually who was responsible for making certain that
those supplies were on board?
SV: The medic was.
LC: You also had a crew chief I presume.
SV: Yes.
LC: What was the list of the crew chief’s duties?
SV: Well, the crew chief was the primary person responsible for insuring the
aircraft was ready to fly. In other words he did his daily inspection each day. When it
came to the twenty-five-hour inspection he did that. That was more taking oil samples
and maybe some minor lubrication. Then there were incremental components in the
phase maintenance that he was required to do either each day and/or at periodic intervals.
He also trained the medic to be an assistant crew chief. So two people working on the
aircraft expedited daily maintenance and stuff like that. Likewise the crew chief was
trained as, not fully as a medic, but kind of a medic’s aid. So that while we’re in flight the
medic can be working on a more critical patient and the crew chief can be tending to
somebody that has you know minor wounds that are not life threatening and/or provide
assistance to the medic where necessary.
LC: So generally your complement of personnel on the aircraft was four people?
SV: Four people.
LC: The capacity, the lift capacity of the aircraft was what, how many people?
SV: It depends on where you were flying and what type of people you were hauling.

LC: Okay.

SV: The typical U.S. soldier on a hot day, probably a max of seven or eight and that’s operating right on the fringes of power and capabilities to fly the aircraft plus room in the aircraft to seat them. Vietnamese who were much smaller, you know as many as you could stuff in there. I use that term stuffing sometimes because you would go into a landing zone where they’ve had what I would term mass causalities. On a three or four dust off ship lift you may bring out twenty of those people in one lift. Fragmentation kind of wounds you could seat three or four of them back in one side of the aircraft. You could stack them up on litters, actually you can put two on a litter, if you used litters. If you’re dealing with that kind of a situation it’s better to make them a little uncomfortable for a twenty minute ride than have their wounds become complicated while they’re waiting for evacuation or have the LZ closed due to combat actions to where we could not get back in.

LC: Steve, was there a defensive armor cladding anywhere on the aircraft?

SV: No. Everything on the aircraft was as it came off the factory. The thin skinned magnesium, aluminum kind of shell to it. There was no armor plating around the transmission or the engine compartment. Each pilot had Kevlar shielded seat so the bottom, the back, the parts of the side—there was kind of a flare that came out from the seats—those were all Kevlar paneled and would take an automatic weapons round. There was this sliding metal plate on the armor’s seat that would slide parallel to the seat itself and protect either the left side of the aircraft commander or the right side of the pilot. It was between the pilot and the window. The crew chief and the medic would slide those forward and they would lock in position. When we came in to land and after we took off they would slide them back. The medic and crew chief had no armored seat or protection. What we ultimately devised for them is they typically sat right up behind our seats on the floor. They would take a Kevlar, generally a Kevlar back pack kind of thing, and wrap it in some material and use that kind of as a seat, would make a little box there and put that in there. So that would protect their butt. Their back was protected by our seats. Then on the twenty-one-inch door, which was a small door that ran up next to the cargo doors
there. On the inside of that door they would strap another like a Kevlar plate. Then they
wore body armor, the Kevlar chest protector and the back protectors. So they were more
exposed than we were, but they had protection as well. The pilots just wore the chicken
plates, the chest protector, which was Kevlar.

LC: Was that a vest kind of thing or was it just in the front of you, just on your
chest?

SV: It was a vest. We had the option of having the back plate so it kind of—I’m
trying to think how you would put it on. You know when you have an x-ray taken
sometimes and they put that lead shield on you?

LC: Yes.

SV: If they put it on your chest, it would kind of slip over your head. You know
there’s a hole there so that chest protector would be on your front and then you had a
similar kind of container, if you would, of fabric where you could slid another one in the
back. The sides were open. You could connect the tube with probably about four inch
wide Velcro straps so you could really cinch it down. We just wore that chest protector.
Otherwise the seat was really uncomfortable and there was no need to have that extra
back plate in there.

LC: Were the vests cumbersome and did they get in your way? Were they hot or
any of that?

SV: Well, it’s probably in the summer when it’s hot. Probably a hundred degrees
outside, about ninety-nine percent humidity. Now you’re sitting in a helicopter with this
chest protector on and kind of look at it like a catcher’s chest protector except it’s about a
half inch thick. It’s relatively heavy. I mean, it’s not that cumbersome. You wouldn’t
want to walk a long distance with it, but it builds up heat so you just sit there and sweat.

LC: About how much did they weigh?

SV: Oh, geez. I’m going to say probably twenty-five pounds or so.

LC: Really?

SV: That’s a guess.

LC: As a pilot rather then the co-pilot did you insist that the guys on your flight
fit themselves out in this kind of equipment or did you leave it up to everybody on their
own?
SV: There was no problem with that.
LC: Okay, everybody wanted to?
SV: Oh, yeah. If you could find more you would put more on there. I saw a video of one of our company helicopters from the later ’70s, ’71 era. It looked like they had actually taken the Kevlar seats and built a higher head protection for the pilots that came up higher on their heads and around to the sides. Kind of like a—well, if you look at the top of the seat, looking down, the back and the side profile looked like kind of U with the flares at probably about a thirty degree angle. Does that make sense?
LC: Yes.
SV: It looked like they had put extensions on those. So there was indications that people were looking for more comfort. The back of the seat on me kind of ended about the top of my shoulders. So your head’s very exposed, as are your extremities.
LC: What kind of helmet were you wearing?
SV: Initially it was called an APH-5, which we had in flight school, or an APH-4 I guess it is. It was non ballistic and no sound proofing in it.
LC: By non ballistic you mean—
SV: You could shoot a .22 through it.
LC: Since it didn’t offer you a great deal of protection from enemy fire and there wasn’t soundproofing what was the point?
SV: If you were in an accident it’s like a crash helmet. It’s going to give you that kind of protection. Obviously it will slow down any kind of projectile. So one would think that if a round came through the aircraft depending on what the velocity is it may slow it down or it may deflect it or channel it. I had a bat come through my side window one night.
LC: A bat?
SV: A bat. It hit the side of my helmet. Of course I felt the side of my head and the back of it and I turned my light on. My glove was all red. So didn’t know if I was hit or what, but I didn’t feel any pain. We didn’t panic until we analyzed it a little bit further. We found the bat up on the glare shield.
LC: So it was probably a good thing that you had it on that night then.
SV: Yeah, probably.
LC: Not good for the bat obviously.

SV: I think the bat was history anyway. Whether he would’ve hit my helmet or not. Later we had a newer helmet called a SPH-4. If you’ve seen any pictures of Army aviators in current, they look like they’ve got little bubble ears on the helmet. Those are more sound protective, more sound atten—I can’t think of the word.

LC: Attenuating.

SV: Yeah, there you go. But here again they weren’t ballistic. There were ballistic helmets in-country that we had access to, but boy those things weighted a ton. They didn’t fit right. If you were ever in an accident like a sudden stop like a forward impact or you had a lot of forward Gs to it. It’s just going to rip your head off.

LC: Because of the weight?

SV: Yeah. Your head and helmet were just going to keep going. So nobody liked them. I think some of the gun pilots flew with them. There were a couple in our unit that flew with them. I figured my odds of getting hit in the head were you know a hundred to one or something like that. There was an element of risk.

LC: Right and just by virtue of the situation. There were so many different risks.

Steve, you mentioned that the seat only came up sort of more or less to your soldiers, the back of the seat. How tall are you?

SV: I’m 6’3” and a half.

LC: Okay. So the back of your neck basically was exposed, would you say that was fair?

SV: Oh, yeah, from the back of neck all the way up.

LC: Did you have any trouble at that height with the size of the cockpit? Was it designed for somebody smaller then you?

SV: Oh, I think the standard human at that time that they ergonomically designed stuff was probably about 5’9” or so.

LC: Did you have a place for you knees and all that?

SV: The Huey is very accommodating. My roommate, Tom Barfuth was 6’5” and he flew just fine. Now there’s a couple times when he and I flew together. The crew chiefs and the medics would come. They felt pretty safe because anything coming
through the front of the aircraft was going to be stopped by the two of us. We just filled
up the front of the airplane.

LC: That was nice.

SV: Yeah. You know the seat was vertically adjustable. They would adjust
forward in aft. Then the tail rotor pedals could be extended or retracted.

LC: You talked just for a moment about the noise. Can you describe that and did
it leave you with any lasting difficulties?

SV: A Huey or any type of helicopter especially in that era basically has a high
frequency warning to it. That’s contributed by the hydraulic system, the transmission.
The interaction of the airflow off the tail rotor and the main rotor and just the main rotor
itself, it wasn’t designed for noise embankment. It’s a very high noise environment. My
wife is convinced I’m deaf. The VA (Veteran’s Administration) is not convinced I’m
deaf. My high frequency hearing—if you take a hearing flow chart and kind of flow it
out, if you look at mine on the lower decibels it runs on about the fifteen, ten to fifteen
decibel level. Then when it gets up into the high frequency range it drops off, almost like
a bell curve.

LC: Really?

SV: Yeah. Except it would be the one side of a bell curve and that much of it
dropped.

LC: Then just (makes sound) right, drops right off. Do you know what pitch,
what the pitch is beyond which you’re not really able to hear anymore? I just wondered if
you knew that.

SV: You mean the decibel?

LC: Yes.

SV: It’s probably four thousand and above the frequency range. Where it impacts
me is if you and I are talking—well, are you married by chance?

LC: No, not at this time.

SV: All right. As I think you stay longer in a relationship my spouse, she’ll be
looking out the window over the sink and she’ll ask me something and I’ll say, “Huh?
What did you say?” I knew she was talking to me.

LC: Right, you knew something came out.
SV: There was verbal noise and when she turns around and then directs the
conversation towards me then I can pick it out. If I’m in a crowd of people like if you go
to a social function it is all a buzz.

LC: Like restaurants you have a hard time?

SV: Yeah if it’s a noisy environment. If you’re standing next to me and talking to me and there’s that background noise I will have to kind of lean towards you to pick up what you’re saying. So there is an impairment.

LC: You have no certification of this from the Veterans Administration?

SV: No, we’re still going through the hassle.

LC: Okay. Steve, I want to ask you a little bit about your daily routine. What was the food like at Lai Khe specifically?

SV: It was heavy in starches, heavy in carbohydrates. If you made it to mealtime it was warm. If you didn’t make it to mealtime it was food that was left out in the cold. So your mashed potatoes with gravy and your roast beef and your veggies would be like it’s been sitting out on the counter for six or seven hours.

LC: If you weren’t there, if you were out on a mission and you came back it was just kind of hard luck?

SV: Yeah. You typically didn’t get any food.

LC: In that instance what did you guys do, eat C-rats or what?

SV: Oh, every once in a while we would eat lerp (LRRP, [long range reconnaissance patrols]) rations if we had them. LRRP rations are the freeze-dried kind of variety, the really yuppie food that the backpackers carry now. You’d try and find some boiling water and hope the bag would hold the boiling water and the lurp rations before it melted through. We carried C-rations in the aircraft and that would be a last resort. You know we figured if we missed a meal we’d miss a meal.

LC: Make it up later.

SV: Make it up later. Get back and we’d drink two or three extra beers to make sure we had enough carbohydrates in us. We flew 24/7 especially if we were in the field and when the call came we went. People would save food for us, but you’d get back in at two or three o’clock in the morning. The last thing you wanted to do was go eat. So you
just kind of went back and you try to grab some sleep because you might be asleep for
forty-five minutes before they woke you up again and took off on another mission.

LC: What about water, Steve? How did you manage that and how was it stored
on the aircraft?

SV: We’d keep a five-gallon can of water in the machine. Here again the water
was nasty. It was heavily chlorinated and it’s like just going out to the swimming pool
and dipping out a cup of water and having a big swig of it. So it wasn’t the most
refreshing and it was typically hot. I mean, it had the ambien air temperature.

LC: Was the water that you kept on the aircraft primarily for the wounded?

SV: No, actually it was for our survival if we went down.

LC: Were there particular supplies of water on the aircraft for the wounded or
were your medics not necessarily concerned about that?

SV: You know it really depends on what kind of wounds that they had. We
would not give water to anybody that had any chest or abdominal wounds at all. If there
was somebody that had fragmentation wounds to their extremities or something that
didn’t impact their abdomen region, the medics would give them a shot of water out of
their own canteen. They would typically send the soldiers gear with them if they were
wounded. If they had a canteen there they could drink out of that.

LC: Okay, Steve, in the information that you sent in you mentioned that in
February of 1969 you were flying with Steve Plume I believe.

SV: Yes.

LC: That he and you flew into a fire support base. Do you recall that incident?

SV: Yes I do.

LC: Can you describe what happened that day?

SV: Sure. As a matter of fact after I wrote my book, which was just released in
October, I was able to reconnect with Steve. I haven’t heard from him since mid—let’s
see, I saw him in 1970. That was the last time I saw him or heard from him.

LC: Did he get in touch with you then?

SV: Yes.

LC: Was that through the Internet?

SV: Actually it was through a mutual contact.
LC: Did you speak to him on the phone?
SV: I did. I’ve spoken to him a couple times.
LC: Really? What was that like speaking to him again after all these years?
SV: I thought it was real cool. Steve was my mentor if you might. The way it was structured in our unit is the new pilots always flew with the experienced aircraft commanders. So the experienced—I mean the guys that had been there six, seven months always took the newbie pilot because they were more experienced. A low time aircraft commander would fly with a more experienced pilot. You see what I’m saying?
LC: Yes.
SV: Somebody that might be ready to become an aircraft commander but yet hasn’t had the time or all the experience. So that you don’t have two new guys flying in the cockpit, in other wards a brand new aircraft commander and a brand new co-pilot. I ended up with Steve as my guy and I flew a lot with him. I learned a lot. So I gave him a lot of credit in my book for him teaching me how to fly and how to survive flying combat missions. So it was real neat for him to give me a call and I sent him a copy of my book.
LC: Absolutely. Now where was Steve from when you knew him first, when you knew him over there?
SV: He was from Colorado.
LC: Where does he live now?
SV: He lives in California. He flies for Air Transport International. He flies DC-8s. So I’ve talked to him a couple of times.
LC: That’s great. That’s wonderful.
SV: When I sent him the book he didn’t have time to sit down and read it, you know beginning so he kind of went back to the index to see if his name was listed in there. You know how you do. So he started going back to the different pages where I cited his name. He called me back and he said, “Well, you’re really very complimentary.” I said, “Well, you’ve got to pay homage where homage is due.” So it was real neat and how we’ve reconnected and hopefully one of these days we’ll have a chance to see one another one on one again.
LC: Very cool, yeah. I hope you do. I’m sure you’ll make the time.
SV: But in fire support base Oran—let’s see I got in-country on seven July. My first flight I think was like—what did I say July?

LC: You meant January.

SV: January. My first flight I think was right around the fifteenth of January or maybe just a little bit later. Fire support base Oran took place on I think one February of 1969. It was a fire support base, had artillery, some mortars, it had an infantry, battalion probably minus, they kind of occupied that. It was between Lai Khe and Dau Tieng. We got a call to go out there and extract U.S. wounded. I was flying with Steve. Here I’d only had one or two night missions thus far so this is a new experience for me. They called us and said, “The fire support base essentially is being overrun.”

LC: Okay. About what time did you get that call? Do you remember?

SV: Boy, I’m thinking ten o’clock at night. We took off. It was relatively close to where we were at. We were at Dau Tieng. So it was a ten-minute flight or so. So once we lifted off you could see the flares and the tracers and everything start to fly. So we got closer and lots of activity. They had gunships that were trying to suppress anti-aircraft weapon systems. You could see the tracers going into and out of the fire support base. You could see the mortar rounds impacting inside the compound from the enemy fire. They were lobbing mortar rounds in and rocket propelled grenades. Our first lift, well, we orbited out to the east a little bit. Here again I’m the newbie so I get to fly going out to the site because Steve is looking at his map. He’s talking on the radio and planning. He points and I drive the direction he wants to go. Kind of like the donkey and the stick, you slap the donkey on the head and you steer him to go one direction or another. He had me set up an orbit to the northeast. As I mentioned to him in our conversation the other day it seemed like the more I orbited out there the higher and the further away I got. You know it was like this desire to avoid that area where everything was happening.

LC: Right. Instead you had to actually go right into it.

SV: Oh yeah, but he would steer the donkey back closer towards the fire support base here and get us in where we could see what was going on. They finally called and said they’re ready. They had six or seven wounded that they needed to evac at that point in time. So Steve took the controls. There was a lot of illumination from parachute flares that were hanging in the air. Obviously the parachute flyers are either artillery or mortar
fired. They go up and around detonate and then this high intensity flare hangs from a parachute, small parachute that ultimately drifts down. So the objective is to keep the area illuminated. That gives them visibility on the ground for seeing the enemy coming through the wire or where they’re at. It also gave us kind of an eerie look at what this landing zone or this fire support base looked like. We were supposed to land to a flashing strobe light. There was so much activity going on inside that fire support base that it was real hard to pick up this strobe light. He would ask me if I could see it. I said, “Well, I see a lot of flashes there, but nothing is jumping out as being different.” He said, “Well, we’ll just continue on in.” What we ultimately landed to was the strobe light, but they were intermixed with the mortar flashes that were coming in. So it was kind of an synonymous flash. There would be a mortar round impact then we’d see the strobe light. They were all kind of landing about where we were supposed to land as well. As we made our approach in and coming over the wire you could see the Vietnamese, North Vietnamese coming through the wire. They were shooting at us. Obviously the ground unit was shooting at them. So it was a lot of chaos. We took a few hits throughout the night coming in. Once we got on the ground folks there in the bunker weren’t really anxious to come out and bring the wounded to us nor could I blame them. They were getting their butt kicked pretty hard and they had taken a lot of incoming and a lot of wounded. So our medic crew chief went out and helped them carry the wounded back in to the helicopter. Then we exited the area. I flew back into Lai Khe. We made probably three or four lifts that night back into that landing zone or into that fire support base. Then, let me see, about first light we made another one final lift in. Then we had a sister bird that was flying in there as well. Let’s see, John Murray dust off 4-A was the sister ship flying in and out.

LC: That was the first time that another helicopter dust off came to that fire support base that night?
SV: Yes.
LC: Otherwise it had been just you and Steve?
SV: Right.
LC: How many men do you think you evac’ed that night?
SV: Well, we made one pick up outside the fire support base too. There was a recon element that got ambushed so we went out there. Probably about twenty altogether.
LC: Where did you land to pick up those guys on the recon?
SV: There was just a small landing zone. There was just a clearing that they
found. They popped a strobe light and we slipped in.
LC: The only cover that you would have had was from the remaining able and
functioning men with that unit?
SV: Yes.
LC: Did you take fire when you came into that?
SV: No.
LC: Okay. How many guys did you need to get out, away from that ambush
patrol?
SV: I think there was probably about three as memory serves me.
LC: Were there any moments during that particular night when you started to feel
a little rattled by what it was you were doing and continued to do it sounds like the rest of
the night? Having to drop off your causalities and then fly back in there again.
SV: Hang on one second.
LC: Sure.
SV: I’ll tell you if I’m uncomfortable.
LC: Okay. Go ahead then. Steve, did you think that night that you were entering
the lion’s den?
SV: Well, there’s—obviously everybody when you’re flying out there when they
say the fire support base is being overrun, there’s people in the wire, there’s that
adrenaline rush. There’s a certain element of fear that runs through your veins at the same
time. Once you’re in it fear seems to be nonexistent so you realize the fear going in I
mean as you approach and after the mission you realize fear that damn they tried to kill
me. You might get that knot in your stomach or you can feel the adrenaline still rushing
through. Then you get the down side of the adrenaline rush, I guess the low side. You just
kind of feel drained afterwards. There’s a lot of hyper talk going on. Everybody’s talking
where the fire’s coming from, what they’re seeing, people talking on the radio, not a
whole lot of time to be afraid. If fear overcomes the pilots, they abort the mission. They
just flat abort it. We weren’t in that position to do that. It wasn’t necessary to abort it.
You know what the risks are going in. You know what the risks are if you don’t complete
the mission. There’s people that depend on you to come in and extract them. So it’s part
of the job. That doesn’t negate the fear and concern. The knot in your stomach doesn’t go
away. You just fly through it.

LC: When you first arrived there on your first landing and pick-up, did you
visually take in the battle that was developing there? Were you actually able to see the
North Vietnamese?

SV: Yes. As we were approaching over the wire and trying to land on the
designated spot that they wanted us. Steve is flying the airplane. I’m backing him up on
the controls, but at night one method of adjusting your radar closure is to look out the
side of the helicopter. At night under limited ambient light it’s kind of hard to look at a
steady point like your landing point and judge your rate of closure. It can either be too
slow or too fast. We didn’t want to be either so a method to see how fast you’re really
moving is to look out the side of the helicopter like you would in a car. If you’re speeding
down the freeway looking out your windshield at seventy miles an hour you don’t have
that sense of rate of closure. Whereas if you look out the side you see those telephone
poles flying by and you can judge hey I’m really moving or I’m not moving. Helicopters
are the same. So as you do that you can look down and you can see the bad little bubbas
running around the wire. Then you can see them shooting at you. You can see the bad
guys down there. You can see the American’s maneuvering a little bit inside the fire
support base trying to get to different positions, things of that nature.

LC: Did either your crew chief or your medic get hurt that night?

SV: No.

LC: Did the tactical situation at the fire support base stabilize over the time that
you were coming in and making your pick-ups and pulling out? Could you see the change
in the situation each time you arrived back?

SV: It did. There was a lull in the battle probably after midnight, one o’clock in
the morning. That allowed a couple Chinooks, the CH-47s to come in and do a resupply.
It also allowed us to get in somewhat unscathed and not taking any fire. So yeah there
was a lull and I don’t know what created that. When I wrote my book I did an Internet
search and found the unit that was involved. One of the gentlemen that I communicated
with had a copy of the log sheets that had been declassified. He sent me a copy of those.
It was interesting to read through the log entries and to kind of see where that lull took place. Here again the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) attacked out of the Michelin Rubber plantation. That’s where they staged this fire support base was right on the edge of it. Michelin provided a sanctuary for Viet Cong and NVA forces. So the best I could ascertain not being on the ground or being part of that battle, but it looked like it was time to break contact and not be caught out here in the open or in a position where they could have air strikes placed against them during day light operations. So this was a nighttime offensive. Probably staged for X number of hours to inflict as much damage as possible and then break contact and wait for better conditions to continue.

LC: Do you remember that unit number off hand?
SV: Ask me another question. I’ve got a book here. Let me just see if I can pull it out of here.

LC: Okay. That’d be great. Did you have any sense or learn later on that there had been other coordinated operations in the area as part of the Tet ’69 Mini-Offensive?
SV: That wasn’t part of Tet I don’t think. Tet was later in the year. This was just isolated to this particular—

LC: This base.
SV: Yeah. That unit that occupied that was the 1st Battalion 28th Infantry of the 3rd Brigade 1st Infantry Division. I tune into their website every once in a while and talk with some of those guys. I’ve got some pictures, after action pictures, of fire support base Oran. It was just blown to bits. I think they vacated that place on like five or six February. They just abandoned it.

LC: Because it was pretty—
SV: It was trashed.

LC: Steve, is it fair to say that this was your first heavy combat set of dust off missions?
SV: Yeah, I think that was fair to say that. Yesterday when we talked I mentioned the first one was the hoist mission. But for extended durations and intensity this was probably the first one.

LC: Okay. Did you feel that the training that you had had, I remember you talking about watching the films during your medical training course and so on, as well as
the flight training and everything that you had been through with the Army up until now prepared you adequately for that night?

SV: The medical training did. Here again we weren’t necessarily in the provider of emergency aid. It was our background to understand what was being described to us by the medic so that we could translate that to our controlling entity at the hospital facilities and let them know more in medical terms of what we had so they could kind of be prepared and/or route us to a facility that was better suited to taking care of them. You know there’s got to be a standard flight training for everybody to obtain, kind of like a benchmark. That’s a plateau that you leave in order to become a better pilot. To say that the flight training didn’t prepare us would probably be incorrect, but yet it didn’t prepare us. Does that make sense?

LC: Yeah, can you say just a little bit more about that? What weren’t you ready for?

SV: In flight school a lot of your flight aptitude, how you flew the maneuvers and the approaches and things like that were based on how smooth you were on the controls. We weren’t, I guess, ski jockeys to where you jerk and jive the helicopter around in flight school. Everything was smooth and it was coordinated. They taught you a certain procedure to fly a confined area. You flew the high orbit, couple of orbits around. Then you’d descend down and you’d do your lower reconnaissance and then you would set up for a nice smooth approach and a nice touch down in the confined area. Combat flying just took that and threw it out the door. We flew in a manner to be deceptive to enemy observation. We changed our flight attitudes, our angles and banks, the whole nine yards. In other words we went from driver’s ed to Daytona 500. Does that make sense?

LC: Totally. Tell me about the kinds of maneuvers that you’ve learned in-country to either avoid detection or avoid being hit by enemy fire. Did it vary by terrain?

SV: It did. There were different techniques over the general and then down in the Delta. There were different techniques at night versus day in both those environments. We would typically—small arm’s effective range was typically fifteen hundred feet. So that as we were cruising out to the pick up site we were at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet or above. Rarely a whole bunch more above that, there wasn’t a whole lot of need to climb to four or five thousand feet, at least where we operated. Once you’re over there it
was kind of a stand off. We would know the general area, what we’re going to go into. We would be getting a briefing over the radio of what was going on. In other words the ground unit that we were in contact with would give us the number of wounded, how they were wounded and the status of his landing zone, whether it was currently under fire, it was secure, insecure, in contact, things of that nature. We would ask them to pop a smoke, which was a smoke canister that all units carried. Then we would ask him to identify the color of the smoke and then we would verify it. Because we operated on non-secure radios, the enemy could monitor that radio frequency. If we said, yellow smoke they could say, “Roger, that’s yellow smoke.” So it’s just kind of a counter check to see who we were talking to and what was going on. Rarely did I fly over that landing zone and do a reconnaissance, especially in the Delta. We saw it. We knew the direction that the enemy came from or where the booby trap was. If it was a booby trap, one could assume it was more secure, but yet still not putting full reliance at the landing zone was fully secure. If it were gun shot wounds sometimes they’d say the landing zone is secure and you’d kind of say, “Well, here’s a guy that got shot or multiple causalities that got shot by a gun. Now this guy’s telling me it’s secure. I don’t think so.” So from the smoke you could pick up the direction the wind was blowing and use that as a factor if need be for your approach. We would typically drop out of altitude very quickly. In a banking turn we’d change that turn to another cardinal heading or another direction. In the decent we would bank back down. In the Delta I would drop down to about fifty feet or so, a quarter mile, half a mile out from the landing zone at a hundred knots. That would be kind of steady state, but I’d vary my heading a little bit as we came in just to be deceptive. I kind of kick it out of trim every once in a while. That changes the profile of the helicopter but doesn’t necessarily change its flight path. So if you’re looking at it, it would look like it’s going to fly off to a different angle, but yet it’s still coming at you. Then we would just do a deceleration and a touch down into the landing zone and load the wounded. Typically take off the same direction that we came in. Here again we wouldn’t follow that path very far out. We would deviate; go a different direction, optimally away from the contact.

LC: About how far out would you—once you’re back up in the air with the guys on board, about how far would you go until you changed direction?
SV: Oh, once we got air speed we would—the ideal was to gain air speed and
stay low, at least in the Delta because air speed was everything. Once you got your sixty,
seventy knots then you’d just pop up the altitude real quick to get out of that small arm’s
range.

LC: Okay. Beyond small arms what other enemy weapons would you be facing
that had a greater range?

SV: In the Delta there was typically nothing. The Delta was pretty open. So you
didn’t see the quad 50’s and things like that. The surface down in the Delta was pretty
wet. Anything with a wheel that somebody would carry or tow was pretty difficult to
maneuver. So we didn’t see down in the Delta per say. When you got down into well
south there was a mountain range and some jungle down there that units that flew down
there would find that kind of air defense capability. If you were close to the Cambodian
border you would find that kind of air defense. Now up over the jungle where it’s easier
to maneuver that stuff over trails and still be obscured and stuff like that and conceal it
then we would run into things like quad 50’s.

LC: And by quad 50’s you mean—

SV: It would be four .50-caliber machine guns mounted on a small stand.

LC: What effect could that weapon have on the aircraft you were flying?

SV: It would bring it down in a heartbeat.

LC: Did it matter where on the aircraft you were struck?

SV: Yeah. It’s going to have less impact in a tail boom. Well, a .50 caliber will
probably go through the transmission, go right through the engine. So you can figure it
out from there.

LC: Yeah. Okay. Steve, let’s take a break.
Interview with Steve Vermillion
Date: March 22, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Lt. Col. Stephen Vermillion U.S. Army retired. Today’s date is the twenty-second of March 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections building in its interview room and Steve is in Washington State. Hi, Steve.

Steve Vermillion: How are you?

LC: Very good. Steve, I just want to note that the copy of your memoir Dust Off did arrive here. We want to thank you for that donation. It promised me to ask you about having a bit of fun actually in the helicopter while you were in-country and using the helicopter to chase down some water skiers. Can you tell me how many times did that happen and where?

SV: Oh, you know it was probably a two or three time event. There was a reporting point that was in bound between Long Binh and Saigon called the Keyhole. It was part of the Saigon River. Just the shape of the river made it look like one of those old timey skeleton key kind of locks. The South Vietnamese had kind of like a country club out there. It was kind of satirical to a certain degree. Here we were flying the helicopters and had soldiers on the ground fighting for their country, but yet they had the time to participate in their country club environment.

LC: A little bit kind of ironic to say the least.

SV: Yeah. Every once in a while if we weren’t occupied on a mission or if we were just going from point A to point B and we happened to see one of them on the river we would kind of drop down and play some games with them.

LC: Can you describe what kind of a boat usually they were using? Was it what we would image as a ‘60s ski boat with outboard motor and all that?

SV: You know some of them were actually pretty nice. They were inboard, outboards. Then some of them were kind of an outboard kind of motor on them. They were nice. I would say about a ‘60s, probably in that case probably a ‘50s vintage, but
some of them were the nice teak woods that you would find probably in a museum now, collector’s items.

LC: Any idea where this sort of country club like facility was?
SV: It was right there on the Saigon River. It was right on the keyhole there.
LC: How far from Saigon itself?
SV: Well, actually it was right on the outskirts of Saigon.
LC: North of the city or down towards the ocean?
SV: Let me see here. It would be a little bit—it’d be on the northern edge, between Saigon and Long Binh.
LC: Were the guys—and I presume they were guys who were skiing, were they—could you tell what their reaction was?
SV: Well, you know it was mixture of guys and gals. It’s never fun to go skiing without women.
LC: Yeah, I’ve heard.
SV: It depends on how we were able to catch them. It’s kind of like a cat and mouse thing. They just didn’t know they were the mouse. If we had time we would come around, obviously get down as low to the water as we can and come around the corner if there was bend in the river and meet them head on. Obviously the people that are watching the skier are not paying any attention to us. So we have a visual contact with the driver and the skier. The closer we get to them at their altitude—I mean think they are right on the water and so are we. We’re just three or four feet off the water, probably going eighty, ninety knots. So it’s a pretty quick rate of closure. They don’t know what we’re going to do. They don’t know if we’re going to run over them. They don’t know if we’re a gun ship. So you can see all kinds of panic in their eyes. Every once in a while it turns into a game of chicken. We didn’t do anything real stupid, but assuming what we were doing was not stupid.
LC: It was just kind of irresistible though.
SV: Yeah. You’re twenty years old. The drawback to the government is that they give a helicopter to four kids basically. Now today at age fifty some odd would I do that?
I don’t know. It’d still be tempting even though it was a lot easier when I was a kid.
LC: That leads me to think about the rules that were actually imposed on you and how you did with those rules. I’m thinking specifically about maximum flight hours. I gather that you exceeded the maximum allowable flight hours on more than one occasion or—?

SV: Yeah and when I did exceed them, as you probably read in the book I got grounded one time. I still went out and flew I just didn’t log the flight time.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about what the regulations were for flight hours and how that was monitored?

SV: I’m not sure exactly how it was monitored. We filled out our daily flight sheets, which was called a Dash 12. Both that form and what they call a 2408 Dash 13 went into maintenance. That maintained the total time for the airframe because there were certain inspections that had to be made ever twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five, a hundred hours. Then when you got up around a thousand hours on the airframe, if they survived that long, you had to do major work on the hot end of the engine. Then that Dash 12 went into operations where they logged their flight time.

LC: So the Dash 12 was about the people and the other form was about the aircraft?

SV: Right.

LC: Was there an honor system essentially in terms of the Dash 12 and filing it?

SV: Not necessarily an honor system. I mean, it was part of the requirement. At the end of each flight where you physically shut the helicopter down, you logged all four crew members or whoever was on the airplane your position, your time, the status of the flight, whether it was combat, hours, or if it was mission support or something like that, the number of missions that you flew within that sequence, in other words we might fly ten hours and never shut the helicopter down. So we would annotate the total time within that and then the number of patients that we flew and the number of missions. I say we didn’t shut the helicopter down. We always hot refueled.

LC: Now when you say hot refueled can you just explain for those who might not get that reference?

SV: Yeah. We refueled with the engine running. We would pull into a number of places where hot fuel was set up. The aircraft commander who was on the left side would
remain in the helicopter. The co-pilot would get out. The crew chief would refuel and the
medic would do a quick visual walk around of the helicopter to see if we had any damage
to it if we had taken fire. Once we got—depending upon what our fuel state was when we
pulled in there—a thousand pounds of fuel, we would get everybody back on board and
go off and either continue the mission we were on or continue one on a new mission that
had come into us.

LC: Were there special facilities or something special about refueling while the
engine was hot? Was there a particular type of fuel or something special about that
arrangement as opposed to a cold refuel?

SV: Well, hot fuel said you could just pull in and stick the nozzle in it and take
on a full load of fuel. It was a fixed site. So there was no fuel truck. They had large fuel
bladders with a pony engine pump on it. That thing would be running. It’s just like
pulling into a gas station so to speak and sitting there with your engine running. If we
cold refueled then you’d have to shut the helicopter down so that’s a two-minute cool
down time on the turbine. Then you refueled it. Then you got to make sure the engine is
cooled down to the point where you can restart it. So you actually lose a bunch of time
when you cold refueled.

LC: Was that cold refueling processed as a routine, was that done basically at the
end of quote unquote “a shift” or the end of a day when you would come back to base
and leave the helicopter so that the next time that you flew out on that helicopter it would
be full?

SV: Well, we never cold refueled. We didn’t have a fuel truck. We always hot
refueled.

LC: Always, wow.

SV: Yeah, always hot refueled. Right there at our heliport we had a hot fuel
point. So at the end of each mission we came back in, refueled, and then we just taxied
over and parked it.

LC: Are you speaking about Long Binh?

SV: Yes, or any place. If it was Tay Ninh we had a hot fuel site. Lai Khe we had
a hot fuel site. They were all over the place. That was the preferred method of refueling
helicopters.
LC: And it was preferred why?
SV: Speed.
LC: Okay. Let me ask you a little bit about the medical requirements for flying.
You’ve mentioned the sheets that you had to fill out that logged hours. That becomes part of, I presume, your permanent record in terms of how many combat hours you flew, but also did you have to be checked out periodically by a flight surgeon or someone in the medical field to ascertain your physical capability to fly the aircraft?
SV: The only requirement was to take a flight physical. That occurred on your birthday. So my birth date was in August so I in fact had to go take a flight physical. It was pretty routine. It was check your eyes, your blood pressure, things like that. It was not as sophisticated as what we got back here in the states like an EKG and all the lab work and stuff like that.
LC: It was basically a walk through.
SV: Yeah.
LC: Was the emphasis on your eyesight?
SV: Eyesight, your hearing, your mental status, things of that nature. They listened to your—it’s like if you went in for a physical exam now with a doc, just a routine physical they would do a urinalysis on you. I can’t remember if they did that over there or not.
LC: Was that for drug screening?
SV: No that was—well, it was probably part of it, but more of it was just to see if you had any abnormalities going on inside. You know like they would here, your albumin, those kinds of levels, stuff like that. Then they—I don’t recall them drawing blood, but here they would draw blood and check your cholesterol and stuff like that. But they listened to your heart and your lungs and do your blood pressure. More of it was how you feeling, you feel all right, things of that nature.
LC: Was that standard for pretty much anybody who was flying?
SV: Yeah. You had to have a current flight physical.
LC: You indicated they reuped that every year?
SV: Yes. When you’re flying for the military it’s a every year requirement.
LC: Did you ever know of guys who didn’t make it through that requirement while they were in-country?

SV: Nobody in our unit that I’m aware of that failed it.

LC: Switching gears just a little bit, I want to ask you about communications. Particularly about your radio communications while you were in the air, in flight. I think you mentioned at one point perhaps in the material that you provided to us that the enemy was monitoring your frequencies and that dust off people tended to use the same frequency. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

SV: Well, I can’t say for sure they monitored our frequency on a regular basis. I would assume they had the capabilities to do that. We stayed on 45.70 FM. That was our standard frequency air to air, air to ground until we got hooked up with a tactical unit. In other words all of our dust off communications would be on a 45.70 and then we would be given a different frequency to contact a tactical ground unit on. So it could be 36.40 or something like that.

LC: How did you get that new frequency of the tactical units?

SV: It would come to us either on a written sheet or it would come to us over the radio.

LC: This would be dispatched from a communication center that was associated with the unit that you were supporting?

SV: No, actually it would be from our dust off unit. In other words there was a medical channel that a ground unit would call into their higher headquarters. It would go into the medical system. Then our dust off operations would receive that message and then contact the dust off aircraft that was flying in the area. If there wasn’t anybody flying then we would get it as a new mission. In other words we’d be launched to go respond. So that’s why I’m saying it might be on a mission sheet that we would get. Here again we would be handed a piece of paper, kind of a mimeograph kind of sheet that would list the location we’re going to, the number of patients, whether they be litter or ambulatory, the type of wounds and how they were inflicted. In other words gun shot, booby trap, fragmentation, things of that nature.

LC: So you would have some sense of not only how many then you were going to pick up but also something about the condition they were in?
SV: The condition and what caused it.

LC: Okay. Steve, the dust off communications center, dust off operations, where was that located?

SV: There was one in each of our fuel locations. The primary one was in Long Binh. We had to stand by in Saigon. We had a stand by in Tay Ninh. We had a stand by in Xuan Loc. Those were during my time frame. Six months after I left they picked one up at Nui Dat and then they picked one up in a different location. But there was always a radio operator there twenty-four hours a day at those locations that provided our interface for us. Now they may come out of the particular unit, in other words in Xuan Loc it was not a medical guy. It wasn’t a 45th dust off guy. It was 199th flight infantry guy. That’s where we got all of our missions handed to us.

LC: When you were back at Long Binh just kind of hanging around in between missions, when you had some down time, did you and the other pilots and crews include those radio operators in kind of the sort of social scene that you guys were in? I mean were they part of your team on the ground as well as when you were actually mission active?

SV: They were part of the enlisted social scene if you might. We had a little control tower operator. We had a little control tower. It’s probably about the size of a breadbox. It was a tactical thing. We had a couple of control tower operators that worked in there and they were enlisted guys. They were part of the enlisted social group. Here again you had a stratus let’s say an officer’s and the enlisted and it didn’t socialize. However those of us that were warrant officers socialized with our crewmembers.

LC: Maybe this would be a good time to ask you a little bit more about that stratification and how that played out during the time you were there. I think in the book at one time you mentioned officers who were prioritizing for example the condition of the aircraft over the mission. Can you talk a little bit about that and the mentality behind it, the REMF (rear echelon mother fucker) scenario as it were?

SV: I guess it’s like any organization that you’re involved with. There are folks at the hierarchy that are more concerned about the bottom line, not necessarily how the mission or the people are accomplishing the mission. You know as warrant officers we were at the bottom of the officer food chain. The military or the Army expanded that
branch, the warrant officer branch to include the aviation assets. It was done on a rapid
fill basis. In other words, once Vietnam came about there was a very large infusion of
young guys into that warrant officer flight program. We didn’t go to OCS (officer
candidate school). We didn’t go to West Point. We didn’t go to Annapolis where you’re
brainwashed and I use that term loosely, into the rigid military thinking. We were kids off
the street that wanted to fly. We went to flight school. We survived all of the BS and the
harassment and learned how to fly. They threw us then into a combat situation. We
viewed our warrant officer, I’m sorry our enlisted guys as a major resource, part of the
team effort. The commission side of the house still operated under the command and
control structure. In other words they were the ones that did the evaluations on
everybody. So it’s the point where you have to separate familiarity breeds contempt, you
know sometimes. So you build that barrier in there. You just didn’t get close to the
enlisted guys, at least the commissioned officers didn’t. It was an old school mentality.
We looked at—the aircraft was a resource in order to fly the mission and to make that
mission successful. Others looked at it as if we damaged it, that we had a long-term
impact. Well, we didn’t think much into the next mission. I think in one of those stories
that I talked about, the unit we were supporting was running through like a coffee grove
and they wanted us to hoist their wounded out. A hoist it takes a little bit of time. You got
to stay stationary, you got to drop this cable down and you got to put people on it and
bring them back up, get them in the aircraft and then repeat the process. It creates a lot of
vulnerability for everybody that’s involved. Well, these guys are being chased by the bad
guys. So it’s not like they’re in a defensive position. I mean, they’re running and fighting
for their lives, as they’re moving with their wounded. We said, “Well, instead of hoisting
these guys we’ll just land on one of these coffee trees and we’ll see how far we can
smush it.” The bottom of the helicopter, there’s an ADF panel. ADF is automatic
direction finding antenna that’s fiberglass. Obviously fiberglass tends to break, kind of
like a corvette. You know you hit something with a corvette and it shatters. This was
much thinner because we’re not supposed to be running into stuff, but we punched a big
hole in the bottom of that antenna and we had some sticks and other stuff hanging out of
it. It was successful. We got these three guys in the aircraft and the other guys were able
to continue fighting their delayed action and breaking contact. So from our perspective it
was a good mission. We get back to the heliport and we have some major there chewing our butt because we damaged the helicopter. That was life. That’s what they gave us the helicopter for is to save lives, not to try to preserve—I mean, we didn’t want to do anything stupid and put somebody at greater risk by flying a suicidal mission where we knew we were going to lose the helicopter and the crew. Damage is damage. We would use down in the Delta the rotor blades to cut through the nipa palm if we had to get into a tight spot. It made the difference of being able to extract the wounded or not extract it.

LC: How dangerous now speaking not about the aircraft, but about danger to yourself and to the other men on the aircraft and recognizing that you’re balancing risks now. How dangerous was it for you to actually push down through foliage of the kinds that you described in order to make a pick-up?

SV: You know that coffee tree that we set on—have you ever seen a coffee tree?

LC: Sure.

SV: They’re not all that rigid. So you just kind of smush it down. We had complete control of the helicopter. It would’ve been more dangerous for us to try to hoist them. We probably would have lost the aircraft if we tried to hoist them.

LC: Because—

SV: The ground unit would have been overrun. I mean, they were moving that fast, you know, on the ground. They were being chased and they were running. They would stop and they would shoot. They’re carrying their wounded, which now is a liability. The enemy is chasing them. The enemy knows that the ground unit is vulnerable because they have wounded because there is a Medevac. I mean they can see us.

LC: Did you take fire that you know of?

SV: We probably did. I don’t recall getting hit. There was a lot of shooting going on. So if it was outbound it was outbound. If it was inbound—we were more concerned with trying to deal with getting those three guys in the helicopter. So when you weigh the risk, my first option is not to go do it. So those guys that are wounded are probably not going to be as well off as they would be now versus later, you know what I mean?

LC: Sure.
SV: Or they could be overrun and the whole group lost. The second option is to hoist them like they had sent the mission in or the third option would be to improvise. So we opted to improvise.

LC: Now how many other of the dust off pilots that you were working with, say in your unit, were faced with that same kind of decision tree and did the same kinds of things that you did?

SV: I’d say about anybody that flew dust off. Understand that the mission is to extract the wounded and that’s what we lived, what menial pay we got, we got paid for. A lot of the helicopters from dust off are lost due to weather, trying to squeeze beyond the limits of the aircraft or the crew or the environment to try to get out there and rescue somebody. I think everybody operated on that decision matrix of okay here’s the cards that I have laid out before me and what’s the best way that I can deal with that and what’s the safest way? I mean as soon as you crank that helicopter up there was risk. We all tried to minimize the risk, but it wasn’t risk free by any stretch of the imagination.

LC: Did the response of officers like the one that you describe who was ticked off because there was damage to the aircraft, did that sour dust off pilots or did it energize them?

SV: Well, let me just say this. We did mentally flip them off. How’s that?

LC: That’ll do. Clear.

SV: Yes, sir, three bags full. Yada yada yada and we just went on our way. The one commander that I wrote about and if you happen to read in the back where I had transcribed the news article and I used the XX kind of for his name. That wore on the unit. Obviously if it gets to the point where people invite a *Stars and Stripes* reporter in, then it has impacted moral. It didn’t—it gave the ability to do the mission. It negated quality of life and the professionalism of the organization. He made stupid mistakes in allocating crews and resources, but the people that had those cards dealt to them still continue to operate.

LC: Were those deficiencies and evidence of stupidity, were those immediately apparent or was that something that you kind of come to on reflection?

SV: No. I think those were quite evident. I mean, when you’re the commander and you have a brand new huey sitting there and it doesn’t fly except for you to take your
nurses, nurse girlfriends to Vung Tau for the weekend or something like that. I mean, that’s very apparent. When our aircraft are either combat damaged or in maintenance because we’ve flown them so long or you got one out there that’s kind of being held together with the proverbial bailing wire and then he has the new one sitting there. A commander doesn’t need a brand new huey allocated to him. If he wants an airplane all he has to do is go to one of the platoons and say I need an aircraft. Let’s take one of your aircraft. If it’s one that you need to fly into maintenance, but you only used a couple hours on it, I can take to Vung Tau or something like that. That is a smart choice. Now him just flying to Vung Tau or Cu Chi with his nurses and stuff like that, I mean that obviously stunk a little bit. But he had those kinds of liberties. For the officers that had married nurses there, he’d punish them for either being late to a meeting or something like that so they couldn’t see their wife.

LC: Did that actually happen? Do you know of instances where that happened?
SV: Yeah, it did. It happened to Harry Miller and it happened to Rob Spitzer.
LC: Now these two men were in what kinds of positions?
SV: They were both pilots.
LC: They were both pilots and they were married to in-country personnel?
SV: No, they were actually married—yes, in-country personnel. They were married to Army nurses.
LC: Yes, I mean American service personnel.
SV: Yes.
LC: Who were stationed where, do you know?
SV: Yeah, Harry Miller’s wife was stationed at the 93rd Evac, which was two hundred yards from us. Rob Spitzer’s wife was at the 24th Evac, which was on our same compound about a mile away.
LC: The 24th, I’m sorry is that what you—?
SV: 24th Evac.
LC: Did that kind of apparent punishment affect moral?
SV: Oh, yeah.
LC: Can you talk about how?
SV: Well, it obviously ruined their moral. They’re griping about it and then obviously we’re seeing the things that they harassed the enlisted guys on. Well, the drug of choice over there was marijuana.

LC: Sure.

SV: I would not guarantee you on my gravestone that there wasn’t marijuana in the enlisted crewmember’s barracks nor was our officer’s club refrigerator lacking for beer. So you could take your choice. Beer is legal, marijuana is not but the pros and cons are about the same. We flew with hangovers. We had two medics that—well, actually one guy was a medic and one guy was a crew chief that we knew were drug abusers. We did the rehab thing with them and tried to work with them. It was a very short served process. We took them out of any position of responsibility. So I mean people were cognizant of it, but you didn’t need to go through and make people live in a sterile environment. It’s like—I don’t know, did you live in the dorm when you went to college?

LC: Sure did.

SV: Okay. So it would be like whomever the dorm mother is or the dorm guy or whatever you know coming in and saying all right everybody’s bed is going to be made this way. You will have nothing on the walls. You’re allowed one picture on your desk and then we’re going to come in and inspect you on a weekly basis or on an unannounced basis. We’re going to shake your room down for anything that we think is inappropriate.

LC: Well, that would have been bad news in my dorm. Am I right in thinking then that the kind of hard line approach, the kind of sit on your head officers, had some role in accelerating or enhancing as it were the use of alcohol and drugs on occasion at least if not all the time?

SV: Yeah. I would say that’s probably the case. Yeah. I mean that was our only outlet was to drink beer. If we weren’t flying, we were probably drinking beer. Of course the enlisted guys had beer, access to beer as well. They’re young kids in the ‘60s. I’ve since talked to one of my medic’s and he said, “Oh, yeah we used marijuana. You just didn’t see it.” I said, “Well, fine. It didn’t impact your ability to do your job.”

LC: Steve, let me ask you a little bit about another kind of area that’s sometimes difficult. I wonder if you saw evidence during the time you were there, 1969, of a greater degree of tension between African Americans and whites who were serving over there?
SV: You know we had some young black soldiers in our company. See I’m thinking one was POL. We had some guys in refueling. One of our drug abusers was a black guy so he didn’t last long as a crew chief or a medic. I guess he was a medic. You know the consistency of our company was probably eighty percent white and then the other twenty percent was probably comprised predominately of Hispanics with a few black soldiers in there. We didn’t experience any racial issues across the board. Now obviously the ratios would not work out the same, possibly like you would in an infantry company. But we didn’t know how to experience those racial tensions.

LC: Were there any problems that you observed between Hispanics and African Americans?

SV: No.

LC: Steve, let me ask you about our allies there particularly—well, first I want to ask you did you ever work with or observe the work of Korean or Australian or New Zealand allies in the field?

SV: Yeah. We supported those guys from a Medevac perspective. We didn’t have any direct involvement with their ground operations. Does that kind of put it into perspective?

LC: Sure. So you did end up once or twice with ROK (Republic of Korea) guys?

SV: We supported the ROKs out of Korea, the Thai’s, and the Australians. The Australians were down around Nui Dat and Vung Tau, down in that area.

LC: Sure. Did you have occasion to Medevac some of those guys out?

SV: Yes, we did. Later on a little bit after my tour, after I left they had an Australian medic and an Australian pilot that were co-assigned to our dust off units.

LC: Wow, but that was after you left?

SV: Yes.

LC: Did you have anything to do with making arrangements or did you know in advance that that was going to happen yet while you were there?

SV: No, and I didn’t know that we had an Australian guy flying except Rob Spitzer has got a—well, Rob and I hooked up a system where we could use a cassette recorder and copy or listen into or record our cock-pit voice recordings. I flew with Rob quite a bit so when I left country I gave him the tape recorder and the hook up. When we
were at our last reunion he had a cockpit recording that he had made. I was listening to it.

There was a guy flying with him and he was Australian. So that’s how I found out that
we had, kind of like exchange pilots that had joined the unit.

LC: Now why did you guys rig up the cockpit voice recording system?
SV: We just thought it would be kind of cool to see if we could capture what was
going on in the cockpit.

LC: What equipment did you use? What was the actual media of the recording?
SV: It was a 1969 vintage cassette recorder. I don’t know if you can visualize it.

How old are you anyway? Are you young or old?
LC: Old.
SV: Old, okay. So you can relate to ‘69?
LC: Oh, yeah.
SV: All right. You talk to some people that are young and they say—
LC: They’re like what.
SV: Yeah. Twenty-five cents a gallon for gas, you know, okay. My parents had
sent it to me so we could communicate by cassette recorder. It was probably, I would say
eight inches wide and maybe a foot long. It just had a little pop up lid where you stuck a
cassette tape in it. It didn’t have the audio reversed where it would pick up the second site
automatically. So you had to reach down and you know flip it. It had a little red button
and a chrome toggle for play, record, kind of thing.

LC: They were heavy as the dickens, I remember too.
SV: Yeah. Yeah.

LC: Steve, did you guys use the same tape over and over?
SV: No, we just used different ones. What we did was plugged it in and we had a
smart avionics guy that said, “Well, if you hook it in up here with these alligator clips it
will pick up all of your internal voice communications over the radios and over the
intercom.” So we did that.

LC: Were voice communications being recorded as a matter of routine on the
ground somewhere, do you know?
SV: Not that I’m aware of.

LC: So you guys basically did this like to see if you could do it?
SV: Yeah. Well, I haven’t sent it to you. I’ll do that. I’ve got a voice recording that I now play when I do a presentation of a live hoist mission at night.

LC: That would be wonderful.

SV: I’ll go ahead and send one of those to you so you can listen in. When I play it, people don’t understand what was going on among four people performing a night insecure hoist mission in the confusion on the battle field and a little confusion in the decision making process inside the helicopter. I had never played that for anybody. I just kept it on a little cassette recorder tape. My son wanted to listen to it. So I let him listen to it one day. As I wrote the book and stuff like that, I converted it to CD format. I’ve taken it and played it at the Museum of Flight a couple of times along with a presentation. People are—it’s not like we’re impressed with your heroics, they’re just impressed with being able to have the ability to listen in on those cock-pit recordings. I said hey this thing is not politically correct. There are words in there that we used on a day-to-day basis. People were referred to as gooks, but that was the lingo in that environment. There were mistakes made, but that is part of every mission that we flew.

LC: Something like that really conveys to the listener, I think, the immediacy. I mean, it puts them there like I was suggesting your writing about your experiences does. So yes I’ll talk to you about that later. Let me just ask about the Republic of South Vietnam’s armed forces. I know that you were in support of ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) units on different occasions. Can you tell me something about your impressions of ARVN capabilities and officers, people with whom you came in contact?

SV: You know I have to do it as a third party observation.

LC: Sure.

SV: My impression of the South Vietnamese Army at that time was general chaos and lack of commitment. That country has been in siege for a long time. People were conscripted into the military much like the VC (Viet Cong) or the NVA were. I don’t think the motivation was there. I mean they had an officer’s producing OCS school located between Long Binh and Saigon. That’s where their officer corps was generated. I think the average Vietnamese, South Vietnamese guy really didn’t want to be there. We would pull into a landing zone with wounded. If it was hot, I mean if those guys were
getting their butt kicked and we were taking fire it was not unusual for the guys who were
helping the wounded to drop the wounded and to try to get on our helicopter.

LC: Did you see that actually happen, Steve?
SV: Oh, yeah.
LC: More then once?
SV: Oh, yeah.
LC: What happened, can you—just pick one of the incidents in your mind where
that kind of thing happened. What happened to the wounded men?
SV: You know actually our medic and crew chief would—well, I wouldn’t want
to say they cold cocked the guys who were trying to get on the helicopter. They
restrained them from getting on the helicopter. Let’s put it that way and went and
physically got the wounded and loaded them on board.

LC: Again this kind of thing happened more then one or two isolated incidents
you saw?
SV: Yes. Here again we had a—I can’t remember this guy’s name. I was new to
the unit and he only had like two or three months left. He was a real stocky Hispanic guy.
He had kind of like a rubber mallet. These guys would glom onto the skids and try to get
in the helicopter. He would thump them on the head or thump them on the hands so that
they would break their grasp and we could fly out. Well, you can’t very well fly with
somebody hanging from the skids. We don’t want to do the old TV routine where you get
them up a hundred feet in the air and they fall off.

LC: No. So he carried this rubber mallet with him?
SV: Yeah.
LC: Was there ever a time when ARVN, non-wounded ARVN soldiers were
actually able to gain entry to the aircraft and remain on board while you guys were taking
off, evacuating the wounded?
SV: Well, yeah they would—if there were a lot of wounded, some guy
carrying—let’s say a guy had a frag wound in the leg so he’s not ambulatory. You got the
arm over the shoulder kind of routine helping him out to the airplane. He would just
forget not to get into the helicopter. We would load his buds and he would be in there too.
We’d find out about that when we’re in route. The other thing, and here again I don’t
know if it was a custom or not, it just kind of infuriated our medics and crew chiefs
because they witnessed more so then we did as pilots, but they would strip the wounded
of their watches and rings and stuff like that, the ARVN on the ground. They’d be laying
there under a poncho and you’d see them stripping the rings and the other valuables off of
them.

LC: What did you make of that kind of stuff? What did the men around you, the
medics in the back and crew chief, did you guys talk about this? What did you make of it
at the time?

SV: Well, the medics and crew chiefs would go run them off and kick them in the
but or something like that to interrupt their thieving process. I think our comment was
just disgusting, kind atypical for the environment, but here again I don’t know if that was
a custom that was part of their society. It doesn’t seem like it would be. At the same time
it was unique.

LC: Was it just opportunistic thievery or did you think it was an index of the
despair? Did you see it from both sides or did you just kind of, or was there really, it was
just only one thing happening that’s pretty bad?

SV: Well, it was perception. So I think the perception that I drew was just
thievery. Somebody had a nice Rolex watch, well, probably not Rolex watch.

LC: Something nice.

SV: Yeah and they just seized the opportunity. The guy was dead so he didn’t
need it any longer so I’ll go ahead and use it kind of thing.

LC: When you were flying ARVN wounded out, did you take them to the same
facilities that you would’ve taken Americans to?

SV: No.

LC: How did that work?

SV: We always called into our dust off dispatch, or the medical holding. If you
read the book it was—God, what was it? It was Queen Tonic was the call sign. They
would tell us where to take them. Down in the Delta, down in Tay Ninh, Dong Tam area,
we would take them into Cong Hoa hospital, which was down around My Tho and then
there was another up in Saigon. That’s where we’d take them to.
LC: When you landed, was the protocol what would happen in terms of off
loading the wounded essentially the same as what would happen at American evac or
surgical hospitals?

SV: No.

LC: How was it different?

SV: Majority of the time there wasn’t anybody there.

LC: Really?

SV: Yeah. There wasn’t anybody waiting on the pad like a little ambulance or
something like that.

LC: Really?

SV: Yeah. So it was not uncommon for us to sit on their pad and wait for them to
come out or our medic and crew chief would take them over to where we would typically
see them enter in previous missions. Down in Cong Hoa they came up with a little jeep
and loaded the wounded on that, like a little mass jeep. The hospital was a little bit
further away from the pad. So they would—

LC: Was—go ahead, Steve.

SV: Go ahead.

LC: I was going to ask whether this was—the fact that no one was waiting and
you guys had to, you had to literally carry ARVN wounded into the receiving area of
their hospitals whether this was because of a failure of communications between the two
systems or was there something else going on?

SV: I think it’s just a sense of urgency and complacency. It could be a
communication issue as well. But it’s not like we hadn’t—I mean, it was a hospital so it’s
not like people just landed there on a routine basis without wounded. I mean a helicopter
shows up, obviously with a big red cross on it. We’re not picking people up. We’re
dropping people off.

LC: You’ve just picked them up in situations that it probably on most occasions
involved a great deal of risk. So then you get them to where they need to be treated and
nothing’s happening. How’d that make you feel?
SV: We didn’t necessarily like to drop them off at those two facilities. But that wasn’t our choice. I’m trying to think of—well, we always took Vietnamese kids into American hospitals.

LC: Why was that?

SV: Because we knew they would be taken care of.

LC: You weren’t clear that that would be the case elsewhere?

SV: Right. If they were Vietnamese kids, there was somebody that was probably going to make the effort to get them linked up with their parents, wherever their parents might be when we picked them up. They also would at least give them emergency medical care. Here again they weren’t supposed to do that and we weren’t supposed to take them in there. It was just kind of a rule of thumb. We were more sensitive to the kids because they were one of the causalities of war so to speak and didn’t necessarily deserve to be in that situation.

LC: Was that pretty much how all the dust off guys functioned if they had Vietnamese children, they would take them to American facilities?

SV: I would say that’s probably a rule of thumb, yeah. I couldn’t guarantee that that always occurred.

LC: But in general.

SV: But from my perspective that’s where we always took them. Dropping Vietnamese off to their respective hospitals, it’s kind of like saying, “Well, this isn’t the best care in the world.” We knew if they were critical they weren’t going to survive. If we’re working on them in the aircraft to keep them alive by taking them into these two facilities we probably sealed their fate.

LC: Steve, what about the kids? What kind of injuries did you see and can you talk about how that affected you?

SV: You know it didn’t affect me a great deal. You never want to see kids hurt. As I just mentioned that was the third party casualty to the war. It’s just like the kids in Iraq. We have a lot more sympathy for the young girl that is paralyzed now due to a bombing or some other kind of incident. A young kid loses his leg to a booby trap or something like that. So the sympathies now that we see from Iraq and Afghanistan are the
same as we dealt with in Vietnam. It could range from fragmentation wounds to gun shot wounds. It just depends upon what kind of action they were caught in between.

LC: Was that harder on the medic and crew chief than other cases?

SV: Yeah, I think so. I wrote one story where we picked up kids from the Rangers and they were primarily fragmentation wounds. The medic and crew chief just sat there and held the three kids. They just didn’t know what to do. I mean, they weren’t dying, but they were obviously hurt. They treated their wounds and then they just held them to try to minimize their fear and to provide some comfort. We typically wouldn’t hold a guy in your arms that was wounded, but you’d certainly hold those kids there to provide comfort. I think that’s probably a lasting memory for the crew chiefs and medics.

LC: Okay, Steve. Let’s take a break here.

SV: Okay.
Interview with Steve Vermillion
Date: April 13, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Lt. Col. Stephen Vermillion of the U.S. Army. Today’s date is the thirteenth of April 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections building and Steve is in Washington state. Steve, I would like to begin by asking just a few more questions about your in-country service. I know that you’ve written a book that describes a number of different incidents, but I wonder if you can give us a sense of some of the missions that you flew for which you received special distinctions? I’m thinking here the Silver Star and the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross).

Steve Vermillion: I guess as a dust off pilot, I don’t know if there was a distinction between what was an award mission and what was not. I guess most folks would agree with that. The reason I stipulate that is it all kind of depended upon if somebody had an interest in what we were doing and if there was something that was a little long term. In other words if we were working with a unit, let’s say for two or three weeks, that particular unit, to where we build up almost a one-on-one relationship, the chances of having an award submitted would be greater. If it was a one time or two-time scenario, things are pretty hectic on the ground and people—I think if you listen to the voice recording they ask for my social security number at the end of it, the ground unit did. That was kind of the indication, or, yeah, I guess it was my social security number or my name and call sign, or my initials, something like that. That was their intent to submit an award. So you kind of get a sense that something’s happening. Now the two awards that you’re talking about, I knew nothing of. Both of those came to me after I came back to the States and I simply got a telephone call that said I needed to be at point A at like 1100 hours with my dressed greens on for an award ceremony. Until I got there I had no idea what the award was or the scenario.

LC: Really?
SV: Yep.

LC: How long after, if I can ask, after you left Vietnam would those kinds of calls get to you?
SV: Well, actually the first one, the Distinguished Flying Cross, was about six months after I came back. The other one, geez I was married. So it was, see the Silver Star was eighteen, nineteen months.

LC: You had no clue that the paperwork was going through its processes?

SV: I knew the Silver Star was. I did not know anything about the Distinguished Flying Cross. The one on the voice recording, the crew received an Air Medal for valor. That was simply mailed to me. There was no award presentation or anything. It just came in the mail.

LC: What, if you can tell us, was the mission for which you received the DFC?

SV: That was a night Ranger extraction. The Rangers were a small unit. They had come into, and we were flying down on the Delta probably about thirty-five miles south of Saigon, out in the rice paddies. They had—I don’t know if they ambushed somebody or if they got ambushed, but their mission was interrupted and they got into a fairly large fire fight. There was only about seven to eight Rangers I guess, something like that, you know small unit, small unit tactics. Somewhere in the fire fight they came across some wounded kids. There was a lot going on. Most of that action took place prior to us getting there. Our extraction was for the three wounded kids. When I showed up on site the gun ships were already on station. They didn’t have communications with the Ranger unit. We hooked up between the ground unit and the gun ships. We became their liaison so to speak. We would relay information to the guns and we would relay back. We ultimately, when we made the approach, we were blacked out. The Rangers weren’t sure where the enemy was. They had moved. They were on the run and they had the three kids. I say on the run, they obviously weren’t running from the enemy. They were trying to get to a location that was more secure for them to defend from. Of course out in the rice paddies that’s difficult to do.

LC: Sure, defensively.

SV: They weren’t sure where the enemy was actually at. So we had one of the gun ships that was blacked out, in other words he had no navigation lights on. This was at night. The other one was in a high orbit. I didn’t know exactly where that blacked out gun ship was. I had my lights on so it was his responsibility to avoid us. As we set up on final approach, we set up in a long final approach. He just kind of tucked in behind us maybe
about a quarter mile. His lights were out black and obviously our lights were on. We had
a little dialogue about us leaving our lights on. It’s like having a big neon sign on you at
night and saying shoot me. But we were kind of the quasi decoy. As it worked out, it
worked. The enemy forces that were on the ground picked up our lights right after we
were on the ground. We received an intense amount of enemy fire. Obviously once we
were on the ground we turned our lights off. Otherwise we were a sitting duck. Those
lights will tend to illuminate anything around us. So the Rangers would’ve been in danger
as well. Once the enemy started shooting, the gun ship who is blacked out just started
laying down suppressive rocket fire. Then his illuminated wingmen jumped on the
bandwagon and followed him right in. I’m pretty sure they inflicted some heavy
casualties on the remnants of that enemy force out there. We were on the ground until we
picked up those kids. Then we came out the same direction that we came in. Our lights
were off coming out until we had moved maybe a quarter mile from the landing zone, but
we were tucked down low. We weren’t more than about a hundred feet off the ground
and then we just popped our lights on, the guns picked us up. We all broke contact. We
headed north to Saigon and we dropped the kids off at the 3rd field hospital, which was a
U.S. hospital. Vietnamese nationalists were supposed to be taken in to—I think the
hospital name was Cong Hoa. We typically did not take our wounded kids into
Vietnamese hospitals. We knew that they would be cared for better at a U.S. hospital.
Eventually being transitioned either back to their families if they could find relatives or to
an orphanage or as the case may be to a Vietnamese hospital. At least that initial medical
treatment would be administered by U.S. personnel. That gave the kids a fighting chance.

LC: Do you have any sense of the condition of the kids that you picked up, what
their wounds were or what state they were in?

SV: There were a lot of frag wounds, which kind of would indicate to me that
hand grenades or other type of explosive munitions. Here again whether or not it was
U.S. inflicted or Vietnamese inflicted nobody knows. They came across the kids in the
village and just decided to go ahead and extract them because they were wounded.

LC: So the Rangers had been carrying these kids along with them?

SV: Yeah.

LC: Did you Medevac any of the Rangers on this mission as well?
SV: You know none of the Rangers were wounded, but I did check back in with them once we left Saigon after dropping the kids off and refueling because they were still in contact when we left. Since we were in that area I just dropped down on their frequency to see if anybody else had been wounded. They were waiting for their extraction bird, which hadn’t come. They were actually kind of anxious to get out of there. So we went in and pulled them out as well.

LC: You did?

SV: Yeah. It wasn’t a Medevac, but we just went ahead and did it anyway. We didn’t have any pending missions. The only thing we would’ve ended up doing was going back and shutting down and waiting for another mission.

LC: Right, but you were unarmed.

SV: Oh, yeah, we were unarmed.

LC: How many guys did you take on? How many Rangers?

SV: Oh, I think about six.

LC: Okay. Do you remember where you took them, Steve?

SV: I don’t. When we got the Rangers on board, we all wore headsets and everything. It’s a pretty noise intensive environment. So you just kind of clicked your mic open so they can talk. We can hear them talking. I just gave them my map and he pointed in the location we went. There was a group waiting for them. It was kind of like their little outpost.

LC: My guess would be they were pretty darn glad to see you though.

SV: They were glad to see us. They were more than welcome for that, or thankful for the ride.

LC: Yes, would imagine. Steve, can you tell me a little bit about the Silver Star mission?

SV: Sure. That particular chapter in the book is entitled, “Third Up Milk Run Goes Sour”. By that I imply there’s three crews that were scheduled to fly in Long Binh. The first up bird was not hoist equipped and would take the preponderance of the mission’s. The second up bird was hoist equipped for any extraction requiring a hoist. That was the dedicated bird. The third aircraft was a back up but primarily used for ash and trash. We would go to different hospitals for patient transfer. If there were VIPs that
needed to be flown someplace, we would get that mission and either take them to Saigon
or Vung Tau, Cu Chi, someplace like that. So whether or not we had to fly was kind of
contingent upon patient transfers. Me and my crew really didn’t like to fly that because
there wasn’t a whole lot of flight time. You just kind of sat around all day waiting for
some non-descript mission to come in. Anyway the two birds, first up, second up had
been dispatched. We were making a blood run, a whole blood run to a place called Black
Horse, which was due south of Xuan Loc and about forty miles to the southeast of Long
Binh.

LC: What’s a blood run?

SV: We were just hauling blood, whole blood to the battalion aid station there in
Xuan Loc, Black Horse. As we were heading there we got a call that said soon as we
complete that blood run we needed to pick up a mission as the third aircraft going into
this particular landing zone. First up had been in, second up had been in to the landing
zone and they had a hoist mission now in a different location that required their presence.
So we were going to be the fellow one’s support ship into to make the extraction. So we
flew our blood into Black Horse. As we were on short final we got a call on the same
frequency that asked us if we were in route to that landing zone. It was from the battalion
commander who was in his jet ranger. I said yes we were. He said, “When you get on the
pad I want you to shut down and wait for me.” I said, “Okay.” We did. We shut the
aircraft down, obviously the folks came and got the blood and moved it into the aid
station. He landed and came up to the helicopter and off to the side of this pad, landing
pad were all these crates of ammo and other stuff that’s just sitting there. He came up to
me. He was a lieutenant colonel at the time and I was a warrant officer one and my pilot
was also a warrant officer one. The lieutenant colonel came up and said, “I need for you
to take that ammunition with you into that landing zone that you’re going into.” Kind of
as, you know, you want to make a statement so your mouth opens but nothing comes out.
As in that process he just said, “Mr. Vermillion, you don’t have a choice in this matter. I
don’t want to hear anything about the Geneva Convention,” yada yada yada. It wasn’t
necessarily in that kind of a tone. It was very directive and very assertive and very
intuitive on my part that we were going to in fact follow that order and carry that
ammunition in there. That obviously is in contravention to the Geneva Convention. I just
looked at my crew and they were all privy to the discussion. Nobody winced so we
loaded it up and headed off. We just kind of looked at that as those folks needing some
medication, how they delivered the medication, whether it’s through an M-16 or through
a law, you know, we didn’t care. In my book I talked about kind of a little bit of
retribution for the VC shooting down Otha Poole’s crew while they were doing a hoist
mission.

LC: For somebody who doesn’t have access to your book could you just clue in a
little bit as to what you’re talking about.

SV: Sure. In February of ’69 Captain Otha Poole, Warrant Officer Hicks and
right now I can’t think of his medic and crew chief were doing a hoist mission east of
Long Binh, just north of just about that same location we were in, probably about six,
seven miles. The airplane is clearly marked with red crosses. They were shot down with a
rocket propelled grenade and exploded mid air. Obviously no body survived. So we just
kind of looked at that as our effort as a little bit of payback when we took that
ammunition in there. We didn’t think twice about it nor did we tell anybody about it until
years later. But anyway as we approached that landing zone there was no
communications between us and the guns that were in the area. We tried on guard, which
is emergency frequency 243.0 and 121.5. Couldn’t reach them, they weren’t on the same
FM frequency that the ground was. They were definitely being worked with a command
and control ship that was in the area. Likewise we didn’t have communications with them
so a lot of confusion. This unit had walked into a very defined ambush taking heavy
casualties and were in the process of trying to fight their way out of that. Our unit had
made two lifts in there already to extract wounded.

LC: Your crew had flown in a couple of times?

SV: No, the first up and the second up crews had already flown in. So we were
the third bird to fly in there. As we made our first approach in we began taking fire and
the unit asked us to break off and reinitiate an approach. Sometimes that’s good.
Sometimes that’s bad. It just gives another opportunity to get a bead on us. Anyway we
broke the approach off and came in from a slightly different direction. Took fire again,
but this landing zone was down in the jungle. It was probably about a 150 feet from the
surface to the top of the trees. It was a one ship-landing zone. There was enough room for
one of us to kind of maneuver around in there, but you certainly weren’t going to get two
aircraft in there, not unless you stacked them on top of each other. Anyway we dropped
into this landing zone. The surface was very muddy. Almost like a quasi swamp without
the water. We kept the helicopter at a very light hover so the skids were just resting on
the surface without the weight of the helicopter sinking us into the mud. The medic and
crew chief got out almost instantly sunk to their waste in mud. The unit was not overly
reluctant to come out to where we were, a lot of confusion still on the battlefield. The
guns were overhead shooting rockets and mini-guns. Some in the trees, which we thought
they were picking out snipers, but here again we didn’t have the communications and that
was just our assumption. The medic and crew chief asked permission to disconnect, in
other words disconnect their mic cord and to haul the ammunition over to the unit. They
weren’t bailing it out of the helicopter. Nobody was coming so they would make a trip
over towing a case of LAWs (light antitank weapon) or a case of ammunition all the time
down in waist deep mud. Then they’d bring patients back with them. Finally the unit got
into the flow of things though. They were coming out and picking up ammunition and
bringing patients with them. Probably about three quarters of the way through this cycle
we get this hectic call from the ground radio operator telling us to immediately leave the
landing zone. They had some heavy movement out to their front. We were in jeopardy as
well as them. We really couldn’t leave. My medic and crew chief were on the ground.
They were disconnected. We didn’t have all our wounded. Now we were expecting
probably six to seven wounded and two soldiers that were dead, KIAs (killed in action).
When the medic and crew chief came back close to the aircraft I gave them the reconnect
sign, which is basically taking your two fists and hitting your thumbs together. That’s
your trying to replicate putting something together. They hooked up and I asked them
how much more they had left to do. They said they had two more wounded and two KIA.
I said, “Well, get the wounded and leave the KIA. There’s nothing we can do for them.”
So they left the helicopter again and set out for the two wounded. We get the urgent call
to get the hell out of there. I said, “We’re going to stay here now.” We’re not talking
hours. We’re not talking long minutes. We’re talking a few minutes, three to four minutes
as these calls come in so it’s not like we’re sitting there for a lifetime. The medic and
crew chief return. We get everybody on board a helicopter and we start to head out of
there. Obviously the wind for us is right off our nose. That is the same direction as the
bad guys. Optimally we would make a 180-degree turn and come out the opposite
direction in which we came in. Well, as we reach the top of the trees we had pretty much
ran out of power. I kind of equated to the feeling is, as you come up vertically it’s like
riding in an elevator and as you approach the top of that hover it’s like that elevator
coming up to, how that elevator will go rapidly between floors and then kind of slow
down as it reaches it’s destination. This elevator just kind of came up a few feet short of
the next floor and that’s kind of the way we were. Our power setting brought us to the
edge of the trees and we were kind of looking at them, the rotor blades being above them,
the pilot vision kind of being right at the trees. So we were a couple of feet short of being
able to clear the trees if we went out straight. If we made a 180 we would lose the effects
of the wind and probably drain off some power and more than likely end up crashing
back in the LZ. So we made the choice that we would just go out straight and take
whatever pittance was due. Once we got to the edge of the trees—and I might add any
more power application would cause the turbine engine and the rotor rpm to bleed off,
which would cause us to gently settle back down into the landing zone.

LC: By bleed off you mean?

SV: It would reduce. Kind of like a car going up hill. If you reach a point, if
you’re pulling a trailer or something like that, you can apply more gas to it and it will
typically just slow down.

LC: Right, it’s almost like flooding it in a way while you’re moving.

SV: Yeah. In this case it just reaches the edge of its power capability. It’s
impacted by aerodynamics, the change and pitch in the blades, but if I increase that
power to the point then it reaches it’s aerodynamic lift capability at it’s maximum point.
Anything beyond that is a negative value, we begin descending. So we’re beginning to
move towards a tree. We can get a ground cushion or additional lift as the rotor wash hits
either the ground or the trees. It’s not as dynamic from the trees since there’s openings
and those trees move, but it’s a little added value to it. So we began dragging the skids
through the trees. The rotor wash hitting the tops of those trees, as dense as they were,
gave us a little bit of lift, which we converted to forward momentum and began moving
forward and looking for what is termed at that point of effected transitional lift, which is
about sixteen to eighteen knots forward speed. That’s where the aircraft actually begins to
fly in a forward state. As we’re moving forward, we’re obviously flying over the bad
guys. The bad guys, if they could see us that was a plus for them, but I think they were
shooting more at the sound and whatever shadow may have been created. So you could
look out there between the skids breaking off the branches of the trees and the tree leaves,
you could see the rounds literally coming up through the tree branches and tree leaves.
We took several hits obviously right in the bottom of the helicopter. Of course they
would come up through the bottom and exit out through the top or the side, depending
upon the angle they came in. Fortunately we didn’t hit anything or take any hits that were
catastrophic. We got forward momentum, the aircraft flew. We headed back to Long
Binh.

LC: Did any of your crew or the wounded that you were carrying sustain
additional wounds?

SV: No. It was only by the grace of God that the rounds missed us. I mean, you
had one come up through the bottom of the aircraft and exited out the left cargo door. We
had eleven people on board that helicopter. They were literally just tossed in there. Some
laying on the floor that were more wounded. Others sitting up against the bulk head or
something like that. There was very minimal room for a direct path. It passed through the
bottom and out the top of the helicopter, the side of the helicopter and not hit something
else.

LC: Do you know, Steve, how many hits you took that day? Were they counted
when you guys got back to Long Binh?

SV: There were three or four hits through the bottom. There was one hole right
next to the skid where I sat. It was directly through the bottom up through the top. A
separation distance was probably six inches, just vertical, vertical space from where I sat
to where the skid was. So we were real lucky.

LC: Yeah and it sounds like some very smart heads up flying as well.

SV: I think it’s lucky flying.

LC: Lucky flying?

SV: Yeah.
LC: Okay, if you say so. At any rate you got some guys to the hospital who clearly were in need of attention that day. Steve, how if I can ask did you find out that some kind of paperwork was in process for this particular job that you did that day?

SV: We were told about it back at headquarters.

LC: Who put it through do you know?

SV: The unit. The unit that we were working with.

LC: Are there other stand out missions? I think for the record it’s good to mention that you flew 1,450 missions so of course there are many, many. Is there one or maybe two others that you really feel ought to be included here and sort of etched out as part of this recounting of your experiences?

SV: You know I think there’s two of them, not to bore people listening to this.

LC: You’re not going to bore anyone, sir.

SV: Recitation of missions. I think one of the most rewarding, all be it we didn’t save anybody’s life, was when we were working with a unit. My memory fades me. I’m trying to think of the unit, but we were well north, northeast of Long Binh working with the unit we had been called out. Probably about thirty-five, probably about a thirty minute flight up there for us. We had already been flying. So we didn’t have time to refuel in between. We got up there. The battalion commander was orbiting his unit. He was our point of contact. We made radio contact with him and he said, “Well, unfortunately our guy has died and we don’t have any more traffic for you.” He said, “Would you be willing to come in and hoist the dead soldier?” Here again that is, if we’re there we’ll haul the dead out for them. We were forbidden to do a hoist mission for the sole purpose of hoisting dead soldiers.

LC: Was that standard operating that you were not allowed to do that?

SV: Yeah, that was. Doing a hoist mission is high risk enough. We did not have a gun ship escort either. Not knowing how this—obviously this soldier died by a gunshot wound. Not knowing where the bad guys were or having a good grasp on the tactical situation just put us further at risk. This guy was talking to me. I just came back over the radio. I’m just thinking this is like December twenty-eighth or December twenty-ninth of ’69 and I was due to PCS (permanent change of station) on seven January. So I was about ten days from leaving country. For some stupid reason I told the guy, “If you can radio it
in to your medic there and see if there’s any form of life left in him we’ll be glad to come
in and hoist him for you.” Well, it didn’t take but just a few seconds for that to sink in.
The battalion commander called in and sure enough that medic was able to find a little bit
of life left in this guy, which was in essence a misnomer. That was just my way of being
able to justify and going in and hoisting if that battalion commander could tell me that
they thought there was a little life left in him. So we did. Unfortunately as we were in the
process of lowering the cable we had a hoist failure. We couldn’t get the cable to go
down or up. The only gun ship cover we had was an Air Force OV-10. OV-10 is an
observation airplane, twin-engine turbines. Two pilots sit one in front of each other, oh I
guess sit tandem I guess, one’s got to sit in front and one’s got to sit in back. Kind of a
twin tailed, kind of a cool little airplane, light armament, but nothing significant. He was
our gun ship.

LC: He was where in relation to you?
SV: He was right overhead. He was making fake gun runs in and around the area
just kind of in an attempt to be a decoy—if the bad guys were down there keep their
heads down as well.

LC: Maybe dissuade them from—
SV: Yeah dissuade them, distract them, take their mind off of knowing there’s a
helicopter near. When our hoist failed I asked the guy in the OV-10 if he would go find a
place for us to land, some open area. He split real quick. Told us there was one about
three or four miles south of where we were. We flew down there, just landed in this open
field. He continued to make his fake gun runs in case anybody was lurking in that area. I
had the crew chief take the jungle penetrator, which is a device that looks like a—it’s
almost like bullet shaped that is heavily weighted on the end. That is on the end of the
cable and it will go down through the trees. Then when you get down there, there’s three
paddles that fold out of that so you can sit somebody on that. There’s a couple of straps
that you can put it around your back. You know clip it in and it will hold you on to this
thing. He took the jungle penetrator and we figured we had about a hundred feet of height
that we needed to reach down to. So he ran that cable out. He and the medic just threw it
all back into the helicopter. Then we flew over to the site again and essentially just tossed
it out the door. We fed it down so we didn’t get a bind or anything in the cable. They
hooked this quazi wounded guy on board or still alive guy, strapped him on the jungle
penetrator and then we just brought him up vertically. In other words we just used the
helicopter to lift him up through the trees.

LC: Rather then the wench, which was broken.
SV: Right. Once we cleared him of the trees and he was suspended about a
hundred feet below us we then flew him over to that same little landing zone that we had
pulled a cable out in and touched him down on the ground and just kind of side stepped
about twenty feet or so and sat down next to him. The medic got the, essentially the dead
guy, and brought him on board. The crew chief loaded the rest of the cable and the jungle
penetrator back into the helicopter, closed the doors and then we took off. The down side
for us is we spent a lot of time on site and we were running on our twenty-minute fuel
light. In the cockpit there is a, supposed to be a very sensitive sensor in our fuel cells that
tells us when we’re down to a twenty-minute fuel reserve remaining. That light was on
and we were still probably about twenty-five minutes out of Long Binh. So we’re sitting
here trying to mentally calculate whether or not we’re going to make it back or not. I
would like to say we were about twenty-one minutes into a twenty-minute warning light
when we decided that we were going to set it down on the edge of Long Binh. We had
called ahead and had one of our sister birds come out. They picked up the KIA. Then
there was another bird that flew out about twenty-five gallons of jet fuel for us in five-
gallon cans. So we had to manually refuel our helicopter out there in that open area. Once
we got that fuel on board it was safe enough for us to fly back to our heliport and then
refuel.

LC: Steve, somebody listening to this thinking of you being only a few days
really from rotating out of the country and knowing what you knew about the condition
of this soldier might wonder what it was that made you do this. I wonder if you can
answer that.

SV: Well, we had a rapport with our crewmembers. That was a good thing about
having a close relationship with your medics and crew chiefs. We just kind of take it in
formal vote. Obviously as the aircraft commander, you know I had fifty-one percent of
the vote. So I can always exercise the option, but I look around and those guys all said,
“Let’s go for it.” The morale factor for that ground unit, having to carry one of their dead
comrades around, not just the burden of packing his body, but just the fact that they’re packing a friend around that is now dead really adds a demoralizing effect on them. It also slows down their momentum as a unit in moving. It’s just a real downer for morale and it’s a pain in the butt to have to move this guy around. They may have to do it for a couple of days until they get to a landing zone and get a resupply bird in. So we took those factors in. If I was on the ground and I were in their shoes what would I do, what would I want? We all associated with them. We didn’t know that unit from the man in the moon. We didn’t know any of the people, didn’t know the commander. We just had empathy for them. Even if we’re close to DEROS (date of estimated return from overseas) that’s insignificant. That was our job. We went ahead and did it although we weren’t supposed to do it by company dictate. Then again I wasn’t necessarily known for following the rules the whole time anyway.

LC: Right as you’ve mentioned on a couple previous occasions. Steve, was there one other mission that you wanted to say something about?

SV: Yeah, and let me just capsulate this one. We got no awards for that, but when I got back from field stand-by, it must’ve been the last day of December. I had a letter, and I think the letter was flown into the heliport by the battalion commander. It was in an envelope. It was addressed to me, but there was no way it could’ve made it from wherever this guy was to our APO (Army post office) address in two or three days.

LC: Right.

SV: I think he went back to wherever his headquarters was. If he didn’t fly it down there personally I think he had somebody fly it down.

LC: But he saw that it was delivered to you?

SV: Yeah. It was addressed to me, but it was certainly representative and talked to the crew as a whole. That one letter of appreciation or thanks meant more to me then any other awards that the military could’ve bestowed. It’s like the military. They mail you an air medal for valor in your post office box, but yet this battalion commander took the time out of his busy schedule to personally write a letter and then fly it down to our location. That certainly meant more to us than anything else at all.

LC: And to your crew as well?
SV: Oh, yes, absolutely. So that encapsulates that. Now the next mission I think. I mean, there were a lot of them that are quite memorable. Flying off of riverine boats in the Delta and stuff like that. But we made a mission on top of Gia Ray Mountain, which is probably 25, 2800 feet mountain well east of Long Binh. There was a signal site on top of that as well as Infantry Company I believe. That was their security. They had mortars up there. It was more of a signal relay site because it was the highest piece of ground. When I got back from Vietnam I did research for my book. I found that the NVA had a signal site on the same mountain. They were just located down a little bit lower down in the jungle.

LC: Yes, I think I’ve read about that.

SV: Yeah. It was real interesting to find out. Something that we all suspected, but didn’t know for a fact. We got a call. There were two of us flying the aircraft, both of us were aircraft commanders. So we were both highly seasoned, which doesn’t mean we’re any smarter. It’s just that maybe the double level of ignorance sometimes would get us into trouble. Instead of one brain getting us into trouble now we had two brains that had the can do type of attitude. Dan Boss was the CG’s (commanding general) aid and he would come fly with us.

LC: How do you spell his last name, Steve?

SV: B-O-S-S.

LC: Okay.

SV: Dan was an MSC (Medical Service Corps) officer and he was the captain. He would come fly with us occasionally at night during his off time. Typically that caused the co-pilot to get bounced. Even though he was an aircraft commander it was always nice not to send out an inexperienced pilot with him. So we typically had two aircraft commanders flying on those types of missions. We were getting a lot of pressure from a ground base doctor who was not at that location to make this extraction. Apparently they had a mortar round go off in a tube, you know just cooked off. They had a premature detonation. It caused injuries to two soldiers of which were limb—they blew off a leg or an arm. So the doc on the ground at this remote location was quite concerned about these soldiers. He was in contact with his medics and stuff up there on top of this landing, this mountain. So unfortunately as we approached out there, I mean, when we
took off out of Long Binh it was clear as a bell and everywhere else it was clear as a bell except around the top of this mountain where they were getting I guess a good term would be convection fog. Since you don’t have mountains down in Lubbock I guess it’s hard. Just think of a mountain with the top of it obscured and cloudy.

LC: We’ll use our imaginations.

SV: Yeah. This cloud probably went a quarter of the way down, down the mountain. The cloud mass was building to the west. In other words as the temperature, the moisture band, the wind approaches this mountain it would form the cloud and it would start building up and moving around. So it was getting thicker laterally as well as vertically.

LC: Okay.

SV: We attempted a couple of times to make the approach to the side of the mountain. I think he meant the cloud wouldn’t go all the way to the ground or to the tops of the trees thinking we might be able to find a way that we could hover underneath the mountain, or underneath the cloud, and possibly find a way to the top of the mountain. That logic was quickly dismissed as we found ourselves now at a hover over the tops of the trees in the clouds and having no visual reference at all. We were literally just hovering on the wisps of a couple of trees and the rest we were watching our instruments. So we’d go a little ways and couldn’t get any further. Then we’d make an instrument take off from that location, break away from the mountain and hoping we didn’t run into anything as we were climbing out through the clouds. We tried that probably two or three times and realized the logic of that process was ill fated. We thought the next best plan would be to see if the ground unit had any illumination that they could put on their landing pad and that we would have visibility of through the cloud layer. Well, we were beginning to run low on fuel. So as they worked that action we headed out to the Black Horse, which was south of that location. That’s where we grabbed some hot fuel. Hot fuel just meaning that we refueled the helicopter with the engines running instead of shutting down. We ended up, because of the weather, having to let down east of Black Horse and then hovering under the cloud layer and we essentially followed roads to Black Horse. We were about fifty feet above the ground with our landing lights, searchlight on, following the road trying to detect any wires that would be extending across it. It was just
kind of like driving down a highway with your lights on, hoping there were no bad guys that we would run across. When we figured we were about a beam of Black Horse we just made a right-handed turn and ultimately we found it. Got the fuel, made an instrument take off back up to the cloud layer, got to, what’s termed VFR (visual flight rules) on top, in other words we could see. There was stars and stuff out there. Headed back over to the top of this mountain, still we’re getting the pressure to come in and make the extraction. There were enough flares for us to make, ultimately make two attempts. The first one we could see them. They were setting a triangle. So we started down through the cloud layer. I would estimate probably fifty feet or so off the ground the flares went out. So here we are in the descent through the clouds and all of a sudden it’s black and we have no visual reference at all. We grasped for any remnants of control of the helicopter. Make an instrument climb out and here again hope that we don’t hit anything such as a radio tower or anything else. Break out on top again in clear conditions and ask the ground unit if they have the opportunity to set up another set of flares. They do. It’s going to be their last one. This is going to be the only time that we’re going to have to get in there.

LC: Is the doctor on the phone or on the radio with you all this time as well?

SV: Yes. Now this doctor is at a different location. So he has not seen the patients. He is just getting his information from the medic’s that’s on site.

LC: But he’s pushing pretty hard?

SV: Oh, yeah. Telling us if we don’t get in there those soldiers are going to die.

So there’s a lot of added pressure on us to make this mission successful. So we come around. They pop the flares. Dan figures he’s flying from the left seat. I’m in the right seat watching, watching the instruments hoping we don’t do something stupid. Dan is flying from the left side. He’s got better visibility through the chin bubble. We’re essentially going to make a very rapid descent down through the clouds. So we’re descending down through this white mass focused on three points of illumination down there, trying to keep from getting vertigo and maintaining control of the aircraft.

LC: Right. About what rate would you say you were descending at?

SV: Probably close to fifteen hundred feet a minute.

LC: Fast. That’s coming in.
SV: Yeah. We were just about flat pitch and probably about sixty knots forward air speed. So it was a fairly speed quick approach. The one factor we didn’t take into consideration was the wind that was blowing from west to east. We were approaching into the wind. As we got down closer we flew right past a radio tower in our descent. That caught the crew chief’s attention because it was right out the door. He said, “Radio tower out the door.” From that point on it started to go downhill. Even though we’re beginning to slow down for what we think is the approach to the lights down there the wind is starting to move us, blow us backwards. So we increased our forward speed to keep from moving, to keep from drifting backwards. I don’t know how close we physically got to the ground before the flares went out. Dan essentially lost control of the helicopter. Our lower PM audio came on. That is a red—that light’s probably an inch wide and a half inch tall. It just blares, just RPM (rotations per minute). Plus you get an audio tone in your headset, this beeping sound. We had pulled in way too much power. We’d over-torqued the helicopter. So we were losing RPM. At the same time we were beginning to rotate because we had essentially lost control of the helicopter. The crew chief’s toolbox, which was not properly restrained, flew out the door of the helicopter. These guys were—the crew chief and the medic had been laying across the floor kind of head to toe looking out for the ground and obstacles. Of course they were now hanging on for dear life because they’re not strapped in the helicopter and we’re beginning to spin. There’s leaves and sand and crap falling through the helicopter. I might add the flares had already gone out. So we no longer had reference to the ground, or where we were in relationship to. We had no special orientation. Fortunately we came out the side of the cloud on the south side of the mountain. We had missed any obstructions, shacks, buildings. We had hit some trees and other than that we pretty well came out unscathed. Once we were clear of the clouds, we got control of the helicopter again. I think everybody took their pulse to make sure we’re still alive and climbed back up on top of the clouds again. There were no more flares. There was nothing else that we could do to get in there. So we headed back to Long Binh and we had our RTO (radio telephone operator) check with them on an hourly basis to see one, how the patients were doing. Did we have any alternatives with the weather clearing? There was nothing that we could do to get in there. The next day, the next morning obviously we change shifts at seven
o’clock in the morning. So the new crews came on. They got a dispatch for that same
location. The clouds were beginning to break up and essentially they just waited till they
found an opening in the cloud layer, just slipped in real quick and extracted those guys
and then flew them back. So their medical condition wasn’t as significant. Well, they had
some significant wounds, there is no doubt about it. The determination that was made if
they don’t get out of there now they’ll be dead was a little overstated.

LC: It didn’t hold true.

SV: It didn’t hold true. So fortunately for these guys they stayed stable and
stayed alive until we got a bird in there the next morning.

LC: It sounds like there was not only some pretty incredible flying going on but
probably some fairly good work by a medic down there on the ground too.

SV: Yeah, whoever that medic was in that deck who was giving him advice did
some good work down there. That’s for sure.

LC: Steve, let’s take a break.

SV: Okay.