February 2024

Frank Soares III, interviewed by Kellie Pelletier, Part 2

Francis C. Soares III

Transcript of an Interview
with Francis Soares
by Kellie Pelletier
June 22, 1999
Augusta, Maine

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Monique Leamon of Casco, Maine, transcribed the recordings.

The MAINE VIETNAM VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT is supported by contributions from the Maine Humanities Council, the Maine Community Foundation, Neil Rolde of York, Maine, the Maine State Council of Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc., the University of Maine at Farmington and Bates College.

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Listener discretion is advised.

FS:Francis Soares
KP:Kellie Pelletier

Tape One, Side A:

KP: This is an interview with Frank Soares for the MAINE VIETNAM VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT. I'm Kellie Pelletier and the interview is taking place in Augusta, Maine, on June 22nd, 1999, beginning at 2:30 p.m.

Hi, Frank.

FS: Hello.

KP: How are you doing today?

FS: Good.

KP: Good. I'd like to start with some background information like your date of birth and where you were raised.

FS:I was born 29th of July 1946 and the family home was basically in Hawaii and I lived there until I was twelve and moved to Southwest Harbor in Maine, and basically that's where I'm from, Southwest Harbor.

KP: Where did you go to school?

FS: Pemetic High School in Southwest, which is no longer there. It's a consolidated high school now.

KP: When did you graduate?

FS: Oh, I graduated in 1964 and I did a year's post-graduate work up at Higgins Classical Institute, which is no longer there, up in Charleston, and then I joined the Army in '65.

KP: Why did you join the Army?

FS: Well, obviously the draft was sitting out there in those days, and I had applied for the military academies, two of them, and I was an alternate for one of them, which was the same thing as saying you're going to get drafted before you get to go to the academy. So I went to Emerson in Boston for a semester but it clearly wasn't what I wanted and before the semester was over with I enlisted in the Army, knowing full well that I was going to get drafted. I wanted to get

the programs that I wanted and to a degree I think I, not to a degree, I felt that I wanted to get into the action before the war was all over with and it seemed like, you know, this thing wasn't going to last that long and I wanted to participate in it.

KP: Is there any particular reason why you chose the Army as opposed to another branch?

FS: Well, my father was a Coast Guard officer and I knew I didn't want to be a Coast Guard officer, and my real interest was the United States Naval Academy and, but like I said, I was an alternate for that. So, I didn't want to be an enlisted man in the Navy because I didn't feel that you really get to do or be as independent as you could be in the Army. So the Army had all kinds of programs that I was interested in, so I joined the Army.

KP: Where did you go to boot camp?

FS: Fort Dix, New Jersey. I joined the Army officially on the 29th of November of '65 and went to boot camp there in December obviously, through the Christmas period, and finished up in January.

KP: What was that like?

FS: Well, in those days it was still the World War II barracks and they were all wood, in pretty decent shape but they were all, all wood facilities. And it was, you know, a real eye opener. I often told, tell people that the toughest experience I ever had in the military was going to what they called the replacement center, or the reception center, I'm sorry, at Fort Dix. When you get there, they haven't assigned you to a particular unit yet, so you just go into this big holding area and it's just chaos, absolute chaos. People are running around, nobody knows where they're supposed to be, what they're supposed to be doing, and the people that are assigned there just yell at everybody, you know. And here you are, eighteen years old, you know, and though I felt I knew a lot about the military because my father was in it, it was a real eye opener for me. And I stayed there three or four days and then went into a basic training unit, and I really didn't have any trouble with basic training. I knew what was going to be expected of me and, you know, physically I was in really good condition and I was bright enough and I, you know, I did real well. I mean, I didn't graduate top of the class but I was, you know, way up there.

KP: What type of training did you have?

FS: It, the basic training course is just general training, I mean, it doesn't specialize in one particular thing. You know, we had weapons training, there was hand to hand combat, and a lot of physical exercises and field work and the, I mean it's just exactly what it says, it's the beginning of the road for your training. We also had the opportunity while we were there to apply for different programs, and what I really wanted to get into was Special Forces, but they wouldn't take you until you, I don't remember what the criteria was, you had to have so much time. So I applied for Officer Candidate School while I was there and, you know, I really didn't know when I left there whether I had gotten it or not, so, but that's one of the things I applied for. I applied for some other stuff, too, but the one I got.

KP: What did you do after boot camp?

FS: Went to Fort Jackson, North Carolina, South Carolina, I'm sorry, and went into infantry training and I was a machine gunner there in, and obviously an infantryman too. While I was there my orders for Officer Candidate School came in, so I knew before I graduated that I was going to be going to Fort Knox as an officer candidate. It was a pretty good school over all, I mean it gave you an opportunity to get a little more well rounded I guess is probably the term I would use, but I liked it over all.

KP: What did you do there?

FS: Predominantly weapons firing, machine gun, in those days they had bazookas which they no longer have. We practiced with mines and .50 caliber machine guns. What else did we have, you name it, mortars. Trained, trained to be an all around infantryman but like I said, my specialty was going to be a machine gunner, which by the way is awful heavy thing to lug around so I was really glad when my orders came in.

KP: What was your rank?

FS: Oh, I think by that time, I was a private E-2 when I left, I think I was private E-2, I think that's what my grade was.

KP: What unit were you assigned?

FS: It was just an infantry training company, I really don't remember the, the unit itself, but it was still part of the training thing, it wasn't maneuvering units or anything like that. After I left there I would have normally gone to a maneuvering unit and, but didn't because I was on my way to Officer Candidate School?

KP: What was your MOS?

FS: It was 11B, 11B-10, which was infantryman, and later, I have gained a lot more MOSs over the years, but that was my first one.

KP: And what was that?

FS: Infantry, just straight infantry. Eleven stands for, in the military personnel system, eleven stands for infantry, a letter stands for your level of competence maybe. A is the beginning, B is right beyond that, so I was 11B, and the 10 again is another level indicator. So I was pretty, pretty low on the infantry scale, you know, I was pretty, couldn't get much farther down than I was. There were a few below me, but there weren't many.

KP: When did you go to Vietnam?

FS: Well, I went to Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and that was a six month program and while I was there had the opportunity to again apply for a whole bunch of other stuff, and again I wanted to go to special forces and again they said at this time you had to be first lieutenant. Well, obviously I wasn't a first lieutenant, so I applied for helicopter training and received helicopter. When I graduated from Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox, I received, actually before I graduated I had orders sending me to helicopter training school and then on to Vietnam. And I went to Fort Walters, Texas which was the basic helicopter training, and then on to Fort Rucker, Alabama which was advanced helicopter training. And then lo and behold, before I graduated from Fort Rucker, expecting to go directly to Vietnam which is what most people did, a whole bunch of us who were armor officers or cavalry officers predominantly had our orders changed and we were sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, back to Fort Knox, to form up a brand new unit that had never existed before. So we arrived there and there was nothing there but a, sort of a big log book that people signed in when they got there, you know. And, you know, there was just, there was this huge influx of people coming in. There was roughly about a thousand of us assigned, about nine hundred something

assigned to this unit. It was the 7th Squadron of the 1st Cavalry Regiment, and we were forming up there and we'd literally picked up everything, I mean, we picked up brand new equipment, we picked up brand new people, you know.

The more senior people had been to Vietnam already but most of us had not been, so in my case, I was cavalry scout, so we went down to, I can't remember the depot in Texas where we, Corpus Christi, and we picked up our cavalry scout aircraft, which were what they called LOHs, light observation helicopter, or loaches, or an OH6A, and we picked them up and they were brand new, and we flew them to Fort Knox and we trained in them there.

Other guys, other people were picking up Hueys down at the Bell plant in Texas and flying them up, and Cobras and they were flying them up and, I mean, everything was coming together at this place. I mean, one morning we'd get a load of jeeps in and the next morning we'd get a load of helicopters in, and the morning after that we'd get a load of clothes in or whatever. And we did that from August of 1967 until late November, early December of '67, which is when we deployed to Vietnam. We had to go through a whole series of tests and everything else, and then we deployed to Vietnam as a squadron.

Really interesting going to Vietnam, though. We had all these aircraft, we had to do something with them, and our instructions were to for the most part take them to Vietnam with us. The scout aircraft, the LOHs, stayed, but all the Hueys and Cobras and stuff, they went with us. So we flew all them out to the west coast from Fort Knox, which, about five days flying time and, which is, it was somewhere around mid-November of '67. And we ran into the really early winters in the Rocky Mountains and, with all these aircraft, and I, in fact I've got some pictures of it at home, it was just terrible weather and we finally, you know, we were brand new pilots, you know, we had three or four hundred hours flying time, and I've got this one picture of us sitting along the interstate, five aircraft, and all the cars are stopping along the interstate because we had to stop because the weather was so bad we couldn't see. So finally the Texas Ranger made us move the aircraft because it was such an obstacle. So I've got another picture of us sitting in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn at a town called Mt. Pleasant, Texas, and we stayed there for four or five days until the weather broke. Then we tried to get through the mountains again and we got up into the mountains and we hit bad weather, and right about that time there was some sort of national emergency having to do with the farmers up in that area, predominantly Indian ranchers, and they were just so snowed in they couldn't get their cattle or anything like that. So some of us broke off and

hauled hay and that kind of stuff for a couple of days, to get to the cows. And then the rest of us broke through and, through a place called the Guadalupe Pass which is the lower part of the Rocky Mountains, and went to Gila Bend, New Mexico, and then to Douglas-Bisbee, Arizona, and then up to Stockton Springs, California, where we left the aircraft and they were prepared for shipment. And they were put on an aircraft carrier called the *Card*, the USS *Card*, USNS *Card*, and some of our mechanics went with them but the majority of us went on troop ship. And, but before we went to Vietnam, we went back home for four or five days and then, and then all flew out to the west coast and got on a troop ship.

It's really sort of interesting, you know, one of the things in my fifty-three years of life, I, I, it never ceases to amaze me is, you know, there's a saying that says what goes around comes around. In 19-, oh, '75 or '76 I was sailing around the Maine coast and I sailed into Castine Harbor and I was sailing around and I went by the *State of Maine* that was sitting there, the training ship, and I looked up at it and I said my God that ship looks familiar. And as we approached it I realized that what it was was the troop ship that I had gone to Vietnam on and it was called the Upshur, and Maine had picked it up after the war had ended and painted it all different colors, but that's what it was. And so I've had the opportunity, she's gone now, but I've had the opportunity a number of times to go on it and see it, and, sort of interesting.

But we formed up at Long Beach, California, and about eight hundred of us got on this troop ship with a couple other, a couple thousand other troops. There was three thousand and something on the ship, I don't remember exactly how many, but I mean it was packed. And, you know, it was the first time that I had an idea that the war in Vietnam was different than any other war that we'd been in because as we, as the busses off loaded us at these docking facilities, I mean, these, it was probably a mile, two miles of warehouses at, and, along the shore and then these docks would stick out at ninety degrees from each of the warehouses, and you know, you really expected a very crowded place and it wasn't, it wasn't crowded at all. It was completely closed off and the only thing that was there was maybe every second or third dock might be a load of troops lined up very quietly getting on these troop ships. Well, I see these pictures of World War II with the troop ships, you know, and everything, there was people everywhere, families and troops and, you know, just mayhem, and it wasn't that way at all. It was this very antiseptic way. So we lined up and got on the troop ship and one of the walls, we were right on the end of one of these warehouses, and there was a wall that separated us from the civilian

community, and as we walked down along the wall, some students had climbed up on the wall and were pissing down on the troops as they walked by. And I once saw a thing with Jerry Rubin on TV and he said, I've never known, I 've never met a soldier who had actually got spit on and I said, wow, I wish I could have had a chance to talk to you. But I mean, I couldn't believe it, I mean I had no inkling that our nation might not be real happy with this war, I had none, I was clueless. And here's these guys standing there pissing on the troops.

And so we get on to the troop ship and, I don't know, it took us a couple of hours to load, it went pretty quick, and the officers on the troop ship had separate quarters than the enlisted, the enlisted were in the, what they called the hold of the troop ship, which is basically a huge loading area, a storage area. And they had bunks in there that, I can't remember, they were seven or eight, nine, ten deep, I don't, I honestly don't remember how deep they were but they were piled right up right to the ceiling, and if you happened to be number eight you just climbed all the way up to number eight and got in your bunk, you know. And, but the officers were in quarters which were, oh, about as big as the room we're in right now, maybe twelve by fifteen or sixteen, and there was a minimum of six of us to a room. Sometimes you had eight to a room, and the bunks folded out and all that. And that's where we were for twenty-eight days.

In, one of the reasons why I spend time explaining what the ship looked like and the area around is for this statement that I'm going to make now. Again, our ship was right at the end of the dock, right near the civilian facilities, and as we got ready to depart, I'd been on the sea all my life, my father was a military, you know, mariner, and so I was more than well prepared for what was going to happen. And the tugs came up and hooked on to us and the dock lines got pulled in, and we started what they call warping away from the dock, and as we warped away from the dock, the tugs pulled the bow out into the stream and we started to slide, slowly slide past that wall that separated us from the civilian community. And I was up as close to the bridge as I could get watching all this happen, and as we, as I passed the wall, I could see hundreds of demonstrators right along this wall. And there was some, you know, cargo company there and they were all, this was a weekend and the company wasn't working where the demonstrators were, and they were all over the place and, with signs and all of that, and again, I mean, I was shocked, I mean I had no inkling that this was going on.

You have to remember I was in some pretty intensive training for the, since I joined the Army, I mean I hardly, you know, never watched TV, seldom read papers and so I mean this really caught my attention. And on the roof of this cargo facility was this particular vociferous group of demonstrators there and they really caught my eye and I, we got abeam of them and, again, you have to remember this, it's sort of foggy, the water is completely clear, you really can't see very far, and this huge ship is just sliding past this wall. And as we get past the wall and I look at this group of people that are on the top of the, the thing, I realize that there's probably three or four women in the group and they're naked as jay birds and they lay down on top of this roof and one of the guys has got a sign and he puts it over the top of one of the women, big sign, and with a big arrow on it and it says this is what you're going to be missing for the next year. And, I mean, I saw no connection, I, to be honest with you until today I still don't see a connection. But, I mean, it was just, I think it was just the, the weirdness of the whole situation.

Well, the ship continues to move past that point and as we move past it we end, get past all the docks and we're out into mid-channel. And, and again, the water's flat calm and it's, now it's really foggy, we can't even see the docks we came from, and here's three thousand some troops on the ship and, you know, most of us are beginning to realize that, you know, we're really gone, we've really left home, we're going to war. And, you know, we look around and there's just nothing, and every now and then you get a glimpse of something through the fog, I never knew what it was, and we started out to sea and I remember thinking, you know, you know, when my parents' generation went there were bands and there were speeches and there was people shaking hands, but here we are, we leave this dock, nobody to say goodbye to us, and just disconnected from the military and from our homes and from our family and obviously from the public because they were on that roof. And I was really feeling a little lost, or maybe a lot lost. And we head out into the channel and, and most of the people started wandering off to the dock, off the boat I mean, going to different places, wherever they wanted to go, but I stayed on up by the bridge and I could see out across the bow as we headed out to sea.

But I knew the area around Long Beach was, it takes a long time to get to sea around Long Beach, and so it started up to lighten up a little bit and visibility started to increase a little bit, and then out of the fog, right in front of us, just sort of like an apparition, this, this ship appears and she's a big one and she's gray so I know she's Navy and she's coming right towards us but obviously not going to hit us, and I watch it and I realize it's a cruiser and as she went away I found

out it was the cruiser *Honolulu*, and she comes up pretty darn close to us and goes by, and as she gets abeam of us, you know, there's flags flying, going up, and lights are going and horns are going and I said, what the hell's going on? And she gets abeam of us now, we're passing like that and she's right alongside of us, and they, they had the whole Navy crew fall out in their dress uniforms and salute us as you go by. And that was the only time anybody said thank you or anything else. And, and it was our own kind, that's what got me. It wasn't our country and it wasn't our families.

But, we spent twenty-eight days at sea and it was pretty uneventful. We had a chance to listen to the radio so I started getting caught up. By then demonstrations, this is December, late December of '67, demonstrations have started across the country and I'm getting a little more filled in on what was going on but it was pretty boring, you know, twenty-eight days at sea. And so in January of '68 we arrive at Da Nang, and Da Nang harbor's a huge thing, almost as big as Long Beach, maybe it was bigger, and we anchor out in the middle of Da Nang harbor and no sooner the anchor drops and then somebody on a mountain top near there starts firing mortars trying to get us. Well, the mortars can't reach us, you know, but I just, you know, looking around the harbor and stuff, nobody seems concerned about this, you know. Somebody's firing mortars at this troop ship and nobody gives a damn. But then what I didn't realize of course there was all kinds of fighting going on and they were trying to keep their heads above water and the last thing they had to worry about was the troop ship sitting in the middle of the harbor.

So we dropped off some of the units there and we then went down to Vung Tau, which was down in the Saigon area, and we offloaded there and we offloaded into landing boats, and again this is this, this surrealistic atmosphere that surrounded the whole thing. We, I'm sure you've seen pictures of World War II landing boats where they hit the beach, you know, like, what was it, *Saving Private Ryan* there kind of thing. Well those are the kind of landing boats were in. And we hit the beach and the ramps go down and we walk out and there's thousands of people on the beach, I mean, it's their sum-, it's their beach thing, I mean it's just a beach to them, you know, there's people walking around in bathing suits and, but here all these troops are off loading right through the middle of it, you know, and you scratch your head and you say, where the hell am I at, you know, what's going on? And we loaded into transports and they took us to our first, first base where we waited for our aircraft to come. Our aircraft were actually already there, they were flying them off to us, but, it was, where the heck was it, *[name]*, which is just outside of Saigon, to the northeast,

fifteen, twenty miles. And we picked up some, not abandoned but some empty barracks over there and formed up, you know, waiting for our equipment to get there and everything else. And when they put helicopters on a, for an overseas thing, they cocoon them, they cover them with a protective thing so that has to be all taken off and the aircraft brought back. I mean, it's not a long process but it takes a day or two to get them.

So our aircraft got there and we'd picked up the rest of our troops and then we were supposed to start training with a unit that was already in country, the Third of the 17th Cavalry Regiment and, which we did, but right about then the Tet Offensive is starting and, I mean everything's chaos, you know, and the first couple of nights were there, I mean, we were, the first night we were there we were mortared and rocketed, you know. Which didn't bother me one bit to be honest with you, that's what I thought war was all about, I mean, I, I expected that. You know, I was ready for it, I don't know, I didn't know anybody who wasn't ready for it.

Part of the problem with that kind of atmosphere is in a cavalry unit, everybody is exceptionally gung ho, I mean, cavalry among the Army units is probably, you know, it's a little hard to explain. But they have a, they have a belief amongst themselves, a John Wayne, I mean you've seen John Wayne movies with the cavalry in it, that's, that's, that's the kind of atmosphere it is, and even in combat it's that way. So I mean we were really gung ho and ready to make the world ready for democracy.

And so we sat there a couple days, we took our first casualties, our first deaths and they had nothing to do with combat. We had a couple of cooks pumping up gas stoves that they cook the food on and they overpumped it and the things blew up and they got fatally burned and they died a day or two later in the hospital. Those were our first casualties.

Right about after that, we took a mortar round right into one of our enlisted barracks and we had a number of people injured but nobody killed in that one. And again, I spoke to you earlier about the troop ship and, well, after the war was over with and I came back to Maine, I joined a National Guard unit and, lo and behold, my crew chief ended up being the same crew chief that I had in Vietnam, the same time that I'm telling you about now. And in fact our careers, we stayed together for twenty-something years in our careers. And he was in that building that got hit that day but he was lucky, he wasn't injured. And then we training with the Third of the 17th.

My job was a scout, which most people really don't understand what a scout does. Unlike what you see in most of the movies and stuff, they don't go flying around in high altitude and all the rest of the stuff. Basically what you do is you hover at about a speed that a man would walk at and you look for stuff, that's what you're doing, you're trying to find stuff. You might fly eighty or ninety miles an hour from point A to point B to get to the area where you're supposed to be looking, but once you get there then, then you hover everywhere. And so that's what we were doing.

And, I don't remember all the places that we trained. I mean, one day we'd be at the, helping Saigon and the next day we'd be over to Long Binh trying to, trying to help them. And, you know, at night was really bad, I mean they'd hit all night long and you'd fly all night long, you know, trying to fight off the place being overrun. You know, I've got some, some photos of areas, a place over to Long Binh called the Widow's Village, every night they'd come in there and just try to break through the wire and we'd hose them down with machine guns and next morning there'd be hundreds of bodies, and they'd haul all the bodies out and the next night they'd do the same thing again. And, so that's, I mean, it was, it was weird.

And, I mean we really, we flew, there was one point there, we flew, one time we flew three days without sleep, just, and I've got my records, I've looked at them before but, you know, in those three days, one day it was nineteen hours of flight time and that's actual time behind the stick, not time refueling or time sleeping or anything, nineteen hours. And the next day was about the same thing, so at the end of three days we were exhausted. We did get some sleep at the end of that. But it was tough skidding and for a while there it looked like they were going to break through, that they really had done what they tried to do, which was overrun the American positions. But much like Hue, it didn't work out that way. We started driving them back and, well before we started driving them back, when things were still looking real bad, we were at a place called, I was with a team, two aircraft one days in a place called Duc Hoa, which is west of Saigon, and we arrived there and there was an assault helicopter unit there. And assault helicopter units predominantly carried troops into combat. Unlike a scout, a scout's trying to find, trying to cause trouble, but the scout finds them and then the assault unit brings in the troops. And, so I got to Duc Hoa, we were over there and this assault unit was there and I'd run into some people I knew, not real well but I knew, and we talked and off these guys went. I don't know, six weeks, two months later, I left the unit that I was

assigned to and actually joined that same unit. But that day, they went into a place right near there, a couple of miles from Duc Hoa, and they went in with ten ships and when the day was done they came out with one. They had one guy get the Medal of Honor and two get the Distinguished Service Cross, but they lost like seventy dead, you know, before the day was over with. And it was a real bloodbath. We, we didn't know it, I mean we were on different frequencies and we were in another area and just happened to see them there that day.

And right after that was the first time I got shot down. I was up in the Iron Triangle and my commander said, you know, there's an area over there that looks suspicious, go check it out. And I hovered over to an area and he was right, it was suspicious, it was a base camp and I was sitting right on top of, again, about thirty feet above the, there were those trees so I was right at the top, literally right at the top of the trees, and I was on top of the base camp. They opened fire and stitched the bottom of the aircraft and lost the engine and, so I turned it and we slid off the side of the trees into an open area right near there. And actually, it's sort of funny in a sense, we got off May Days but I don't know if anybody heard us and I had an observer with me, and so when we hit the ground I said, you know, we're leaving this damn thing, we're going because they're going to want, you know, the bad guys are going to try and take this. And, so we jumped out of it and I threw a white phosphorus grenade in to burn it and it hit the seat, boff, right out the other door. I said the hell with that and we just kept going. And we ran through the jungle that surrounded this particular area and we did run into, into a bunch of bad guys coming that way and we had to fight our way out through that, but that literally took seconds. And we just blew our way through. They weren't ready for us and we were coming like bats out of hell, because all we had were our personal sidearms with us. And so we just broke right through and when we did, we broke open to an open area and there was a village right near there which I knew was a friendly village. So we ran like, as fast as we could, and by then I could see aircraft circling so I knew that they knew we were down, and, but we ran into the village for protection, and we ran right through barbed wire. I don't even remember going through it, I just remember getting there, and then no sooner got through than one of our aircraft picked us up and took us out.

But I was sitting there on the aircraft on the way out and I look down and, I had shorts on, my pants that had gotten cut right completely off and they were down around my ankles, you know, and right around my knees they'd been cut off by

the barbed wire and I was cut, and, but I never even felt it, I never even knew it, you know, I just, wow, I couldn't believe it.

And so the next day we're off again and got a new aircraft and had us doing other missions. We covered the arrival of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, they had been up to a place called Dao Giang and Saigon was in bad shape. It was pretty clear that Saigon was going to collapse and so they were bringing the 11th in to protect it. So we covered their arrival, but they had to literally drive right through the Iron Triangle, which was one of the hottest places in the country. And, you know, they'd knock off the lead tank and, you know, we'd scout the area ahead of them but you couldn't see the bad guys, and they'd blow the lead tank off and then they then trapped along these roads, you know, and the tanks couldn't go, couldn't spread out because it was all jungle and swamp on each side of the road. And, you know, there wasn't anything they could do and so we'd fire up the area, we'd fight until they could break through, they could somehow push that lead tank off into the rice paddy and then they'd start up again, and they'd go. That happened three or four times in the forty miles or whatever it was to get to, to Saigon. But they did make it and, and that was a hell of a long day, I can tell you that.

And we had, this whole time, you know, the, our squadron, which again consisted of about nine hundred, a thousand people, we had helicopters at all kinds of different places doing all kinds of different things. And, you know, I hate to, to add to the, the Oliver Stone *Platoon* vision of Vietnam, because in my mind it wasn't that way, but we had a squadron commander, a lieutenant colonel, and he called us together not too long after we'd gotten there and said, I've just been selected for the Army War College, which is at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, I think usually an indicator that a person's going to make general grade, they're going to be a general officer. And he said, before I go there, you're going to make me a reputation that'll get me promoted. I didn't much like this guy anyhow, and when he said that I liked him even less. And I'm a first lieutenant, you know, what the hell do I know? And in the week following that we lost six aircraft and we had six dead out of that, and, you know, it just kept up, we just, it was that way, we just kept losing aircraft, losing people, and it just didn't seem to bother the guy and later, as I told you earlier, I left and went to this other unit and when I was in that unit I heard that he had gotten shot, and they told me that on the day that, when he got shot, that on the radio guys were cheering they had gotten him. He lived and made general-grade officer later on, so.

Anyway, it was a hell of a good group of guys, but it, it, the unit never had the cohesion that I learned later that a unit should have. And not too long after that incident where he said he was going to make him a reputation, I was luckily, I was assigned to the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company, the one I had seen that day, and, which was at Lai Khe and their call sign was the Robin Hoods, and their gunships were called the Crossbows. And it was one hell of a good group of people, I mean, unlike ourselves who had all come into country brand new and nobody knew anything about anything, including the leaders, these people had been there, you know, they'd been there for thirteen months and they'd rotate us so there was always an experienced cadre there. And there was people who could teach you. And I was not upset to leave the scouts, but at the time I left the scouts I had been shot down, shot down or forced down, on some occasions I just really got shot down, boom, engine quit and you're on the ground. Sometimes I got hit and we just had to get it on the ground or she was going to crash but we got it under power onto the ground. But I'd been shot down or forced down three times with scouts before I left, and this is in a couple months time frame, so, yeah, I was not upset to leave that unit.

Went to the 173rd Assault, the Robin Hoods, and I mean it was really a professional group of people. I mean, these were, these were pilots who knew their ass from a hole in the ground, and, you know, they were really good. And I was assigned to a gunship, an attack helicopter, and I really, really liked doing what I was doing. Again, the Tet Offensive now is still going and, but it's, it's winding down. You know, later I found out that, that, you know, the Vietcong were decimated and that the North Vietnamese suffered the worse losses of a modern army in history, and even the Iraqis I guess didn't suffer that kind of loss, two hundred and seventy five thousand dead, and I can see why. So we continued to fight that battle.

Lai Khe where I was at was second only to Khe Sanh in the amount of artillery and of mortar rounds. Every day we'd get hit by mortars and artillery and we were just, we lived in bunkers, we'd had tents but we lived in the bunkers because we couldn't, couldn't use it, we were in a rubber plantation, mission and rubber plantation, we were in the trees, so that worked out pretty good because a lot of times that would activate the rockets, they would explode before they got to the target. And, but they'd been there a while so everything was sort of established, you know. The cavalry, what happened is you moved, one day you'd be here and the next day you'd be somewhere else, and the next day you'd be somewhere else, you never had any permanency. These guys would

go out and always come back to the same facilities. They weren't much for facilities but they did come back to them.

I trained as a, as an attack pilot for, you know, a short period of time. I had a fair amount of experience by then and then became my own section leader. We had two sections to a, to an attack platoon, and so I had my own group of aircraft, and later became platoon leader. And it, it was good flying, it was good stuff. We had, they were grossly overloaded aircraft. I mean, nowadays, if somebody tried to operate aircraft like that they'd court-martial them, they'd be gone. But that was the only way you could do things, I mean, you couldn't, I mean, you, the gunships never got called out unless some-, unless there was a fire fight going on. I mean, there had to be contact for them to be called, or fighting anticipated for them to be called. Unlike the troop ships who one day could be hauling rations, the next day they could be hauling gas, the next day hauling troops, and only occasionally had to do assaults. That's all we did, we did assaults or we attacked positions or whatever. And, you know, we've got, I'm trying to remember how many ships we had now, I think we had eight, we had eight ships and a back-up, so we had nine ships and those things just ran all the time.

They were in pretty tough shape. We had two types of gunships, one was called the Hog and the other one was called Frog, and the reason for it was their handling characteristics. A Hog was generally armed with, predominantly with rockets and we had two door gunners in the back, but forty-eight rockets. And, again, they were grossly overloaded and we, we kept them at night in the revetment. A revetment is an L-shaped earthen works where they were protected, so if a rocket came in and landed, the shrapnel wouldn't get the helicopter, it would hit the earthen works. So we'd keep the revetment, keep them in the revetments at night, and then a Hog, for instance, you'd crank it up and go on a mission where, you always had morning patrols, missions on the days and the night patrols. On a, on an early morning patrol you'd get out and just, you know, we'd literally be airborne just as the sun was coming up. But the Hog was so overloaded, she, we had a runway right in front of us, what you'd do is you'd kick your gunner and your crew chief out, and they have to walk to the end of the runway. And you'd pick the helicopter up but she was so overloaded she wouldn't hover, so you'd pick it up until the rpms started to bleed off on the rotor head, and it would start to slow down, then you knew you'd pulled too much power in, so you'd put it right back down again just a hair until the rotor went back to the correct rpm, and what you did then was, you'd kick your pedals, you know, rotor, for your tail rotor and you'd work it

back and forth and that would break loose the friction that was holding the aircraft in place and then she'd start to slide. And it was just barely moving, you'd push your stick forward and you pushed your pedals back and forth and she'd start to slide, she'd start to slide, and you'd just keep doing that until you got to the end of the runway, and then your gunner and your crew chief would stand alongside the aircraft, and then you'd turn the aircraft in the direction of the wind, and hopefully you had a little bit of wind, and you'd start this whole process again.

And, but this time your clear intent was to get it airborne. So you keep the whole thing going, by now you've burned off a couple hundred pounds of fuel getting off the runway, and you start this wiggling motion again and you'd keep going and it would go a little faster and a little faster and a little faster, and it would start to move, start to move, start to move, and then you could feel what's called transitional lift, when it shifts from being a ground-driven vehicle to an airborne-driven vehicle, there's a phase there and it's called transitional life, and you could feel it starting to shudder, she'd start this shuddering business, and right about that time the gunner and the crew chief would run and jump in the aircraft, and we'd slide down the runway, still almost in contact with the runway but we'd started to pass through transitional lift, and the rpm would start to fall and when it had dropped to a little, a little point the horn would go on, whoop-whoop-whoop, and a little, you know, basically telling you you're going to crash. And, but we just kept going faster and faster and faster and faster and faster and so you'd get down to the end of the runway and you're just about running out of runway, and by now you're doing about seventy miles an hour or so, and you just bring your stick up just a little bit and you pick it back, pull it back, you don't touch anything else, and she starts to climb, climb and you just barely clear the trees and then finally you were airborne.

And she was called the Hog because that's all she would do, she wouldn't come up, she wouldn't hover, she wouldn't do anything else. And once it was airborne you're fine, you burn fuel off and everything else. The danger of course was if you lost your engine soon after take off because it wasn't going to fly, it was a brick. I had a very good friend of mine was killed that way, he just lost it and boom, he was gone. And of course it was heavily loaded with ammunition and fuel, boom, she'd just be, which didn't happen a lot, that was the good news, but when it did happen it was catastrophic.

Then there were Frogs, Frogs operated very differently. They were a little bit lighter but they had a canon mounted on the nose, and you could keep your crews with you....

End of Tape One, Side A

Tape One, Side B:

KP: You were describing the Frogs.

FS: Yeah, Frogs are different, they're not quite as heavily loaded because they're firing 40mm canon rounds and, as opposed to rockets, and you could take your crew with you when you went out to the runway, but again these beasts wouldn't hover because they were so badly overloaded, so what you'd do is, you'd have your crew meet you outside the revetment and to get out of the revetment you'd hold your pedals steady and your stick steady and you'd grab the, what we called the collector which makes you go up or down, and you'd grab it and just give a hell of a big yank on it real fast, and the Frog would come right up in the air and then come down again, because it didn't have enough power to hover. But by then you got it out of the revetment, you slid it out of the revetment as you did that. And that's how you got to the end of the runway, you just kept yanking the thing and as it came up the rpm would drop off and the horns would go and the lights would flash, and then you slid down twenty feet away from where you were before. And you just kept doing that, you kept hopping to the end of the runway. And you get down to the end of the runway and you turn into the wind, and if the gods were with you that day you had a little bit of wind, and you'd start down the runway doing the same thing. And you'd hop down the runway and one time it would finally hop and, each time of course you kept pushing the forward so you're gaining speed as you hopped, but one time it would finally hop into the air and it would stay in the air. And you'd be airborne then and off you go on to your mission.

And so the aircraft were used pretty damn hard, and they were used all the time, almost twenty four hours a day particularly during the Tet Offensive. We had, you know, some really good enlisted crews and we had some really good officers, and people knew what they were doing, they knew their area that they were given really well, and, you know, I really felt like I was working with a group of professionals. By the time I got there, my unit, the one I was assigned, the Robin Hoods, before the Tet Offensive was over, ended up being the most decorated unit in Vietnam for that time period. Later some other units became more decorated. Like I said, one of the guys had a Medal of Honor, a couple of them had Distinguished Service Crosses. They were also involved in the assault on the embassy, I don't know if you've ever seen films of American helicopters landing on the roof of the embassy in downtown Saigon because the embassy had been overrun by Vietcong, but they were involved in that.

And we were involved in, when I got there, we were involved in the retaking of Cholon, the Chinese sector of Saigon. And, you know, in some ways, I mean, the experiences were, as far as a pilot goes, were just unbelievably good. You got shot at, but, I mean that's part of being a gunship driver.

But, for instance, in the Cholon, you know, we would literally fly down below the buildings, and you'd fly down a street and you'd look up and there'd be two or three stories on each side of you, sort of Luke Skywalker effect of going right down the thing and, you know, shooting whatever your targets were that you. And I had an opportunity to blow up a Shell station while I was there, that was really neat. Hit it with a couple of rockets, there was a tank truck out front full of fuel, hit it with a couple rockets and that baby blew, and when she blew she went. That was really good.

So, we had that opportunity, and then the offensive slowly wound down, it didn't just stop. The Vietcong units that, the NVA that had survived the Tet Offensive, tried to withdraw west out of Saigon across an area called the Plain of Reeds, sometimes called the Plain of Jars I think, head towards Cambodia, and they would try that at night, try to move through at night. And then one particular day, my cav unit that I'd been assigned to went in that area and found a whole Vietnamese regiment that had not made it through that night, they were out in the open, and there was this, for some reason they wouldn't surrender, I don't know, remember what it was but, you know, the only thing they had to protect them was grass and fatigue shirts, you know. But they fought, and they fought right to the end. I don't know how many people we killed, but we really killed hundreds of them but they just kept, they wouldn't quit.

You know, you had to admire their, their tenacity, if not their judgment, but, and that pretty much ended the fighting for Saigon. Saigon was a mess, I mean it was, half of it was burned down it seemed like, areas around there were still hot pockets, you know, for months afterwards we'd, we'd have these unexplained fire fights and it was some unit trying to move somewhere or something like that they got caught.

About that time the Navy, apparently this was a mission that had gone on before the Tet Offensive but when the offensive started they stopped doing this, the Navy asked that they start getting gunship support on the river because the freighters would come up the river from the South China Sea and they'd be on their way up and they'd get hit by these NVA rocket units and they, they never really sank any of these freighters but they beat the hell out of them and caused fires

and killed people. So what we would do is we'd take off, you know, like two-thirty, three o'clock in the morning, fly down to that area that we were supposed to be defending along the river, and refuel and then we'd fly the river at dawn. And literally, I mean, the sun would come up and, you know, you'd be watching the ground, and really it was sort of pretty, you know, you'd be flying along and it was dark but yet you could see, the ground below you was completely dark but you could see the sun come up over the horizon and the world would get light around you, but yet the ground was still just pitch black, you know.

And then slowly it would start turning to light, you know, and so we'd fly up and down the river protecting these, these freighters and, you know, on more than one occasion we jumped a unit that was trying to shoot up the freighters. The Navy had these river boats there at the time, riverine force and the river boats, and we worked with them and if there was a contact, if there was shooting, you know, they'd go in and we'd cover them or vice versa.

Usually what would happen is that nobody else could get to the unit, we were the only ones that could get to them, so we were the first responders if you wish. But normally, a normal morning, there wasn't any contact and right after dawn we'd return to Navy base which was called Nha Be, and land on their helipad. Well, the Navy didn't live like the Army did, I mean, the Army, I don't care if you're an aviator you still half the time lived out of a bunker or a foxhole or, not all the Army units but most of them were that way. And if you were lucky you had a tent. But the Navy didn't live that way, they had buildings and air-conditioned facilities and, you know, restaurants and the whole nine yards, so we always fought to fly for the Navy because, you know, it was nice, nice digs. And we'd get there at dawn and go in and have breakfast and they'd cook breakfast to order. Our mess facilities weren't bad but the Navy's were, you know, unbelievable.

You know, when I, when I hear a Navy guy talk about Vietnam I, unless they were a Seal, I don't get too concerned about what they have to say. Probably shouldn't do that but I saw so many of them, I know they lived differently that we did. But we'd go into these, this thing, and we, like I said we'd fight to get the jobs, and we'd get there and go in and order, for me it was, every morning it was, that I was there it was ham and cheese on whatever, or ham and cheese on the other things, they'd cook it to order. And this is my version of a fast, of a flashback - they had a juke box in the place and it, poor Navy guys, I mean it only had a dozen songs on it, you know, and that's all they could listen to, so

every time I was there either I'd play it or somebody else would play it. There was a song called *Walk Away, Rene* by the Left Bank and somebody would play that song, and now today, I don't care, you know, where I'm at, if I hear that song, I mean I can see that facility just, boom, right back with me, I just, it's not an unpleasant thing at all and, but for me that's my flashback.

And then you normally, we'd, we'd work all day long with the Navy doing something and at the end of that day we'd return to our home base, which was a number, a couple hours flying time away. And then the next day somebody else would support the Navy and it might be a week or two before we had the opportunity to go back down again. It was, it was a decent assignment.

I, some of it was unpleasant, I mean, you'd get there before dawn and you'd be flying low over these swampy areas that had little channels going through them, just a labyrinth, it was unbelievable, it was like a plate of spaghetti or something, you know, with these channels going every which way. And the locals were told that from the period of darkness until dawn that the locals were not allowed in the area and anybody that was in the area would be shot, it was that simple. I mean, if you found a boat out there, you took them out. And that's exactly what would happen, you know, we'd, many times just before dawn we'd find troops, you know, boats trying to go somewhere and, you know, immediately we'd attack them and immediately they'd start firing back at us so I know it wasn't a group of Sunday school girls out getting caught in a wrong area. And a lot of times you'd hit them with a rocket and there'd be secondaries and they'd blow up like a Roman candle, you know.

But this one day, and I, for the life of me, in fact I was thinking about it the other day, I don't know how it all happened, but again we were in this area of what they called a free fire zone and there was this big sampan, and a good sized sampan, I don't know how many feet but she was a good size, and I didn't see it until I overran it, I was going, flying about ten feet over the channel and came, come flying around this corner and bang, here's this sampan. So immediately I pull the nose back and start climbing for altitude and my wing man starts following me up, and we're arming all our systems and getting ready to fire the rockets, and the boat went straight ahead and I made a loop up around behind it and came back down again, and basi-, well, I was in attack mode. I'm sure you've never heard of an *[unintelligible word]* turn, but I made an *[unintelligible word]* and came back in to attack it and I just got ready to fire off the first pair of rockets and I saw a movement on the deck and, until today I don't know how I saw it or what, but as I, something made me stop and as I approached the

boat, there was about a dozen kids on the deck of this boat and, I mean I don't know whether it was a bunch of bad guys on the boat or not, nobody fired at us. But I didn't fire, and we flew around it and around it, we tried to get a Navy patrol boat in to get it and they never, it was, the Navy was too far away, so eventually I let it go, but, I mean I never figured out those kind of things work, you know. They were a tenth of a second from all of them dying, you know. But they didn't.

We, you know there was all kinds of stuff that, that happened to us. We were involved in the battle of Loc Ninh, which was not a real great thing for the Americans, the Americans got their asses kicked and then they had to go back in and take it again. And, but after Tet things changed dramatically. I mean I, the Tet Offensive I was ready for, I thought that's what war was, but things calmed down and you'd go sometimes a week and nothing, no firing or anything and all of a sudden, boom, it'd blow up again, you know, some firefight somewhere. And it went through that way through the summer, what we would consider to be summer, and the platoon leader that was there left and I took over as platoon leader, and, you know, I think I was really good at what I did and, and I think we became a really good team.

I think in a sense we, we had an attitude problem, you know, we wanted to fly and that's why we were there and we knew what we needed to do and just get the hell out of our way, and that's how we felt about it. And, you know, we used to joke, you know, what are they going to do, send us prison in Leavenworth, Kansas and take us away from Vietnam for a year, oh, that's pretty terrible. And, that's, that's sort of our attitude, I mean we didn't give the leadership any hard time, but by the same token the leadership was not visible at all. I mean our commander, I remember our commander, last name was Lee, supposedly a descendant of Robert E. Lee, but we never saw him on a mission, the whole time I was there I never saw him on a mission. He, we'd see him playing tennis or something like that, but, which was fine with us, I'm not complaining. I mean, he kept out of the way and we got the job done.

But the war was fought not by generals, and the war wasn't fought by senior sergeants or anything else. The war was fought by eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds. I was a twenty-one year old captain when I took over the platoon, and twenty-two before I came back. And, you know, everybody was the same way, our warrant officers, you know, give this guy a half a million dollar airplane and he's nineteen years old, you know. But one thing I, Vietnam taught me and I believe it until today, I mean, I've seen it happen. I don't care what a person's

age is, you give him responsibility and they usually rise to the responsibility, and that's what I saw happen. And I saw some really good people there. I don't know, you know, the summer sort of wore its way through, a number of different incidents and that kind of stuff.

As fall started to approach, we saw a different pattern in the military operations. I think the summer, from what I could see, is they were trying to recover from the beating they had taken in the Tet Offensive, and, but by fall the units, and we were starting to pick up more NVA units coming through and, and that kind of thing. By fall I had yet to see anything of, you know, the, the Vietnam that most people think of today, you know. What I saw is the kind of unit I always expected to see, you know, dedicated Americans fighting for, you know, what they believe in. It wasn't until fall that I, and I never did, that tour, my first tour I never saw anything that would lead me to think otherwise even though I've seen all the movies and read some of the books, but fall came and we had this one incident where we were going in, which we pretty much thought it was a peaceful LZ, but just on the safe side we would prep as we went in. Then as we pulled them out we were ready, you know, a number of hours later, we were, we'd be watching to make sure they were okay. Well, we went in to cover a bunch of troop ships who were going to recover these troops and bring them out, and we were ready for combat but we didn't expect any. And as we went in covering those troop ships, my door gunner on my right side started firing, and I looked down and he was firing at American troops because, I don't know why. And I yelled at him to stop his firing and he wouldn't and so I turned the aircraft on side and so he was shooting straight up at the air and, and he hit the tips of the rotor blades but, and, you know, we're on our side, and then he brings the gun back through the cockpit and my, my door is right here and he brings the gun through and for some reason it jammed right there, so he's sitting behind me and he's got a machine gun behind me and he's trying to clear it so he can fire. And I told my other crew chief, I said, if he loads it back up again you're going to have to shoot him, I said, if he shoots the three of us, you know, we don't stand a chance. And, you know, it was really, really tense there for maybe sixty seconds and then the guy takes the machine gun, puts it on the floor and sits back and just looks, and he never said another word, and we evacced him to a medical hospital, he had a complete psychotic break, just gone, just, he's in another wor-, I don't know where he is today. But it certainly was exciting there for a few minutes.

And again that fall the, more and more troops are heading into the area and, but we hadn't had any big knock-down drag-out battles like we had had before, and in

all honesty we were getting pretty bored. Gunship drivers like to, to shoot stuff up. One day we were flying the Cambodia border heading south, this was before we went into Cambodia, the United States went into Cambodia. This is now probably November of '68, maybe, yeah, it's November of '68, and I'm lead ship and my wing man's back behind me up higher, and the idea between doing that is somebody would shoot at the lead ship and then the wing man would come in and hit him, once they started firing on the lead ship, and that's how we'd usually maneuver. So I'm coming down this river that separates the two countries, and, just as low as I can go and as fast as I can go, obviously trying to draw fire but not get shot down in the process. Sounds complicated but it really isn't, it's not. You know, by the time most people see the aircraft, pull the gun out and fire, you're gone. And I came around this corner and, lo and behold, there's a guy on the Cambodian side of the border fishing, and he's in uniform, so I know he's a bad guy. And I come around the corner and here he is, and I look at him and he sees us, so I do a right hand brake and I, which is a 90 degree climbing turn, right over the top of him, and when I do I go into Cambodia and I look and we'd just passed over this little river and I look down and here's this big open area, I don't know, acres, many acres, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty acres, I don't know, and it's just full of troops. They've got their tents all lined up and they've got trucks parked and they've got weapons all lined up, looks like something out of a World War II film of a barracks area. I mean, dozens and dozens, hundreds of troops. And everybody just looked at me, you know. So I brake around again and head back into Vietnam and climb up to altitude and I call for direction from some higher, I mean, this is way beyond my pay grade. You know, I've obviously found an element that's getting ready to break into South Vietnam.

And, you know, nobody seems to know what to do or anything else, so I wasn't about to let it go, so I switch over to the artillery frequency and I call for artillery fire and he says, you know, where do you want it? So, here's Cambodia and here's Vietnam, so I called for the artillery fire to land in Vietnam and it does and I said, okay, now I want you to adjust, I want to you go west, you know, four hundred meters, and he says, roger west, four hundred meters. And normally that's too far an adjustment, normally you start your fire all over again because it was too far a break. Then it's quiet on the radio and he comes back, he says, are you sure you want me to go west four hundred meters? I said, that's correct, I want you to go west four hundred meters. He says, is that still in South Vietnam? I said, that's right, it's still in South Vietnam. He knew I was lying, and I, and of course I knew what I was doing, and he says, roger, fired, and the artillery started landing in the middle of that unit. And no sooner did

that than this huge, my commander that I was trying to get a hold of, finally we got back again on the frequency and I told him what I'd done, that I was dropping artillery on these guys. And he says, how many? By then we'd identified probably four or five hundred troops and their weapons and vehicles and all that kind of stuff. And so, the 25th Infantry Division's right near me and they had a battalion of infantry on alert all the time, so they bring those troops up and alert, and they do this assault into Cambodia and land in Cambodia and the battle lasted all day. And at the end of the day, you know, many hundreds of North Vietnamese were wiped out, and you a year later of course the United States went into Cambodia, but, you know, the Cambodians and the Chinese were all saying there's no, there's no troops in there. Well, yeah, I hate to tell you, I saw them, you know. And, you know, by now I'm starting to get close to going back to the States, you know, and one of the things that used to occur that used to drive me bats was when somebody got ready to, where they got short, they would start taking these extraordinary measures to protect themselves, you know. And guy that had been platoon leader before me, he stopped flying like sixty days before and just stayed around the bunker, you know, all the time, you know, so he'd make it home alive I guess. But I refused to do that and, and in fact the day I left Vietnam I flew a mission and then when the mission was over with they flew me to Bien Hoa and I went into the replacement depot and they processed me and shipped me home in an airplane. That was the war for me.

KP: When exactly was the first time you got shot down?

FS: Oh, I've never recorded that. I was shot down six times, three in the scout and then three in an attack aircraft. At the battle of Lai-, well, the first time I got shot down would have been February of 1968. My worst, worst one, I've never had anybody seriously hurt on any of the shoot downs. One time I sort of broke the airplane, but, we were out to Loc Ninh, I told you about the fighting up in Loc Ninh and Loc Ninh has got triple-canopy jungle there, it's, it's sort of like a redwood tree, they're huge trees. And the ground is, obviously they grow out of the ground, but the ground has no green growth on it, it's all co-, it's all just dirt and fifty, sixty feet above that is a canopy of green stuff that are, that level, and then there's another level of trees that come at the next level, and the top of it is ninety, a hundred feet high, and that's the way it was up at Loc Ninh. And we'd been there one day and withdrawing American troops out of an LZ and it was really, really boring, just boring. And we kept going around and around covering these guys and, you know, there's supposed to be bad guys there but nobody ever saw them and, you know, we

just, we were bored. And we'd been in the air all day and we just, all we'd have is a chance to refuel, we couldn't eat, we couldn't do anything. So now it's like two-thirty, three o'clock in the afternoon and the last of the troops are coming out so I told the crew, I said, you know, open up your C-rations, go ahead and eat, you know, we'll cover these guys. And on an attack heli-, a gunship helicopter, Cobras only have two people, Apaches have two, but the old gunships had four. The pilot sits on the right side and the co-pilot sits on the left.

Well, my co-pilot was a warrant officer, he'd opened up a can of chicken noodle soup and he was eating it, and he knows, I was flying, and he no sooner opened that thing and there was a .50 caliber machine gun down there, we didn't know it and we flew right over the top of it and it stitched us, just stitched us. And it came right, the first couple of rounds came up right between us and it just went up right through the nose, came right up through the overheads and just, blang, blang, blang and all the shit comes flying up. And she catches fire and starts burning and, you know, I really just didn't know what happened, I mean I couldn't figure it out for a split second. And, but she was still under control and I looked over at Dewey, I told Dewey to arm his weapon systems and, but there was something wrong with the radio, it had been cut, the wires had been cut but I didn't know it, and so I turned to yell at Dewey and I looked over at him and there's all this stuff coming out of his helmet and hanging down and all this other stuff, and I said, oh, my god, you know, he got it right in the head. And, you know, I thought it was his brains hanging out. And no sooner did that than Dewey turns to, looks right at me and he's got this goddam chicken soup all over his helmet, all over his face, and he's wiping it out of the thing, and right about that time the next round of ammunition comes up and stitches us again and takes the engine out this time. And the crew chief's right directly behind me and he's standing on a toolbox full of his tools, and a .50 caliber round comes right up and it hits that tool box and jams all the tools right into his foot, and his foot was as black as your machine there. And that was the only person that was really badly hurt, and he was in the hospital for a while.

But, so we started down and we were over this triple-canopy stuff, I mean there was no place to go, and so the procedure for a helicopter going down in the trees is you bring the nose back and you flair it and you start losing your speed and lose it, lose it, lose it and then when you finally have lost all your speed, you go down tail first into the trees and, the rationale being that the air frame will protect you as you go down.

And so that's what we did and, but I screwed it up a little bit, as I got closer to the trees I kept flairing and flairing and she kept settling and we got to the top of the trees and it ripped the tail boom off and then she started to rotate and she went in upside down into the trees. And we went down through the trees and of course this rotor head, you know, weighs four or five thousand pounds and it's still turning and chopping tops off the trees and this thing's banging as we go down, and we're upside down, it's just shake and shake and shake and shake, crash, crash, crash, crash and the crap's flying everywhere. And, you know, you really, you're not scared, I mean it's just happening so fast you're just trying to keep what you've got left of the aircraft together. And finally it went just crash bang, crash bang, crash bang and it all finally settled and stopped and we were upside down and I looked through the greenhouse, which had been the greenhouse, and it was hanging like that, and it was gone and I could see the ground, the ground was twenty feet away. So, you know, by then we'd gone through seventy, eighty feet of tree, and so we unhooked our belts and we knew that if we unhooked them we were going to fall on our heads because we were hanging, you know, so we were careful about that and nobody was badly hurt and we just dropped to the ground. It couldn't have been twenty feet from the ground, maybe fifteen feet from the ground. And we dropped to the ground and grabbed our weapons and headed back in the direction we knew the Americans were at, but we also knew there was bad guys that way, too.

So everybody just followed me and I headed in that direction and we broke out into an open area and there was nobody there, and we swung out into the open area, we had emergency radios with us, and we started to call. We set up, we'd taken our machine guns with us and we set them up in the open area, and we started calling for air and no sooner did that and the American units came around the corner with armored personnel carriers, came in and picked us up. And that was it, airplane was gone. Eventually they got it out of the trees and stuff but there was not much left of it.

And, like I said, there was only two times that I really, bang, just got flat shot down, the one in the scout and then that last one I just told you about. Other times we'd have hydraulic systems shot out where you can't fly it without them, and so you'd have to get it on the ground and so you'd crease her into some rice paddy somewhere, you know, but you were under power, you were under some control. There was only two times where I lost complete control. The others, you know, and the times that I got shot up and had control, I never hurt the aircraft.

But, you know, most, I remember when the aircraft left Vietnam and we were heading back to the States, the Freedom Bird, the airliner bank flew out and I looked out the window and I said to myself that in my lifetime I will probably never accomplish as much as I did in that one year, nor do as much good as I did in that one year. And, you know, that's thirty-one years ago and I still feel the same way, it hasn't changed. And, you know, I don't know what the politicians did, that's their problem, but I know what I did and the guys that were with me.

And I was awful lucky, I've, over the years there's been a number of people that have come into my life who were there then, and some of them, I told you about the crew chief, another guy who's just retired from here in the building, he was my company clerk over there, and he, he was our Radar O'Reilly, you know, it wasn't all work over there, I mean, you didn't get any time, very much time off. I had time to go to Hawaii and see my wife and stuff like that, but there wasn't much time off. But occasionally you'd have an aircraft to take in maintenance and stuff, and one day, this guy was always at me to, he wanted to fly with us, you know. You have to remember in Vietnam, out of the people that went to Vietnam, only one out of seventeen saw combat and, you know, there were people who really wanted to get into combat so they, I don't why they wanted to do it, they just wanted to do it. And he was one of them. Well, I would never take him into combat with us because of the, the aircraft was so overloaded we couldn't, we didn't have space for a passenger. But one day I was doing a maintenance check and I, and when you do a maintenance check you take only ammunition, you strip all the weapons off of it. He wanted to go with me, and I'd taken guys like him before. One of the things that you used to get stuck on every now and then is you'd have to take newspaper reporters out, you know, and, you know, the Dan Rathers of the world kind of thing, so we sort of had a routine set up. So in this case I told the guy, I said okay, you can go with us. And so we went out and we did the maintenance check and we flew here and we flew there and, I always flew right on the deck, I mean that's just, as a gunship that's your only protection.

And so we're getting ready to come home and the crew knew exactly what I was going to do because I'd done it before, but this guy had no inkling. And he's sitting there in the back seat and there's a gunner on one side of him, a crew chief on the other, and he's just watching, the doors are open, the wind's blowing through, and I'm sure for him it was an exhilarating experience, and here we are four or five feet off the rice paddies going like a bat out of hell.

And in the area I was headed into, there was a high rice dike, a high dike in the rice paddy, and then on top of the dike were these palm trees and they just lined it, sort of like teeth out of a comb, and a couple of the teeth were missing, they'd been blown up by artillery fire or whatever. And so I was low leveling here and low leveling there, so I start heading over towards those palm trees and, you know, just right on the deck and he's sitting there just fat, dumb and happy and he, but he can look right out the windshield. And, you know, he, even as much as a hot rodder as I was, he, he expected me to lift up here pretty soon and I didn't climb to go over the trees and I just kept on going, I kept on going, and, you know, the crew chief was telling me on the radio, he says this guy's getting nervous, you know. And we just kept going and going and going, and just when he was absolutely convinced that we were going to hit the trees, there was no way out of it, we were going to hit them, I turned the aircraft sideways and I flew through one of those breaks in the thing sideways, you know. He let out this scream, it was the funniest thing you ever heard. But when we had his retirement party here a month or two ago, I told everybody at the party about it and it was hilarious, you know, people were rolling on the floor.

So that was my war. I came back again in '72 for sixty days and it was changed, I mean I didn't recognize areas. I was flying cargo then, those Chinooks, and, you know, some of them got shot at, they got shot at a couple times and we were there for sixty days and we went back to Korea again. That was my war.

KP: You made a couple references to LZ. What was that?

FS: Landing zones. Generally what happens, in an operation the air mission commander would indicate an open area that aircraft could land in, and the landing zones were generally, you'd have helicopters and artillery prepping the area around the landing zone and sometimes fighter bombers hitting it because it was supposed *[unintelligible word]* bad guys. The trick was to pick the LZ just outside of where the bad guys were but not right on them because you didn't want them shooting at you as you landed, but you wanted it real close so that the soldiers, once they got off the aircraft they could attack.

KP: When did you join the 173rd exactly?

FS: 173rd Assault Helicopter Company, that was, must have been March, yeah, it had to be March of '68. Yeah, March of '68.

KP: And what was the name of the river that you helped the Navy?

FS: That's a good question. I've always called it the Saigon River but I'm not sure that's the name of it. It might be the Occidental or something like that. It, actually it comes out of Saigon, passes through Saigon and then joins right up on the Mekong farther down, the Mekong River farther down. But I think it's the Saigon River or something like that. You can't miss it, it goes right through to Saigon, right by the side of Saigon.

KP: What was the housing like?

FS: Well, for us during the Tet Offensive it was foxholes and trenches and bunkers with sandbags on them, you know, earth and sandbags. We lived in the bunkers and slept in the bunkers during the time we weren't flying. Towards the end we got to the point where we, well, when the Tet Offensive got over with we started building wooden platforms and we put tents on them so we stayed out of the rain. I mean, I don't know if you've ever seen the movie *Forrest Gump*, but in it he's talking about Vietnam and he says, and then the rain started, like somebody flipped a switch. That's exactly what it was like. I mean, I can remember, you know, one day hot and dry and dusty and literally the next day it started raining and it didn't stop for months. And the whole area we were in was inundated with water and it was hard flying in it, it was tough flying in that stuff. And, but, so we built these tent platforms to get them out of the water. And later as I was leaving they were trying to build real buildings, you know, but they weren't there when I was there.

KP: What was your food like?

FS: We had, our mess hall wasn't bad. You know, you could have bacon and eggs kind of thing in the morning. You know, usually you had some sort of selection. But lunch and supper, depending on what your missions were, were usually C-rations. Lunch was always skipped and, unless you're working for the Navy, but, you know, if you were out on missions and stuff, you always had C-rations.

KP: Did you have any contact with the Vietnamese?

FS: Not much. You know, we had some Vietnamese officers and stuff around us and stuff. In fact, over there on the wall is an award I got from the Vietnamese in the place I was at, an award for valor. But, you know, I just didn't work with

them that much. I mean I worked with them as units, you know, we always routinely worked with them as a unit. You know, they would be doing an operation and I would support them, but one on one, I didn't work with them very much.

KP: You didn't have any contact with any civilians at all?

FS: You mean American civilians?

KP: No, Vietnamese civilians.

FS: No, what we would tend to do, we'd have a mission somewhere and then we'd stand by waiting to be called back in so we'd go a number of miles away and we'd set the aircraft down on the road, shut if off and then just wait to be called back in again. And then we had a chance to interact with the villagers, you know, and, I mean I've, I've got some pictures of, you know, little kids in the barbed wire and stuff and eating our C-rations and stuff, but we never saw the same people over again. You know, we had a chance to talk with the old papa-sans and old mama-sans and stuff and eat their beetle nut and, you know, we'd spend a whole day with them sometimes, but, you know, we didn't live with them. And, but you know, that being said, at times I often felt very close to them. I mean these morning patrols I was telling you about, we'd be up before the sun and we'd be on station before the sun and we'd be working an area that was given to us and it had villages in it, but it was all rural and it was farm areas and stuff, and, and I can remember literally going, flying low over these areas, you know, before they were getting up. And, you know, they'd get up and they'd get out of their hooches and walk out back and go to the bathroom into the stream and whatever, you know. It was just like we were seagulls or something, you know, they just, it was part of their lives.

And I can remember during the daytime on more than one occasion watching a mama-san leave the field and she'd walk to the side of the field and a couple of women would go with her and she'd go into the naphtha palm and have a baby, and she'd be in there a while, then she'd come back out again and the baby'd be on her back and she'd go back to the field and work. And so I had a chance to see them a lot, but I, I, you know, I have friends of mine that actually lived with them and actually were in the units and stuff with them but I wasn't that way.

KP: Were you able to stay in contact with family and friends while you were in Vietnam?

FS: No, actually I sort of got into a little problem with that. I quit writing for a long time and my parents were really, particularly my mother got really upset so she contacted the Red Cross and they called my unit and gave me hell because I hadn't written in a couple months. I did write fairly frequently to my wife, but that was about it. But, I don't know, I had a hard time writing when I was there, I don't know why but I did.

KP: Were you hearing anything about what was going on in the States while you were over there?

FS: A little bit. We had a newspaper that would come to us fairly frequently called *The Stars and Stripes* and they were fairly accurate. I mean the big, the big riots and that kind of stuff were covered so we knew about it, you know, the, Martin Luther King getting shot and John F. Kennedy getting shot and that kind of stuff, I mean not John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy. The big things like that were covered and then the big, the big demonstrations were covered so we knew, but we didn't understand it because here's these newspapers and stuff like that saying that we're losing the war, and we, we know that's not true at all. We just literally destroyed a modern army, I mean we killed two hundred and seventy thousand.

You can't imagine it, what it was like. I mean, there'd be villages where they had tried to break into the village and dawn would come and you'd be flying around it and as far as you could see from the village to the wood line, you know, half a meter, half a click or three quarters of a click or five clicks, it was nothing but bodies. I mean their bodies, not our bodies. And, I mean, we devastated them. I mean, it's a little hard to overemphasize what it was like. I mean, there were times when we couldn't load the ships fast enough and shoot them fast enough. I mean, and rockets and, and you know, particularly, you know, during the Tet Offensive, and yet here's these newspapers saying we're losing the war. And we never underst-, I don't understand this today, you know, as far as I'm concerned is revisionist writing. I mean it had nothing to do with reality. And, you know, if you actually go to the military reports and stuff like that you'll s-, you know, they're there, the facts are there. But the people who run our nation today weren't there and not only that, they didn't want to be there and that's not what they want to hear, so I don't bother to change their minds, that's their privilege.

KP: When were you discharged?

FS: Well, I ended up being a career officer. I finally got out of the Army the first time in August of 1973 after having gone to Germany and Korea and a short tour back to Vietnam again. And came back to Southwest Harbor, brought my family home and went to college, and then had the opportunity to go to work for the National Guard as what they called a technician in those days, and later became an active duty person assigned to the National Guard, what they call AGR. And so I retired in '93 from the combination National Guard/Active Duty. I had ten years of active duty and a whole bunch of years in the Guard, and so I guess in a sense I was a professional, in that sense I was a professional Army officer. And since '93 I've worked in the Department of Education and I've worked here with veterans.

KP: What was your experience when you returned home from Vietnam?

FS: Well, I was again very lucky. I returned to Southwest Harbor but I was on orders to Germany so I was just passing through. But I spent a month in Southwest Harbor and I don't know, I, before I left, before I joined the Army, I had, when I was in high school I had been selected for Boys State by, and of course this was an American Legion activity, and, you know, the World War II guys surrounded us in that town and they were, you, you know....

End of Tape One, Side B

Tape Two, Side A:

KP: You were telling me about your experience when you returned home.

FS: I was, I went back to Southwest Harbor. I guess I need to tell you a little bit about Southwest Harbor at the time. There was about three hundred families there and, you know, it was a rural fishing community, very tight knit and that type of thing. It was starting to grow a little bit but it was, you know, my home, the place I looked forward to coming to. When I got back there, the encouragement that I expected wasn't there. I've told my father this and I've told others, that to me one of the most important jobs a soldier has to do in their life is that when they become older, when they become the veteran, that it's their job to bring the boys home again and bring them back into society. That it's, they don't have the ability to do it themselves, that it's the old warriors that are to do it. And, and I've decided this over the years, but I sort of expected that when I came home, and it wasn't there.

The veterans from World War II who should have been there to help us back just weren't, trying to get space, it's like they were ashamed of us. They believed whatever the hell they saw in the newspaper, if it was in the newspaper it had to be right, if it was on TV it must be what's happening. The fact that it had little to do with what was going on make little difference. But the thing that got me the most was, I was Episcopalian, and I went to church and the priest, who was a real anti-war guy, started doing this thing about Vietnam and the baby killers and all the rest of this stuff, you know, and it was clearly aimed at me, I was sitting there in uniform, and I just got up in the middle of it and walked out. And I haven't been back to an Episcopalian church since. You know, that, it wasn't antagonistic at all, but to me it was worse than being antagonistic because you were cut off. I mean, sure, my family members were there, my wife's family in particular were there for me. But they couldn't do what needed to be done and that was to bring us back into society.

You know, there's often a lot of discussion about how society treated the veterans coming home, and they did poorly, but the fact of the matter is the real tragedy was the veterans who were there didn't bring the soldiers home. They're the ones that have to do it, not the people who stayed at home. And it didn't happen.

Luckily I went to Germany and so I was surrounded by people who understood what had happened because they were there, and we were all on our way back again.

And so I had a support group around me and I really think that helped. But, and then of course by the time I got back to Vietnam the second time, it had changed. I mean, it was the end of the war.

KP: When did you go to Germany?

FS: It would have been late February or early March of '69.

KP: And how long were you there?

FS: I was there twenty months. I came back and I went to Florida, to *[name]*, Florida, I went to fixed wing school because I was only a helicopter pilot. And then I went to CH-47 training at Fort Rucker and then I went to Korea. And then, I'd been in Korea a few months and then there was another Tet Offensive, many years later now, and by then most of the Americans had gotten out and the South Vietnamese, and the few Americans that were left, couldn't resupply themselves so we went back for sixty days to fly resupply missions and stuff. I wasn't in an attack unit or anything like that then.

KP: What did you do in Germany?

FS: I was a cavalry pilot, I was a scout pilot, flew border patrols and flew attack. By then attack aircraft had changed and they became like that Cobra that's up there on the wall, and they were two seaters, the four seaters had gone, four people. And, you know, flew borders, we were testing whether cavalry type aircraft, Cobras and, helicopters really, could survive in that kind of environment. Nobody believed that a helicopter could go up to a tank, go against a tank and win, nobody thought that would happen but of course it did and today we know better than that, but, but we were trying to do that. But one hundred percent of us were Vietnam vets, I mean I don't care if you're a pilot or an enlisted person, it was the same thing. So we had a lot of support amongst ourselves, you know.

KP: Did you ever remember while you were in Vietnam what it was like, you said when you left the treatment that you received as you were leaving, did that ever cross your mind while you were there?

FS: You mean about the, the demonstrations and stuff?

KP: Correct.

FS: Well, for the most part I think, I thought it was an aberration when I first got to Vietnam. I didn't think about it when I first got to Vietnam because of the Tet Offensive, I mean that's all we concentrated on. Later as I started reading stuff in *The Stars and Stripes* I, I did tie it in to what happened on the dock that day, but again I thought what was happening on the dock was an aberration, and I really clearly didn't understand what was going on at home until I came home. I mean, it was so far beyond, and I think most of us felt this way, so far beyond anything we could even dream of that we had to see it to understand it, I mean we had to be there. I mean we, particularly the Tet Offensive because just prior to the Tet Offensive, you know, we left a country that was winning the war, that there wasn't any question it was a, it's late '67, it was a just war, we were winning the war, and nobody questioned as a large amount our role there. And in the thirteen months I was in Vietnam, I came back, all of that had changed, all of it. And suddenly I wasn't a hero leaving, I was a villain coming back. And, you know, it just, there wasn't, there wasn't any support, I mean it just didn't exist. And, and as Americans I think we try to kid ourselves and say, well, you know, you know, it's society's fault and that kind of thing. It's not, it's not society's fault any more than it's the German people's fault for what happened in the concentration camps. It's an individual fault, each person had a little piece of that fault. They may be members of society but they all had a piece of it, and they turned on us, they turned on their sons and the few daughters that were there and, and made us outcasts. And I don't know of a Vietnam vet that feels too much differently than that today.

KP: Have your political views changed since the war?

FS: Yeah, well, obviously I don't trust politicians very much, you know, I have the honor of, to actually work for Gov. King, who is truly an honest man, but he's the only one I've run into in my years in doing this kind of stuff. I consider myself a moderate, middle of the road. Some things I believe strongly on and some things I'm very liberal on. I don't believe we ought to be getting into any wars, I was dead set against Kosovo, and I don't think our political leaders understand power projection, and sooner or later we're going to get burned badly. And I know that our country won't stand behind the people who go, that's what bothers me the worst.

KP: How do you think your experience in Vietnam affected your life?

FS: Clearly it was a watershed, I mean, it could be nothing less. It made me grow up, take responsibility for things that I wanted to do but really didn't know how. You know, I found that I became extremely, not just cynical, worse than that, very hard. I heard about people being in combat being that way, but, you know, you could snuff out a life in a split second and never blink an eye, I mean just, you know, you know the first couple of times you, you know you, you're involved in killing somebody it really bothers you, but after a while it doesn't bother you. And that bothers me today, you know, that ability to do that.

And you know there's, I'll be honest with you and anybody that ever listens to this tape, I have yet to find anything glorious about war. I have yet to find anything noble about it or anything good about war. However, I did find good and wonderful things in the people that were there, you know. It's a little hard to explain, I mean I saw people lay down their lives, I mean, how do you teach somebody to do that, I mean, I mean, to give your life for somebody else. You don't see that in this society too much today. And, but we didn't do it for our country, and we didn't do it for our units, we did it for each other. You'd have to be there to really, to get a feel for it, but I mean you'd be out on a mission and somebody would give a May Day, they were going down, and there'd be, these air mission commanders would be yelling, you know, you've got to, you've got to do your mission, you've got to do that, and there'd be aircraft breaking off everywhere to go protect that guy, you know, it would just be to hell with you, we don't give a shit. What are you going to do, send us to Leavenworth? We're going to go, he's one of ours and he comes first, you know, and that's the way it was. And, anytime I went down I had somebody right next to me, not because they had to but because that was the code. Tomorrow you might go down and you'll want somebody next to you.

KP: So what do you for Maine Veteran Services?

FS:I'm the bureau director. We have veterans facilities across the state and, you know, I'm an advocate, the advocate on the state side for veterans, you know, I advise the governor and the commissioner on issues that have to do with veterans, and obviously manage the programs and that kind of stuff. And now, try to fight a battle that, you know, now that the guys are home and they're sick and they need medical, now Washington's taking it away. And the same cynicism that veterans had after Vietnam, they're starting up again because, you know, they were going to be taken care of thirty years ago and they aren't being taken care of today. The closing of Togus, not closing, because Togus

won't close, but the loss of medical benefits and all the rest of it. So that's my new battle. That's the war I fight today.

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

FS: Well, I've thought about that, I really have. I guess in a sense I would, but the thought of it scares the hell out of me. I, it was a beautiful place, I mean it was, it's hard to explain, I mean it was so beautiful. I mean the jungle would be so lush, you know, you'd have these rain storms and the rain would come out of the *[brief pause in taping - interviewer coughing]*.

The place was so beautiful, I was talking about the rain storms, but it would rain and this triple canopy jungle I was telling you about, the rain would fall all the way through the canopies and everything would get totally soaked and then the sun would come out and it would start turning to steam from the bottom up and the steam would come up through the triple canopies and of course I was right down on the tree tops looking for whatever I was looking for, and, but it was surrealistic, it was, the steam would just literally boil right out of the trees and the sun would be shining on it, sort of these rainbows passing through it. And the, the boa constrictors and stuff like that that were down in the lower things would climb the trees and they'd get up to the top and they'd hang from the branches so the sun could shine on them and stuff. I mean it was, it was, you know, just truly typical of Vietnam, it was so beautiful but so deadly, you know. And you know the South China Sea was just as green and beautiful and these beautiful white beaches. And I mean just the whole, the whole country was that way. I'd love to see what it looks like, I mean, you know, I'd like to, on the ground, see what some of those areas look like. But I don't know whether I'll ever go back. Wait and see.

KP: What scares you about going back?

FS: Oh, I don't know. It, you know, I think a long time ago I came to terms with what I did and what happened to me and happened around me in a matter of fact kind of way, you know, I mean, but emotionally I'm not sure I've really gone through each thing and come to terms with it all. You know, a lot of stuff, see until today, I mean right now, somebody will, that I know, will talk about an event happening and I won't even remember the event. And it isn't until I talk about it for a while and then all of a sudden it starts to come back and I remember. And sometimes I guess what scares me is what I don't remember

about all of it, you know? And, I don't know, I guess that's what bothers me about it.

KP: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

FS: No, I don't think so. I mean, I wish I could say I was glad I went but that's not true. But I'm glad I came back, which some didn't, so.

KP: You sound like you were definitely a very lucky man.

FS: Yeah, yeah, sometimes I was.

KP: Well, thank you, Frank. It's been great.

FS: Yup, well, thank you.

End of Interview