Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Michael Hoffman. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Hoffman is in Colombia, Mississippi. It is the 17th of October, year 2000 at approximately ten minutes after four in the afternoon. All right, Mr. Hoffman, would you please begin by giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Michael Hoffman: Okay, I was born in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1952 and moved to High Point, North Carolina when I was approximately three years old. I grew up in High Point. I stayed there until I graduated from high school in 1970. Would you like for me to go on?

SM: Yeah, just go ahead and describe if you would what led you into entering the United States Air Force?

MH: I was a jock in high school and that takes up a good bit of time, and my grades kind of suffered as a result of that, and I wasn’t a good enough jock to qualify for a scholarship, and my grades weren’t good enough to get an academic scholarship. So, of course the war was raging about that time, 1969-70 and I had a certain amount of desire to serve my country but I also had a certain amount of desire to serve myself and I could go into the military and receive some training and then qualify for the GI Bill. So, with that in mind, I graduated in May of 1970 and enlisted, took a few weeks off, and enlisted in the Air Force in July of 1970.
SM: What did your parents think about you entering the military service at this point, in particular the Air Force?

MH: Well my father was an Air Force veteran. He actually joined the Army and while he was en-route to basic training the Air Force was created so he enlisted in the Army and later was discharged from the Air Force. I had an uncle who was a career man in the Air Force, and my father was a conservative and supported our actions in Southeast Asia. I believe he was relatively proud that I had decided to join the service.

SM: How about your mother?

MH: My mother had died in October of 1969.

SM: What did you know or think about what was going on in Southeast Asia at the time when you were thinking of enlisting? As a high school student, you described yourself as a jock. Were you kind of cognizant of foreign policy and events overseas?

MH: It was a big topic in 1968-69, and of course the TET Offensive of ’68 had elevated it to everybody. I had the same picture that everybody that bothered to watch the evening news every evening. We were getting a pretty good picture of what was going on in Southeast Asia as to the extent of what was going on, so I think we all were pretty aware. There were a good many people, well, not a good many people, but people in my high school that were anti-war. They wanted to be hippies in the worst way and they attempted to be the hippies. I don’t know how much of that was they just wanted to fit in and be part of that and how much they were actually against the war. We had a pretty good idea of what was going on.

SM: What did you think was going on?

MH: What did I think was going on?

SM: Do you remember, at the time?

MH: At the time?

SM: It was a long time ago.

MH: Yes, it was. We had a real live shooting war going on and I had heard both sides and I was aware of the controversy about what was going on. It didn’t really deter me. I guess I saw what was coming down on the side, that what we were doing was attempting to save South Vietnam from communism.
SM: Okay, and did you talk much with your dad about this as you were getting ready to enter the service? Did you get to talk with him more about this type of stuff or did you keep away from it?

MH: I think we kind of kept away from it. I do not remember that we had a big discussion about the virtues of what was going on in Southeast Asia. We had not had any arguments where he was the conservative and I was the anti-war. We didn’t have that. I grew up knowing that my father felt that it was good for people who’ve gone off to the military and then came back and went to school and stuff, so I knew he thought that was a good idea, and in hindsight I thought that was a good idea, too.

SM: What did your dad do?

MH: At that time my father was a sports writer at the High Point Enterprise. He owned outright the first stock car racing magazine or newspaper, actually it was a newspaper, devoted strictly to NASCAR. That’s what he did.

SM: What about your siblings? You said you had one brother.

MH: I have one brother who is ten years younger, so I enlisted when I was 17 so he was seven years old and he wasn’t involved too much in that.

SM: But big brother is going off to war?

MH: Yeah.

SM: What made you decide Air Force versus the other services? Was it for technical skills?

MH: I’ll try to make this brief. My father, a gentleman had bought this newspaper and had moved it to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I stayed behind to finish my last three months in high school and then I moved down there and I went off to the post office in Tuscaloosa and I had taken the Armed Forces Entrance Exam. They gave that at high school every year. Seems like I took it again for the recruiter and did pretty good on it. I actually went down and talked to the Navy guy first and he gave me this spiel about how I’d done really good on the test and offered me this nuclear propulsion school, but you’d have to enlist for six years because the school lasted two years, and he went on to say that I’d get down to Orlando and take basic and at the end of basic I would take another test and if I passed that I would go to…and I said, ‘Well wait a minute, what if I don’t pass that?’ He said, ‘Well, you’ll still be in the Navy for six years,’ so I said, ‘Well keep that
thought,’ and I went down the hall and talked to the Air Force guy and he offered me, they had a thing going on called Project Guarantee in the southeastern United States. They would guarantee you, when you enlisted, that you would go to one of four tech schools and that if you completed the tech school, that you would be assigned to that career field. So, that sounded like a pretty good deal to me and I decided to go with them on that, four-year enlistment instead of six and guaranteed tech school.

SM: Go ahead and describe, if you would, departing for the Air Force and your arrival at basic training, and discuss basic training.

MH: I drove down to Montgomery and took the physical and I believe it was Gunner Armed Forces Induction Center down at Montgomery, and I came back. My father had given the blessing and signed the papers for me, and I can’t remember exactly. I remember leaving on a bus and driving down to Montgomery. It was run by the Army and it was the only really bad food I remember having, terrible food. I will say this about my physical; we had been going all day long for the physical and they had the inductees and the draftees separated into separate groups and at the end of the day this Marine sergeant came out and wanted to know who the draftees were, and we pointed at the other guys and he said, ‘Congratulations, every other man in line is a Marine.’ They were taking 50% of the draftees into the Marines at that particular time. We departed from Tuscaloosa on a bus and went down to Montgomery and I spent one more night. Got up, took the oath. They took us out to the airport and there where six or eight of us or something like that going into the Air Force. We flew from Montgomery and we had a layover in New Orleans, I remember that, because we had food vouchers and they had put one of the older guys in charge of the food vouchers and all the paperwork. We went to the restaurant and they took the food vouchers and bought pitchers of beer with it, so we sat around and drank beer. We got back on the airplane and flew into San Antonio and this was July 6th or 7th, somewhere along that time frame. I do remember this; back in that day you had a ramp you had to go down to the tarmac and I remember I was approaching the door of that airplane and you could feel the heat. It was just like you’d opened the oven door to check on your cookies or something. The heat was just coming through there. It was terrible. We went to the airport and we had these drill sergeants or so at the door and at that time they were pretty abusive, verbally abusive and they still hit
you and that stuff. I remember that they were quickly separating the people coming
down that ramp. They could spot you into a big room that they had at the terminal and
here we are coming off that beer and all this heat and then they’re up in your face
hollering at you. I remember this, that they eventually put us on one of those blue Air
Force buses and hauled us out to Lackland. Would you like me to go further than that?
SM: Oh yes, please do.
MH: Well we arrived at Lackland and it was like I want to say six o’clock in the
afternoon. It was light, I remember that, and they took us to the welcome center and they
herded you into this building where they had these little school desks with this thing on
the side and there were people in that room and I remember we filled out a bunch more
papers. Then toward the end a guy stood up there and he had two stripes and we thought
he was God, you know, and he ran off about 20 names and my name was one of them,
and he said, ‘Everybody else get up and go out to the busses.’ They were going to take
them and get them something to eat for supper. But the 20 of us, we were to stay. So we
stayed and they all left. Then, they came around there. We were scattered around the
room and they said, ‘Okay, you blankety-blanks are in something called Project
Guarantee, right?’ ‘Yeah.’ The rest of the half of you, the airplane is broken down in
Memphis, Tennessee, so you’re going to sit here and you’re going to wait on it, and
you’re going to sit there and you’re not going to move and you’re not going to talk.
You’re going to sit there.’ So we sat right there until two o’clock in the morning without
getting up, no bathroom break, no water, no food, nothing. At two o’clock in the
morning, in came our other 20 or so guys and they put us on a bus and took us over to a
barracks. We went in the barracks and there were no sheets or anything, it was just bunks
with pillows. We crashed; we were happy to get on them. Then I think about four
o’clock in the morning they came through and woke us up and started our day early,
basic training.
SM: What was it like going from High Point, North Carolina to that experience in
the Air Force? That’s a pretty rural area in North Carolina, isn’t it?
MH: Actually High Point is a city I want to say of about 60,000. I’m actually a
city boy. We had city buses and I would catch the city bus in the morning and go down
town and go to the theater. So, there wasn’t a big change in rural to urban type setting,
but the biggest thing I remember was the temperature. It gets hot in North Carolina but it’s nothing like it was in San Antonio.

SM: Any other transitions or interesting changes that you remember as far as going from High Point into the Air Force, or any experiences you were kind of surprised about?

MH: No, I don’t think so. I mean, I’d always had interest in the military, and maybe this sounds foolish, but you see movies and you had an idea what goes on in basic training. They’re going to get in your face and they’re going to yell at you and they’re going to herd you around. It was no big surprise. I pretty much had an idea what was coming. It lived up to my expectations.

SM: What was the most challenging thing about basic training?

MH: I was in fairly good physical shape because I had just come off of five years of organized football and shot putter on the track team and wrestler and that kind of stuff, so the PE part of it was not particularly challenging although we ran in combat boots, and that was a little interesting. It was so hot. As a matter of fact, they had a 25th day evaluation and you had to go run and they had a three flag system at Lackland and that was if there was a yellow flag out, you were not supposed to have PE. If there was a red flag out, you were not supposed to march if you go out [?], and if there was a black flag out, you were not supposed to be outside of the building. Well our 25th day evaluation when we were supposed to run the mile in a certain amount of time, we looked out and the black flag was flying, so we’re thinking, ‘Well, we wont be running today,’ and sure enough, the famous, ‘Fall out in PE gear and combat boots,’ came and we fell out and we marched over there. As I approached I noticed there was a whole row of ambulances parked over there and we got out there and sure enough we ran. It was not a particularly…you didn’t have to sprint; you just had to get out there and pace yourself. I remember I was starting my last lap and everything felt fine and the next thing I knew there was a drill instructor kicking me and I was laying on the ground, he was kicking me saying, ‘Get up you son of a bitch, get up!’ I had passed out; first time I’d ever passed out in my life. So I got up and finished running. The academics was not particularly challenging. I believe it was just getting used to this guy being in your face and hollering and you’re not able to make…all you can do is stand there and take it.
SM: So the harassment?

MH: It was more of a psychological adjustment I guess was the most challenging thing.

SM: What was your routine like in basic training? What did your daily activities encompass?

MH: I cannot remember what time but we just call it o’dark thirty. I remember the first morning a guy came through blowing a whistle and beating two metal trash can lids together. That’s a wakening. He didn’t do that later but he would just holler and turn on the lights. You would get up, quickly get dressed. I don’t think we made up the beds or anything right then. We would fall out and march to chow and have breakfast and come back to the barracks and it was still dark, it was pitch black dark. Then you would get your barracks squared away, make up your bunk and square everything away, and then you would go to class usually and have several hours of classroom. Then at some point you would come back to the barracks and change into PE gear and you had PE every morning. I think you just had it once a day, I can’t swear to that. You had a guy up on a tower and there’s hundreds of guys lined up and you did jumping jacks and push ups and the regular kind of stuff, and then you would run every day and eat a bunch of chow at some point, lunch. Quite often you would go get shots or some other medical type thing. They would check your teeth and they would do things like that. There was barracks activities, I would call, cleaning the latrines, common areas. These were open bay barracks so your little part of the world was squared away. Wasn’t much to do there but there were jobs to be done around the barracks. Then there was any number of different other training…oh, you drilled every day, but I can’t remember if that was in the morning before lunch or after lunch, several hours of drilling around on the drill pad. Then you had various other activities that got worked in like first aid and a couple of days you went to the rifle range and twice you did an obstacle course. You had your share of KP or base detail when they had you cutting grass or doing any number of things like that. You were busy. The first several weeks particularly you could do anything that was not organized. From the moment you got up at like four o’clock or whatever until you crashed at nine o’clock or whatever time, there was not one minute that you got to sit down and call your own. They had just changed basic training from eight weeks to six
weeks and they later told us they did exactly everything that the people did in eight weeks, we did it in six weeks. They didn’t change the schedule, they just changed the number of days you had to do it in.

SM: They crammed more in and you worked a lot later.

MH: We worked later. We worked weekends. I remember this, our first weekend they had opened up some World War II barracks and they had what you called a sister flight, and that is a flight…the classrooms were made to hold two flights of people. I think that’s about 80 people. So, you had a flight that always went with you and that was called your sister flight. We were the only two flights in that squadron area. We were the first two when it reopened. Our barracks was in pretty good shape but it had been closed up so it took some cleaning. I remember our first Sunday morning, our drill instructors, they called them TIs, technical instructors, he came in that morning and he had a bunch of cans of paste wax and rags and he told us, we moved our bunks back against the wall and then we got down on our hands and knees, one all the way across the barracks, one row of guys had a can of wax and then facing you was another row of guys with a rag, and this was the kind of floor that had the square tiles, and you would take one tile and apply the paste wax to it and then you would move back and the guy would move up with the rag and he would wax that tile. We went the entire…this is what we were going to do Sunday morning. We started this process and some guy stood up and said, ‘Sergeant, we have a right to go to church.’ The drill instructor said, ‘You’re absolutely correct. Who wants to go to church?’ About three guys, four guys, said they wanted to go to church. So he told the squad leader there, he said, ‘Put these men in their 1505s, tan dress uniforms, take them to church, and then when you get back from church, come to me.’ We’re waxing the floor and they’re getting dressed and they go to church. Well they come back an hour later or so and they get back in their fatigues and he tells the squad leader, ‘Take them to the chow hall. They’re on KP.’ They pulled KP for like 14 days straight. As soon as their regular duties were finished, they went to KP. So, we got the message. It’s like, ‘Yes, you have a right to go to church, but you’re a damn fool if you tell the drill instructor what your rights are.’

SM: Did any of those guys stop going to church?
MH: At some point like three, four weeks in we all went to church. We didn’t have a choice. ‘Everybody fall out, 1505s.’ But, nobody asked to go to church again.

SM: Any other interesting incidents like that in basic training in terms of group punishments for certain types of infractions?

MH: No, we had it pretty easy I’m pretty sure. I think most people had an idea that Marine Corps basic training was very hard, Army was probably pretty hard, but the Navy and I think the Air Force, the perception was that this was going to be a much easier go of it, and I believe it probably was. I don’t think anything else happened as far as a group punishment. The idea was that they were going to psychologically break you down and build you back up to what they wanted you to be and they had a lot of little games that they played. We spent several days. The footlocker had to be exactly right. I remember we had a practice open locker inspection. Somebody was going to come in, an officer was going to come in from another squadron or something and inspect us and I remember that during the practice we had spent hours and hours getting everything right in the foot locker. Mine was like the third locker from the squad leader in a single bunk and without a top bunk on it and then you started your double bunk and we’re standing there looking straight ahead but you can hear this guy just tearing up these foot lockers, throwing stuff, and threw somebody’s tray down the steps, it was on the second floor of this two story wooden barracks, and he got to mine and the way we were positioned you could see what he was looking at. I was passing, I was doing pretty good. He opened my shoe polish and on the inside of the lid there was a scratch that was on there when I got the can and he wanted to know what the blankety-blank the scratch was doing on his blankety-blank can, and he took the can and just stuck it up to my nose, black shoe polish, and just twisted it on my face! Then he made me go run around the outside of the barracks yelling, ‘I am a pig, I am a pig, I am a pig,’ for the rest of the inspection. As I was running around these barracks I noticed he threw something out the back window. I mean, he was having a good time in there. It was definitely early on they wanted to establish who was in charge and what the pecking order was, and your job here was to do exactly as you were told, when you were told.

SM: Any other incidents like that for other people, where they were singled out and forced to do something like that, that you remember?
MH: I didn’t really consider I was singled out that time. He was doing that to everybody. I didn’t get to see the rest of it, I was outside running around the barracks, right.

SM: And other people inside were doing other things?

MH: You could hear him. Of course the windows were open. It was, like I said, July and there was no air conditioning because it was hot.

SM: How about weapons training? What kind of weapons did you get trained on in basic?

MH: The Air Force isn’t very big on weapons. Our idea of a weapon is a 500-pound bomb. Lackland is a huge base. As a matter of fact, it is on both sides of an interstate, with a walk over. We left early one morning after chow and marched and I mean we marched until daybreak to get to the firing range. On that day they had what they called a dry fire and we went and started off in a classroom situation, two people to a table, and there was painted on the table all the parts of an M-16 and I can’t remember if the rifle started in one piece or started in pieces but it either went one way or another and then took it apart and put it back together, or vice versa, anyway. So we became familiar with an M-16 by parts. After we had done this, each of us had to put it together maybe a couple of times, we went out and went through what we were going to do the next day. We went through all the firing commands for the firing range. This is a huge firing range. There is no telling how many hundreds of guys could be shooting at one time and we went through that with no ammunition. So, we had a pretty good idea what we were going to do. Then, the next morning we got up and repeated it but we went to a different location and we spent one day, and that’s a pretty long time, on the rifle range. Seems like I want to say that there were five positions that we fired from and I think we had like 12 rounds for each position and 60 rounds at a man sized target, I want to say 100 meters away. You had to have 48 hits in the man silhouette to qualify. One interesting thing happened to me. We’d been told under no circumstances put the weapon on automatic. I was laying there shooting and your own drill instructor was not present as well I remember. These were all guys just on the firing range. I’m sitting there shooting, I think I’m doing pretty good, and this guy comes up and I’m in the prone, I’m laying on my belly, and he kicks me, ‘Get up you son of a bitch. You were told not to put that
weapon in automatic.’ Everything’s ‘Sir, yes sir,’ and ‘If not, don’t tell me it’s not,’ and he took the weapon from me and looked at it and it was not in automatic, and he broke the weapon open and a pin had broken in there and my weapon had gone to the automatic mode because that pin had broke. So I was pulling the trigger and I thought I was just shooting once but I was actually shooting twice and he saw the multiple cartridges come out. So when we went to get our targets, that was right at the end, we went and got our targets and I had missed a couple high because of the…as a matter of fact I had missed some because those second rounds were going high. If you didn’t hit your 48 you had to stay and do that again in the afternoon, and I actually only had like 47 hits or something and the guy told him to pass me because the weapon had malfunctioned. But, that was about it, and to be honest with you I did not put my hands on another M-16 ever.

SM: How about other small weapons as far as pistols?

MH: Nothing.

SM: Nothing?

MH: Nothing. We did the M-16, 60 rounds, and then you were supposed to requalify once a year and they pencil whipped it every year.

SM: When did you know what your job…?

MH: Career field?

SM: I was just going to say, in the Army it’s an MOS, and in the Air Force, is it AF…?

MH: AFSC, Air force Specialty Code.

SM: AFSC. When did you find out what your AFSC would be?

MH: Well when I enlisted, as a matter of fact, I was given a choice of four jobs the day I enlisted. I could be a ground radio operator, an SP, security policeman, administrative specialist, or an aircraft maintenance specialist, and I selected ground radio operator. I’d filled out all the papers and I went home and I got to thinking, when I was in the Boy Scouts, I never did learn Morse code. I could not learn it. So, I got concerned about that and I called back up to the post office and told the sergeant, ‘Hey, I’ve got second thoughts here,’ and he thought I was talking about not going. I said, ‘I really don’t think I want to be a ground radio operator,’ and he said, ‘Oh, well that’s no problem,’ so I changed over to aircraft maintenance and it turns out I’m happy I did that.
because the ground radio operators called because everybody in basic was one of those
four things, so we had three or four guys in basic that were going to be ground radio
operators and they went to Keesler and did a short class and then went to Vietnam and
were assigned to the Army. They were assigned to like the 101st Airborne or something
and they were forward air controllers, radio on their back, antenna waiving. So, I was
happy I had made that change. So I knew from day one that I was going to be an aircraft
maintenance crew chief.

SM: Is there anything else you want to describe or discuss about your basic
training?

MH: Not really. I was very happy to get out of there. They had psychologically
converted me over to whatever. I would have done anything they said to get out of there.

SM: During basic, did you have much opportunity to correspond with your dad?

MH: I don’t want to say I wrote every day, but I probably wrote a couple of times
a week. There wasn’t a whole lot to write about. I’d tell him how hot it was in San
Antonio and we had marched again today. There just wasn’t a whole lot, and we weren't
given a whole lot of time. I think we were given some time after the first week or so that
you would have time to write letters. The Air Force was not so cuddly back then, and I
think that now they want you to write home and make sure your parents…they didn't
care. So yes, we corresponded but I don’t remember anything specific about it.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss your transition from basic to your
advance training?

MH: We went to tech school at Wichita Falls, Texas, Shepard Air Force Base,
Shepard Tech. We rode a bus, a pretty long trip from San Antonio to Wichita Falls. It
took most of a day. We arrived and they had PAT barracks, PAT, that’s Personnel
Awaiting Training. We went into the PAT barracks and caught a little bit of harassment
from the people that had been there for months because you could spot the guys coming
in with their basic training haircuts. They called you kings, and I don’t know exactly
where that comes from. We did KP every day. Everybody in that barracks did KP every
day at the chow halls, and there were multiple chow halls at the base. It was a pretty big
operation. It was nothing awful but you’re cleaning nasty pots or you’re running the
dishwasher or something. I got to talking to a guy and I said, ‘How long does this last?’
and he said, ‘Well it lasts until your class starts,’ and I said, ‘I wonder how long that is,’
and he said, ‘What are you going into?’ and I said, ‘Aircraft maintenance,’ and he said,
‘You’re lucky. They start one of those classes about every day.’ He had been there for a
couple of months doing KP. He was going to be a missile repairman or something and
that class only started every six months. So it seems to me like I pulled KP for a week or
ten days, something like that, long enough that I got plenty tired of it. Then they came to
you one day and they said, ‘Okay, you report to this student squadron,’ and you packed
up your bag and you went over and the first sergeant put you in a barracks and did all this
stuff, and sure enough your class was ready to start like the next day or two days or
something, and I started. I was on morning shift every six hours and they had three
shifts. I can’t remember if my class had three shifts but some of the schools did. I went
to school from six o’clock in the morning until noon. Then there was another group of
people that used our classroom from noon until six o’clock in the evening. Do you want
me to talk about the class itself?

SM: Absolutely.

MH: The way the squadron was run? I probably remember more about the
squadron than I do the school. We would get up, here again, we were in rooms which
was a big change from being in the open bay barracks and there were four man rooms,
two sets of bunk beds per room with three desks, three wall lockers, government issued
desks, plain gray desks, and it was kind of odd to be in a room. We would get up in the
morning and get dressed and I can’t remember if we did any of our clean up stuff. I think
we did a little bit of it if we got ready soon enough. Then we would fall out as a
squadron and march to the chow hall. It was a fairly good haul over to our chow hall. As
soon as you got there you would break formation and you were free to go in and eat
breakfast or you could turn around and go right back to the barracks, but you had to
march to the chow hall. Go in, and I always ate breakfast, and then you headed
individually back over to the barracks and your room had to be squared away and then
you were assigned certain jobs. I was on latrine crew for example, and the new guy starts
off with urinals, and the longer you’re there, because people are graduating every day so
you’re moving up in seniority and then eventually when you’re the top guy you’re what
they called the Latrine Queen. But, you would go do your latrine duties after your room
was squared away, and when I say squared away, I’m talking about the desk had to be like one and one quarter inches from the…you had a ruler and the desk had to be one and one quarter inches from the wall and the drawer had to be opened one and one half inches, the chair had to be two and one half inches, the lamp had to be one and a quarter inches from the back, and they measured this stuff. If you were off any at all, it was a gig, and if you got too many gigs you got restricted to the base over the weekend. But we would come and do all this stuff, get the barracks squared away, and then we would form up because everybody in that barracks was on A-shift. An entire barracks would be on B-shift, an entire barracks would be on C-shift, night shift. So, we would form…and it would be pitch black dark and we had these flashlights with the yellow comb thing on the end of it, do you remember this, and you would go to marching to school and I remember, I always remember, I was looking up through there and there would be thousands of these yellow comb flashlights, everybody had to carry one, just as far as you could see, going to that school. You would march up there and then you would break and go into class. I want to say about 20 guys were in a class or something like that. Then, when you finished class at 12 o’clock, the B-group would be marching into the area. We had a parade every day. They called it noon toon, and the way it was, you would march up this avenue where the housing was to where the school was, a long avenue, and halfway up it they would put a review stand and they had the big microphone and they would play the marching music and B-shift would have a parade coming, and at that parade they’d score you, anybody out of step, how straight the lines were, all that. Then, when they got into the area they would form up and heading back to the housing area we would have the parade going the other way, and by the time you got to the squadron area they would have hung the results down to the 1st sergeant and if you messed up, you had to form back up after lunch and he would march you around the block, around and around and around until he thought that you had sufficient marching that you would do better the next day. You had this every day. You would also get the results of the inspection when you got there. They would name off the barracks numbers and how many demerits there were. So, you would go to chow, seems to me like lunch was on your own. I don’t think we marched too much. Then, there was a time that you had to be back and you would go do what they called the base detail and you would go and my job
for a long time was to mop a hall at a hanger, one of these classroom deals, a big, long
hall, and had to mop it everyday. When you were released from on base detail, before
you went to base detail must have been when we would have…yeah, we would have the
time that we would have PE or marching or anything else they wanted us to do, clean up
the area, something like that. Then we would have base detail. Then by the time you got
back it was late enough for dinner or supper and you would go to chow and you were free
after chow but we had a good bit of homework. We had homework every night, a couple
of hour’s worth. You also had guard duty, just dorm guard duty, but you did not do area
guard like they had in basic training. So, you were pretty much free. You could stay up
all night if you wanted to but they were going to get you up at o’dark thirty.

SM: Would you describe the technical detail that your advanced training went
into?

MH: I was not a mechanic. I was not a wrench twister on cars or anything like
that. As a matter of fact, on the aptitude test I had done well in three of the four areas and
barely passed mechanics. So I ended up as a mechanic. The classroom started off very
basic, and when I say basic they would hold a wrench up and they would say, ‘This is an
adjustable jaw wrench,’ and I would write down, ‘Adjustable jaw wrench.’ Well, when
the first test came, the first answer was crescent wrench, so all these natural born
mechanics would all put crescent wrench and I didn’t know what a crescent wrench was
so I put, ‘Adjustable jaw wrench,’ and I ended up being an honor graduate, because these
guys were bored out of their minds, they knew about being mechanics, and it was all new
to me, and I was trying to suck it up and pass. But, they start off very basic. These are
the wings, this is the fuselage, this is the canopy, because they don’t expect you to know
anything about an airplane. The school I was in, it was called 431X1C school, in other
terms, it was one and two engine jet aircraft, basically fighter aircraft, but that could also
be like not a 727, it had three engines, but a DC-9. So, any aircraft that had one or two
jet engines we were going to school for; no specific aircraft. But we went through phases
and we had pretty good literature, easy to follow, written at a level that was easily
understandable. We had a good bit of it, quite a volume of work. A crew chief, they
want you to know a little something about every system on the airplane. But, you do not
go in enough detail. I know how the hydraulic system works in theory, for example, and
I know when its not right and I know a leak when I see it, I know the parts, I know that you have your hydraulic pump and then you have lines and then you have actuators. I know all that, but as far as actually preparing the hydraulic system, I really wouldn’t want to take that on. We knew the aircraft overall, and then if you had a hydraulic problem you would call a hydraulic specialist. Now this rascal, he didn’t know squat about anything else on there, but he knew that hydraulic system from one end to the other. So our training was we had training on engines and we had training on hydraulics systems and fuels systems and flight controls and instruments and avionics and ejection systems and weapons systems, landing gear, just on and on, every system you can name on the aircraft we got the brief overview. The training was good. We had hands on simulators and when we were talking about landing gear we had a big thing with landing gear that would simulate the cycling of a landing gear. The instructors were all knowledgeable. They were all aircraft maintenance people that had spent time in the field and had requested or gotten the job as instructors. So, overall I’d say the training was pretty good.

SM: Now when you said they spent time in the field, how many of them had Vietnam or Southeast Asia experience?

MH: I would guess all of them.

SM: Did they talk much about it?

MH: 1970 is late in the war and I cannot imagine a 431 who had not been to Southeast Asia one time at least. Some of them were multiples. Some of them had been there several times.

SM: Do you remember any particular issues or lessons that they tried to pass on to you specific to what you might encounter in Southeast Asia?

MH: One thing about our job is that maintaining an aircraft is pretty much the same no matter where you’re out. I crewed F-4s in southern California before I went overseas and then I went to Korea and crewed them there. Then we went to Southeast Asia. It’s the same. It doesn’t really matter to a crew chief if those are blue practice bombs or 500-pounders. The aircraft still has to be inspected, repaired, fueled, launched, recovered. It really doesn’t make a bunch of difference. They were more interested in…they pushed safety a good bit because you can really mess up and you can get
yourself killed real easy. An aircraft is as dangerous sitting on the ground as it is to the
enemy just about. There’s 100 ways that thing can kill you sitting there. So, they pushed
the safety. Plus, they knew this, too; when we left the tech school we could go to a duty
station and we would go to what they called FTD, fuel-training detachment, and when
you get to a base you are trained to a specific aircraft that’s on that base. In other words,
my first assignment was at Travis working on C-141s, which was a mistake that was later
corrected. I went through the FTD school. Why we know what the wings were and the
fuselage and the engine, we knew all that, you spend weeks and weeks going through
every specific system of the aircraft that’s on that base. So they knew we had that
coming up. So, they were doing a general make-sure-you-were-safe-around-the-aircraft
and didn’t look like a complete idiot when you got to FTD school, 12 weeks long.

SM: So then I guess the next logical step then is to go to that?

MH: I’ll just say this; we graduated around…let’s see, I got there in the middle of
August, and 12 weeks would have been the middle of November. I went home on leave
for a short period of time. I think I had a couple of weeks or something like that. I know
this, they had assigned about 120 of us, about six straight graduating classes to Travis Air
Force Base, California. That’s all we knew. We were in a hurry to get home. We hadn’t
been home in four and a half months, something like that. Then, made your way back to
Travis and we all basically had the same report date so we all reported in to Travis which
is halfway between San Francisco and Sacramento, big military air lift command base,
jumping off points in Southeast Asia. They had C-141s and they had one C-5 there. We
were all of course wondering what the heck was going on when we got there and realized
that they were all cargo planes and we had just spent all this time learning about fighters,
and we inquired and they said, ‘Well, we needed you here,’ and we said, ‘Well we have
this guarantee,’ and they said, ‘He he, yeah, the needs of the Air Force outweigh
whatever paper they gave you.’ So we settled in, about 120 of us. We were assigned to
different squadrons on the base, different jobs. We went to FTD school in the daytime
and then I worked a swing shift in the 780 section, which is configuration. Cargo planes
have to be reconfigured internally for whatever mission you want; cargo, paratrooper,
airevac, that type of stuff. I was going to FTD school and all of us, by this time we
understand that whatever the Air Force says, that’s pretty much the way it’s going to be,
but this one guy’s father owned some kind of factory back in Georgia or something and he said, ‘Well that’s not right, they can’t do that,’ so his father hired a lawyer out of San Francisco and this lawyer came up and told the general in charge of Travis, and we later heard this from the people in the outer office, that the lawyer told them, ‘You’ve got three choices, General. You can transfer these men back to fighters, just like their contract says, you can get them to sign a waiver waiving their rights, or you can give them an honorable discharge. Now you take your pick.’ We didn’t know what was going on but we got called back to the base theater, pretty good crowd of folks, and we got the grand tour, buddy. We got the, ‘You’re an important part of MAC,’ and how important Military Airlift Command is, and they just didn’t want to mess with transferring 120 people is what it was. The thing that got me was they told you that 95% of the people that started their tour at Travis ended up right there at Travis. They didn’t go anywhere. There were no MAC bases overseas. Well, I was 18 years old by now and heck, I’d joined up to see something besides Northern California. So, after a few days of this we had to make a decision so about 60 of us decided we wanted to go back to fighters and they took the 60 of us and we filled out what we called a dream sheet, and that was, ‘Where would you like to be assigned?’ You could name a base or you could name a region. So, I had just said Southeastern United States. I just wanted to get close enough that I could go home occasionally. We turned in our dream sheets, and in just a few days, real quick, they called us back, the 60, and they started calling out names and handing out orders and I got orders to go to George Air Force Base which is between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and got to comparing and everybody was either going to Eglin in Florida or George in California. The 30 or so people that had requested to go back to Southeastern United States all went to George and the 30 or so that had decided that they liked California and wanted to stay in California all got sent to Florida. After they gave out the orders the officer said, ‘All right, men, I’ll guess you’ll notice you didn’t get to go where you wanted to go.’ ‘Yeah, we noticed that.’ He said, ‘Well, we did that just to show you who’s in charge.’ So, the 30 guys that wanted to stay in California all went to Florida and the guys that all wanted to go back to the southeast…see, that Project Guarantee, it was conducted in North and South Carolina and Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, and so everybody in that Project Guarantee was from the Southeastern United...
States. So, anyway, I flew home. One good thing about Travis is it was easy to catch a hop and I caught a hop to Charleston and flew back into Birmingham. My parents picked me up. I drove back out to George so I’d have some transportation, and I started all over again at FTD school.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss that, then, the FTD school?

MH: Okay, well, I’m getting used to the routine by now. We’re not exactly rookies anymore because this would have been around May I think of 1971. I’d been at Travis long enough to catch on that we were no longer considered right out of tech school or something. I can’t remember if we had two stripes by then. There was a group of us reported in about the same time so I had some friends that came with us, 30 people stayed together. George was the base in the United States Air Force at that time where they taught pilots to fly F-4s. Now a pilot goes off to ATC, Air Training Command, and he learns to fly and they give him his little wings and he’s a pilot, but he’s only good for flying trainers. So, this was the base where they would take all those guys and bring them out there and teach them to fly F-4s. It was not Air Training Command so it was not Mickey Mouse like ATC was, it was a regular TAC operation. The FTD school was very much like tech school. You went I want to say about six hours a day or whatever and you just go over system after system and engine and hydraulics and everything again specific to that aircraft. I can’t remember if I worked in addition to going to school. I did up at Travis but I cannot remember if we did that at George. Perhaps maybe we went to school a little quicker, then work. I was looking at my diploma, Aircraft Maintenance Technician and F-4 112 hours classroom time, so that would be like 20 days or something; very detailed training, very good training. It always was; knowledgeable instructors, good material, good training devices, big emphasis on safety. I finished the FTD school and you’re out on the line and they take each one of you and assign you to a trainer so every three level – when you graduate from school, you’re a three level, and every three level, you’re not allowed to work out there without being supervised by a five level. I had a good instructor, a Mexican, Rodriguez I think his name was, and he was very laid back and he was a good instructor. He’s responsible for your OJT. He had to sign off on all these tasks that he shows you how to do. You follow them around and pretty much touch what they touch and don’t touch what he tells you not to touch, and
you get the hang of it. You learn the aircraft as you’re walking around. He points out the
things, ‘Don’t touch this, for God’s sake,’ and, ‘Be careful, this is hot,’ and, ‘This right
here will fall on you and kill you,’ and that kind of stuff. It was pretty uneventful. The
thing I remember was that we had F-4 was probably the most terrific aircraft that the U.S.
had sold overseas and we were teaching not only American pilots but we were teaching
Japanese pilots, Luftwaffe pilots, Israeli pilots, Iranian pilots, Australian, British. We had
a bunch of Iranian crew chiefs, too, and these guys were dumb as rocks. They had been
picked, they told us, because of their English abilities. They were not mechanics, they
had not been in any kind of mechanical training, but they could speak English, sort of.
So, they had been assigned to us, like I had my trainer and myself and then I had this guy
following us around, too, and the idea was they were going to go back to Iran and be the
instructors. So that’s what I remember, I remember the international…I remember they’d
launch a group of four aircraft and you might have an American pilot and a Luftwaffe
pilot and an Israeli pilot, all in one group go flying. I do remember this; it was spring
when I got down there, so it was okay. It was up in the desert. New surroundings; it was
quite different from Northern California. It was out in the desert and that’s okay until it
gets to be like June and July and then it’s like hot! It’s damn hot out there. My friend
and I, we were low on the totem pole seniority wise. Most of your guys out there
working were returnees from Southeast Asia, most of your three stripers, so you were
basically in two…you had people getting ready to go overseas and people who were
coming back from being overseas. We were in that low group and my roommate and I
had both been assigned to what they called hot pit refueling, and that’s where these
aircraft were flying so many missions that when they’d pull in, rather than pull them over
here and pull a fuel truck to them they had a hot pit refueling set up where there’s a hose
coming up out of the ground and they’d leave the engine running and you’d fuel him and
then he taxis over to the sport and he’s ready for another pilot to come. It’s a lot quicker
than using trucks, but that makes for a long day when it’s 110 degrees and the exhaust is
blowing on you from the aircraft in front of you and that’s a couple 100 degrees. We’d
been doing this for about a week and we went to the flight shack and said, ‘John, this is
just bullshit. We’ve got to get out of here.’ He said, ‘Look at this,’ and we went over on
the bulletin board and there was a notice that they were looking for tail gunners for B-
52s, for volunteers. So we went down to personnel and we asked for the papers and we filled out papers and volunteered for that. Well, we got down on the paper to where it said DEROS and neither one of us knew what DEROS stood for, something about return date, and we asked the guy, ‘What does this mean?’ and he said, ‘When did you come back from overseas?’ because we were two stripers by then so he assumed maybe we’d been overseas, and I said, ‘We hadn’t been overseas,’ and he said, ‘Sorry, they’re only taking volunteers if you’ve been overseas.’ So, he took our papers and threw them away, and we said, ‘Wait a minute, how are we going to get out of here?’ and he said, ‘Well, you can put in an ABG.’ ‘What is that?’ and he said, ‘Anywhere but George, volunteer worldwide status. Volunteer to go anywhere, worldwide, anywhere they want you.’ So, we both filled one of those out and put it in, and about pretty quick, maybe a week or ten days even I came to work and John had orders. He got orders to Da Nang, and I said, ‘Oh man, that’s not a good place to go.’ The next day I had orders to go to Osan, Korea, so that takes care of our brief career at George. It ran from spring to it must have been October because I reported to Osan in October or November, something like that.

SM: Real quick question; was the F-4 a difficult aircraft to work on as a crew chief?

MH: No, I don’t think so, and I don’t have anything to compare it to, really. The C-141, the day I graduated from FTD school is the day I got my orders to go to George. So, I never crewed the C-141. My job that I had while I was going to class was in the configuration department section. I have no real experience. I stayed on the F-4, I was in the F-4s until I came back from overseas, and at that point I got put on training base in Texas on T-38s. So, I don’t know that it was particularly hard to work on. I just couldn’t tell you that.

SM: And why don’t you describe the trip over to Korea, and did you know a that point what you were going to be doing in Korea?

MH: Well yeah, I was a five level. I had gotten my five level. As soon as you finished FTD school and your trainer signed you off, you were a five level. As a matter of fact, you couldn’t go overseas. I believe in ’70, this would have been late ’71, I think earlier maybe you had been able to go overseas as a three level but at some point they changed it. You could not go overseas until you got your five level. So, as a five level,
you’re a certified crew chief. You can crew the aircraft. At that point, that’s what you were going to do wherever. You were going to crew an aircraft, or there were a lot of other jobs. You could work in a hanger doing the phase inspections and some other things that 431

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Hoffman. This is CD #2, and this is the interview on the 17th of October, year 2000. All right, sir, I’m sorry, would you please continue with your description?

MH: Sure. You were asking if the aircraft was hard to crew?

SM: Well, the trip over to Korea.

MH: Well I had taken a car out to Southern California and I had an aunt and uncle that lived in Fountain Valley, California. So, I was lucky. I could go down on weekends and get out of the desert. So, I drove back and this would have been I’m thinking October of ’71 and spent a little bit of time before I went overseas and flew, I would have flown out of Tuscaloosa or Birmingham, one, flew into San Francisco and then went from San Francisco up to Seattle. I was going to leave from McChord. I made a mistake and signed into the base. I got there like a day or two days early and I made a mistake and signed onto the base, assuming that I could go back off when I wanted to go over to Canada, I’d never been over to Canada, and found out I couldn’t leave the base. So, I was stuck walking around McChord Air Force Base just looking at the scenery for a couple of days. We departed on a commercial aircraft, it would have been a stretch DC-8 I believe it was. It looked like a 707, Northwest Orient I think it was, configured for military which means that it had an extra row of seats on it, very cramped, crowded. It must have been I’m guessing 300 people on that thing. We took off and we were going to fly a great circle or whatever they call it. We were going to fly along the edge of Alaska and down along the edge of Russia to Japan and we got up around Alaska and had aircraft problems and had to land in Anchorage. So I can say I’ve been to Alaska anyway. It was early in the morning and the coffee shop wasn’t even opened, and they had a round terminal to see all the beautiful scenery. But there were a lot of crew chiefs on that flight and I noticed like 30 of us stood there and watched them work on that airplane; we were pretty interested in that. We went on and flew into Yokota, Japan and there we swapped over to I believe it was Korean Airlines I believe is how I flew over to
Osan. When I got there I noticed as we were taxing in I hadn’t seen the aircraft. They were doing some work on the taxiways or the flight lines there, so we processed in and went to the orderly room. It was still duty time. We went over to the orderly room and the guy looked at us like we were from outer space or something, ‘What the hell are you doing here?’ He said, ‘Well, all the aircraft are down at Kunsan because they’re doing work on the taxi-ways and stuff.’ He took us over and put us in the transit quarters and then he told us, ‘Come to the orderly room in the morning and we’ll figure out what we’re going to do with you.’ ‘Okay.’ I don’t know if you get jet lag going in that direction, but we’re all…I cant remember if we went downtown immediately or if it was the next day, but I think we went to the orderly room the next day and said, ‘Oh, yeah, we forgot about you guys,’ and said, ‘Just come back and see me in the morning, again.’ So he gave us all day off, right? So we went back, put on civvies, and Osan, the village, is just right outside the gate. You can walk from the base right into the city of Osan. So, we were enjoying the local hospitality and we’re having a great time and we’re coming back to the base at like two o’clock in the morning or something and crashing and getting up and going to the orderly room and he keeps saying, ‘They don’t know what to do with you.’ So we’re having a really nice time. This went on for seven days. Wow. That was the nicest thing the Air Force ever did to me, I guess. So we spent seven days like I said studying up on local customs, you might say, and finding out about the local drinks and local foods and that type of stuff. We had gotten to where we were just calling in. We weren’t even going to the orderly room. Finally, like on the seventh day we called down there and we were expecting them to say, ‘Call back the next day,’ and he said, ‘Yeah, get your ass ready. They’re going to send you down to Kunsan.’ So, we had to pack up and we went out there and got on the plane and it was a 727 but it was like a commuter hop. It would come over from Yokota. It would go to Osan, then it would fly from Osan to Kunsan and I think Kunsan and I think it went back to Yokota. We caught that aircraft down to Kunsan and that’s where all the airplanes were from Osan so they’re flying pretty stout down there. We reported in, got put in the transit barracks, told to report. And this was November, and it was cold when I left Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and I was expecting it to be cold but the weather was real nice. It was not cold. We reported to the flight shack and there was two of us reported to this one flight. It was a trailer out there
somewhere, and we went in and the guy said, ‘Where are you guys from?’ The other guy
that was with me, he was from somewhere where they didn't have F-4s and I told him I
was from George. He looked and said, ‘From George?’ and I said, ‘Yeah,’ and he said,
‘You F-4s?’ I said, ‘Yeah, sure,’ and he said, ‘Well come with me.’ So we got in the
pickup truck. Kunsan is a little different in that the aircraft are dispersed. It’s on the
ocean, it’s on the Yellow Sea and they’re dispersed and put in hard arches because it’s
vulnerable to shelling from the ocean, from Naval gunfire. So, he took me out in the
boonies somewhere and there were some revetments there and a couple of aircraft parked
and he said, ‘Okay, you’ve worked F-4s, that’s going to be your airplane right there. You
got pilots coming in 15 minutes.’ 15 minutes is pretty quick. He went to drive off, and
he said, ‘And that’s your airplane right there, too.’ So I had gone to where there were
two people assigned to every aircraft to a place where there was two aircraft assigned to
every person. So I knew this was going to be interesting anyway, but I handled it okay.
I’m fairly good student I think. I had learned my lesson out at George and I was okay
working by myself. I worked and stayed at Kunsan. Korea was not a very high priority
in ’71, late ’71. We were 50% manned. If we were supposed to have 40 crew chiefs, we
had 20. I don’t know what the numbers were, but we were way undermanned. Our
mission there was to fly basically training missions everyday. We dropped a lot of
practice bombs. We kept six aircraft parked at Kunsan in an alert area which were armed
with nuclear weapons and these would have been the first six nuclear weapons to hit
Peking. We were straight across the Yellow Sea from Peking. Other than that, though,
we carried a lot of air-to-air missiles, that kind of stuff. Our job was in case hostilities
broke out we were going to run up and provide air superiority over the peninsula.
SM: Were a lot of the airmen you were serving with at that point Vietnam
veterans there?
MH: No. It seems to me like most of the people that I was serving with, now I’m
talking about five level, a five level can be an Airman 1st Class, two stripes, or a Buck
Sergeant, three stripes. Generally speaking…and then you can be a staff sergeant and
still be a five level. The staffs generally are just getting out or they have just reenlisted,
and of course your staff sergeants, some of them might have been…well, I don’t know of
any of them that had been to Southeast Asia, the tech sergeants I’m sure had all been to
Southeast Asia, the master sergeants and on up. But my peers, my fellow crew chiefs, I think we had one that when we later got to Southeast Asia, we found out he’d been there already. But, most of us had not been to Southeast Asia. In a four year tour, generally speaking, you’re going to get one tour overseas, and we were sitting out the war nicely on the Korean Peninsula there; a little bit cool. Coldest place you ever been; colder than Lubbock, undermanned, and the weather was less than desirable, but not a bad way to set out the war I guess.

SM: How effective do you think being in that situation in Korea where you were, as you pointed out, undermanned, a rather more trying experience than your previous assignments, was that good for you when you finally did find yourself in Vietnam?

MH: It was different. We had all the parts we needed at George, we had all the people we needed. It was just no big deal. If you went to change a tire you would have plenty of people and trainees and everything else around. You learned to do stuff a little differently at Kunsan. For example, I ended up on night shifts. I like to work night shifts. So, if you volunteer, you don’t have any trouble staying on night shifts. We would actually not have enough people to do a tow team. When you go tow an aircraft somebody has to drive the tug, somebody has to be in charge, somebody has to ride the breaks in the cockpit, and then you have to have two wing walkers. Well we didn’t have enough people to do wing walkers so we would go find the security policemen and they’d shoulder their M-16s and come walk the wings for us. So, I’m saying, you learned to make due. I worked pretty good by myself, so we had what I called a bread truck and the aircraft are dispersed, remember. It’s not like a regular flight line where they’re lined up side-by-side where you’re help is just two aircraft away. Somebody will be down there. They will carry you out there and drop you off and they had a status board in the truck that told the status of the aircraft. Well, he would also write on there where he dropped you off so he would know where to come back and get you. It was kind of so spread out and everything. During bird season they allowed them to hunt in between the revetments, hunt birds with a shotgun, so you know we were pretty spread out. So they’d drop you off, and hell, if they didn’t come back and get you, you had an hour’s walk to get back to civilization. But, it was okay. It was an interesting experience. Like I say, the most
memorable thing was the weather. Kunsan’s there on the ocean. It was put there during
the Korean War because you had a prevailing 20-knot wind coming off the ocean and it
was a bomber base and those bombers would take off into that wind with a heavy load.
So, 20 years later that wind was still blowing, and when it gets below zero and then you
have a 20 knot wind on top of that, it gets kind of chilly and then it’s pretty difficult to
work on an aircraft under those conditions because you’ve got to take your gloves off.
You’ve got to take your parka off to work the aircraft.

SM: Is there anything else that you want to talk about with regard to your tour in
Korea, your time in Korea?

MH: Not really.

SM: Are you glad you served there?

MH: Yeah, I enjoyed being in Korea. Not everybody can say they’ve been to
Korea. I also did a two-week TDY back to Yokota, Japan while I was there. That was
interesting. When Nixon flew to Peking for the first time, we provided the air cover for
him. We launched all our aircraft and about 50 aircraft accompanied him to Peking at the
request of the Chinese government because they couldn’t guarantee his safety. I don’t
know, I enjoyed it. We were the number one mobility squadron for Pacific Air Force.

That’s how we ended up in Southeast Asia.

SM: I guess that’s the next step, then. How did you end up going to Southeast
Asia, first I guess to Da Nang and then to Thailand?

MH: Well April 1st, April Fool’s Day, we had just passed ORI, Operational
Readiness Inspection, and we were celebrating. They gave us two days off and I’d never
had two days off overseas. They had a big beer bust down on the flight line and
everybody got soused pretty good. We were supposed to be off the next day. So,
daybreak, 1st of April, we’re laying there in the bunk and the sirens goes off, and we
assumed it was some kind of April Fool’s joke or something so nobody got up.

Everybody just, ‘Uhhh,’ you know. In a few minutes, in came some lifer, you know.
‘Get up, you can’t hear the sirens?’ ‘Yeah, we hear it.’ ‘Get up! Get dressed!’ They
had a bus outside the barracks for us and they put us on that bus, and it was snowing. We
went to the flight line and as we drove out on the flight line we noticed that they were
painting over the tail numbers on our airplanes, so I said, ‘Oh, shit, look at this. They’ve
never done this before.’ So they dropped us off and they told us to configure the aircraft, three tanks, three external fuel tanks on them. So, we went to hanging tanks, and we hung three tanks on everything on base. Then they came back and took us back to the barracks and they brought some more people by then, rounded them up. Well they brought some more people in to ready the aircraft, preflight them, start launching them, whatever, and they took a bunch of us back to the barracks and they said, ‘Pack your bags and get your mobility bag.’ So we reported over to the gym and they processed us out. They gave you a copy of your orders and said, ‘You’re going to a classified destination for a classified mission for a classified amount of time. Take your toolbox, and weapons will be issued upon arrival.’ So that looked kind of ominous looking, ‘Make sure you got your dog tags and your Geneva Convention card.’ But, they wouldn’t tell us where we were going. So we got on these C-130s and a C-130 is like a…hold on just a second.

SM: Sure.

MH: C-130 is like taking the bus; it takes forever to get there. So, we launched out. This was probably around noon I guess by then, and we got on the airplanes and we took off, who knows where. So, we landed at Taiwan after a long flight and we said, ‘Well, is this where we’re going?’ ‘Nope. Don’t leave the terminal. We’re going to refuel the aircraft and we’ll be leaving immediately.’ Two hours later – immediately, yeah – we took off again. ‘Where are we going?’ ‘They won’t tell us.’ So we ended up at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines about two o’clock in the morning. I got off the airplane and it’s like 100 degrees. They’ve got a sign, ‘Welcome to Clark,’ and it’s got the temperature and time, and it’s like 100 degrees. We all had on arctic parkas and long underwear and sweaters and stuff. So, we stripped down pretty quick. Then they gather us up and they tell us, ‘Well, all hell has broke loose in Vietnam and all the aircraft, all the fighters, from Clark, are gone; they’ve deployed over there. You are going to set up operations here. You’re going to be the backup. You’re going to change out your ECM, Electronic Counter Measures equipment, and you’re going to let the pilots get some training in this terrain.’ Seems like it must have been Saturday, or must have been Sunday morning at two o’clock I’m thinking. Anyway, we were supposed to come to work like Monday morning, report to the flight line, and we’ll set up operations. So, they were in essence giving us the next day off. They put us in the barracks and we found
beds and lockers and got a few hours sleep, and then morning came and we popped up, put on our civvies, and like good GI’s we were heading downtown to check out the local population and customs and stuff. So, we were on our way trying to find the gate and get the heck out of there and one of our lifers came by in a pickup truck and said, ‘Hey guys, get in the truck.’ ‘Hey Sarge, we’re headed downtown,’ and, ‘No, no, come with me.’ So he put us in the truck and rounded up a few more strays and took us down to the flight line in our civvies and said, ‘Start pre-flighting them.’ ‘What?’ ‘Yep, pre-flight them.’ So we went pre-flighting the aircraft and then he came back later with some guys in uniform and took us back to the uniform and let us change and we got packed. We got back to the flight line, and they were gone. The aircraft were all gone. I asked the guys, ‘Where were they going?’ and the pilots told them they were going to Da Nang. So, we were all pretty sure we were going to Da Nang right behind them. Well, they sure enough were down at the terminal, and they told us, ‘Okay, now there must be 100 C-130s parked there at Clark but we’re waiting on a specific one,’ or something. So, we’re sitting there waiting and waiting and it gets dark. We’ve been there all day. They finally let us go, but we didn’t have a barracks to go back to, so we went to the airmen’s club and of course we were all pretty much convinced we were heading off to the war the next day so we were partying and the airmen’s club there had one of these huge seashell chandeliers with a big table in the middle where you could sit about 20 guys, there were about 20 of us in there, and somebody found out that you could buy the champagne and you could make corks shoot up there, so we were all getting champagne and shooting the corks up into their chandelier, blowing their chandelier all to pieces. We were having a good time, and we noticed that in the door came about 30 SPs and they came straight over to us and they just surrounded us, and they said, ‘All right, guys, you’re out of here.’ We got thrown out of the club and I think they provided us some transportation or directions or something. We ended up back down at the flight line terminal where we spent the night outside laying on our duffel bags. So the next day, finally this C-130 shows up that we were supposed to go on and we got on the C-130 at some point during the day and we took off and it would take forever to go anywhere and we’re flying and you can see out the window, there’s a couple of windows, you’re over water and then you’re over land, but we keep going inland. We all knew Da Nang was right at the coast
so we all noticed that you could actually see artillery duels going on, the flashes, and finally we landed and we were at Ubon, Thailand, and they had taken half of our aircraft and sent them to Da Nang as replacements. The other half they had sent to Ubon, Thailand, and they figured with our number of crew chiefs that would make us manned correctly. We actually had two squadrons of aircraft with us, you might say, but only one squadron of personnel. So we ended up at Ubon with half the airplanes and the personnel. We set up there and started operations, we started flying combat missions the next morning I guess, as soon as we could get out to the flight line. I remember this, we worked 14-hour shifts. We had two 12-hour shifts going but they made you report an hour early and stay an hour late. So, for those hours you had both shifts there. I remember we worked 14 hours and we worked it for 14 days. We were out there working one day on a day shift there and we looked up and a C-141, when it's on final has got these really bright landing lights, very recognizable if you’ve ever seen them. Someone said, ‘What’s that?’ and we looked up and there must have been six or eight C-141s stacked up on final approach, just way out you could see them. They said, ‘What’s that?’ and I said, ‘I know what that is, that’s C-141s,’ and they started landing; just every couple of minutes one would land. What they had done was they had picked up Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina and the entire operation had brought it to Ubon. Well of course our operations had stopped while these aircraft were all coming in so they gathered us up and they said, ‘Okay guys, go back to the barracks and pack your bags.’ So we humped it over to the barracks and we packed up our bags and by the time we got out there were already guys standing outside waiting to get our bunks. So, they took us to the terminal. We got rid of the airplanes, launched them out. ‘Where are we going?’ ‘Well, we’re going to Udorn, Thailand,’ because we had D models, F-4D models, ‘They have D models at Udorn and they’ll be able to support us better and they’re going to bring all these E models in from Seymour Johnson in here. So here again, we sat down and waited on an airplane. No airplane, no airplane. It got to be dark. Finally it was ten o’clock at night. We’d get on the C-130 and we were headed to Udorn. So, whenever we went we had this equipment down in the middle of the airplane and jump seats on the side and we’re just seeing where you can find a place and I had gone to sleep and the guy beside me pokes me in the side at some point and says, ‘We’re getting
They want you to buckle in.’ So, we buckle in and we land, and we taxi and we pull to a stop and we’re sitting there, nothing. That back door opens, the side door on the aircraft opens and a guy sticks his head through the door and he’s standing on the ground and he’s got on a helmet and a flak vest. He says, ‘Welcome to Da Nang.’ They had actually diverted us in flight and we ended up at Da Nang, which would have been around the 15th of April, something like that.

SM: Quite a surprise, huh?

MH: Well the way things were going, nothing was a surprise I guess, but yeah, I had to say we were surprised. We got off the aircraft and they had a bus sitting there. So they put us on the bus and they drove us around and it was dark, of course, and it’s about one o’clock or two o’clock in the morning, something like that, and you don’t see anybody running around or anything, and it turns out that’s prime time for attack. We didn’t know that. We’re standing around like a bunch of idiots and we’re riding on the bus and we go over what they called Gunfighter Village because the 366 TAC Fighter Wing was the Gunfighters, so crew chiefs and everybody lived in what they called Gunfighter Village. They had put all these barracks together, two story wooden barracks. They bunched them up real close, I guess the theory being make a smaller target or something. They put us in the open bay barracks that night and we happily crashed. The next morning they got us together somewhere and they gave us a little spiel; ‘Here’s the deal. We don’t have a place to park you as a squadron, so we’re going to…’ they had three squadrons there, ‘We’re going to let you fill in the empty spots in the revetments. Instead of arches they had revetments, or hard arches, I’m sorry, which is a revetment with a concrete/steel arch over the top of it. So, rather than keep us together as the 35th TAC Fighter Squadron, ‘You’ll be attached to one of the three squadrons that is here.’ So I was detached to the 421st TAC Fighter Squadron, Black Widows. We went down to the orderly room, the flight shack, orderly room, whatever, for that squadron and they said, ‘Anybody want to work night shifts?’ ‘Yes, I want to work night shifts,’ so they were happy to put me on night shifts. Night shift there was midnight to noon, so I was told to go away and come back and report to B Flight or whatever flight I was in at midnight. I think they showed me where the flight shack was so I’d know where to go at midnight. The guys I was with, they were also going to be on nightshift. They wanted
me to go downtown because they were going to go to China Beach and go to downtown Da Nang and just go do some stuff, and I said, ‘No, I don’t really feel like it. I’ll go tomorrow.’ They went off and went to China Beach and did all that stuff. That was the last day the gates were open. They locked the base down the next day, so I never got to step foot off of the base. I reported to work at midnight and I got there a little early to make sure I got there and I was already in the shack and had met the sergeant, the staff sergeant I was going to work for. They had roll call, so he went to calling names and they called, ‘Delveccio,’ and I’m thinking, ‘Now how many Delveccio’s can there be, right?’ This is my roommate that had volunteered with me, and sure enough, I looked, and there he was down there. Here I am in the same flight with him at Da Nang, and I ended up moving in his room. They had us in the open bay barracks and the permanent party people were in the barracks where they had made rooms. The GI’s themselves had actually stolen plywood and stuff and made rooms. So, he had an empty bunk in his room, he and another guy, and I got invited to live a much better standard of living than my fellows down in the open bay barracks. So, I worked midnight to noon, I want to say six and one, I can’t remember exactly, but there was nowhere to go on your day off anyway so it didn’t matter if you had a day off. We had old Homeweek there for a little bit, and then ten minutes or something it was over and we had to go to work and they took us around and showed us where our aircraft were parked and they assigned me to one of the Korean aircraft, D-models. They stood out like a sore thumb. The E Models had the shark teeth on the side and the D models, and sure enough, wherever there was an empty revetment they’d stuck a D model in. I went to work the aircraft and the sergeant, he was a Mexican guy and I cant remember his name, but anyway, he drove by in the truck and said, ‘Hoffman, I got something for you to do,’ so I said, ‘Okay,’ so we got in the truck and I’d been on duty now for 15 minutes or something, and he took me out to the trim pad. A trim pad is when an aircraft has had major work on the engine or some system. You take it out, and the F-4 has a tail hook and you can lower the tail hook and there’s a big metal link sunk down into the concrete that you can hook that aircraft to, and that way you can run the aircraft in afterburner or at high RPMs and it won’t move tied down. So, he took me out to the trim pad and said, ‘We got an aircraft here that needs to be run. We got instruments and the engine shop will be out here shortly.’ I said, ‘Okay.’
So, there’s a light all. Remember, it’s dark. There’s a light all running out there and you can see from the light all there’s a bunch of barbed wire over here just 50 feet away from me, but I did not pay any attention. I did not know where the trim pad was. I didn’t know where anything was. The engine shop guy and the instrument guy showed up and the engine guy ran the aircraft, the instrument guy worked the – whatever it was, and we stayed on the ground and did the startup and that stuff for them. We had taken care of whatever, it was done, and they had shut the aircraft down and they’d gone down there and we were standing at the nose of the aircraft basically waiting on our ride. It was too far to hump it and we’d just wait and they’d come back and get us. We were standing there, that was on the east side of the runway, and they were facing me so they were looking east and I was facing them. I was facing west, facing out across the runway, and suddenly there was this…it looked like a fireworks display. It was this sparkly white stuff and it just came up right out of the ground and just went hundreds of feet into the sky. This was well off in the distance from where I was, and I was amazed. I said, ‘God, look at this!’ and they turned around and we were just amazed at this sparkly looking…we didn’t know what it was; we didn’t have any idea what it was. Just about that time an AC-47, which was parked on the west side of the runway, about halfway up the runway, was being refueled and the fuel truck took a direct hit. Now buddy, we knew what that was! We knew that was bad! So these two guys pass me. There was a bunker behind me and these guys passed me, like zoom, they were gone! I turned around and I was the first guy in the bunker; I passed them! It had a little roof on it. It was not just an open sandbag bunker, it had a little roof on it and we dove right through that hole. Dumb, God, if there’d have been a snake in there, we’d have been dead from that! Didn’t even bother to look; dove in there and I mean I hugged the ground like you wouldn’t believe, and you could feel the rockets hitting the ground. The ground under you was just trembling. There was two more waves of rockets came in after we went in there. Well, after it quit coming in we were convinced we came out of that bunker, and what that white stuff was was the flare section of the off base bomb dump they called it had taken a hit, and all these phosphorous flares had gone off at one time. Of course the AC-47 was burning like hell halfway up the runway on the other side, and that was interesting. Behind us, didn’t know it at the time, but what there was was there was a drainage ditch
for when the monsoons come and this ditch is like six foot wide and six foot deep and has
ridges across it, one right beside the flight shack. Along the top of that there was a six-
inch high pressure fuel pipeline, and that thing had taken a direct hit and it burst that pipe
and that pipe had filled that drainage ditch full of fuel and it caught on fire. When we
came out of the bunker, it looked like Gone with the Wind, when they were burning
Atlanta. These flames were like 100 feet into the sky and had traveled way down that
drainage ditch, and it was very impressive. I had been there a total of not 24 hours. That
was my first night at Da Nang.

SM: Let’s see here, why don’t you go ahead and describe the nature of the unit in
terms of your commanders, you immediate supervisors, and also the morale of the unit?

MH: Brand new unit, I don’t know if I ever met the commander. When you’re
working 12 and 12 like that, with no place to go, it was pretty much work. Get up, I’d
sleep, get up around 11 something, get dressed, and walk to work. We worked from 12
to…after role call, they would go get us some food, and about every other night it would
be a C-ration and that was great. About every other night it was what we called dog food
sandwiches, luncheon meat sandwiches, two of them in a brown paper bag, and that was
bad. They would bring you by and then they would just drive by and throw a bag at you
or a C-ration at you. Here again, crewing an aircraft, it doesn't matter where it is. There
is a little something added in that particularly at midnight, prime time was basically
midnight until like two o’clock in the morning. I don’t know why, but that was when
they generally attacked if they were going to attack. So, you held your breath for those
two hours. If you got past two o’clock, I don’t recall them attacking the place after two
o’clock I don’t think. I think they did attack at eleven o’clock one time, caught
everybody kind of [?]. It was more of like just harassing fire. It was rockets, Russian
122 millimeter rockets and then occasionally it was mortar rounds, and you would catch
small arms fire, particularly if you went out to the tank farm. The tank farm, where we
kept our drop tanks, stored them, was next to the perimeter, and that makes sense because
people aren’t into tank farms that much and it gives you a little extra insulation. But,
you’d go out there and you had to shine a flashlight to see what you were doing and
you’d start catching some small arms fire. When they shoot at you from that far away,
too, you don’t even hear them shoot. What you hear are the bullets hitting in the gravel
around you. But, it was just harassment. The outfit I worked for was maybe 12 guys.

I’m thinking I may have been the only one in that flight from Korea, maybe just one more if there was. Most of these guys had been there for some length of time. See, John Deveccio, my roommate, he’d been there every since I’d been in Korea, so he’d been there five or six months. He was an old timer. It was nice to have him because I picked up on...he clued me in on some of the stuff. We were a tactical fighter squadron. We were flying mostly tactical air support, meaning dropping bombs on Vietnamese. The U.S. Army had basically hauled ass by this time. We didn’t even have the Marines. The only Marines I know of, they had brought in a squadron of Marine F-4s there at Da Nang and they’d brought in a bunch of Navy A-6s. The Army was gone, combat troops were pretty much gone, and we had ARVN protecting us. We were supplying the air power. We dropped a lot of ordinance. We dropped a lot of 500 pounders, 500 pounders with extenders, 500 pounders with those fins that pop out, I think they call them snake eyes, CBU’s, napalm. We would go, and they must have alternated us around because we’d go through a phase where we’d fly MiG CAP, CAP was Combat Air Patrol, and during that time you wouldn’t do bombing missions but you would change your aircraft over to be configured over to four sidewinders and four sparrow missiles. The aircraft would go fly around North Vietnam and just hope a MiG would come up and basically making sure that MiGs don’t go jump on any of the bomb aircraft in the bombing configuration or on the B-52s. The B-52s were bombing pretty stout. You’d come into work and they’d tell you if you had a frag. A frag was a mission, it stood for fragmentary order, something, anyway, it means a mission. If you came in at midnight and they told you that you had a 12:30 frag, that means you had to go over and get busy because hopefully the dayshift guy had the aircraft ready, but depending on what they told you about the missions and stuff, you would either get an aircraft ready to take off and fly or if you didn’t have a mission, and the person beside you didn’t have a mission, you were going to help them, you would go start doing daily chores. We would LOX the aircraft, liquid oxygen. You would have a LOX person assigned for a week at a time and it would be his job to go pour the LOX [?] out of the aircraft and pull them over to where they had the LOX bottles set up, and put liquid oxygen in the container and bring it back to the aircraft. Nobody liked to do that because liquid oxygen is dangerous. You would just go
about...go check performance on the aircraft. It may have just flown a mission and
needed to be post flighted. It might need fuel. So you would just find out what the status
was and you would take care of it, and your neighbor, the guy in the next revetment who
you need to help you launch your aircraft when it gets to be time, find out what he’s got
going. He might need help. One guy can’t hang a drop tank, for example. It takes three
or four guys. So, it is a little prime time right when you come to work so you don’t want
to be standing out in the darn open a whole lot counting change. You can kind of hide a
little bit and hang around the bunker. The revetment walls, you couldn’t smoke on the
aircraft side of the revetment walls so you’d go on the other side. They have bunkers out
there with what they called SP augmentees. These were like guys from finance or
something during the day and he’s pulling guard duty at night, and he’d be sitting in that
bunker around there and you’d go in there and get in the bunker with him. This is the
bunker with no top, just sandbags. You could go smoke back there. You tried to keep as
low profile as possible. They’d bring you your chow probably about, say, 12:30,
something like that. After role call somebody’d go with the supervisor and go pick up
chow at the chow hall and bring it back. So, if you didn’t have a launch right then you
could sit down and eat your sandwiches or eat your C-rations. This was pretty much it.
It was interesting, this shift, because half the shift was at night and the other half was in
the day. So, when it got to be sunrise basically you try to kind of shut down things and
we’d all climb on top of the arches and watch the sunrise and smoke up there. You
weren’t supposed to but you were up there where nobody could see you anyway. We did
that just about every morning because they had beautiful sunrises. You were at
Wilmington. When you have a sunrise over the ocean it’s got that mist in the morning,
the beautiful sunrises. They had these beautiful sunrises at Da Nang there. We’d work
until noon, get off at noon, go get some lunch, go to the base theater because it was air-
conditioned. Go in there and sit and go to sleep. When the movie was over you’d get up
and go to the barracks to try to get some more sleep or go do something if you had to do
anything, go to the post office or go to the BX or something.

SM: Now when you say smoke, are you talking about cigarettes?

MH: For the most part. The other stuff was very expensive and I did smoke. I
had never seen any until I enlisted. As a matter of fact, I didn’t see any when I was in
Northern California but I had been exposed in Southern California and you would think it would be plentiful and cheap, but it was not at Da Nang. Later, in Thailand I found out that you by Voodoo grass sticks a nickel would buy 20 sticks for a dollar. It was being brought into Da Nang and being sold for five dollars. So we had capitalism at it’s best. It was not plentiful because it just wasn’t plentiful. Later it was in Thailand.

SM: What kind of rapport was there between the enlisted men and the officers in your unit?

MH: Generally it was pretty good. We had one pilot. His name was Arnold, Lieutenant Arnold. He smoked dope. They called him Pig and he liked being called Pig. The enlisted men called him Pig. He was an all right guy. He’d taken ROTC to get through college to pay for college and he was doing his time like we were, and ready to get out. I went to recover an aircraft, help to recover an aircraft that came in and parked and I went up to [?] and the first thing the pilot hands you the red bag with the pins, and there’s like six or seven pins in there or something like that. You have to pin the ejection seat so it won’t fire. He can pin several of them but then there’s like three or four pins back there that you have – and really, it’s just a cotter pin – that you have to pin the actuator so the seat won’t eject. He cannot get out of that seat with it pinned. So I went to pin the seat and there was a cotter pin in the actuator. Whoever had launched that aircraft had slipped a cotter pin in this guy’s actuator, and what that means is if he’d have pulled the handle, he’d have gone nowhere. So evidentially, the rapport there wasn’t too good. But, I didn’t even bother him with it. I just pulled the cotter pin out, pinned the seat, and acted like nothing was wrong because I wasn’t going to be caught being the guy that did that.

SM: Any other similar incidents like that while you served in either Da Nang or in Thailand?

MH: Somebody trying to do in a pilot or something like that?

SM: Uh-huh.

MH: No, I cannot think of anything else like that.

SM: Well, that’s tantamount fragging.

MH: It was the Air Force version of trying to frag this guy, and I cannot remember. See, I wasn’t permanent party, so after the guys have been there for six
months with these pilots, maybe one of them had done something. I didn’t know anybody well enough to know any circumstances or history or anything. We were just sort of passing through. Of course we ended up staying there for a pretty good while.

SM: And any incidents? You mentioned your first experience with your flight line getting hit, getting rocketed. How often did that happen? Were there any other particular events that you’d like to discuss?

MH: If I had to put a number on it, I would probably say that they probably attacked about twice a week. There were a couple…let’s see. I was asleep on my night off and I was lying there and I was probably a little wasted and I woke up and I think I remember hearing something way off in the distance like a siren. They had a siren that went off. A guy came on the loud speaker all over the base and said, ‘Da Nang Air Base is under attack, take cover.’ I remember laying there thinking, ‘What is that?’ and then it came to me what it was. I jumped up and hauled down the hallway in the barracks, two story wooden barracks, and they had a wooden porch on each end outside, and I went through that screen door and it had been raining a little bit and I hit that…they’d built a porch on that end and had not painted it yet and it was slick, and I bounced off the rail and I hit it so hard that I bounced back in front of the steps. The steps were to your left as you went through the door. You had to turn to your left and go down the steps, and I bounced into the way and the next guy came through that screen door and found me just sort of suspended there and he shoved me and it took about…it seemed like it took about 15 minutes to go down those steps, but I think it was probably a little quicker than that. I ended up, I was rolling and I woke up and I was lying across the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps. That was close as I came to getting injured I guess. It turned out it wasn’t even a rocket. It was B-52s bombing close enough to the base that the people set off the sirens. It wasn’t even a rocket attack. One more.

SM: Absolutely.

MH: Okay. I was the LOX man one night and they impressed upon you how explosive LOX is. It’s not something you want to be hanging around. I was over there at LOX on the backside, this is on the other side of the revetment, and they had a revetment with nothing but the LOX bottle and I was LOXing and I heard this, ‘Boom!’ and this was later on, not quite as jumpy, not quite so willing to jump and hurt yourself just
because there’s a boom. Well, there was a boom but there wasn’t a bunch of booms, so I thought, ‘Well, what is that?’ and then after a few seconds there was another boom. After a few seconds, after a while, there was another boom. So I’m thinking…and a truck drove by and a guy yelled, ‘Mortars! It’s a mortar team shooting at us!’ So, I decided I did not want to hang around the LOX bottle. So, I went around and got in the other revetment next to me, pitch black dark in there. There was light around where I was LOX and I could sort of see around there. Anyway, I didn’t want to hang around that LOX bottle. I went around there and hunkered down. There was a bunch of boxes in the revetment, no aircraft in there, but a bunch of boxes and I hunkered down and waited and what happened is a mortar team got in what they called a dog patch, and I don’t really know where that was because I didn’t leave the base, and we had Cobra helicopters that flew around to protect the base. The cobras could see the mortar team. They could see the muzzle flashes from the mortar, but this is during the Vietnamization of the war and everything and they had to get permission from the Vietnamese to shoot and by the time they got permission to shoot the mortar team had run out of ammunition and left. But the truck came by and the guy said, ‘Hoffman, what are you doing in there?’ and I said, ‘I didn’t want to stay in there with the LOX bottle,’ and he picked up his flashlight and shined it in the boxes behind me and it was 20 millimeter cannon rounds, tens of thousands of them in there with me.

SM: Anything else that you wanted to talk about from Da Nang?

MH: I guess that’ll do it.

SM: I mean, you didn’t have any interaction with Vietnamese people did you?

MH: Mamasons. Mamasons were interesting. She somehow became aware that she could speak French, English, Vietnamese, and something else I think. I got to talking to her. She seemed kind of old at the time because I was 19 years old, but she might have been 30 something. I got to talking to her and her husband had been the editor of the biggest newspaper in Da Nang and he made the mistake of writing something about the government that they didn’t like so they busted in the door, took him off one night. Well, because of the connections she made with the base, she was able to get a job as a mamason, and I don’t think maybe so much for the money, but there was a certain degree of protection that she was working at the base. She was our mamason; she did our boots
and our fatigues. So, that was the just of the interaction that I had with the Vietnamese
was talking to her.

SM: Was there any concern that she was perhaps collecting information?

MH: No, but one day they had a lot of Vietnamese that worked on the base, they
worked in the chow halls. The MPs were driving around behind a garbage truck and they
noticed the guy up on top was drawing something and they got out and said, ‘Hey, come
here,’ and he came down and he was drawing a map of the base. One night I mentioned
that the Cobras flew around the base and we had Hueys that threw flares out, dropped
flares, and when the aircraft were not actually taking off and landing they may put out 50
flares at a time, all the way around the base, and they were trying to light up the
perimeter. Well, we were sitting around and we noticed that this helicopter went zipping
down across the base, which was unusual. They usually orbited the base, and it was one
of the Cobras and he was just hauling ass down to the south end of the runway. Well, got
to looking down there and that other Cobra joined with the Cobra already down there and
they set up a cross fire and several of the Hueys had come over and there were a bunch of
flares down there, and these two Cobras set up a cross fire and they went to hosing down
the perimeter with their cannon, 20 millimeter I guess. They just hosed it down, down
there. Next morning they went out there and I think there were like 30 Vietnamese in the
wire, a sapper team. Now this is rumor, okay. It wasn’t rumor they were out there. They
were dead, but they said that some of them were ARVN. Some of them were ARVN in
the daytime and Viet Cong in the evening. If I had been out on the flight line and seen
Vietnamese rounds or something, that might have got our attention.

SM: Well, why don’t you go ahead and discuss then the transition from Da Nang
to Thailand? How did that go about?

MH: It must have been late in my shift one day. It was daylight and they called
us together and said, ‘Everybody from Korea…’ well, can I back up a second?

SM: Absolutely.

MH: We had gotten concern because Hue had fallen and Quang Tri, and the
South Vietnamese, God bless them, were hauling ass for Saigon. They were going down
Highway 1. We were the first guys to talk to these pilots when they come back, and
some of them were very talkative. They want to tell you what’s going on. They just
want to tell somebody. The base was pretty much getting surrounded. We went to flying missions where we did not put the aircraft back in the revetment. We just pulled them in, the pilot set there, sometimes we hot pitted, they left the engines running or they shut down, maybe, but we would fuel them. It depends on how quick we could get a truck. Weapons people would come and arm them at the same time. You measure time out/time in, chocks out/chocks in as the length of the mission, and a lot of that is taxing around on the ground, and these missions were getting to be 15 minutes, and they were bombing just right over the hill from us. We got kind of concerned about that and we actually questioned. What we were asking was, ‘Are we going to get some weapons?’ and they basically told us the story about how earlier in the ‘60s the Air Force guys had been given weapons at the perimeter and they had shot the trees. There was a clear cut out to some trees out there, but it was within rifle range, and how that they were fighting like hell on the other side of those trees and it was U.S. Marines. Anyway, the Air Force guys ended up killing a bunch of U.S. Marines out there, so they were not going to give us any weapons. They just weren't going to do it. So, we asked, ‘What’s the plan?’ Well, they said, ‘When the base is overrun,’ not if, but when the base is overrun, ‘You are to make your way downtown and there’ll be some ships in the harbor and that’s how we’re going to get evacuated. I pointed out, ‘That’s fine, sir, but I’ve never been downtown. I don’t know where downtown is,’ and he said, ‘Well you better stick with somebody.’ But, within a day or two after this concern, this meeting, they came by and they said, ‘Everybody that’s from Korea, go to the barracks, pack your bag, and get to the terminal.’ The terminal was on the other side of the runway on the other end of the base. They didn't have to tell us twice. We boogied back to the barracks, and of course we had come in with only one bag so it wasn’t a big deal. We packed our little bag and we hauled. We stole a truck and just went around there and when we got over there, there was a C-130 sitting there and they were packing guys. It had a flat floor, no seats in it, and they were pushing people to the back of the airplane and you sat down on the floor, put your legs around your duffle bag kind of, and they were just packing just as many people as they could get in that thing. When they got it full they closed the door and we took off and left. I don’t remember how long the flight was, but we were real happy when we got high enough because they were shooting at the aircraft off the end of our runway. They were
shooting heat seekers at our airplanes as they were taking off. So, we were happy when
we got high enough that there was no small arms coming through the aircraft. Anyway,
when we landed, we were at Khorat, Thailand. The thing I remember about it is do you
remember in the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy…the first part of the movie is in black and
white and then when she gets to Oz and opens the door, everything’s in color? That’s the
thing I always feel like. When we left Da Nang, everything was in black and white.
When we got to Khorat, Thailand, we opened that back door because it was kind of stuffy
in there, they dropped the back gate as we were taxiing. It looked like Oz out there.
Everything was in color, beautiful place. The base was beautiful. They had an Army of
Thai gardeners and there was flowers everywhere and it was a beautiful place.

SM: Just out of curiosity, did your unit lose any aircraft while you were at Da
Nang?

MH: My unit being the F-4s?

SM: Right.

MH: From Korea or the 421st?

SM: Either one.

MH: Yeah, we lost…I can’t remember if we lost any airplanes in Korea or not,
but I know some of the E models from the 421st got gone. I’m going to estimate that
there was a total of six or eight aircraft lost.

SM: What time frame?

MH: This would have been mid-April of ’72 until late June, early July. Did I put
down more specific dates in that thing I gave you?

SM: Not that I recall.

MH: It was from April until like late June, April-May-June, so three months. I
think I counted one time, there’s a website and I want to say there were like 11 guys that
got killed from Da Nang while I was there.

SM: Did you know any of them personally?

MH: No. There was an avionics guy that got done in I think that first night that I
was there in the attack. Most of them were aircrew. But, I think four or five were not
flight crew and the rest of them were flight crew, and you could kind of tell from the
dates where one guy got done in, but you don’t lose one guy in the airplane. An F-4 has a
crew of two, so I think I looked at that one time and kind of figured it must have been like six or eight aircraft lost. On the day shift, a lot of times we wouldn’t hear what had happened noon to midnight.

SM: What were the biggest differences between Da Nang and Thailand, being stationed there and conducting operations from those bases?

MH: Well, you’re locked up from a personal standpoint. You’re locked up. You’re a prisoner in Da Nang. In Thailand you can immediately go downtown, interact with local personnel. Let me give you an example. When we got to Khorat, it was so crowded. It was completely packed. There’s an Army camp next door called Camp Friendship that had been a big depot operation during the height of the war, but it had been shut down and turned over to the Thai Army and I think they had basic training going there. Well, they took us over there, and they said, ‘Where are we going to put these guys?’ so they carried us over there, and they put us, the enlisted guys, in what had been civilian personnel little hooches. These were four room hooches with a latrine, pretty nice digs, much nicer than what we were used to. I think there was seven U.S. Army personnel left, a lieutenant and six MPs. It’s interesting, at Khorat and Camp Friendship, there would be one gate, the first gate you would come to would be Thai soldiers and they’re running the gate. Then, 20 yards or 30 yards inside was another gate and there’d be U.S. MPs would be there or on the Air Force side the Air Force, and Khorat was a Royal Thai airbase. Well, that strip of land 20 yards all the way around was Thai and the rest of it was ours, and they did have a few airplanes parked there. We were put over there and the Army refused to see after us because we weren't Army and the Air Force would not come over and check on us because we were on an Army installation, so we were basically on our own you might say. I’ll just call it decompression from coming out of Da Nang. We tried our best to party ourselves to death, and we gave it a valiant effort, but you just can’t drink all the booze and smoke all the dope. You just can’t do it all. We tried. That was a pretty good duty right there besides the fact that nobody’s shooting at you. Our workload dropped to...I don’t want to say nothing, but the workload got cut tremendously. Nobody’s looking at you. The Army and the Air Force are both denying that they want anything to do with you. They put us back as the 35th Tac.
Fighter Squadron there and we went back to work for our own supervisors and that kind of stuff.

SM: What about missions? Was there any difference between the types of missions you were preparing for and conducting or was it pretty much the same thing in terms of your actual job between Da Nang and Thailand?

MH: When we first got there, there’s not much difference. You’re flying a shuttle mission. They moved the 421st that I was part of out of… I don’t know how much they moved out but I know for a fact they moved the 421st to Takhli because John Delveccio, my roommate, he went to Takhli and they moved the whole 421st over there. I don’t know whether they kept any aircraft stationed at Da Nang or not but we would launch out aircraft that would fly east and bomb, I don’t know what, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, something. They would land at Da Nang, be rearmed, and fly back and bomb it on the way. Then they’d shuffle back and forth several times a day. So, it was kind of like a little thing going. I had been crewing this aircraft the whole time I was at Da Nang and I had become attached to it and set a record number of missions one month at Da Nang with it, and I took my job very seriously. My aircraft never missed a mission.

We’re there at Khorat and got some kind of little avionics problem and a panel was off on the left side of the stabilizer on the aircraft and the guy finished. He’s fixed the aircraft and I’m up there trying to put the panel back on. On an F-4 the panel, the structure of the aircraft, it’s like an insect, strengthen the aircraft within the body and put together with what you call high torque. Earlier aircraft, they had ridges or ribs on the inside to provide the structure and the skin was just stretched over it. But anyway, the panel has to be put back on and these panels have hundreds of screws in them. Our lifer, our head lifer, Sergeant Garcia pulled up down at the nose of the aircraft and was hollering something at me so I came forward and got off the aircraft to see what he wanted and he said, ‘I have to move to another office. Get in the truck. You’re going to help me move my furniture,’ and I said, ‘Sarge, I’ve got pilots in 15 minutes,’ he said, ‘Well you’re going to have to come move furniture,’ and I said, ‘Wait a minute, I can’t. I’ve got pilots in 15 minutes.’ He said, ‘No, I told you to get in the truck.’ I won’t say what I said. Anyway, he convinced me to get in the truck finally. I came to work the next day and I wasn’t crew chief on the airplane anymore. I had been moved to hanger. He knew how much
the aircraft meant to me. So, I went to work up in the phase hanger and put me to work for a black staff sergeant and I noticed the first day I was there Garcia came by and I saw him across the hanger over there talking, Garcia pointing at me kind of. The guy was nodding his head. Anyway, in phase hanger, what you do is take somebody else’s aircraft comes in and after X number of hours you have a certain number of jobs that have to be done on the aircraft. You have to pull panels off, check actuators, check lines, do stuff like that, and check it off. Well, I went to doing my job and the guy watched me for a couple of days. After a couple of days he came to me and said, ‘Now tell me what it is? Why are you here again?’ I said, ‘Hey Sarge,’ and I told him what happened. He said, ‘Well, I’ve been watching you and you’re a good worker,’ so he made me a dock chief. Now, I’m in charge of a dock now.

SM: I’m sorry, would you explain what that means?

MH: A dock is a spot in the hanger you might say, and a dock chief is over a couple of other people working in a dock. An aircraft goes in for a phase inspection and you have a stack of laminated cards and they’re numbered and you have to go through this deck and you have to comply with everything. The dock chief is responsible just like the crew chief is out on the line.. So anyway, after a week at work, now I’m a dock chief. I got two people working for me. I managed to get back on night shift, which is where I liked to be anyway. I got two pretty good guys working for me and we find out two of us could work and one can go take a nap. So, after a week, I’m sitting here, I’m a dock chief; I got it worked out where we’re getting our eight hours sleep at work and one person who rotates. There was a bomber, a B-66 bomber that was in the hanger and had been there for a long time and you go get in the bomb bay and go to sleep. So, that gives you more time to party. You don’t have to waste valuable time sleeping. This is the best duty I had overseas, so he didn’t mean to do me a favor, but he did. That was a big change in my work, when I came off the flight line, and I was working in that hanger right up to the time that it was time to go back to Korea.

SM: Was that something you ran into a lot, kind of as an obstacle, or did you witness very often the difference between lifers and draftees or guys that were not in for life, just in for a short duration?

MH: First termers, we called them.
SM: First termers, okay.

MH: First termers or lifers. Yeah, generally speaking, there wasn’t too much hostility between officers. We didn’t have that much interaction with officers. We had interaction with lifers, and some of them were great guys, some of them were great guys, and some of them were double-barreled assholes. It just depends. It just depended on what kind you got. They could stick up for you and do the right thing and make life tolerable or they could be part of the problem.

SM: Were there any other interesting or noteworthy incidents while you served in Thailand? Anything you wanted to discuss?

MH: Before I went to the hanger, we got this guy, and he was like a 20-year captain. He is a goof up, little short hair cut, and he is a goof up. The chiefs don’t like him because when he goes to take off, bad pilot, would dump fuel on take off; reach over and be dumping fuel because he’s not a skillful pilot, and somehow that helped him, although I don’t know exactly how. What I know is that after you do that in your aircraft, eventually you’ll develop leaks at the dump valve and it creates work so nobody likes him for that. So he’s out there and he goes to take off and he breaks ground and about time that he would be dumping fuel, all of a sudden the entire payload of ordinance comes off the aircraft. It’s still on the pylon, so he reached over there and next to the fuel dump is a little switch, very similar to it, but its safety wired down. It’s got this copper safety wire, which means that you have to make a conscious big, strong effort to break the safety wire to get to the switch. So, this guy’s like 50 feet off the ground, halfway down the runway, and all of a sudden here comes all of the bombs off the airplane. The ordinance dump switch, he hit it, and the pylons, with these bombs attached, go bouncing end over end down the runway, and after a couple of times the bombs start coming off the pylons and then after a few bounces a few of them, or three of them, went off. That was pretty memorable. So he circles around and there’s two parallel runways there. He lands but he’s got these big holes in runway number one and of course by the time he got in and taxied to a stop the wing commander, the base commander, everybody and his momma was out there. He swore he didn’t touch nothing, he didn’t do it. It was a bad switch. The aircraft does have a squat switch as soon as you break ground. It’s designed to disarm your ordinance on the ground, and as soon as you break ground that switch is
no longer… anyway, he claimed it was a malfunction. They tore that aircraft down to
nothing, put it back together, there was nothing wrong with it, and about a week later the
base commander ordered that aircraft off his base and that pilot to take it back to Korea.
That was probably the most memorable thing that happened at Khorat as far as at work.

SM: Well, are there any other incidents in terms of your service while in Thailand
that you wanted to discuss?

MH: No, I enjoyed it. I went down and tried to put in for a COT, Consecutive
Overseas Tour, but I was already too late. When I got back to Kunsan, I was a short
timer. As a matter of fact, they were getting ready to send me back to Kunsan so I could
DEROS back to the states. If you look at my military record, I was never in Thailand or
Vietnam. The only thing I really have to prove it is that they were holding out the tax on
our paychecks while we were in Vietnam, which is wrong, and they said that they’d make
it right when we got back to the states. So we got back to the states and there was a guy
that had been with me. We reported there at Reese. When we processed in there we
asked about that and the guy said, ‘What are you talking about?’ He showed us our
records; we were never anywhere but Korea. I couldn’t fight them, so I forgot about it.
But this guy I was with, his father, had worked as a campaign worker for John Stennis,
the Senator from Mississippi, and he called home and told them what they said and we
went to work… this was not like our first day at work because we were at work. You had
to process in. We’d been there about a week. So, when we went to work the next
morning we were told to go back down to personnel, and when we went back down to
personnel, oh man, they couldn’t do enough for us, ‘Want a cup of coffee, Sarge?’ They
gave us letters that indicated that we had served in a combat zone from such a date to
such a date and we ended up getting our money back. I’m sorry, I forgot where I was
going with that. Oh, I know. I was going to have to go back to Korea to go back to the
states because I was always in Korea, if that makes sense, and they were already cutting
orders for me to do that and then they decided to pack up the entire squadron and we
went back to Korea and I think I was in Korea about two weeks and then it was my time
to DEROS back to the states.

SM: Where did you arrive when you came back to the United States?

MH: San Francisco, a commercial flight from Yokota, Japan.
SM: What month was this again? What month and year did you leave Thailand?

MH: I actually got my tour cut short. Korea is a 13 month tour and Southeast Asia is a 12 month tour, and we’d been in Southeast Asia for more than half the tour so they cut us back to 12 months, and I’m thinking I came home just about the election time, which would have been the first week in November, or maybe the week after the election, something like that, and then I reported out at Reese. I spent my 30 days and I reported in the middle of December, something like that. Operations were real slow because pilots had gone home for Christmas. I came into San Francisco and I got there and midnight, something like that. I heard people talk about that people protested or talked ugly to them at the airports. I didn’t see it. I mean, the place was not very active and we went to the USO place there and I think we were able to go take a shower there or something and change clothes or do something. I’m pretty sure that that must have been when I caught flight around two o’clock in the morning out of San Francisco and 747 and I think there were like 15 passengers on it. We had as many stewardesses as we had passengers. I’m sorry, my wife was telling me something. They asked us, they came back and said, ‘Would you guys mind coming up to first class? There’s only 15 passengers and if we could put y’all in one spot, it would be easier on us.’ So I flew first class from San Francisco to New Orleans I believe is where that airplane landed. So I didn't have a traumatic homecoming at all.

SM: When you returned to the United States what did you think about the way things had been going here, anti war activity, Vietnamization of the war?

MH: Yeah, I knew very little about what had gone on. It’s strange; I hear a song to this day or see a TV show or rerun or something and I’ve never seen it, and its stuff that happened in 1972. that’s kind of odd. It’s like a missing spot as far as what was happening in the states. We got Stars and Stripes, and lets face it, I’m not sure exactly the integrity of Stars and Stripes. I don't think they were going to give us the full story on a lot of what was going on.

SM: No.

MH: You know, I wanted to be with my peers. I wanted to fit in, but I just never could get the hang of protesting. I mean, I tried, but I just couldn’t make myself think that we were doing the wrong thing so much. I just couldn’t get that thing going. I mean,
I was smoking the dope, and I did, I was a liberal for many years after that. But, I just never could quite get into the protesting the war or thinking that we were…if I had, I don’t think I could have gone over and did the duty. I’m not quite the hypocrite that I could have been that vehemently opposed to the war and yet gone and participated. I don't think I could have done that.

SM: How did you spend the rest of your time in the Air Force? How much time did you have left when you came back to the United States?

MH: I got there right before Christmas of ’72. I was supposed to stay in until July of ’74. I worked out at Reese. Reese is closed now I believe.

SM: Yes, sir, it is.

MH: Ever been out there?

SM: Yes, driven through, but there’s not a whole lot going on there.

MH: Well it was just covered up with T-38s back then, T-37s and T-38s. We got the lieutenants that just got out of ROTC and they came out there and its kind of a big let down after crewing the number one fighter aircraft in the world. We were the hot shots in the Air Force at that time. There were no F-16s or anything like that. We were it, and they got that swagger thing. There’s two kinds of airplanes; fighters and targets. T-38 was kind of a let down. I tried, and after about a week out there I volunteered to go back to Vietnam. They pulled my record and they said, ‘Oh yeah, Sarge, we can have you back in just a few weeks, but you’ll have to extend,’ and I said, ‘No, no, no, look at my record, I have two years left in the Air Force.’ They said, ‘Yeah, I see that, but you’ll have to extend,’ and I said, ‘Why?’ and they said, ‘Because almost every man on this base has volunteered to go to Vietnam.’ It was not good duty because it was here again, ATC was low on the totem pole for manpower. We were short manpower. We had a tremendous amount of workload because they were trying to turn every person in the world into a pilot it looked like. You would launch an aircraft out and before the aircraft taxied back in your next student would be standing there waiting on you. It was busy work. I’m from where there are trees, and I don’t know, I found Lubbock to be kind of depressing because when you turn 360 degrees and see the horizon, I don’t know. I was looking for a tree. We used to go over to New Mexico to the Lincoln National Park and we’d go skiing at Ruidoso and stuff just to get out of there to go see some hills and trees.
and stuff. I spent the next…I actually got out early. There was a big reduction in force in the Air Force. From April 1st, 1974 they threw thousands of guys out early. I say threw us out; they let us go early. I got out on the 1st of April instead of the 7th of July or whenever I was supposed to be out. So, what is that, a year and four months? I spent those 16 months there in Lubbock. I started off on base shift and I wiggled my way to night shift like I tried to do. I like night shift. I worked night shift for the [?] of that time. It’s not so hectic. The pilots are flying during the day and then you actually do the maintenance on the aircraft at night, so you’re the ones that are actually preparing the aircraft while day shift is off. I did a couple of extra little jobs. I was the NCOIC, noncommissioned officer in charge of the end of the runway check. What that is is after the aircraft is launched it taxis to the end of the runway before it takes off, you make a last check to make sure it hasn’t developed any kind of leak or to make sure that it hasn’t run over a piece of metal and cut a tire, any of that kind of stuff. You do a quick look over. I don’t really like being in charge. I’m not a supervisor at heart. I see it as being stuck with a couple of airmen out there working, end of runway check. I worked transit alert. They tell you to never volunteer for anything but they came and wanted a volunteer one time and something told me, a little voice, told me to volunteer and I volunteered. A guy that worked at transit alert had broken his leg and this is really good duty, transit alert.

SM: What is that, would you explain?

MH: When an aircraft that’s not assigned to a base lands at a base, it’s handled by transit alert. This is the follow-me truck deal, you’ve seen that, because this airplane doesn’t know where he’s at. He’s at a strange airbase. So, the truck goes out, follow me, you lead him to a transit parking area, and basically all you’re going to do is fuel him. I mean, you can do some maintenance on him if you have to but if it’s big maintenance, they’re going to bring somebody from that base to come handle it or something. So you get to wear a nice little white uniform because you’re not doing maintenance, you’re just pumping gas. I got to do that for about two months while that guy was in a cast, but I basically just crewed aircraft for those last 16 months and like I said, got out early and headed east.
SM: When you got out, what did you think about the Vietnam War and the service you had provided during that time period?

MH: Honestly I felt better about it when I came back from overseas than by the time I got through with Lubbock. The Air Force declared war on the airmen at some point. Look, you work in aircraft, you get dirty. At some point along the line they decided we were going to have open rank inspections at every shift change. This is when the war, I guess, was officially over or something. They decided we were going back to looking pressed fatigues. Everybody that came back from overseas was wearing your green jungle boots. No, you can’t wear those anymore. Don’t come in with those anymore. You have to go out and buy black boots, and they handed those things out like candy and you bring back five or six pair. Well now you’ve got to get into your beer money and go buy boots. What is the purpose of this again? So we can look like Air Force. So, there was a much different feel than overseas. There was a little more teaching and a little more hostility you might say between the lifers and the first termers, I found back stateside. Can you hold just one second please?

SM: Sure.

MH: You still there?

SM: Yes.

MH: Now one of the best lifers I ever worked for was there in Lubbock, but I don’t know, I just found it to be a little less mission oriented feeling. Does that make sense?

SM: Yes, sir.

MH: We were trying to get these…when they’re shooting at you and you’re sending the aircraft out with bombs to try to maybe drop on their head. To me, that raises everything a notch. Then, when they’re expecting you not to have any grease stains, and you’re a mechanic, I think we’ve lowered things a notch there. But, Lubbock was reasonably uneventful. I’d come in the military thinking of seeing my uncle, he’s done all right, 17 years old in and out in 20, retired at 37. I would have probably still reenlisted if they had given me the COT to stay in Thailand I’d have probably reenlisted. But, the air training command, ATC in Lubbock there pretty much convinced me to get out and try something else.
SM: Well, was there any kind of difficulty for you when you got back to the United States in terms of transitioning other than what you’ve already discussed in terms of dealing with some of the…well, in the Army it’s called Mickey Mouse, Mickey Mouse stuff?

MH: We call it Mickey Mouse here.

SM: Well in addition to or besides dealing with that, were there any other issues or problems that you had with adjusting back to the United States, back to being in the garrison military, either right when you got back or shortly thereafter? How hard was it for you to transition to being a civilian again?

MH: Well I can understand people that came back directly and then boom, they were civilians. But see, I had that whole 16 or 18 months, something like that, from the time I left overseas. I also had a transition period between Vietnam. I considered Thailand a transition period. Then, I considered of course Reese being a transition period too so I didn’t just end up on the street directly. I’ve heard of stories, a guy, he’s shooting in Vietnam and 48 hours later he’s back in the states a civilian. I can see that being kind of strange. I don’t know if we’re ever a good judge of our own psychological condition there. You know, I think the hardest thing for me was that I felt guilty about not feeling guilty. Does that make sense at all?

SM: Sure.

MH: My peers were against the war, they had their arguments they were laying out, they were adamantly opposed to the war. ‘Don’t you feel guilty?’ There were a lot of Vietnam veterans that were right out front as opposed to the war and everything. ‘Don’t you feel guilty?’ ‘No. I don’t really, but I think I should.’ So, I think I felt guilty about not being guilty. Of course I continued to smoke some illegal substances you might say there in Texas and I drank my portion. I came dangerously close to turning into an alcoholic almost, by the military. They were so afraid of grass that they pushed alcohol. I’m talking mixed drinks two for a quarter at happy hour, beer cheaper than coke, a beer bust, a quart bottle of blue label Smirnoff was a dollar and a quarter. I drank screwdrivers. The orange juice was two dollars so you didn't’ want to put too much orange juice in it. So I drank. It had certainly turned me into drinking. I don’t drink now. I mean, I buy a bottle of scotch and it lasts six months. It don’t mean I don’t ever
have a drink. As far as transitioning, I drank a lot there in Texas, and mouthed off to the
cops there in Lubbock and got beat up for it, just mouthing off because I was drinking too
much. I consider that my transition to getting used back to the states. But, Lubbock was
so different that it was like when I left Lubbock I had to have a transition period, get back
to the way it was in Alabama.

SM: What are the most important things you took away from your experiences in
Southeast Asia on a personal level?

MH: I’m not sure about that.

SM: Was there anything at all?

MH: Will you say that again please?

SM: Sure; what would you say is the most important thing you took away from
your service in Southeast Asia for you personally; not in terms of your professional
development or things that you learned, but maybe some things that you learned about
yourself, something you learned about human nature, something you learned about the
nature of war, maybe something that had a long term impact and effected who you are
today?

MH: Well I found out…that’s an interesting question. I don't think anybody’s
ever asked me anything quite like that. That first night at Da Nang before I found out I’m
a coward to a large degree. Rambo I am not. They were shooting at me and I was
looking for that bunker and I passed those guys. I was the first one in there. Now as it
went on it got to where it wasn’t that frightening, so I guess one thing is you get used to
anything I guess. I found out the most exciting thing that will ever happen to me ever is
to get shot at and missed. Nothing else; the birth of your child, nothing, college
graduation, nothing is going to compare to somebody shooting at you and missing you. I
don’t know if that’s the kind of answer you’re looking for or not.

SM: Absolutely.

MH: I did find out that I am capable of doing more than I had given myself credit
for before hand. It gave me a lot more confidence I think. I don’t believe I had a lot of
confidence in my ability. I was a C-B student, say, in high school, and when I went back
to college on the GI Bill I was a straight A student and I think it was more of a question
of just plain self confidence as something I didn’t have in high school but I did have later.
I don’t know if it was necessary to go to Southeast Asia to do that. I think a lot of that had come about from making it through basic training, making it through tech school, being a crew chief, feeling kind of cocky and good about that. I don’t know that it required me to go to Southeast Asia to do that, but just from a total military experience I think that’s what I’ve learned.

SM: If you could choose anything, what would you want your grandchildren to remember most about the way you served your country in Southeast Asia?

MH: My grandchildren?

SM: And your great grandchildren.

MH: What would I like them…that there’s honor in serving, regardless of whether it was good or not; that going and serving I think was right in itself. I’ll probably think of something later.

SM: Well if you do we can add it in if we want.

MH: What do you want your grandchildren to remember about your service?

SM: Yeah, ‘What did my grand dad do in Vietnam?’

MH: I don’t think I know, I don’t [?].

SM: We can come back to it. You gave a very good response I think. What do you think we should take away from Vietnam as a nation?

MH: I was more interested in Vietnam after I came home and I did check up on it a little bit, what did we just do, what did I just do kind of thing and in hindsight it appears to me that I don’t quite understand how we could have supported the French going back in an attempt to recolonize Southeast Asia or French Indochina after the war. I just don’t see how we could, with our history of overthrowing colonial powers, have supported the French in an attempt to go back and recolonize. I wish people would think sometimes, or I wish the government, before you become too entangled in a situation, would try to look at it from several points of view.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?

MH: I cannot really think of anything. I hope I haven’t rambled.

SM: No, not at all. Well thank you very much. Let me go ahead and end this interview. At the very beginning we had discussed that the purpose behind conducting this interview was so that we could, that is Texas Tech University, the Vietnam Archive,
would be able to transcribe it and make the tapes and transcripts available to students and
scholars and people interested in learning about the war from your particular perspective
and I just wanted to reverify if that is still okay for you in terms of releasing this
interview to Texas Tech and the Vietnam Archive for the purpose of disseminating it.

MH: Sure.

SM: And I also stipulate that I release this interview. Thank you sir. Let me go
ahead and end the recording. This ends the first interview with Mr. Michael Hoffman.