Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Nick Cirincione. I am located in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Archive. Mr. Cirincione is located in Keller, Texas. Mr. Cirincione, why don’t you begin by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself and leading up to your employment at Bell Helicopter?

Nick Cirincione: I was born in New York City and about nine-ten years old my family moved from the city to the suburb, which actually was the second house on the block, in New Jersey because they built their own house and so we went from the apartment dwelling to homeowner and this is where I remained until I graduated from high school and doing things like delivering papers and landscape work and so forth and at the time I had no choice. If I didn’t have intentions to go to college, which I didn’t at the time, then I had to do my time in the military so I chose the Navy because I liked…my favorite uncle had spent time in the Navy during World War II and I said, ‘Hey, that’s what I want to do,’ and so by accident instead of being a shipboard electrician which I picked out as occupation and for training, they gave me electrician okay but it was with helicopters at Ellyison Field in Pensacola, Florida. Of course I join the Navy to see the world, and well, I saw Chicago for boot camp, I saw New Orleans, I saw Jacksonville, Florida, and then I spent the rest of my time, four years, the rest of the four years, three years equaled four was in Pensacola, Florida with two deployments aboard a carrier to Mexico and that was my tour of the world. So when I got out I decided, well, enlist or get out. I
decided to get out and see if I could...what I could do with myself and I can always go back in
and I got my A&P license...

SM: I’m sorry, what does the A&P stand for?

NC: Oh, Airframe and Powerplant which is a certified maintenance on general aviation
and that’s required for anybody that signs off their own work and it’s an FAA requirement so I
decided that would be the direction I’d go, continue my aviation experience from the Navy. I got
my A&P license and I said I wanted to stay with helicopters, I got introduced there in the Navy,
and still wanting to see the world, so I didn’t want to work in New York and commute back and
forth from New Jersey to New York so I sent a bunch of resumes out and these helicopter
operators and I ended up in Lafayette, Louisiana at the time was hiring, oh was it ‘64, and they
were hiring people coming in that had tours in Vietnam so they were getting experienced pilots
and maintenance folks from Southeast Asia and anyway they said, ‘Come on down,’ so I drove
down and worked for them and then another outfit in Grand Owl, Louisiana in steel helicopters
and they go long story short, I found out that Bell Helicopter by some friends that had already
left, Petroleum Helicopters, they were looking for reps to go in the field and one of their
requirements was go to Vietnam and so a friend of mine calls and says, ‘Hey, come on, why
don’t you hire in with Bell.’ By that time I waited a year and they wouldn’t talk to me so I had to
go to work with another helicopter operator there in Grand Owl, Louisiana for a year before they
would talk to me. I called up and said, ‘Okay, a year’s up.’ I went in for an interview. In fact,
Louisiana of course was the oil field and so I had military and commercial experience at the time
and I walked in for the interview. ‘Okay, you’re hired.’ So at that point I had used all my
background with the aviation experience and the license and I was hired on to Bell Helicopter to
be a field service representative. At that point, long story this as well, but I was supposed to be
going to Vietnam but they sent me to Brazil for a year. Come back and they say, ‘Well, you put
it off long enough. You’re going to put your time in, minimum of a year, in Vietnam,’ and I
said, ‘Okay.’ Now this was, I hired into Bell Helicopter in ’68. July ’68 between short run,
South America, I got to Vietnam 1970. That put me in Southeast Asia.

SM: Now why did you have to wait a year before going into Bell Helicopter for an
interview?

NC: Oh, because Petroleum Helicopter’s raising hell with Bell Helicopter saying,
‘You’re hiring all our people away,’ so the agreement was, ‘Alright, okay, if they leave your
employer for a year, at that point then we’ll interview him. Other than that, we won’t…’ see, before I decided to hire on Bell Helicopter there must have been at least four that I know of, four or five people that went and hired right on and all of a sudden they say, ‘Hey, we can’t handle this,’ so it was agreed between companies.

SM: And what exactly, what kind of work were you doing for Petroleum?

NC: Maintenance. They put me in their depot for about six months. They brought them in for overhaul and training, and after they felt comfortable with you they put you on...they had about, oh, I guess ten bases at the time on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana working oil field, ten and five, seven and seven. Had more time off than I had money then and so before they put you by yourself at one of the shell pads for crew changes, they want to feel comfortable that you’re going to work out, so they sent us off. Also I volunteered for sling jobs where they would take the helicopter on special contract for hauling, doing work for the power line people, putting up aluminum towers or hauling stuff or construction job with helicopter air lift, and so that kind of broke up working within the oil field. That was pretty interesting and I always wanted to get around...and stringing wire, hooking up on these power companies. We’d take the wire and then we’d string it up on the poles and then they’d hook it up and that saved a whole lot of work. Also off the Gulf Coast they had a lot of marshes. They had hurricanes knock down some power lines so that was another operation I volunteered for and they were bringing the crews out everyday and bringing them in in the evening and then during the day bringing whatever they needed or hauling stuff so that was pretty interesting. I didn’t think I wanted to be on the Gulf Coast doing that forever. I still wanted to see the world, and so Louisiana wasn’t the whole world. So being young and adventuresome I said, ‘Well, I guess Vietnam will get me on the other side.’

SM: Right. Now what about in Brazil? What kind of work were you doing there?

NC: I was assigned with the Brazilian Air Force. In fact, I was the only American on the Brazilian Air Force base. Didn’t speak any Brazilian, Portuguese, or Spanish. I got to the airport and the area rep was supposed to meet me, he didn’t show. So, about an hour later and there I am with my bags at the airport, and no Portuguese and he showed up. They bring me down to the Brazilian Air Force Base; you know it was the USA handshake mission, map mission out of Rio. They drive you down to the Brazilian San Paulo, then on to Santos, Santos is to San Paulo what Miami is to New York. It’s their beach area. So they drive me down there
one night in San Paulo and then they drive me to the base, the Air Force base, Brazilian Air
Force base, and they drop me off with my bags and so we met everybody, we’re having lunch,
and they say, ‘Well if you need anything, call.’ Well, if you’ve ever tried to call anybody in
South America there’s no English and the phones didn’t work too good in the ‘70s, ’69 I guess it
was and that was kind of…anyway, I survived and I learned to speak and to understand Brazilian
Portuguese. I went to school, found out there was an American school, and got to know a lot of
people and so I survived the thing. I found an apartment. That was my first overseas experience.
Boom! I figured I was a survivor because I made it through that. Then I didn’t want to come
back and they said, ‘No, the contract’s over.’ That’s when they told me I’d delayed my
departure to Vietnam too long, ‘It’s time for you to go.’ I mean, I didn’t delay it. They assigned
me to South America.
SM: Now did…what kind of aircraft were you working on in Brazil with the Brazilian
Air Force?
NC: It was equal to the…well, really it was a commercial 206 which was actually what
the Army called the OH-58 and also they had some Hueys, UH-1H’s and what happened was
they had sent them to Bell for school, for training, and it was a government map program,
handshake I guess you call it, and part of the package is you send a rep down with the
equipment. That’s where I came in. I met some of the people there at Bell that were going to
school and then I met some more people but there was only two people on the Air Force base
that spoke English, good technical English, so I worked through them and the rest was Brazilian
Portuguese and it’s not the same Portuguese as in Europe but the same like the Cajun French is
not the same French you go to Paris, now, but it was a mixture. That was quite an experience. If
I had known what I was going to get into I probably would have…but I didn’t know, so I
survived.
SM: What were the hardest things to adapt to in Brazil?
NC: The language. The language from the point initially. I ate…I forget how long, I
could order at the restaurant Filet Mignon Confritas and Brahma Chops, which is steak and
potatoes, fried potatoes, and beer. I got so sick and tired of eating the same thing and then I
finally decided I got to learn some more about this, this is in town, the language. But, I ate at the
Air Force base there, that wasn’t a problem. But once I got past that and I learned a few words,
then I met some friends, it got easier. But there’s a culture difference. Also, if you don’t use
your language a lot, you start losing it. I mean, not losing it but you have to think harder, the
names of things because you’re using very little of the English basically and then you’re thinking
of a word and you say, ‘Oh, what was that?’ And the loss of communication, of course you’re
dealing with a lot of people that are talking and most of it you don’t understand. I was
determined. But technically they were pretty good. To the interpreters, they did real well
surprisingly.

SM: And what about the, I guess, the maintenance aspects of the helicopters you were
there as a field representative for? Any particular difficulties working in Brazil in terms of the
aircrafts themselves or were they well suited to the climate and the stresses they were put under?

NC: The aircraft was suited, it was tropical, but Bell helicopters operate all over the
world and that wasn’t a challenge. The climate wasn’t a challenge, it was, well, they set up a
school local and so I work with the people that were going to give the classes to translate from
English to Portuguese if they had a question. There was one interesting…well also we wrote
bulletins if we found something that was important they had a process where they can write the
bulletin, let everybody know there’s a problem here, and one of the funny things that happened
was he was trying to translate this thing about fuel and fuel contamination and process and
procedure and what to watch for and all this, and he got to this word that said, ‘Gas farm.’ Well
he looked it up and the translation, gas, and then farm, farm is where you grow food and I said,
‘Yeah, but they use it in the terms of tanks and facilities,’ and so we had a talk about that so he
could understand what they were talking about so I thought that was kind of unique. A lot of it,
when you start translating, literal translations don’t necessarily work out and so it took some
explanation. He converted it to something that would make sense to him and anybody else
reading his writing.

SM: Did you encounter the same problems with technical names of certain parts of the
helicopter and things like that, that these names, the specific names given to certain parts of a
helicopter might not lend themselves to easy translation to Portuguese?

NC: Yeah, that’s exactly right. In fact, the same thing happened in the Middle East, but
that’s another story. What happens is you’ll see a translation, say like swash plate right? Be
writing along and then all of a sudden swash plate in English and that’s the way they overcame
it.

SM: So they just went ahead and used the English?
NC: They just put in the English word and didn’t try to…we have the same problem with
the native Americans when they’re trying to tie in some technical terms it doesn’t lend itself very
well so what they did was just write along any language everything would work until they got to
the technical term and they just stuck it in there. They said, ‘Okay, forget it.’
SM: Okay. So technical English, but native language and everything else.
NC: Excuse me?
SM: Technical English, but native language and everything else? They’d use their
native language in describing all the other things?
NC: Oh yeah, because this info that they were translating was going to Brazilians and
most of it, there wasn’t that much English that I could see. In fact, downtown, I’m telling you,
there wasn’t any English that I could find to speak of. A little bit here, a little bit there, but
nowadays, whenever they send a rep to a country, they try to get someone that’s either from that
country and wants to be a rep or has the language skills. Then, they were more…in the ‘60s,
they sent you out. So the thing about being a rep, you got to be an individual that can stand on
your own two feet and be independent and be able to hold your own. But, if you need directions
all the time, you’re…
SM: You’re lost.
NC: You’re going to be lost because it won’t be there and communication is not always
the best because today’s world with the internet has improved things. As long as you can plug in
some place you can get a message out, but then there’s the phone and that was terrible. Not only
was the language a problem, but the phones were horrible. I’m sure they’ve improved since
then.
SM: Were there any lessons or was there anything that you took away from your
experience in Brazil that was important when you got to Vietnam?
NC: Well let’s put it this way; the introduction, not a visit, but living in someone else’s
culture, probably helped me adapt in Southeast Asia a lot better than…because that was my first
shot. So I think that was my first introduction to culture shock, not in the sense that I got
shocked out, but just trying to make things work. The frustration of language and your day to
day activities and trying to figure out how they function and it’s not exactly your interpretation,
probably helped me when I got to southeast Asia and all the countries that I visited thereafter. It
proved to me that I was adaptable, I survived it, and I left with a nice letter of which you’ve got a
copy in my resume package from the Air Force mission general who got word from the Brazilian
Air Force, his counterparts that they liked the service that was provided. Let me tell you, you
drop in the middle of an organization and you’re the only American and all of a sudden you got
your bags and its, ‘Well, if you need anything we’ll see you,’ and they left, it’s a pretty neat
experience for someone who’s never been overseas, but it forced me to adapt and of course
under the tension of making it work and I gained a lot. Yeah, I would say from the cultural point
of view that was my introduction for future adaptations and learning there’s more than one way
of doing something and it’s not always the American way but it works.

SM: How about technical lessons? Any particular issues in dealing with technical
problems or technical aspects?

NC: Technically, let me say this; we did not translate the manuals. You used the
manuals that were printed for the aircraft. That would have been a nightmare I mean from the
sense of misinterpretations so it’s easier to read…well, what am I trying to say, sometimes if
you’re trying to talk to someone and you’re not good in that person’s language, speak your own
language and let them listen to what you’re saying. If they know a little bit about English then
they’ll try to talk in their language because you’ll probably botch it up so bad there’s no hope.
But as far as the aircraft, we use nothing but the English manual. That’s the only way to make it
feasible because you’ve got a translation that may cause a real problem. It would be better for
them to struggle through on the official manuals than it is to convert it to theirs and like you just
mentioned earlier, there’s a lot of words don’t exist and by the time they get through trying to
twist it around to make it understandable to them they have lost the whole ball game. So the
problem of technical, but the way you do that in reality, if you got something, a bulletin or
something in English and you’re showing something, go to the aircraft, put
your hand on it. Don’t just point. If you say, ‘Well this little widget over here,’ you got to put
your hand on it. You got to grab it so that he knows that’s really what you’re talking about.
He’s not looking someplace else, and physically show and tell. That will work and then they’ll
correlate that to the words or the book or the figure, whatever. It takes a lot of patience, this is
not a…you know, like here, 90 miles an hour. You got to slow down, back up, and then try to
see if they got, if they’re doing things. Kind of walk around and see what they’re doing and if
you think they’re doing something wrong you’re going to have to nicely get someone to help you
to see what’s going on because sometimes they go…you know, it’s just a process. It just takes a
little longer. But as far as technically, I didn’t see a big problem mechanically because the ones
that were working the maintenance obviously…a lot of them have been to schools and some of
them been to the States, and some of them go back. There’s been a lot of interaction so I was
comfortable. I’d flown in their aircraft and some of their aircraft was pretty old they had at the
time in the ’60s, they had some World War II aircrafts still flying, but of course there’s always
room for improvement. And their budgets were, if you think our budgets were bad, theirs was
terrible. All their money went for the equipment and then the rest was second priority.
SM: And did you work exclusively on helicopters or did your work also include fixed wing
aircraft?
NC: No, just helicopters.
SM: Just helicopters?
NC: I was there for Bell Helicopter.
SM: Period?
NC: As one sergeant wrote down, ‘Representante del fabrico del Bell,’ and that’s
representative of the manufacturer of the company.
SM: Okay, all right, so from Brazil I take it you went from Brazil back to the United
States and then from the United States to Vietnam?
NC: Yeah.
SM: Did you know exactly where in Vietnam you were going?
NC: Well, let’s see, yeah, Vung Tau, and they said, ‘Gee, we need someone to be an
instructor over there at Vung Tau,’ and I said, ‘Oh, okay, are you going to send me down to the
training school to learn how to be an instructor?’ ‘Well it’s kind of urgent, we need to get you
going. Do you really need that?’ you know they kept asking me, ‘Do you really, really need
that?’ I says, ‘Well, maybe I don’t,’ you know? I’m leading into something here, you know the
old way and even today the sense is throw the baby in the water and see if they can swim. Hey!
It swims once again. Obviously over a period of time, X number of people washed out and they
expected you to be pretty flexible and you were tested and it was you. You’re on sight with a
customer, something goes wrong, it’s you. That’s it. So it was easy to sort out the heat from the
shaft. So I went there and got with the instructor that was there and we went to the [?] and
helped me along and then I was up on the platform. But of course, the only thing was lacking in
the technical, the exposure to the model and the Bell training, they ran us through six months of
school in and out of different models and also working military helicopters and commercial
helicopters hands on all helped. You couldn’t possibly be a field service rep if you didn’t have
any hand on experience. How are you going to relate? I mean, it just don’t work very well, and
so the real survival factor was the fact that all the schools in conjunction with my hands on
experience came together so what was missing as far as the instructor was the platform
experience and that’s communicating to this group of GI’s. Well come to find out, it wasn’t that
much pressure from the sense of it was an excuse for them to get out of the field and in Vung
Tau which wasn’t a bad place to be and they had opportunities for R&R, so they liked to come
into school and refresh because they weren’t on the battle field and it was a peaceful place with a
beach and they could relax some. They weren’t in there to give the instructor a hard time, either,
so it all worked out. But, what I did was see, here I am in Vietnam and I don’t know all the
problems and all the issues there so I turned it into a session of ‘Let’s…’, towards the end, I said,
‘Let’s share information. If anybody’s had some maintenance problems, why don’t we share
with everybody else?’ Well guess who else was learning? So I went to X number of classes that
way so I’m hearing all the stuff they’re complaining about so we all got up speeded on current
issues and that kind of worked out pretty good.

SM: Now, when did you actually go to Vietnam? What month and year?
NC: I went to the in country with AMTAP they called it, I forget what the acronym
stands for but I was in country in February of ’70 and I was in the AMTAP school to April of
’70.

SM: And this was at Vung Tau?
NC: Huh?
SM: This was the school at Vung Tau?
NC: Vung Tau. The story there is one day I get a phone call from Saigon, a supervisor,
and he says, ‘You know, we’re having problems in Da Nang,’ and this is going back to what I
told you that everybody makes it, right? A guy by the name of Kaneoeoe from Hawaii was a rep.
The, oh I forgot how high it went, they said the customer, the top level, has asked for this person
to be removed and, ‘We think we want to send a new one.’ I said, ‘Well, I guess I’ll…the low
man here, just got in country, I guess I’ll go,’ so I just said, ‘Okay,’ and that was it.

SM: So you spent two months at the school?
NC: Huh?
SM: You only spent two months at the school?
NC: Yeah.
SM: Okay. What were the major lessons as far as when the soldiers came into the school and you asked them, you know, what kind of maintenance problems are you having? Do you remember some of the major problems that they were having with the helicopters in Vietnam?
NC: Well sure. It sticks; things that you’re interested in stick. At the time I was trying to get my feet on the ground and so that helped. When I went up to Da Nang, of course, then I was with the operating unit with the real aircraft and so all these things come together and every operation, the oil field, like I worked when I was with the Navy in Pensacola, was a training environment. That’s one environment. Then, down in the oil field, the oil patch down in Louisiana, that’s another environment and each one presents different maintenance issues or problems or a way of operating and Vietnam of course was a war zone and that was a different environment. So, you just try to feel out what reoccurring problems that they’re having and then you can help where you can and report back to the factory and so forth. But that, I guess it was good in retrospect to go through this process before I went to the operating unit because it made me better prepared.
SM: But what specific things?
NC: Huh?
SM: What specific things did soldiers tell you were problems with helicopters in Vietnam? Do you remember the specific things that they said? You know, whether it was maintaining certain electronic components or maintaining hydraulic systems, whatever? Were there specific problems that you remember?
NC: You mean things that stood out?
SM: Yeah, that stood out that were kind of common amongst the various soldiers that were going through training that you helped them resolve.
NC: Well one thing that’s common in Desert Storm, any place you got sand or loose soil, you get main rotor/tail rotor erosion and there’s nothing you can do about it. You just, when you reach excessive then you’ve got to replace things and the engine inlets, they have to have screens or something to filter out the dirt because then you’ll have erosion of the engine and over time you start losing power so that was common. Like on the Gulf Coast in Louisiana, you had salt conditions where you would wash and preserve the engine every night. That’s a corrosion
problem. So those would be the things of environmental adding and of course with all the sand and dirt and so forth, but we had some problems with honeycomb panels separating and then there was some field fixes for that. But, nothing that I remember that was earth shaking but things that I needed to know depending on the operation and what they were doing. So we shared information back and forth. Sometimes a person has an incident and you never hear of it again because we just isolate it. They don’t constitute a trend or anything.

SM: But what was the biggest problem that you remember that an individual or unit encountered?

NC: Well, okay, like I mentioned, erosion of the main and tail rotor blades, engine power, in fact in the early days of Vietnam you know these engines didn’t have all the power you needed and in the way they loaded them up, you know, everybody piling on. They think it’s a truck you know? I don’t know if you heard any stories but on the Charlie models or the Marine Corps E models, they were underpowered. It just, you may, if you’re going ground hovering and you’re scooting along and then stories of guys running along side the helicopter, get some forward air speed, and then jump in and then try to get enough forward air speed and then pull it up because just a straight hover and then a forward flight, especially in the summer when it’s in like Texas in the summer when it gets 100 degrees and so you lose a lot of power during those high heat conditions. And of course, if you load it up too much and sometimes I guess in an emergency you got people piling in there, the pilot’s really on the edge trying to keep that thing from having an accident. But, later on, the horsepower went up and nowadays very powerful engines. I mean, we’re not talking like we did in the early days of Vietnam. Like the early Hueys were, you know, a lot of machine and small engine. I mean, the engine manufacturer spent a long time increasing the horsepower and then we went to twin engines. Nowadays, most of them are all twin engines instead of single engines.

SM: So one of the biggest problems with the early Huey…

NC: Excuse me?

SM: One of the biggest problems with the early Huey in Vietnam was that it was underpowered, not enough power?

NC: Yeah, I would say. You need a lot more skill as a pilot to fly them safely. You really had to watch what you were doing. It was the seat of the pants.
SM: Do you remember about what time frame Bell started to redesign the power plant for the helicopter and make it a stronger engine, a better engine to deal with the combat environment and the heavier loads?

NC: Well…

SM: Did it happen during Vietnam or after Vietnam?

NC: Well, the development of these more powerful engines actually happened…it takes a long time to redesign an engine and certify it, but it was more towards the end. These things really didn’t come into production I guess until the ‘70s but it didn’t really get out to the field because when I got there in ’70 they were still flying the Marine Corps E model, the Army C model. Now those engines were upgraded, but they still needed a lot more power but definitely an improvement from the beginning. But, the real powerful that we’re talking today, twin engines, like Desert Storm. Oh, that’s the powerhouse that they needed in Vietnam. Everyone said that.

SM: Are you talking about the Black Hawk?

NC: Huh?

SM: Are you talking about the Blackhawk? What aircraft are you talking about that was used in Desert Storm? What helicopter?

NC: Oh, the W for example. Well, they went from the AH-1G and then there was variations and then the T model and the W and now they got the X and the Y. But the Cobra, let’s put it like this, everybody recognizes the Cobra, the G model on up to the W that was used in Desert Storm, that’s the powerhouse that they needed. It was twin engine and plenty of power and that’s the one that would have been nice in Vietnam, but all this wouldn’t have come about if it wasn’t for the war effort. That prompted a lot more R&D and a lot more funding to develop these more powerful machines. But, they did very well considering…and the Huey of course, that thing is considered the gooney bird of the helicopter world and they’ll be around for a long time somewhere, doing something.

SM: So when you went up to Da Nang, this was I guess in April, May of 1970?

NC: Let me see, okay, I went up to Da Nang from…well actually, with the Marine Corps was April ’70 to June of ’71. I was there when the Marines left and then they moved me and we’ll get into it a little later I guess, they moved me over to Red Beach with the Army from April ’70…wait a minute, hang on a second, oh ’71 to April ’72. But when I got up there, here I am
replacing someone who didn’t, when he got back, he was going to be laid off and all they said
was that I was up there to replace him and then he left. So here I come behind a rep that didn’t
work out, so there I was with the Marines. I went from living in Vung Tau which was at a nice
apartment there facing the, what the hell gulf was that, China Sea, South China Sea, and in a
cement cinderblock typical Southeast Asia building apartment which was nice, to living on the
beach with the Marines in a hooch which is nothing more than a tin shack with sandbags,
surrounded with sandbags or ammunition boxes full of sand all around it in case there was some
rockets come in that sprayed some shrapnel but none of these beach houses or hooches they
called them would have taken a direct hit but in every one of them had a pit where you could go
into if in fact something was coming. So I went from up town to shack. We worked seven days
a week and they allowed us one week, well five days, two weekends, something like that, of
R&R where we wanted to go. So, I had a job to convince them, I had to develop a rapport with
the customer because now they’ve got a bad taste in their mouth, and show them that I was there
to help and so the process began and I had to give some classes. Turned out there was some
lacking in things and so I found things to help them and got on their good side and so it all
worked out but it’s a tense situation when you come behind someone who’s had a problem.
You’ve got to over come this feeling and this tension and get them on your side. That’s part of
being flexible, I guess. Like I say, if you don’t have the right psychological makeup and
communicate well or something going for you, then you may not be the right type for being a
rep. Only problem is you get pretty independent. Your boss is halfway around the world. It’s
your show for right or wrong, and so we have people that have been in the field too long and
they come back in the office and I can tell you there’s a cultural shock after being out for 11
years when I came back in the office to adjust to all this control; reporting to, keeping…I kind of
felt like I was incarcerated. I had freedom to function and operate on my own, and then all of a
sudden I have all this reporting to do and it was about a six-month adjustment getting back to my
culture and then as well as the culture at work and some people never make it back. They go
right back out in the field and ‘I don’t want none of this,’ and they’d rather be independent on
their own. I needed to come back because I felt it was time to come back. But anyway, it
worked out and when the Marines left they sent me over to Red Beach with the Army and so that
was the other half of the story. They operate a little different. The Marines did a good job of
perimeter patrol at night and the Army didn’t do that and so everybody missed the Marine Corps
and how they seemed to tend to be more conscious of the perimeter. They used to have helicopters flying all night long throwing flares and kind of lighting up the area in case anything was going on. Of course, you’d always have sentries at the corners of the base, and that was at the Army too but they just didn’t have this act of helicopters flying around and throwing flares and whatever.

SM: Now in Da Nang with the Marine Corps, besides giving certain classes, what was your…in addition to that, what did you do? Did you help them troubleshoot problems and things like that?

NC: Oh yeah, we had some Cobra stabilization problems and we got through that and if a question comes up, they can’t find something in the book, or, ‘Am I within limits?’ Also I have access, we have access to Bell. We send communications back and forth and I get limits and okays and troubleshooting information and just working with the maintenance folks to get them flying and, ‘Is this safe,’ and ‘Do I need to replace it,’ and ‘This dash number, can I use this in lieu of that,’ and ‘I’m having a problem here. I don’t understand this.’ And, it was organizational maintenance, which was the field type and anything beyond that, we replaced the components and sent them in to depot. So it’s an ongoing process. You’re just working and living with the customer and they know where you’re at and also you have field information that you get continuous from Bell, the manufacturer, and a lot of times you get heads up stuff that’s coming. They have what they call service-engineering memos, which was advanced information. Eventually you’ll get the manual but in the meantime they were able to send it to us direct and we were able to assist the customer way ahead of time because the system’s so big and by the time everything filters down time has gone by, and also I can send out questions and get some responses from the factory on immediate situations. We’re the link…any organization, especially military, is so big and spread out so much, that eventually it all gets out there but they can’t cover everything so you’re the one they come to. You represent the factory to get some help and then also out of this comes field history for the company to improve the manuals, to improve the troubleshooting procedures, to improve the product, and so there’s feedback going back and forth. So it works, it works very well with the right person. If you got a personality problem, then you got a problem and they usually don’t last very long if the customer says, ‘Out!’ and the customer, basically, is always right.
SM: And that’s the company’s philosophy, Bell helicopter…accepts that as their philosophy, ‘The customer is always right?’

NC: They roll it up the chain of command and they go over to Bell and they say, ‘We want this guy out of here,’ you’re out. You really have to be on your toes. You’re being tested continuously and either you make it or you don’t and I can assure you there’s a number that didn’t make it. You know you’re satisfying a lot of people, or trying to, and communicating with your boss back here in the States, with the customer in front of you, and then his chain of command and it’s quite an experience. You learn a lot about people. You have to! You know, you can’t just go out there and fix the helicopter like you’re working in maintenance and then go home and forget it. You have to circulate at all levels, so it’s…I didn’t know exactly what I was getting into but I did want to see the world. Wherever I went, you know, Hub and Spoke, like a wheel, wherever I was whenever I had time off, then I would go to a different place. So on my own as a civilian is when I actually got to see the world. I guess I completed my mission. Then I wanted to get out after 11 years and then I been here at Bell since ‘68 when I left Iran. I spent five years in Iran.

SM: I’m sorry?

NC: Go ahead.

SM: I was just going to say to get back to your experience with the Marine Corps real quick, who did you interact with most in the Marine Corps chain of command there at Da Nang?

NC: Excuse me?

SM: With whom did you interact most in the chain of command, the Marine Corps chain of command? Was it the maintenance NCO or the maintenance officer?

NC: The key person in my life in reality was the maintenance officer. Yeah, he was the one that they would come down to to find out what’s going on. Yeah, you communicate on gatherings and everything with the CO and various reasons, but really the work of day is the maintenance officer. If he’s not happy with you, then you’re done and if anybody wanting to know how you’re doing within the military Marine Corps they’ll go down to the maintenance officer. So even though you got along good with the crew, the people actually hands on, you still had to satisfy the maintenance officer because he’s the key person. Also, you need his signature. There’s a monthly certificate of service that says basically the things that were done during the
month and then he certifies your work and then that goes back in and goes back to the company for reimbursement. So, there’s a lot of checks and balances here.

SM: So Bell helicopter would charge the Marine Corps for your service out there?

NC: Yeah. It was a contract, and the same with the Army.

SM: What was your daily routine like in Da Nang? You know, you get up at what time, and what was your average day with the Marines like?

NC: Well, we’d get up…well, there wasn’t no alarm clock. When we get up early in the morning, I guess if I remember right, it was seven-eight and go have breakfast and then we’d spend the day down at the hangar. We had an office down there and they knew where we were and then periodically we’d visit, you’d have a central place, and then you’d have more than one squadron to support and you would visit all the squadrons and then the maintenance officer, go down and see what’s going on, go look at the board and see what’s up or what’s down and if they’re down you want to know why, see if you could help out and sometimes people get over cautious and start taking stuff off that’s still serviceable and you have to put on your PR hat and chat with them and find some limitations in the book to show them that it really wasn’t necessary because the more they take off then it’s a parts problem and then it’s down for parts and you can control that. Sometimes we had a series of hydraulic servos, little leakage and they’re replacing them. Suddenly, they were out of servos and so we took a whole bunch of them down to the hydraulics shop and did a leak check by the book and found out that they were still serviceable so you have to do it public relations style and get it back in the system. Or, a guy will start changing rod end bearings and all of a sudden supply’s out of rod end bearings for the pitch link on the main rotor and then you say, ‘Wait a minute, that’s a lot of rod ends and it’s only got six or seven?’ ‘Oh yeah, well…’ so you have to overcome that person’s judgment in a nice way. Go over to the shop and start taking a dial indicator and for looseness and then convince everybody. The quality person is usually the one you have the worst time with because he says, ‘Well I condemned it,’ and you’ve got to show him and convince him that it’s still serviceable and next thing you know you got aircraft down waiting for parts. Whenever the fleet gets down to a percentage, I don’t know, they were all different, 70-80 percent, they want to know why because they got to report that to the front office and they say, ‘Why is one third of my fleet down? What’s wrong?’ Next thing you know, ‘Well, what can you do about it?’ and you get called into someone’s office, ‘What can you do about it?’ Also if there’s an accident, if it’s other
than straightforward it got shot or some kind of error, then they want to know. One day we had three tail rotors left the aircraft in the air so I find myself in the colonel’s hooch with all his CO’s there from all the squadrons and all these broken pieces in the middle of the floor at night and he’s calling Washington saying, ‘I got a problem, I’m not sure I understand it. We want to send some people from Bell to investigate,’ so I’m in there listening to this and I say, ‘Oh, this is great.’ Here comes the people from Bell and all they need to do is find out, ‘Well for God’s sakes, it was this, this, and this and that should have been caught,’ then I’m on the hook, right? So I says, ‘Oh boy.’ I couldn’t…it wasn’t anything that anyone could put their finger on. Well, they sent two people out of the field investigation lab, the head engineers, so I met them, went over to see the CO and then saw the pieces and then gathered up information or whatever. In the meantime everything’s settled down and things were working okay but as it turned out everything worked out all right. They found some things but it just wasn’t anything that anybody really overlooked or whatever as a series of things that could have contributed to it. They could never get their finger on it. But, then after that, everything was fine. But that’s an eerie feeling. You’re sitting there and he’s talking to Washington and saying, ‘Send the teams?’ Uh oh. There goes Nick. You get into these things, you know? You get called and someone says, ‘What’s wrong? What can you do?’ I guess sometimes they expect you to have magic but it’s not all magic but you do provide. It was quite a tour.

SM: What other interesting things happened when you were with the Marines in Da Nang?

NC: What’s that?

SM: What other interesting things happened with you when you were with the Marines in Da Nang? Any times when your area of operations was attacked or mortared or anything like that?

NC: Well, when you first come in the country and over to the Saigon office there and they introduce you and the first thing they tell you is that, ‘Well, you’ll learn the difference between incoming and outgoing,’ and I said, ‘Oh?’ ‘Well, unless you’ll be jumping in the bunker all day long,’ not all day long, but for no reason at all. ‘You’d look kind of silly everybody watching you, you know?’ But, you know, periodically, at night especially, there’s a lot of artillery and things going off at night but it’s outgoing and from time to time Da Nang had some rockets and mortars come in. We had a couple hit the beach where we lived in the middle
of the night and then hit the flight line, damaged some aircraft. Da Nang Main, which was
mostly Air Force, had that base got hit and then the city of Da Nang. It’s random, scattered. It’s
like I got a letter from home that says, my mother says, ‘Jesus! I read where Da Nang got
rocketed!’ Well, I go back and say, ‘You know, it’s just like an accident.’ If you happen to be
on the corner you know about it. Other than that, you’re going to have to watch the news and
read the paper like everyone else. The things they were throwing were very focused. You know,
they hit the runway and there’s a spot, some chips in the cement or (?) or whatever, blacktop, but
it’s not like a hurricane that covers 40 square miles and so it’s a very focused situation. If
something hit around the hooches and then wasn’t direct, then there’s enough sandbags and stuff
to deflect it. But, there’s always the possibility of something happening. The real mission, all
the civilians…it was civilians on contract doing maintenance believe it or not and it also was
field reps mixed in with the military or whatever, was the support base and from the support base
is where the air craft would leave to go on missions. These were the real action ones, we weren’t
subjected to that. Every now and then the Navy would come out and one day a destroyer was out
there just shooting away. I don’t know what it was shooting at this hilltop and you see some jets
in the background and the Army’d be carrying this artillery all over the place with their Chinook,
but we were basically in a secure area and the military had the mission. The real mission
belonged to the military. They figured the support end. They didn’t need to have all the troops
there just doing maintenance and that was the whole just of it. Once in a while you’d have
problems in town. We were allowed to go to town in Da Nang, we weren’t restricted. The
Marines were. They wouldn't let them go in but the civilians could. One day it was four reps in
a jeep. I guess that sticks with me pretty good. We were coming to this intersection. It was close
by China Beach, which was in country R&R center. Suddenly, we weren’t going no place. All
the traffic was jammed up and it was the mob there and we couldn’t back out. We couldn’t go
anywhere. So, way up front a vehicle or two took off and the next thing you know they’re
throwing rocks at it and then the people forces, they had M-16’s, and they were wondering
around in the crowd there and whenever a group of teenager’s form a gang, you know, where
there’s more than one and you have several of them gathered together we nicknamed them
cowboys for some reason. I don’t know how that starts. Just like the enemy was Charlie, you
know, every war has a nickname? Anyway, then this group of teenagers formed, cowboys, and
they started smashing windshields. We were the first jeep to get smashed and I’m sitting in the
passenger side up front and there’s just a bunch of glass and I’m reading my old report it said
that it got hit with a rock on the side and somebody was going to try to hit me with a bottle but
someone stopped him. They just went from jeep to jeep smashing windshields and eventually
the one behind us backed up which allowed us to back up. We just kept inching back and I think
I’m reading to refresh my memory. The jeep quit and I got nervous I guess. It cranked up and
we kept backing up until finally we could turn around. Then, we got on some communicator, I
guess it was radio or radar communications or what we called the base and they sent a helicopter
over to get us. We left the damn jeep and we did what we needed to do and then they flew us
back out from Marble Mountain, that’s when I was with the Army, over to Red Beach and from
that time on…it was during Tet which is their annual thing and that seems to be a time when a lot
of people get over active. We used the helicopter to get around and things quieted down.

SM: This was Tet of ’71?
NC: Huh?
SM: This was Tet of ’71?
NC: Yeah.
SM: Okay.
NC: No, it was January, according to the report here, it was January 30th…my report’s
dated January 30th, ’72.
SM: Of ’72? Okay.
NC: Maybe that wasn’t Tet, though.
SM: Well, it’s awfully close.
NC: Huh?
SM: It’s awfully close.
NC: No, what this was…okay, I got it. That wasn’t Tet. The problem was there was an
American that hit somebody, a civilian, and it riled everybody up and we got in the middle of it
and I want to say this; if anybody’s had the experience of being in the middle of a mob, you
never forget their faces. It’s not human anymore; it’s really weird. You can read all the, all the
change in their personality. People are motivated to do things that normally they wouldn’t even
think of doing. But anyway, we got out of there and during Tet, now that Tet came up, that
wasn’t Tet, you’re always on the alert and there was one time they were really expecting some
more problems because Tet, the biggest one that’s in the history books was Tet ’68. Right after I
hired on with Bell, that’s when I was reading ‘67-’68, I was reading about the TET Offensive
and that was pretty bad. But since then, it never matched anything like that one. I think it was
just disturbances. You get yourself in some really weird situations and you know, it’s a different
mindset being in a war zone. You go through a process of adapting and concerned about
everything and then you’re not concerned, and then all of a sudden it’s, ‘Oh well,’ and you’re
living or reacting on more of a daily basis than a long term basis. It’s just a whole different
mindset and it’s hard to explain but I guess it’s a situation where hopefully we don’t really need
to have to adapt. But, there seems to be one skirmish after another in the world some place. I
probably wouldn’t be anxious to repeat the experience, but I guess I’m kind of glad I went
through it and came back okay but you certainly learn a lot and reflecting on the whole thing and
then you wonder. The big picture stuff, you know, that’s always a question in everybody’s mind.
So, between the Marines and the Army, seems like the Marines are more…oh, how can I
say…they were a very tight knit group and they seemed to be more concerned on monitoring
the…or apprehensive about potential problems and so they put a lot of effort, like I said, into
patrolling the perimeter at night for example and other things. So when the Marines left, there
was some concern that that may leave a bit of a vacuum. Also, when I went over to Red Beach,
interesting little tidbit here; if I remember, Nixon had turned loose the bombers in Cambodia and
at night the B-52s, I guess what they called a saturation bomb, was so many bombs being
dropped in the far distance, not close to us, but way off someplace, it was a continuous rumble.
Someone said…and that went on for a long time. It was just a continuous rumble. Then
Highway 1 which went right up Da Nang and up towards the DMZ, well they started pulling
the…this is early ‘70s, right? They started pulling the troops out. Well all day long you see
these convoys, U.S. convoys coming down, trucks, going south, right? We’re thinking, ‘Holy
Christ, before you know it it’s going to be Red Beach and the DMZ…nothing between Da Nang
and the DMZ,’ and they said, ‘Oh boy.’ Well now Charlie’s going to figure out that he can get
froggy but turned out he never did. He never did a thing other than the normal harassment, you
know, let people know you’re still around. You still have a few things out. In Da Nang one
night, I spent the night in Da Nang, and in the middle of the night I woke up and a couple of
rockets hit…they had a storage area, a fuel storage area at the Air Force base, Da Nang Main,
and it hit one of the tanks and the whole place…the sky was lit up with this yellow flaming fuel.
I thought that was kind of exciting. I’ve heard rockets come into Da Nang a number of times and
it’s just a few and they slam in and the difference between the rocket coming in and a mortar, as described…the rocket you can hear. It just slams in solid. But the mortar sounds like a, someone said, like a big elephant foot, ‘Poof,’ and so you can tell the difference there. A couple of rockets hit the corner of a barrack, a two story barrack at Da Nang Main when I was there and yet people got hurt on that one. Not just the fire, it was the rockets. So, from time to time, some people did get hurt but it wasn’t…you know, what you see all the scenes in the actual missions, but they’d let us know they were there. The German hospital ship in Da Nang was interesting. I’ve got a picture of that in my album. They would take care of anybody no matter what. They didn’t ask for credentials, so all the…any Vietnamese that needed help was helped. Period. So whenever they were going to throw some rockets into Da Nang, they would let them know so they could go out to sea. Well, after a while the word got out, ‘When the thing is out, expect some rockets in Da Nang,’ and sure enough. The next day, it didn’t come back in. Well, it’s making sense, right? Well you know the funny thing; well, not the funny thing, but life goes on. There’s interruptions. I guess you could compare it like I saw on airport freeway between Fort Worth and Dallas here two weeks ago, no, a week ago; Saturday afternoon we’re coming over the hill and Holy Christ there was four lanes of traffic backed up. So, we went over to the service road and we saw two cars and a bubble gum machine and we thought, ‘Oh, well that’s got to be an accident.’ Well we drove a little further and there was five or six cars piled up. One of them had flipped and was up on top of this other one! I said, ‘Okay, now we’ve seen…’ and then we went and there was three more cars! Well, in the half-mile run, I don’t know, there were five, six, seven, eight cars. I don’t know what happened. Someone must have stopped short or something and caused the domino effect. Well, we got around that, we got into Dallas, did whatever, and then a couple of hours later coming back the other way the road was clear and everything was moving. Well, it’s no different…you know, my experience was they would cause disruptions in that one riot or they’d throw in some rockets or some mortars and do some damage, and the next thing life goes on. It just doesn’t come to a screeching halt. People still have to eat, work, and sleep. Then the locals, all these military bases, well they found a way of making money. Everybody had a hooch, had someone to do the clothes and take care of the hooch. They’d just come on the base.

SM: Did you have a Vietnamese person do that for you as well?

NC: Huh?
SM: Did you have a Vietnamese person do that for you as well?

NC: Yeah, the reps had one hooch, the Bell reps, and we had a, they called them mamasons. That was the term they called them. Then there was this one young boy that someone had hired and they just took care of the stuff. You can’t tell the difference you know, whether they’re from the north or the south. But, they sure liked the PX. You know, we’re from the land of the big PX you know and whenever the dump truck from the base would go out to dump, there would be a mob of people waiting to get their hands on the stuff. They used that for building materials and we get crates in of stuff and we throw the crates out and all that and they’d build houses with it. So, there’d be people fighting over that stuff. One day, there was this…entertainers would go from base to base. In fact, even Bob Hope showed up while I was there and he entertained the troops. You’d have Korean entertainers or you might have…they come from all over. You’d be…it’s unbelievable what goes on. Where do these people come from and how do they get clearances and how do they…I don’t understand but they show up and out of nowhere they set up in the club if there’s a club or on a flatbed trailer or something and they’ll entertain the troops. One day it was everybody was off and this one gal, entertainment groups, were all the way from the hanger. So here comes the local dump truck from Da Nang, you know, run by locals, coming over to the hanger to pick up the garbage. Well they realized nobody was there you know so I was up there with everybody having steak and beer, whatever, to have a break and we look over and yeah, they got the garbage all right. They started loading up the truck with everything in it so someone had to go down there and chase them off. They were helping themselves to the rest of the stuff to see what they could use.

SM: When you went from the Marine Corps unit to the Army unit, what else besides the…there’s a difference between the security. The Marines were more secure in terms of the patrolling…

NC: That was the impression.

SM: Right. And there seemed to be more unit cohesion in the Marine Corps than there was in the Army unit.

NC: There was more what?

SM: Unit cohesion?

NC: Yeah.
SM: There was more of the better morale amongst the Marines than there was amongst
the soldiers?
NC: You know they’re trained that way. They stick together.
SM: Were there any other major differences between the two?
NC: Huh?
SM: Were there any other major differences between the two?
NC: Well, the Army had the resources. They definitely had more resources and access,
too. The Marines operate…actually the Marine Corps is a lot smaller so their budget and
everything’s a lot smaller and they tend to try to conserve you know, although you know, there’s
things. The Army definitely had a bigger budget and more resources to work with and usually
they get a lot newer stuff.
SM: What about the proficiency of the technicians?
NC: The what?
SM: The proficiency of the technicians that worked for either side. The guys that
worked on the helicopters themselves. Were the Marines equal?
NC: I really didn’t see much dramatic, you know, I mean the Huey is a fairly simple
helicopter. Of course nowadays things get real complicated. They had civilians…well, okay,
there is…here is another difference that the Army had contract maintenance civilians there, U.S.
types, while the Marines did their own maintenance. Okay, there’s a difference there and I guess
the idea of that is unlike the Army, they’re expected to deploy aboard ship and you can’t have
contract maintenance. They may take a squadron like they do in the States for training and go
aboard ship tomorrow morning. They have to be self-sufficient. The tendency is they have to be
more self-sufficient and the only way to do it is you do it yourself. But the Army don’t have to
worry about shipboard per say as…of course you probably had stories where they hauled aircraft
for them but I’m talking about on the norm and so they brought in civilians. But the Army had
the mission. They went out on all the missions so that freed up a lot of people. But, their
organizations’ bigger and they got more maintenance to do and I guess it was economical for
them to do that. But yeah, I guess that would have been a difference. So I don’t know how I can
compare them. They function, they function very well. I didn’t see any major things but I just
thought about that as the fact that the Marines have to be self sufficient and so anyway. The only
way the Marines have relented, and the Navy come to think of it, now you’ve got my thoughts
going here, like Pensacola, they have contract maintenance for their primary helicopter trainers
and that’s simply because it exists in Pensacola and that’s it. They’re not deployable aircraft or
training aircraft and so they felt it was more economical. But, if you went out to the squadrons,
Navy and/or Marines as far as I know, they’re self-sufficient. Now in the depots, they got
civilians. All militaries I believe got civilians. Another comparison, okay, I’ll give you another
comparison then. Three stages; the Marines, when they first got there, landed on the beach in Da
Nang. That’s what they did, they stayed on the beach and they lived on the beach and this was
the Seabees that come in and do the construction and facilities. Basically it was tents and then it
went to hooches where they had metal roofs and just a wooden shack with a metal roof, and so
that was primarily how they all lived, including the CO. Now, you go to the Army, the facilities
are more. They’ve got more facilities and they put more effort into living conditions but still
living on the beach and basically hooches. Then you go to Da Nang Main with the Air Force on
State side. Two story wooden barracks, paved roads, I mean everywhere was sidewalks and all
and you think, ‘Holy Christ, where am I?’ Cam Ron Bay, did I pass through? I’m trying to
think, but I know it was a super facility. I think the Russians moved in after we left, or after
everything fell, but you go into the Air Force and they build things state side. It was amazing the
difference in the way they operate. They don’t have to go aboard ship and their intent was to
have all the comforts, I guess. But, it was like going on a state side base to be honest with you.
Now of course I got there in the 70s and it was a long time coming and after X number of years
all the facilities were built, but the…what was I going to say? The variety of people, of reps
from various companies, and my whole focus obviously is on the rep side and you had reps for
Cessna, you had reps for U’s, you had reps for like Lycoming, GE, Bell, Sikorsky, Boeing, and
the ones that make it in the field are like minded people and they’re all…I don’t know what it is.
It’s just there’s an attraction to go out in remote areas I guess or something. And you don’t, you
can’t be a person that’s fastidious or you mind getting your hands dirty or living in minimum
living conditions and things aren’t going quite right. I tell you what you learned in the hooch is
you always kept the food on one end only, never bringing it to your sleeping quarters. Well
you’re living on the beach, the roaches are all over the place so you learned very quickly that all
the food was in one corner of the hooch period. Before you went to bed you tried to wash your
face and hands so you didn’t have any residual food on you. Now, one of the things you did, you
left the light on and you kept the fan going to keep the mosquitoes off of you. Fans were a life
send. You may or may not have had air-conditioning, that was a big ball of steel, but the fan was essential. Well, when Nixon turned loose the B-52s and the troops were moving south, we said, ‘Well Charlie’s going to get an idea, he’ll figure he’s got easy pickings here,’ so me and my friend, the other Bell rep, and I haven’t told this story too much but it doesn’t matter now, but inside the hooch was a trap door and the trap door went into a sandbag bunker which was attached to the hooch. Normally if you thought something was coming, you had any warning, you’d have a place to jump in. So, we decided we’re going to start sleeping inside this bunker because we’re expecting some trouble, see. Well, you have the problem with the roaches. Now you’re not on a bed, you’re lying on the sand on top of a blanket or something on the sand inside these stacks of sandbags. So what we learned, or found out, and you talk about adaptability now, is if you lit some candles, we had two candles and they would last a couple of hours, if you lit some candles that was enough light to keep the roaches away. They wouldn’t bother you. So then, a couple of hours later the candles burn down and you wake up hearing little noises, scratching noises you know? Look, so you light a couple more candles and they leave you alone. I wonder how many people would put up with that? Sounds crazy, but we did! I guess that’s the height of adaptability. We didn’t run out of there and come home, we were putting in our tour I guess. The more I think about it, the funnier it gets. You learn a lot of things that you’re never going to find in the books at the school, but it’s just one of those…oh, and also, you latched on to a little Honda. Bought it somewhere, secondhand, thirdhand, fourthhand and basically that was most of your transportation. I drove in from the base into town in a little 50 cc Honda with six wheels going by and everything. One of them ran me into some sand along side the road. I said, ‘Uh-oh, I’m going to flip!’ Nah, it just slowed me down, but yeah, back and forth into town. I says, ‘Holy Christ, if I’d just thought of that why would I be doing that anyway?’ But I guess if you have to go to town, you have to go to town. Yeah, the Marines, they wouldn’t let them in town. That’s another…I forgot about that. And then they allowed seven days a week and then like contract or whatever they’d let us go for a week someplace. I went to Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Australia, where else did I go? Thereabouts, those are the big ones. On the Vietnam radio was all the advertisements for all these R&R centers and it’s not like World War II, you’re there for the duration and then you come back which led to the baby boom, but anyway…you know, where do you get…but I’m trying to think that you, well, if your Honda went bad and you need some fixing, it’s just like you take your car and you go down to the local dealer or the
garage in town there’d be a little shop and you run in there and the locals would fix it. I mean, I
don’t know where they got the parts from or how they did it, but they’d get in there and they’d
get on it and fix your Honda and pay them so much money.

SM: Well how much interaction did you have with Vietnamese people?
NC: What’s that?
SM: How much interaction with the Vietnamese people did you have?
NC: We lived…everybody lived on a base. Other than Saigon, they lived in town but my
rep experience there in Vietnam was on a base. Well no, Vung Tau was in this apartment that
we lived in, but we didn’t have…the dealings we had was mostly with Americans to be honest
with you. Other than on the periphery was the interaction in town or to get something fixed or
they would hire on to do the cleaning or whatever, you know? But it wasn’t a personal
experience. I don’t recall where there was, you know, getting to know people and their families.
I don’t remember any of that. There were probably more…most people did more drinking than
you would normally do in the States. Sometimes you need it to sleep, to relax. Sometimes you
get too relaxed. It wasn’t a good environment for an extended period of time. After a while you
have to get away from that, but I would think you…well yeah, some reps couldn’t leave it alone
after they left, I can tell you that. They become alcoholics. Not a high percentage, but a
percentage. You get too close to that stuff and they couldn’t let it go. Also, trying to keep your
own if you were married and going on assignment that’s hard to keep your family together.
There’s a very high rate of divorces amongst reps, the ones that stayed in the field. The ones that
made it work and kept it together, it’s quite a feat because you’d be gone so much. But there’s
always…I don’t know how to put it, but no matter where you go in this world, even the back of
Julius Caesar right, and the great wars, and the Greeks, and in the old West, right? There was
always the camp followers, I don’t care where you’re at, I don’t care what the circumstances. If
it’s a military action or if it’s a rough and tumble, even in Alaska right? You got these camp
followers that follow the troops, so if you think Southeast Asia was any different, no, I got news
for you. There was always lots of friendlies all over the world and I guess that’s life. It was all
voluntary.

SM: Were there any women?
NC: Huh?
SM: Were there any women field representatives that you were aware of?
NC: There’s always the camp follower. They seemed to come out of nowhere.

SM: No, I mean for Bell Helicopter? Did Bell Helicopter ever send a woman into the field?

NC: No.

SM: Okay.

NC: You mean while I was there?

SM: Yeah, while in Vietnam that you were aware of?

NC: I don’t think ever, no, not to my knowledge. I have seen since then, I think it was Lycoming or Allison or someone, I think it was Allison. They hired women reps. In fact, Bell has some, I don’t know if she’s still there, but an instructor pilot at the training school. Things have changed in the last 20 years. But at the time of Vietnam, I don’t ever remember any company that I’m aware of having a woman rep there. I was going to mention something here. You know, the opportunity to see the world and what turned out to be…I had no idea in high school how I was going to get to see the world other than that was my goal but it turned out to be that my magic carpet was the helicopter and by accident the Navy sent me to Pensacola to helicopter training squadron and that’s what started the helicopters. Other than that, I didn’t have any aviation anything when I went in the Navy but that’s the start of the whole scenario and then it turned out that I didn’t see the world with the Navy which was join the Navy and see the world. It didn’t work, but I ended up as a civilian on my own and the magic carpet turned out to be the helicopter.

SM: Now in all your maintenance training…

NC: Huh?

SM: In all the training you received in maintenance and everything else to work on helicopters, did you ever receive enough training to actually be able to fly the helicopter yourself?

NC: Well I have had my hands on the controls and when I was working with PHI we were flying out to the rigs and I’d go out, we’d have lunch out there. It reminded me of being aboard ship down on one of those rigs out there with the metal compartments and all that, and they let me have the controls but no. I didn’t get any direct pilot training although I was at the controls but it never was my desire to be a pilot to be honest with you. I liked the technical end and I guess that’s my bent but it’s quite a coordination. It’s not like flying a fixed wing, you
You’ve got both feet, both hands functioning. You got your hands on something and it takes a lot more coordination and close…you know, the fixed wing you get up and level off and set it up and it pretty much will stay level but the helicopter you kind of flying it all the time. Nowadays, of course all this automation and back up systems and all this other stuff they got, it’s probably a lot easier. I understand the V-22 surprisingly is a lot easier to fly than it looks. It looks big and lots of stuff but they say it’s really a dream to fly. I don’t know. You know, when you’re someplace, find the time, that’s what I did, to branch out. In other words, if…well here, you’re getting a lot of opportunities to travel. Some people go from the airport to the hotel to the meeting and then back. Well, if there’s time in route, take advantage of it. I always made it to whatever major city I got into, I made it to the museum to see what the heck’s going on to find out all about their culture and also the lay of the land. Some people I know, all they did was party. Well, you can do that anyplace really. So, I like to do more and so I did. The Australians were very friendly.

SM: Did you work much with Koreans?
NC: Huh?
SM: Koreans?
NC: No, I’ve visited…I think one time we went to their base but I didn’t work with the Koreans. I can tell you one thing; they had a reputation that the North Vietnamese wanted nothing to do with them. They were pretty fierce. They had an advantage over us. See, everything we did the whole world was monitoring and beating on us. They go out and do something, the media wasn’t interested. So, I understand when they had an engagement, they didn’t take too many prisoners, they just…and the word got out that they were a pretty mean bunch. But no one, the media didn’t pay much attention to them but everything we did was blasted all over the place. We couldn’t even sneeze without someone reporting it. Then, the TV, yeah, turn on the news and see what was happening, you know, I don’t think helped. But, I don’t know. I think the situation is very complex but I don’t think the evening news watching Vietnam helped things.

SM: Now you were in Vietnam at the height of what was called the Vietnamization of the war, which was the transition of the American forces fighting the war to the Vietnamese forces, the ARVN forces fighting it. Did you not work in concert with that goal in terms of
training Vietnamese maintenance people to work on helicopters that they’d be using once the Americans left and that kind of stuff? Bell Helicopter didn’t work with the Vietnamese as well?

NC: Well I personally was not involved with the VNAF in that mission. Some of the other people were. I remember them saying something, but I was with the U.S. Marines and the Army.

SM: Okay, but there were other representatives then working with the Vietnamese as well?

NC: Yeah.

SM: Oh, okay.

NC: I’ve heard conversations and talks, but me personally, no. You know, most of the experiences of the American GI over there other than there was certain ones that worked with the VNAF or the U.S. military that worked with what they called them…the tribes things…

SM: The Montagnards?

NC: Yeah. That probably, I would suspect was a more personal experience with the Asians than supporting, like my experience is mostly with Americans. So, I was more…the ones like…most Americans in my experiences was probably isolated from the personal experience. Well, we didn’t get out of it like some of the things I was hearing like at the conference. You learned after, yet it was happening and would have been known, but there wasn’t that kind of communication going on so you would probably get a different story than someone…now the advisors, the next conference you’re going to be inviting papers from the advisors?

SM: Right…

NC: Well those will probably be a lot of personal experiences, one on one they were dependent on each other for survival or whatever and that will make an interesting conference. I’ll try to make that one because I’m going to try to get a little bit more of what I didn’t get when I was over there. But that’s normal. Like in Tehran, Iran there were some Americans that went over there, they went to work, they lived in the apartments, they had gatherings amongst the Americans and in two years they went home. Well they didn’t mix very much, so you can get all kinds of stories depending on where you’re coming from. What’s happening now I guess is I’m getting the rest of the story, you know Paul Harvey, the rest of the story? Part of the story I didn’t get when I was there, I’m picking up the loose ends and so and people are wanting to talk about it. I’ve been talking to people at work and suddenly they’re surprised. I say, ‘Vietnam
Archive,’ and right away they want more information and yet this person hasn’t said bo-peep and then I find out, ‘Wait a minute, he went to Vietnam? Well talk to someone. He went to Vietnam? He’d be interested in that.’ So I’ve shared information from your organization.

SM: Great.

NC: The surprise is, even to me, is that hey, people are interested. They want to talk about it. Because there was a long time, you came home and that was it. You just don’t bother with it. Leave it alone. Now, all of a sudden there’s a new generation and the experience the other week when I looked around, it was a small auditorium that holds about 300, I roughly figured that about 2/3 of the people sitting there, the students, weren’t even born when Vietnam fell. All of a sudden they’re taking notes seriously. This is all new to them. So here we are, that’s a lot of history, now, son of a gun.

SM: Well what did you think about what was going on politically when you came back?

NC: Okay, I…let me look at this…okay, February ’70 to June of ’71. I think it comes…okay, two years and seven weeks so if you add one more week that’s 26 months. I like to say 26 months, that’s easy, that’s the same if you count the travel time I guess. When I came back, back when I…I’m trying to think this, there was no communication. In fact, I didn’t find any real interest from anybody about Vietnam. Nixon was pushing the Vietnamization of the war to turn it over to them and when Vietnam fell in ’75 I was in Tehran, Iran, and it bothered me. I said, ‘All that effort,’ and having been there thinking that maybe you accomplished something or added to something and suddenly overnight there were…well, within a short time there, they were overrun and literally it was over and it bothered me for a long time to think that all that effort and to think I had…what for? What was the reason here? But still, there wasn’t a whole lot of…there wasn’t good feelings. You know, there were people going to Europe and Canada bailing out to avoid the draft and of course Nixon got enthralled in Watergate and it wasn’t a settling moment. There was a lot of confusion. When I hired on to Bell in ’68, let’s see, was it the Republican convention in Chicago had all those riots? Was it Republican or Democrat? I think it was Republican, and it was on TV. People were getting hurt. Of course you always see that one picture, I guess it was Kent State where that gal and the student got killed. It wasn’t a good subject that people were interested in and after ten years I guess they had enough so it just kind of went away and I went on to other assignments and getting busy with
Bell. Time has gone by and then slowly, and you got it, I started seeing articles. I mean slowly. I mean ten-15 years later you’d start to see articles about Earthwatch and return to Vietnam and then world wildlife foundation, someone reported finding a new species. I’m saying, ‘What’s this?’ And then suddenly I start seeing ‘Tour Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam,’ and then our [Arcrumby and Kent] was a very high quality, high quality touring company and suddenly they were taking tours to Vietnam. Then all of a sudden I see in Dallas Fairpark at the music hall, ‘Miss Saigon.’ I said, ‘Well I got to go see that.’ Hey, someone did their homework. They did have a Huey in it on the evacuation. They had a Huey on the stage and it all up on the evacuation. But, they did their homework. If you get a chance it’s a great Broadway show. It’s well done. The essence of Vietnam, but it’s keyed to the personal side that you won’t get on the media or the battle scene. There’s more kids with the GI’s, and anyway, I thought it was well done and you’ve got the brochure there. That’ll come back some place, somewhere. I understand it was in Europe. I think it broke in London or something and then came to the States, so anyway you start seeing all these things and then you’re thinking and seeing and then all of a sudden I didn’t know anything about you folks and then ten years ago you guys got the university there, got the idea that maybe we ought to start saving this stuff. Then the people that got interested, in retrospect, 20 years ago probably wouldn’t have wanted to dwell into it but now in thinking back it’s time to think it over and record it. You don’t want to make the same mistakes, and if you don’t record it, there’s a lost generation here someplace. Between our side of the house and Vietnam, there’s a generation that if someone don’t record it the South Vietnamese won’t have any history and also the generation of the ‘60s will be a lost generation because no one will have the history to try to try to figure it out although there’s documentaries all over the place, but I don’t think there’s anybody who’s trying to pull it together as well as you folks are from all angles, and that’s neat; every direction, not just the American story, not just the South Vietnamese, but everything. That’s pretty neat. And, like I said, now what surprised me is the people at work that I’ve somehow known and mention it, it just sparks the interest. ‘Oh really?’ One guy said, ‘I want information, you got a word…’ ‘Yeah, website. Here it is,’ and he’s a member. This one guy’s an ex pilot, Army pilot, who belongs to the Army Vietnam Helicopter Pilot’s Association?

SM: Uh-huh, the VHPA.
NC: Well I told them that they’ve used you folks and decided that that’s going to be their archive. I says, ‘I saw it, I saw the place where it’s at.’ Well he didn’t know that, so I gave him some information. I guess people are starting to want to talk about it and of course then now from your conference you’ve got a new generation out there of Vietnamese Americans who were born and raised here. Well that’s interesting, and all it takes is one generation. You know someone asked, this is…the Aborigine in Australia are the longest continuous culture in the world. 30,000...they’ve traced them back 30,000 plus years. Continuous culture, and so the question comes up, ‘How long does it take to westernize an Aborigine?’ and if you’re not thinking quick, you’re straining. Just one generation, right? You start from the baby, right? You know, people strain, ‘How long is it going to take…’ ‘Well, it’s one generation!’ So here we were here at your conference and there was one generation right there, and very much Americanized in a lot of respects. But, they still have the older generations as the base line to find out where they came from and their cultural background. But when they’re gone, if there’s no record, then it’s gone. The essence of a lot of people that preserve a record that the next generation won’t have that generation to go ask, ‘Remember when? Tell me all about it.’ Well, there won’t be. They’ll only have the record that someone took the time to preserve. But, there’s a lot of lessons here obviously, for a lot of people so I think your mission is well founded. But it’s bigger than just…it’s not a narrow perspective. It’s pretty broad. Here you are calling me and getting my thoughts. I think that’s neat. Is there any area that you can think of that you want to prompt me?

SM: Yeah. Let me ask you what you think should be the most important lessons we take away from the Vietnam War from your perspective. What lessons should we take away from the war?

NC: My lessons?

SM: What do you think, yeah.

NC: You mean…

SM: As a nation, from the military perspective, from the technical perspective?

NC: Oh, any perspective?

SM: Yeah. What major lessons should we take from our experience in Vietnam?

NC: Well, and of course in hindsight it’s always sharp and it’s always easy to say they should have done this and they should have done that, but one of the…it was the longest, the
United States’ longest war and everybody says it right off the bat; it was a political war. They did not let the military complete their mission without interference and decisions were made here in a control zone with no knowledge of what’s really happening other than it was all politically motivated. They never called it a war and so the military really took the brunt of it. They were given, well I’m not going to say an impossible mission, but a very difficult mission to accomplish with all the restraints and everybody and people that were there and guys that went in the field. This one guy who sits next to me says, ‘I went in one mission, they wanted my dog tags.’ I said, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘In case I got captured they didn’t want me to have identity on me,’ but obviously he’s back and okay, but I’m just saying, ‘What’s going on here?’ So they would take a hill, and then they would abandon it. They would take an objective and then abandon it and I hear that too a lot of times. It wasn’t like you move them from south to north, right, and as you secure the area and you go to the next step and suddenly you own the whole country. They’d run them in, they’d take it and break it up, and then they’d pull it out and it never seemed to have secured the area and kept it or maybe I’m missing something but I hear on that, too. But what came out of this, and I notice that it stuck, is since Vietnam we’ve had things like the Panama Canal, we’ve had Desert Storm, you could probably name a few other things. We did not go in to stay, and we got out of there. That obviously was acceptable to the American people and no president was going to get it to prolong. I think that lesson has been embedded. They did away with the draft. I’m disappointed in the sense that I know from my own experience that there’s some kids that need discipline away from the house where they can get away with a lot but they can’t do it under strangers. If you’re not going to go on to higher education or doing something productive, then four years or two years in the military ain’t going to hurt you. I think that’s a good experience. Instead they hang around the house and hang around the house and don’t really go to school and get a full time job. They’re just hanging around getting in trouble. Of course you can get in trouble in the military, too, but at least you’re away from home, you get to see a little bit more of the rest of the world, and get a dose of discipline from strangers who you can’t give a hard time to whereas you can do that with your family and get away with it probably. That, I don’t think, was good. But, we still have a lot of people in the military and there’s still people volunteering so it’s not a case of people don’t go in the military but there may be some of them that needed to go, even just for a couple of years, are on the streets getting into trouble. The other thing is their economy was so
fragile. If the United States wasn’t in there dumping goods and services on the south and on other countries in the north, if they left them alone, you almost want to believe, and look what happened here. They came down, they took it over, and here it is 20-25 years later. They’re wanting to do business with us. I mean, it didn’t hold up. So by their own initiative, could it have solved itself? You know, like saying if you left them alone in their own weight and that one speaker said, in hindsight he said, ‘If you left it alone, the Chinese would have come in and taken care of it,’ and of course in the course of events, when Vietnam was weak, the Chinese would come down and when Vietnam was strong, they go up into China and Cambodia and Laos. It’s centuries of fighting. I mean, who would ever think that we would come in there and just wipe all that history out and take care of things? We’re new kids on the block, we’re about 300 years old if you go back to the pilgrims, right? The great experiment goes on, but I think we have a problem with the middle east, it’s understand them people and thousands of years of history. We’re not going to go in there and shake hands a couple of times, pat them on the back, and it’s all over. It’s so deep rooted. I guess ego got in the way and we couldn’t nicely back out after we had committed so much, but who knows. It’s a shame, the people that got killed, though, but maybe down the road, looking back, this may have been the catalyst to something better. Maybe the whole effort, when you go back, say ‘Well, the roots of this was here, and if this didn’t happen then that wouldn’t happen,’ but right now I think it’s too soon to predict anything like that. Things are happening and to me they seem pretty positive. We have other countries going in there, but of course their labor rates low and so that brings in industry and finding the remains is softening the introductions of…they’ve got resources. They got, in the South China Sea, they got oil. They got a lot of resources that need to be developed, they just don’t have the technology and the capital to develop it which means other people come in and do it for themselves. I’m positive and I’m glad to see that people are talking. I went to the Wall a number of years ago. I wanted to see the wall. I’d heard so much about it and I walked over there and there’s this bronze statue of these three grunts. The artist was a master. I mean, the tension was there and the veins in the arms of the grunts were…you can see it. The guy, he or she, did a fantastic job and I had no idea of the positioning but it came to me. It was so well done. I realized that here’s these three grunts looking towards the apex of the wall, and what they were doing, the symbolism was looking for their fallen comrades and I said, ‘Wow, that is so powerful.’ Then you go to the Wall and it’s such a simple design and right away you
understand that from the statue that whole wall is for the grunts, I mean, for the grunts. There’s no generals, there’s no big man on the horse with a fancy uniform, the whole thing is for the grunts, for the troops, the infantry, the guy in the field, and then you see them looking at the Wall and you soon realize there’s a reflection and that’s you. Especially the finding the names. Oh, the emotions are still there and there you are staring at your own image at the name that you knew of. Then they leave the photos and the Smithsonian I understand is collecting it and one of these days there’ll be an exhibit and of course some of that stuff will dry up over time as the generation gets older and passes and then that would be a pretty good exhibit with all the stuff that they’ve collected. But, nobody, from what I gather, envisioned the impact of that Wall. Such a simple design, and it’s from the people. The government allowed them to put it there but I understand it wasn’t government funded. It’s a terrific thing. And then that, I think when the Wall was dedicated I think Reagan was still in office I’m almost sure and then everything started breaking out. They had the march in Washington and then more and more people and then I notice a lot of TV interviews and there was more and more discussion and they had some speakers that day. What day was that, Memorial Day? It was in May and I guess one of the comments that I remember was, ‘Getting it out is part of the healing process,’ you know? Bottled up inside it just festers but just talking about it and getting it out was part of the healing process and that started I guess the war kind of kicked that off. So time went on, right, and I went to the southwest archivist meeting in Austin last year and I see this gal with a label saying USMC research center and I got to thinking, I said, ‘Jeez, you know, I got some stuff from Vietnam.’ My house is filling up and if anything happens to me it’s going to get dumped by…that’s the way things are lost. ‘Are you collecting?’ And she said, ‘Oh yeah, we’re starting to collect stuff from individuals and we’re the only ones in Quantico that collect from individuals.’ So I got the card and I went and visited and I left some stuff and they said, ‘Well, we’re really focused on USMC,’ and I said, ‘Okay,’ ‘But why don’t you try Lubbock?’ And I says, ‘Lubbock?’ That’s only about five hours from Fort Worth, what am I doing in Quantico, you know? Had to go all the way to Quantico to find Lubbock! You can tell that story. That’s like going around from my front door to get to the back door, go all the way around the world and come back, you know, it don’t make sense. But anyway, it led me to you and then I find out ten years ago your whole archive was a briefcase and has grown since then and everybody I’ve talked to there’s interest. Also, I’m finding out that I get comments that there’s still a lot of
strong feelings once people start talking but not violent but just suddenly in the midst of conversation someone will say something like there’s still something. I think that was mentioned at the conferences. When he started out trying to put this thing together, he didn’t realize just how much heat was still out there and I can imagine that, especially depending on your experience, you know. What you experience…some of them, I know, you hear some stories that haven’t gotten over it yet. There’s some of them that go back like Dolin there to walk and I guess he found his people and the Vietnamese and the Americans together walked back to the battle or returned to the battle scene and that’s the way of letting go, I guess; letting it out and reconciliation I guess is the term they use to get things in perspective again and get it over with to get on with your life. You can’t live in the past. So, the timing was right, that’s my opinion. You folks were at the right…the timeline is perfect and you’re right there, and you still have resources to draw from but it won’t be 20 years from now…oh, I was talking to a young lieutenant, Vietnamese at a barbecue. He sat down and everything was fine, he sat down and we got to talking. I needed some directions in Houston, I got a conference in July. He was from Houston and he said, ‘Oh yeah,’ and he gave me directions. Well, here’s this young lieutenant who’d never been over there and I mentioned to him in passing, we got to talking a little bit, that, ‘You know, you’re lucky.’ I says, ‘You’re getting all this, you still have people that have been there, you know the history, you learned the history and everything,’ and I said, ‘But 20 years from now most of them people won’t be around anymore.’ The ones that are up there in their 70s and 80s, 20 years from now they’ll…I mean, just the nature of the beast, they probably won’t be around. And all that knowledge will be gone and that’s what’s happening now you’re collecting it. So, if you waited 20 years to start this thing, you can gather material but I don’t think it would be as such a rich resource as what you’re going to have at your moment in time. I guess ten years ago? Yeah, things were just starting. That’s when the Wall was evolving and everything.

SM: Okay. Is there anything else you’d like to add tonight?
NC: Well, what time is it?
SM: It’s going on to a little after seven.
NC: So we were on the phone for…
SM: two hours. Why don’t we go ahead and break here and we can get this transcribed and sent to you.
NC: Yeah, I guess we were huh? Wow.

SM: Okay, let me go ahead and end it officially. This ends the first interview with Dominick Cirincione on the 19th of April at seven o’clock.