

**Oral History Interview of
Eddie Randle**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
November 14, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

Part of the:
African American Oral History Project

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Interview Series Background:

The African-American Oral History Collection documents the diverse perspectives of the African-American people of Lubbock and the South Plains. These interviews and accompanying manuscript materials cover a myriad of topics including; early Lubbock, segregation, discrimination, politics, education, music, art, cultural celebrations, the May 11th 1970 tornado, commerce, and sport.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Eddie Randle as he recounts the time he spent in basic training in flight school and then being a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. In this interview, Randle discusses the trials and tribulations of flight school, Vietnam, his career, and his family.

Length of Interview: 02:40:34

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Keywords

Vietnam War, computer science and repair, Texas Tech

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

This is the fourteenth of November; a round two. Andy Wilkinson with Eddie Randle at his home. It's in the afternoon, a beautiful fall day in the seventies. We're looking out on the golf course, as we were just the other day. Today, though we said earlier, it might even make us wish we were golfers. We were talking about the—is Brewster, B-r-e-w-s-t-e-r?

Eddie Randle (ER):

Yes. And I may have told you incorrectly the last time. The Douglass is with two s's, D-o-u-g-l-a-s-s.

AW:

No, I think you did—

ER:

Well, the school I mentioned—yeah, I guess. I think it was the Douglass with two s's, yes.

AW:

And these are called Brewster—

ER:

Brewster-Douglass projects.

AW:

Did you say “place” or was it “projects”?

ER:

We called them “the projects,” that's what we called them. They were—I confess, I haven't done my research on this but I think the first lady Truman was there at the opening.

AW:

So, they were new pretty well when you moved in.

ER:

Yes.

AW:

Or when you moved to Detroit.

ER:

No. They were built, I think, in the late thirties, early forties. So, they've been around for a while.

AW:

Well, he wasn't president till after, you know—before the end of World War II.

ER:

Roosevelt.

AW:

Eleanor Roosevelt.

ER:

Eleanor, yes.

AW:

Not Truman.

ER:

No. My history is—

AW:

Now, are they occupied in this—

ER:

No.

AW:

I was going to say, "This looks awfully"—

ER:

This picture, they may have been.

AW:

I mean, this one. These are unoccupied? Because it looks like there's nobody around them.

ER:

I don't know when they were taken. They don't exist anymore. The last time I was in Detroit,

which was this summer, they were gone, the thirteen story buildings that is. So, I don't know. Looks a lot of greenery around so I don't know.

AW:

And no cars.

ER:

Well, that was not unusual. There was not really—the parking areas were away from the building area. And then—whenever this was taken—we didn't have very many automobiles, surprisingly, in the Motor City. But it was a housing project designed specifically for negroes.

AW:

How did they design it specifically for African Americans?

ER:

I should qualify what I said. It was built for black occupants. I don't know that it had any special physical characteristics other than—

AW:

But that's what they intended—they knew that's what they were intended to do.

ER:

Other than the occupants were African American, so yeah. And I lived—this was a—there was a relatively major thoroughfare in Detroit that went north and south. It was called Hastings Street. These buildings were located on the west side of Hastings and I lived on the east side of Hastings. There was a residential neighborhood that bordered these buildings for several blocks along the eastern side of Hastings Street, which is now the I-75 freeway. They came through and took all—well, the residential neighborhood. These were left standing. So, the houses were all gone. Yeah so, as a kid I used to go there in that neighborhood and, you know, play. It was sort of—even though it was one block away it was like not in your neighborhood, because we didn't really—some of the kids I didn't know. There were so many of them.

AW:

Plus if you had a major thoroughfare in between, that would make a difference, too.

ER:

Yeah. Crossing Hastings was something else. We used to ride the elevator up to the top floor. I guess—I recall—we had tennis shoes, PF Flyers, those shoes, and then we had street shoes. When we had our street shoes on, we would race the elevator down. We would start at the top and you could grab a hold of the rail—

AW:

To keep from falling.

ER:

—put your feet on this—there was like a little ledge there below and you'd just slide down.

AW:

And if you had on street shoes it was slick.

ER:

Yes. And then when you hit the landing, you obviously would let go and do a one-eighty and hit down the next one, and many of us, including me, we could beat that elevator down to the first floor.

AW:

I guess that spoke as much to your youthful energy as it did the slowness of the elevator, right?

ER:

Yes, right. That was a challenge that most of us as kids tried to do.

AW:

That beats walking on the tracks trying to play chicken with the train.

ER:

Well, we did that too. We did that too. That's how we got downtown Detroit sometimes, we would hop a train.

AW:

Oh, you would hop a train?

ER:

Oh yes. It was either walk, ride our bicycle, or, you know, hop a train.

AW:

So, the railroad bulls weren't watching that close?

ER:

Well, they probably didn't care. They were so many of us doing that they just couldn't keep us off the tracks. And there were quite a number of tracks in Detroit. You know, we were talking the last time—I don't know if it was during the interview or not—but, this is the picture that I

mentioned to you. This is the eighth grade graduating class from Bishop Elementary School. This lady right here—well, girl—is my oldest sister, Mary Randle. This girl to her left is Mary Wilson of the Supremes, one of the three original Supremes.

AW:

I was going to say, “Who is that beautiful woman there?” That is Mary Wilson.

ER:

Yes. And I actually have her autograph on the back, too. That’s just a picture of my sister. In fact, I had that, the actual—the original—here in Lubbock for probably ten years but when I went home for our family reunion I took it back and gave it to my oldest sister. So, I made a copy of it.

AW:

Who else is—

ER:

I don’t know that’s there’s anybody else who—I’m sure there were some others who became famous but I don’t know.

AW:

Now, you wouldn’t be in this group because that’s your older sister.

ER:

No. She’s seventy-four so she would—I would’ve been maybe in the second grade—third or fourth.

AW:

What a great photograph, though.

ER:

And I don’t know if I can—if—

AW:

Oh that’s—so you have a scan of the back, too.

ER:

Yes, yes. It doesn’t come out—it didn’t come out quite like I would hoped it would’ve come out. But there’s Mary Wilson’s signature from the eighth grade.

AW:

She looks so grown up for eighth grade.

ER:

Yeah. Well, you know, the kids, they dressed up. The adults, of course, dressed up for any occasion, not just church. That was important, to look good in, of course, class pictures. They do look older than eighth grade, don't they?

AW:

That's what I mean, for eighth grade. I suppose a suit and tie makes everybody look sort of older.

ER:

Yes. And of course—I can find a number of articles but I stumbled across this one the other day after we talked. It discusses—let's see what's this one—mentions—here's a picture of the original Supremes. Florence Ballard, Mary Wilson, and Diana Ross. They mentioned—let's see if I can't find—there were lots and lots of singing in the Brewsters—that's what we called them, Brewsters—people sang four-part harmonies on street corners, the parks, on porches and in the stairwells where the echoes were best. So, we also sang in the stairwells, besides flying down them like crazy people. Mary Wilson from the Supremes grew up in the Brewster-Douglass projects along with Supremes members Diana Ross and Florence Ballard. Just some things just to validate. Sometimes I'll mention that to people and they go, "Yeah right."

AW:

Yeah. So, here you have some proof.

ER:

I have the proof.

AW:

You got something else there.

ER:

Well, we talked about—briefly we touched on Vietnam.

AW:

Yeah. We were going to start with that. Actually, what I had for next time was you had met Margaret and then I have Cranbrook attorney, which I'm not sure—that doesn't ring a bell with me—and then body bags. Those were the two things to start us off today.

ER:

Walter Lewis. Walter Lewis. I didn't do my research, I apologize, Andy, but I remember the name Walter Lewis. He was—in 1963—

AW:

L-e-w-i-s?

ER:

L-e-w-i-s. His mother remarried in '63. He was one of two—I failed to mention that there were two of us black students to be the first to win an academic scholarship and Cranbrook. He was the second one in 1963. He was a year ahead of me so he was in the graduating class of 1966. Walter Lewis. His name was—I can't remember—he changed his last name. his mother must've remarried or so forth. But anyway, he was part of the Adjutant General's Office in the military. He went into the military. He was responsible for prosecuting these people in the military who were involved in the drug smuggling from Vietnam back to the U.S. in the body bags—that movie, I believe, American Gangsters, was patterned or that was the true story that was behind that. So yeah, we talked every now and then. He did that mention that there were some people who were not pleased with what he was doing at the time.

AW:

I'll bet that's right.

ER:

He was concerned about his safety for a while.

AW:

Especially in the war where the term “fragging”—

ER:

Right—no, this was back stateside. This was on—

AW:

I know it, but I mean, that had—it was no longer a sacrosanct to target a member of the military by other members.

ER:

Absolutely, yeah. But these were, I think, pretty much civilians on this end of the drug trade. They didn't want to go to jail. They wanted him to know they didn't want to go to jail. But yeah, that's Walter Lewis. I apologize, I didn't do my research.

AW:

No, that's great. I had a note and it was clear as day when I wrote it down and today I'm looking at, "Cranbrook attorney, what does that mean?" Body bags, I get what that means. Well, so, when we stopped last week, you—we had pretty much talked through Fort Walters and the dangers of flying will all those amateurs who were learning how to fly.

ER:

Many, including me.

AW:

You had met Margaret at a dance in Denton?

ER:

That's correct.

AW:

Now, was she at Texas Women's or at North Texas?

ER:

Texas Woman's, W-o-m-a-n-s. She was at Texas Woman's University, yes. But the dance was at the University of North Texas.

AW:

Okay. So, I think we were getting ready to ship you off to Vietnam at the end of our last talk.

ER:

Perhaps. We were going to start at Fort Walters. Essentially the primary school was there. I'm not going to go into a whole lot of great detail because I think there's a better venue for me to discuss that. But it was a challenge. I mean, the first time that I'd ever flown in anything was when I set foot in a helicopter at Fort Walters in Mineral Wells, Texas. So, needless—it was quite a challenge. Quite exciting too. What we had to do—the training was—it was in three phases, essentially. There was the academic ground school phase. In fact, when we got to Fort Walters we were considered—what they called "Snowbirds."

AW:

You'd already had the ground training?

ER:

No, no, no. That's what they called us when we got there until we were assigned to a company. We were called Snowbirds. I guess it was a couple weeks or so, and then we were assigned to a

company. Primarily it was ground school, all academics and military development, officer training with a lot of stresses: psychological and of course, athletic, physical fitness and so forth, but no flying, no aviation, for the first six weeks or so, I think, before we had a chance. So there was an opportunity for those who were not able to get through that, the academic ground school and the military discipline portion to flunk out. Then the flying portion began and we had a certain number of hours in which they expected to solo. Now let me tell you, there was a civilian company called Southern Airways of Texas. They had the contract to do most of the, if not all, of the maintenance on the aircraft, those helicopters, and they also were responsible for the preliminary flight training for us as warrant officer candidates, student pilots. So, they were civilians. My instructor, I think he was from Texas from the accent. I started off really well the first few hours, just get did really well, then I hit a bump in the road, so to speak. It was stressful. It was hot. It was extremely hot when I got to Fort Walters in March. It was surprisingly hot for March, for me. I thought, This is hot. But anyway—but it was a little difficult. I had a little difficulty. I was struggling and I could see the writing on the wall that I could possibly flunk out because of the skill and I knew I could do that. I don't know—his training style was very difficult. I can remember words in my headset, "Left pedal, left cyclic. Left pedal, left cyclic." And I kind of know what that meant. You pull in power. You have to pull in—push in the left pedal and so forth. But saying it and doing it are two different things when you have like five controls and four appendages and you don't want to kill yourself with any of that because two pedals, collective, cyclic and a motorcycle-kind-of twist grip throttle. And this guy cut me no slack. I don't know what his motivation was but he was hell-bent on I don't know what. So, I went to the platoon leader or the flight leader and explained my difficulty and told him, "I think I can do this but I don't if I could do it with this instructor." So, what he did for me was he assigned me to a military pilot. Normally was we did was after we've soloed, which was about ten to fifteen, eighteen, hours of flying, then you would no longer be instructed by the civilian. You would be instructed by a combat veteran, generally a combat veteran. So, he said, "Okay. This is what I'll do. I'll assign you—I'll move you now." So, I got this captain who had just come back from Vietnam and was an instructor pilot. Laid back guy, Andy, I mean, this guy was—of course, laid back—I guess he was happy to be home, you know. Because I was pretty well laid back when I got back from Vietnam. But anyway, I sat in the helicopter with him. I made a mistake, just calm, no screaming in my ears, would make the correction, and we'd just move right on. So, it worked out beautifully for me. I think I was like the second or third one in my company to solo. So, that was an experience. I won't go into soloing. There's a unique story there when I look over and—

AW:

I'd like to hear it.

ER:

Okay. I'd be happy to give that to you. We would go out to these areas called stage fields. There were several around Fort Walters. They were owned by the military.

AW:

There's a big one west of town, wasn't there?

ER:

Well, that's a heliport. There were two huge heliports.

AW:

That's what I'm thinking of, yeah.

ER:

But the stage fields were like a little—

AW:

Still lots of concrete out there.

ER:

Stage fields were small concrete runway deals out there with a tower, a radio transmitter and so forth. So we'd go out there, do our work then we would go out into the area of operation and do our area work. And so, we were at a stage field going through taking off, landing, doing autorotations, which is a special maneuver to deal with an engine failure. My instructor pilot—I don't remember—I don't have his name and I want to find that information out. It is available. We pulled up to the takeoff pad at the runway. We're talking and then he says, "Set the helicopter down." This was after I had ten and a half—about eleven hours. I set it down and then he unstraps his shoulder harness. He still has his helmet attached which has the mic cord. He clicks the mic and he says, "Take it around the traffic pattern a few times, Eddie." Then he pulls his mic cord out and walks away. [Andy laughs] He walks away and leaves me.

AW:

So, he had either a lot of confidence or he was trying to get rid of you.

ER:

Right, one of the two. So, he leaves me so I—"This is it. I got to do this." It came to my realization that he wants me to—he thinks I can solo. So, I pick the helicopter up to a hover, I do my clearing turns, then I call the tower for authorization to take off. They give me the takeoff permission. So, I fly out on the—taking off—then you're supposed to look—I was in the left-

hand traffic pattern so I look left to clear myself. There was this cyclic sticking up with no hand—

AW:

Now, say what a cyclic is.

ER:

I'm trying to think—let me get this right now. What seat was I in? I was in the right seat that day, I think. Yeah, the cyclic is a control that provides a forward, sideways—

AW:

It's like the stick.

ER:

It's like the stick. You push it forward and the helicopter goes forward. Pull it back and the helicopter stops and it'll actually go backwards. Left to go left or right. Well, there were two and they move simultaneously together. So, when I look over to clear myself—and normally—every time I've been in a helicopter has been in with an instructor pilot like that—

AW:

Yeah, but now there's no pilot.

ER:

Yeah, like that guy that just walked away. So, I look over and I see this cyclic floating around in mid-air with no hand on it. That's when it really dawns on me, "It's me."

AW:

It's you by yourself.

ER:

"It's me in this machine and nobody else," so I was just praying that that machine knew it's way around that traffic pattern a few times without killing me and destroying the machine. But that's a solo—no pilot will ever forget the solo. But that was the remarkable thing, looking over seeing that cyclic just floating in mid-air with no hand to save us, which—

AW:

Would you describe the kind of machine that you trained in. What was it called?

ER:

Yes. Fort Walters, we had predominantly two. Most of the—there were commissioned officers

who were also student pilots. We didn't train with them. They were kept separate. Then there was us, the warrant officer candidates, those who were not officers and who either just came to service or those of us who had been in the service and were enlisted personnel who had gotten to that flight program. Officers generally flew in a T—a 13—excuse me, 23. It was Hiller 23. The helicopter that I flew was the Hughes TH-55. It was a reciprocating engine that used a 115/145 Avgas. It had a fully articulated four-blade rotor system, three or four blade rotor system.

AW:

Were these engines—were they radial or were they inline?

ER:

They were radial. I'm thinking—I think they were radial because they were round.

AW:

So, it wasn't a jet propulsion.

ER:

No, not this helicopter.

AW:

So, the front of this helicopter, it had a lot of glass on the front, right?

ER:

Yes. Plastic, yeah.

AW:

Or plastic. But I mean, a lot of bubble.

ER:

Looked like a little grasshopper kind of little thing. Little, tiny yellow thing—orange, orange, orange, excuse me. Orange little tail. I apologize I don't have a picture of one.

AW:

That's all right.

ER:

I do have a lot of pictures.

AW:

That'd be easy to find that.

ER:

Yeah. The TH-55.

AW:

It would hold two people, right?

ER:

Two, yes. Yes, two. The TH-55. The interesting thing about it, Andy, is that it didn't have—well, it had a sort of a governor but it was manual. You heard me mention three devices—four or five devices with four appendages. Well, one was the throttle. When I graduated into the turbine jet engine helicopters, there was a governor that managed the power. So, on this TH-55 when you pull power, you had to roll on throttle because in a helicopter, rotor RPM remains constant.

AW:

And you just change the pitch of the blade.

ER:

Well, you change the engine RPM's to compensate for more power. You reduce the power—

AW:

So you get more torque.

ER:

You get more torque, right. But rotor RPM remains constant, about 300 RPM. You don't vary rotor RPM in a helicopter. You vary engine speed so you have to—and that's a—you can't let the rotor decay, go too slowly because then you'll—

AW:

You'll lose your lift.

ER:

You'll lose your lift and then you have other issues. But in that helicopter—

AW:

Like crashing.

ER:

Yes, like crashing. But in the helicopter, you would have to roll on throttle. Then when you reduce power you would have to lower the throttle so you didn't get in overspeed, not necessarily from the engine but overspeed the rotor and have a blade fly off, which is a really

bad thing. But that was a TH-55. I don't want to get—go on too long on this. But that was my solo. Then after—and with the remainder of the training there was on and off with instructor pilots. We would do cross-country.

AW:

So, sometime after your solo you might still have an instructor pilot with you.

ER:

Oh definitely you did. You did, yes. And ground training was continuous. Not just avionics. We did avionics, mechanics, weather, lots of weather training, radio communications and all of that was at ground school.

AW:

Did they ever teach you what the fighting side of operating helicopters was about? It seemed like there would be tactics.

ER:

Nothing. Nothing, no. It was—

AW:

It was just about the machine.

ER:

It was trying to learn how to fly that machine. That was important. You had to know that because if you were still dealing with that trying to deal with people trying to kill you, you were going to have a hard time as a pilot. So, no, we didn't get any tactical stuff in that regard. It did come in the advanced phase. No, we were just learning how to fly that dadgum thing, which was not easy. If you ever see a movie and someone who's never flown a helicopter—including a fixed-wing pilot—if you see them sit in a helicopter seat and take off without killing themselves, you're looking at a ruse. You're looking at a lie. It won't—can't happen. Never happened.

AW:

I think I read once that—engineers as a lot are a little bit nerdy. There was a—some sort of—it wasn't a contest but people weighed in on various aspects of machinery. It was like—not unanimous but ninety-something percent of the engineers, flight engineers, said that a heli—the conclusion was a helicopter really can't fly and they're not quite sure how it does it. [Laughs]

ER:

We have a phrase for that.

AW:

What is it?

ER:

It's "beating the air into submission."

AW:

[laughs] I like that.

ER:

That's what we did. That's what they do. And for very good reason. I mean, the mechanics of it baffled engineers for a long time. Briefly—there's something called translational lift. When you reach a certain air speed—if you know anything about aerodynamics—the helicopter rotor blades are the wings. They move through the air—they're forced through the air as opposed to—

AW:

That's what creates the lift.

ER:

Right. And lift, of course, varies with the square of the velocity of air over the airfoil. So, you have this thing called—say you had a two-bladed rotor system and you're moving forward in a particular direction, say in front of you, the wing—the rotor blade that's advancing—depending on the rotation—that's advancing and this half of the arc has its lift based upon its normal speed, about three-hundred revolutions per minute, plus the air that's passing over it as you're moving forward. The blade that's in what we call the advancing arc, half an arc, has the normal lift of three-hundred RPM minus the wind. So, when you—

AW:

So, it's going to tilt.

ER:

Right. Absolutely. They tilt like this and they crash.

AW:

And they flip over.

ER:

Flip over and crash. And they did that again, and again, and again, and people were just baffled. Well, when you reach a certain air speed it makes a difference so they would go—they'd tip. Well, the way the helicopter compensates for that, it's all done in the push-pull tubes and the

mechanics that are built into the linkages. So, as the advancing blade reaches—starts into its arc, the pitch automatically reduces.

AW:

So it doesn't lift as much.

ER:

Right. And the pitch in the retreating blade automatically increases. In fact, that's what we call VNE, velocity never to exceed. That's why helicopters are generally not as fast as fixed-wings, because the limit is the limit of that pitch on the retreating blade because it will stall. There's something called retreating blade stall. Because you'll have very little pitch in here and this thing will be yanked up. But it's all done automatically through something called a swash plate.

AW:

So the intuitive thing for a person like me who knows just enough about this to be dangerous, you look at the tail—

ER:

That's another issue.

AW:

—rotor going and you think, That's what keeps it from flopping over, but that's not true.

ER:

No. That keeps it from—that keeps—that's the anti-torque. That keeps it from spinning around because—there's one of Newton's laws: for every force, there's an equal and opposite force. So, the torque of the main rotor, the engine, it wants to be countered by an opposite direction. The tail rotor's just blowing to keep the nose straight, and that's what the pedals do, keep that—

AW:

I guess that's why when they first had any limited success was with the auto-gyro, because it had wings in addition to the rotors so it and so it had the other wings to keep it from—

ER:

That is correct.

AW:

—from that tipping.

ER:

And helicopters like the Army's inventory—in the Army's inventory, like the CH-47, the Chinook, it has tandem, two blades. What you'll notice on every helicopter, they're going in the opposite directions so there's no tail rotor. What happens to turn, to go sideways, the anti-rotor systems are tilted. They'd tilt like that to go sideways. Of course, they both go forward. And they—well, they don't mesh but you don't—one doesn't hit the other one. That's not good. Anything that happens to your main rotor system is not good.

AW:

They don't glide the same way that a fixed-wing—

ER:

Now you're talking about autorotation. Would you like to know about autorotation?

AW:

I would.

ER:

Okay.

AW:

I've flown in a helicopter once. In fact, I was actually rescued in a helicopter.

ER:

Were you?

AW:

It was not a serious rescue. I mean, there weren't people shooting at me.

ER:

Well, you want to tell me about it?

AW:

I will but I want to hear about autorotation first.

ER:

All right. I've had people say to me, "You've got to be nuts to be in an aircraft when the engine quits. It falls out of the sky like a rock." I said, "I would be nuts if I got in an aircraft that did that." There's something called autorotation. In fact, we could not graduate from flight school unless we were capable of performing an autorotation successfully, that is not killing the

instructor pilot and ourselves. So, what happens, Andy, is the helicopter can glide. It can use—well, say you have an engine failure. Well, your first and most important task is to recognize that you have an engine failure. That's a little—that's very easy to do in that little TH-55 because there's a gasoline engine back there going [imitates engine sound] making a lot of noise.

AW:

You can hear when it quits.

ER:

But with the jet turbines, you can't tell because they wind down. Although there are some indicators—you'll get a buzzing in your ear and you'll get a light on the dash and so forth.

AW:

I was going to say, "You're bound to have some kind of Christmas tree on the—

ER:

Yeah. You'll know something's happened. So, recognizing that something has happened then the very next thing to do is to take the pitch out blades. You have to lower this thing—there's a thing on your left called the collective. When it goes up, the pitch in the blades go up. When you push it down, the pitch reduces. That's what gives you lift. So, you immediately lower the collective then of course you have to put in a little pedal that keeps it from yawing, right pedal. So, then you're in a decent. You've got this inertia, all this power built up in the main rotor system. The rotors are enormous in size. People are surprised when they get right up on a helicopter, especially a Chinook. They're about two-feet across, not to mention the length. So, they have an enormous amount of power—

AW:

Mass. Inertia.

ER:

—mass and inertia built up into them so you need that and you're going to use that to save yourself. So, you lower the collective, take the pitch out, and as you're falling through the air, the air passing through that rotor system keeps it rotating.

AW:

So you don't drop like a rock. You do have lift but—

ER:

Well, you don't want to lift. Well, yes.

AW:

I mean it's not lifting you up but it's keeping your from falling.

ER:

It's a controlled crash. It's a glide. As you're falling through the air, the air that's moving through the rotor system keeps it turning. You have to be careful not to let it turn too fast. You might have to pull a little pitch because of the rotor system—three-hundred RPM. They go too fast, they'll fly off. If they go too slowly because you're pulling pitch when you shouldn't be, they can decay and you'll never get them back because you don't have an engine. So, you have to watch that. You do that, you lower the collective, you always land and takeoff into the wind. So, you turn to favor the wind because that provides the best lift. You have to find an intended place to land. Hopefully it's a cleared area. Which, as a pilot—as you're flying alone, you're constantly looking at the ground looking for those cleared areas. At night, you're looking for light-colored areas because dark colored are trees. So, you've already picked out your place to go if you have an engine failure. You do that, I can't tell you how many times, along the way. So, you turn in and you decide if you're going to make it. You can do certain things. You can adjust the speed by pulling a little pitch or you can maneuver it a little. You can do certain things to extend your glide path or to descend a little faster. I actually had an instructor pilot that showed me how to basically stop and go backwards and go forwards in an autorotation to land right in the spot that we were over when he rolled the throttle off. Instructor pilots would be flying along and they would just roll the throttle off. They wouldn't kill the engine but they'd roll the throttle off and you'd have to land it, see. But you're going down and you find your intended place to land then, and only then, do you make your mayday call. You've got to get all this other stuff together otherwise—it's academic to be calling people because they'll just come to pick up the pieces. So, you do all that. If you have time to make the mayday call, depending on your altitude, you may not.

AW:

You'll be on the ground before you have time to—

ER:

Right. And we practiced autorotation from a hover.

AW:

Because you don't have much leeway then.

ER:

Right. You can kill yourself from a three-foot hover. So, we practiced those, too. When you see pilots, helicopter pilots, hovering at high altitude for no apparent reason, that's a dangerous maneuver. That's not smart piloting. You never want to be at what we call "low and slow"

because you lose your ability to do a successful autorotation. So, we had to autorotate successfully throughout flight school. I really never did feel confident as a pilot until I could do that. It was frightening. You'd descend rather quickly. Of course, you've got to have all your marbles—and you can just set it down just like you can almost—on an egg without crushing it. They tend to spot with practice so if I'm going to be in an aircraft with an engine failure, let me be in a helicopter as opposed to a fixed-wing. And hopefully—

AW:

Really?

ER:

Oh yes. Oh absolutely.

AW:

That's because you know what you're doing.

ER:

Yes. Well, no. That's because you don't have to have a nice long runway. You just need a cleared area and, of course, you need to do all the right things and you need to have the skill and ability to put it in that area otherwise it's all for not. So yeah, helicopter any day.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Oh yeah.

AW:

That's great to hear.

ER:

For an engine failure, oh yeah, that's where you want to be. Your chance of surviving is much higher. Chance of failing is high, too, if you don't do the right things. You've got to do the right things in order to make a successful—

AW:

What's the old adage—for a fixed wing, a takeoff is most difficult on the plane, landing most difficult on the pilot. But it seems like in helicopter, everything's difficult for the machine because it really—you're expecting a lot out of that machine.

ER:

Sure. Well, takeoff and landings are two of the most—just like in a fixed wing—they're two of the most dangerous transitions in a helicopter. That's why you want to gain—if you don't have altitude, you want to gain altitude so you can do all of those things I mentioned in the autorotation. If you're in a pinnacle—if you're taking off from a mountaintop, you want to do what we call "air speed over altitude." You want to get your air speed up, okay. If you're on the ground, you want to get your altitude up before you do anything else.

AW:

And air speed up when you're on a mountaintop so you can get further away from the mountain.

ER:

So you can get air speed. Air speed's important. You need air speed and you need altitude. That's why I say pilots who hover at higher—above three feet or more for no apparent reason, that's dangerous. That's a dangerous move.

AW:

When there's a rescue going on, you're trying to fish somebody out—

ER:

You have no choice.

AW:

But that is a very—

ER:

That is a very dangerous move.

AW:

—stressful thing for the pilot.

ER:

It is very stressful. Very stressful. Very dangerous. But you have no choice. I was in a number of situations where I had no choice. I had to be in a—outside of the normal envelope of operation. But yeah, you just hope everything works right at that time—you don't have a failure—you don't have an engine failure. But yeah, that's an autorotation, Andy, yeah, so don't let anybody tell you that helicopters fall out of the sky like a rock. Now, they do if you don't know how to do an autorotation. You're in trouble. Or if you get yourself in a bad situation where you can't do one successfully. So, you stay out of that dead man's zone, that area of low altitude with no air speed. If you're low altitude, you need to hauling across the terrain so that you can pull up, go quickly

to come back down. That's a maneuver that we practiced also. We called it "speed reduction"—"low-altitude speed reduction autorotation." We did those, too. They made sure you could land the thing if it crashed—if the engine failed. And there were other problems that would happen like tail rotor failure. On a scale of one to ten, ten being—ten is a loss of the main rotor system, that's a ten. You're in real trouble. Nine is a transmission that doesn't free will. When the engine fails, the main rotors disengages from the engine so it can do the free will so that you could do rotation.

AW:

But if it didn't disengage—

ER:

But if it didn't, that's a ten. A tail rotor failure is about an eight. Oh, it's a very serious move.

AW:

How does—if you lose an engine—isn't the engine what powers the tail rotor?

ER:

Yes.

AW:

So how do you have a tail rotor when your auto—

ER:

Well, slipstreaming. Basically, the air passing through the helicopter—

AW:

Is doing the same with the tail rotor.

ER:

—is keeping you relatively—your nose in a relatively straight—once you get airborne, you don't really need the pedals that much because the air passing across the airfoil—the airframe, rather—keeps you relatively straight. It's just when you get real slow is when you lose that capability, that things get a little hairy. If you do have a tail rotor failure, then, now then, you're going to need a runway.

AW:

Because you're going to have to—

ER:

Because you're going to have to go in and the wind's going to direct your nose. You're not going to have any control. You use torque—you fly—you find a long place to land. A runway would be nice then. If you have tail rotor failure, you want a runway. You come in really slow—well, not slowly—you come in very shallow. You get over the runway and then at the very last minute before you set it down, you use the throttle to try to get your nose straight to get it, then you put those skids down, then you slide down the runway on your skids. We practiced that, too, in flight school. If you couldn't do—what the instructor would do—they wouldn't disengage the tail rotor—the instructor would put his feet on the pedals and would kick it out of trim and would make you take your feet off the pedals then you would have to land it without your feet on your pedals using the maneuver that I just mentioned. So, if you couldn't do that, you wouldn't get out of flight school. If you couldn't do that, you didn't need to get out of flight school.

AW:

So, it strikes me that if you made it through Fort Walters, you were in pretty good—you were ready to work.

ER:

You could handle the aircraft. You were relatively good at that. Relatively good. Relatively good. I never became an excellent pilot—well, I consider myself an excellent pilot—until many hours after that, you know, like anything else. So, Fort Walters—we soloed. They'd take us out to the Holiday Inn and throw us in the pool. That was part of the solo. There were some wings—excuse me, rotor blades—that we would go under at that Holiday Inn, the rest of the flight unit would. That is at a memorial there on Highway 180 right now in Mineral Wells, those wings. I went under those wings—

AW:

I've seen those.

ER:

—in 1970.

AW:

Now I'm glad to know what all that means.

ER:

Yes, they were at the Holiday Inn there on 180. So yeah, then we graduated from Fort Walters and we lost a lot of student pilots, warrant officer candidates. They either didn't make it academically, didn't make it in aviation or they just didn't cut the mustard as officer material.

So, they dwindled it down. So, then we went to Fort Walt—Fort Rucker, Alabama for advanced training.

AW:

Where is Fort Rucker?

ER:

It's close—it's right—the city right outside of the base is called Enterprise, Alabama. It's relatively close to Dothan, Alabama, if you know where that is. It's at the southeast part of the state somewhere.

AW:

That's what I think.

ER:

But Enterprise, Alabama is the city right outside the gate. So, we go there and we start out in probably the most—at least for me it was—the toughest phase of training, which was instrument flying. We flew—

AW:

Isn't that toughest for everybody, though?

ER:

It's got to be tough. There's no way it's easy because—

AW:

I mean, you've just gone through—and we didn't learn to fly helicopters in police work—but we learned intuitive things, particularly the use of your weapon and how to use it, when not to use it, when to use it, and those things. So they became the whole object of all that training as was with your training was to have an intuitive sense. Well, when you get to instruments, you have to forget your intuition and you've got to work it.

ER:

Seat of the past does not work. None of those things work.

AW:

And you got to believe your instruments, too.

ER:

Yes, you must, or you won't get through flight school.

AW:

Or you'll kill yourself.

ER:

Well, hopefully you won't get through flight school before you have a chance to kill yourself.

AW:

I don't know at all about the situation with rotary craft but in fixed-wing, you read time after time that a pilot stacked it into a mountain or something because they didn't believe the instrument, you know.

ER:

What happened—my belief in most of these instances on private pilots who kill themselves or injure themselves and others is because they run into a weather situation that they're not capable of handling. They're not instrument rated. They're not instrument rated and they run into weather. That, I think, is the single most—the deadliest combination. You don't have the instrument rating and-or the aircraft is not instrument rated and the weather, the element of the weather. The weather is a frightening thing. If you don't respect and understand the weather, you're going to have some serious problems. And that's why instrument flying is so important. That's why learning how to do that is so—you can be a pilot—you can fly what we call VFR, Visual Flight Rules, all your life and survive and be happy but you've got to be smart. You've got to stay out of weather. You've to recognize it. And sometimes—what happens to some pilots is they misjudge things. They either misjudge them or they go beyond what they should go through. They don't get the proper weather reports or there's a deadline or something that's pressing on them. They take risks. They're trying to impress people. Who knows? But, when they run into weather—if you run into a weather event and you're not instrument rated, you're jeopardizing yourself. You're putting yourself in jeopardy. And for me, that was the most difficult, I would say. I think that was more difficult than learning to fly that helicopter.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Oh yeah. It was in the middle of the summer and Alabama was hot. I would finish instrument flying, I would just be soaking wet. What the instructor pilots would do—we flew Bell 13's. These were the bubble—they were actual—they actually looked like the little grasshopper things.

AW:

It's sort of like—

ER:

But it was—

AW:

When a little kid draws a helicopter, they draw that Bell 13.

ER:

But it had all the—had instruments for tactical. We ended up—when we graduated we had what was called a tactical instrument rating, which is a little different from a civilian rating but I guarantee you we were able to handle any weather event. So, our training in that helicopter—by the way, I want to back up a little bit and say: we were qualified to fly the TH—once I left Fort Walters, I was qualified to fly the TH-55 helicopter as a pilot. Then when we got to Fort Rucker, Alabama, our first training was in that TH-13, the Bell 13. Let me tell you, that kind of—you thought you were a hot shot as a pilot. You were just, “Give me the world. I’m ready.” Then they put you in this thing and make you fly by instruments and you realize you’re not very good at this. So, what they would do is—we would wear this hood on our helmets. Then there were places around the bubble that we could cover.

AW:

So you couldn’t see.

ER:

You could kind of cheat but it wasn’t smart to cheat. You could kind of peep if you really wanted to but you didn’t do that because you didn’t want the instructor to see you doing that. And plus that wasn’t helping you. You needed to learn how to do that. So, that’s how we did the bulk of our instrument—and plus there were flight simulators we used. We used flight simulators, too, for our instrument training. Not as fancy as the ones they later got but we used—some of them were like World War II relics. But anyway, that was the instrument portion of the training. We lost a lot of pilots, student pilots, in instrument training. It was just so hard. But you had to do it. You had to know how to do it to get through flight school. If you didn’t, you shouldn’t get through flight school. And then what we had about was this Cadillac of a helicopter called the UH-1 Huey. Let me tell you, Andy, it was definitely a Cadillac.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Oh my goodness. Great, big, enormous, ginormous thing. The UH-1—well, we practiced on the D-models. I think there were some C-models and D-models. There may even have been some

old A-models. But the predominant Bell Jet—excuse me, the predominant UH-1 Huey helicopter in Vietnam was the H-model. But for training, we were using the older models. But huge. I think it carried eleven fully-armed—the capacity was eleven troops.

AW:

You could almost put the TH-55 inside of one of those things.

ER:

Yeah, right. Surely. A couple of them. But you look at this enormous thing, I mean, you can't—you couldn't even—you couldn't see the back of it. Of course, the main—the crew of the Huey, it's a four-man crew, four-person crew: pilot, co-pilot, door gunner and crew chief. And so, the crew chief and the door gunner were responsible for looking out the back to make sure you don't hit the tail rotor on something. But, it was an enormous aircraft. It had that Lycoming L-13 jet engine—turbine. We used a turbine. It was terrifyingly big. I remember the first time I sat in the seat and picked it up to a hover. It just lifted and it just sat there. [AW laughs] I wasn't giving it all of this on the pedal and the cyclic and keeping—that little 55 would be—the wind [imitates wind sound], little gust of wind, and it wanted to go over to the next county. You picked that Huey up and it just sat there. I thought, Wow, what a machine. It was a very, very forgiving machine. I think we were all impressed with that, going from what we had learned. We didn't qualify that TH-13, the Bell 13. We never got a qualification as a pilot in that helicopter because that was not the goal of that portion of the training. It was strictly for instruments so we never did qualify. I mean, we could fly it because we had to fly, but we never were certified as pilots for the 13. Going into the Huey, we were all qualified in the Huey. Just such a Cadillac. Just a beautiful machine.

AW:

Was that what you flew mostly in Vietnam?

ER:

No.

AW:

[Laughs] So, you didn't get to fly a Cadillac.

ER:

I didn't get to fly the Cadillac. I flew a baby Cadillac. At the end of graduation of flight school—and when we lost some students in the Huey training too. The top—I believe it was the top ten percent of the graduating class, the military offered a transition into the other Army helicopter—the other helicopters in the Army inventory. At that time, they were the Chinook, that CH-47,

that tandem rotor bladed Chinook, there was the Cobra gunship. We had, I think, just a couple of cranes, that big sky crane; we had a couple of those. I don't want to get too long here.

AW:

No, I was just keeping that from buzzing.

ER:

Okay. We had the sky cranes. We had OH-6's, the Hughes, the little scout helicopter, and we had the Army's version of the Bell Jet Ranger, the OH-58 Alpha. It was the Alpha model. So, I happened to be fortunate enough to be part of that group who qualified for what we called a "transition course" into another helicopter. So, let me say that, once you graduate—once I graduated from flight school, I was a warrant officer. In fact, you actually separate from the military on the very same day you—you don't leave—you don't go anywhere, just on paper you leave the Army and from whatever rank or whatever you were, for us anyway, for the warrant officers, then we become an Warrant Officer 1; WO1 is our classification, our rank, then we're aviators on that day. So, all of us—

AW:

But you're still in the Army.

ER:

We're still in the Army, right. We're just the Army reserve. It's the USAR [**United States Army Reserve**]. We were all qualified to fly Huey's at that point. We could be stationed in any unit that Huey's. But like I said, For the select few of us, we got to transition to other helicopters if we chose. They offered it to us for that bunch and I chose the Bell Jet Ranger.

AW:

And why did you choose to transition away from the Cadillac?

ER:

Well, because I had heard stories about how that helicopter was being used in Vietnam. I knew that it was being used—it's a reconnaissance helicopter. I knew it had that mission. I knew it had a mission I wasn't too excited about, which was the Cobra gunship scout helicopter mission. That was probably the most dangerous mission in Vietnam. I knew it was used in a VIP mission.

AW:

Hauling the Brass around.

ER:

Hauling the Brass around and I thought, That'd be nice because I don't guess they want to get killed. So, that was my motivation mostly. The Cobra gunship—the mission of that machine—

AW:

Those are the ones that had the machine guns—

ER:

Designed exclusively to kill things. That has no other purpose as a pilot and a co-pilot and weapon systems.

AW:

You can't pick anybody up, save anybody. You're just out there to shoot—

ER:

It's a weapons system. But that one, it had a mission with the scout helicopter, the small helicopter, which was the Hughes but they were being—that 6—OH-6 I mentioned. That's the little egg-shaped helicopter that you may see. Remember that movie on TV Hawaii Five-O?

AW:

That's what—

ER:

They had the little egg-shaped—

AW:

It was painted red or orange and there was—what was his name—and he was African American too.

ER:

Yes, right. The pilot, yeah. That's OH-6. They were being phased out. Now, they were great scout helicopters but they were being phased out because Bell won the contract for the scout helicopter.

AW:

And they didn't build that so.

ER:

No, Bell built that. So, those were my motivating factors going into that because I thought hopefully I could get a job as flying a—

AW:

The Brass.

ER:

—Brass. But, the training for that helicopter was the gunship and the scout training. That was incorporated in learning to transition to that helicopter.

AW:

So, when you got out of the transition, you could fly any of those other craft?

ER:

The TH-55, the Huey, and the OH-58 Alpha, yes. And that training, incidentally, was at Fort Knox, Kentucky, back where I went into the service as an inductee. But I was trained in the scout mission so I could've ended up in Vietnam with a hunter—what we called hunter-killer teams. As the scout helicopter, I was supposed to fly over the treetops looking for the bad guys and draw fire.

AW:

That sounds like—"I'm just going to run out there and see where they are."

ER:

And target, mark the target with the smoke or something and get out of the way then the Cobra gunships would come in and shoot off rounds, rockets, or whatever. Then I'd fly back over and—

AW:

See if there was anybody left.

ER:

—count or if I got shot at again, we'd do it again. But that was—I was trained for that mission. But when I got to Vietnam, I got in—I didn't get in a combat assault company. I was assigned to an assault support unit.

AW:

What is that—that's after the assault?

ER:

Leading up to and after, yes. We didn't—we did not ferry the troops into battle. We did not bring them away from battle. We supported them before the battle with reconnaissance, electronics, intelligence. We supported them—we can support them during the battle, too, generally from a

distance and we supported them after the battle. We resupplied—we would resupply during the battle. The assault support units were designed specifically for maintaining those combat support units.

AW:

You would fly a machine or craft that could deliver things, so it had cargo?

ER:

Yes. Well, I flew the Bell Jet—the OH-58 Alpha exclusively. A couple of times I flew a Huey but I was assigned to fly the OH-58 Alpha. And my task was—my tasks—were flying VIPs, reconnaissance. I would do artillery support. I would help the artillery batteries adjust their guns. I would do spotting. I would spot. Pretty much anything you needed for a little, small helicopter. And I did—a couple times I did the scout mission, too. Just around our perimeter—I was stationed at Cần Thơ Army Airfield, which is in in the delta. We were talking about that yesterday, or the other day, Andy.

AW:

Because I wasn't familiar with that one.

ER:

This is Cần Thơ. This is—let me show you this. I'm showing you, Andy, a picture of southeast Asia, which includes Vietnam. That's a view of it and here's another one far away. Vietnam is right here so you can get a perspective of where things are. Of course, south Vietnam extended all the way from the bottom, which we call that Nam Cần, all the way up. The DMZ [**Demilitarized Zone**] was like about right in here, above Huế, right around here. So, all this area. The country—the southern part of the country—

AW:

So, Cần Thơ is right down in—

ER:

Right. "Can toe" is how it's pronounced

AW:

Cần Thơ was right—

ER:

Was in the—it was—that's the Mekong and the Bassac is one of the tributaries off that river. The country was divided for military purposes into four regions. We call it four Corps, three Corps, two Corps, and I Corps, like one, two, three, and four. Those were the military regions, and I

predominantly operated in four Corps and Cần Thơ was the headquarters for most of the III Corps operations. There was a city just to the north a little bit from Cần Thơ called Vĩnh Long, which was another large city. I keep saying Saigon—of course they call it Ho Chi Minh City now but I know it as Saigon. So, let me go back to this first picture so you can get some perspective on the distance between Cần Thơ—air miles was—I don't have that on there. There it is, about seventy-nine air—straight as the crow flies. It's about eighty miles. If you're on the roadway, if you're going seventy-nine miles an hour—

AW:

About a hundred.

ER:

Yeah, it's about a hundred or so. So, this—my area of operation extended from Saigon all the way down to the delta, from that down to this picture right here. This is where we operated. That's not it. So, from—

AW:

Here all the way down.

ER:

Yeah. And Cần Thơ—from Cần Thơ to the bottom, which was Năm Căn. This is the gulf of Thailand and this is the South China Sea. That's about another eighty to ninety miles or a little bit further.

AW:

And you're awfully close to Cambodia, too.

ER:

Oh yes. Go west and you'll hit the Cambodian border, which is what we did a few times when we were not supposed to. So, yeah—but that was our area of operation. I was stationed at—the first company that I was assigned to was the 271 Assault Support Helicopter Company. That was a unique company. I think I'm correct in that it was the only company in Vietnam that had CH-4 Chinooks and OH-58 Alpha helicopters. The Bell Jet Ranger and the CH-47, that tandem rotor-bladed Chinook. We were the only company in Vietnam that had those. And so, the big Chinooks, of course, they did hauled artillery, supplies and troops, but not into combat, no. We were what's called an Assault Support Helicopter Company so we did anything and everything designed to support the ground commanders. The assault—the combat assault units. And our mission—for that Bell Jet Ranger, we flew VIPs, as I said earlier, reconnaissance. We had a Chaplin mission. On Sundays we would take the Chaplin around to the little outpost that didn't—

AW:

To camps.

ER:

Yeah. Not large, little smaller camps, on Sundays. Pickup supplies. We would land out on—there were ships out on the—off of Vũng Tàu and Saigon—that had items that came in that we would need to go pickup and land on the ships and get those kinds of things. So, those were the kinds of things that we did. Now, the—I guess six months into my tour, five or six months, the company commander called me in and said, “The maintenance officer is DEROSing”—DEROS is you return to the States—“I need a maintenance officer and you’re it.” I said—

AW:

Were you handy with a wrench?

ER:

Well, yeah. I said, “I’m not a maintenance officer.” There’s a special training for maintenance in helicopters. I said, “I don’t want to do that. I’m not trained for that, I’m a pilot. I want to fly. I want hours.” He said, “You don’t get what you want. You get to do what I tell you to do.” So, I was pretty disappointed about that. I didn’t want that mission but it was an important mission. I think we had eleven to thirteen OH-58 Alpha’s in our platoon. So, it was important to keep them flying. I mean, I didn’t have a choice.

AW:

Why did they pick you? They must’ve thought that you were capable of doing it.

ER:

I’m guessing that was the reason. So, to my dismay, I must’ve demonstrated something. So, Jennings was the maintenance officer before I left. Gene Jennings, he was the maintenance officer. It was his time to come home. So, there I was. I had no maintenance training other than the training in flight school where they teach you how to pre-flight and so forth. So, I was really kind of stressing out about that because there I was responsible for maintaining these helicopters. So, I spent many hours reading technical manuals. Now, I had a sergeant who was in charge of the platoon—and another thing, too, I failed to mention: one of the reasons why I thought the flight program and becoming a warrant officer was a useful thing was because I generally would not have command responsibility. The warrant officer branch in the military was created because the army wanted specialists. They wanted highly-trained technicians for certain jobs.

AW:

There weren’t administrators or supervisors.

ER:

No administrators. No command responsibility. They were given tasks, specialized tasks, and no command responsibility. So, my job as a pilot—as a technician was to fly the helicopter. So, now I'm in charge of this whole maintenance crew. There was the sergeant—there had to be like thirteen or fourteen crew chiefs. For the Bell Jet Rangers, you see, the crew chiefs didn't get to fly with the helicopter as opposed to Huey's. Now, a Huey—remember me saying four man crew: the crew chief, door gunner—now, the crew chief was a door gunner, too, when he had a gun but he was also—I say “he” because there were no women at that time—he's charged with maintaining the helicopter. The crew chief, the door gunner, the pilot and the co-pilot. But for the Bell Jet Ranger, since we were on a four-seater, we couldn't allocate a seat to the crew chief. That means we were only able to carry two people. So, the crew chief never got a chance to fly. They were kind of—but every chance I got I always took them with me when I had a free seat because I recognized them. But anyway, I was in charge of this outfit.

AW:

So now you're a Commander.

AW:

A Commander. I didn't want that but I got that. And I took my job very seriously. I did a lot of reading, stayed up late at night, watched what they did, the crew chiefs, in maintaining the helicopters because, you see, my job was when the rotor blade was replaced or the tail rotor was replaced—

AW:

You had to certify it was worthy.

ER:

I had to certify it was air-worthy. I got test pilot orders and I had to—

AW:

So, you got to be the test pilot?

ER:

Yes, I had to be a test pilot for that. So, I had to certify the aircraft as air-worthy so that was important to me. First of all, I had to fly it first. So, I had invested interest in knowing it was maintained.

AW:

There's some logic to that.

ER:

There's some value in that. There were certain maneuvers I had to execute in order to certify the aircraft as flyable. Then for the other aircraft that were going out on missions, if a caution or warning light came on and they had to set down and so forth, I was the only one who could come out and authorize that aircraft air-worthy again. There were certain things we called "red X", that would red X an aircraft where it wouldn't be air-worthy again unless somebody with a certain credential could certify it, and that was me. So, I took that very seriously because—for obvious reasons. But I'll tell you what, Andy, I think that was the best thing that ever happened to me because I learned how to be a—I learned how to be a pilot knowing more—the more I learned about the mechanics of that helicopter made me a better pilot. It was incredible. And I knew stuff as a pilot: knew how to test, pre-flight it. You go through the checklist and all that. But I'm talking working on the transmissions, replacing the tail rotor drive shafts, balancing the rotor systems. We would go through that stuff. We'd stand on the skids and then somebody would stand out there with a pole, you know like a PVC pole with tape around it. I'd pull up on pitch to get the blades to—we put crayon markings on the end of the blades and we watched to see where the blades would hit that pole then we would adjust the flaps on the blades to get the thing balanced so it wouldn't bounce like that. All those kinds of things. And it was me with the helicopter doing that. Of course, I had to sign it off afterwards. So, that made me, I think, a better pilot than I would've been otherwise. So, even though I was upset I didn't get as many hours as I wanted to, it made me a—I think it made me a better—

AW:

Did you get paid more for more hours?

ER:

Oh no.

AW:

So that was just something you wanted to do.

ER:

Now, we got combat pay. I think it was something like sixty-five dollars. We all got combat pay, combat flight pay. Flight pay was sixty-five. Let's see, what was it? Combat pay was—we got combat pay an extra amount and then we got flight pay an extra amount. The commission officers got more flight pay than we got and we, as warrant officers, we were all upset about that because that was our primary MOS [**military occupational specialty**]. These guys were commission officers—aviation was always a secondary MOS for them. They were either artillery, infantry or whatever. But, generally if those select few commission officers who did go through flight training and did become aviators—I mean, they didn't put them in an infantry anymore or artillery because that would be—

AW:

It probably didn't make them in charge of maintenance either, do they?

ER:

No. That would be a waste of the training. So, once they got their wings they never went back to their primary MOS. But for the commission officers, aviation was never their primary MOS. Now, I don't know if it's the same now but there was always a secondary for commission officers. But for warrant officers, which was the level below the commission officers, that's kind of changed now. We were always upset because, you know, that was what we did as a warrant officer. We had no other specialty. We were the specialists in aviation but we got paid less than the commission officers. And so that's what I did. At the last, almost three months, of my tour in Vietnam—I stayed there almost a year—the person had a—there was a—we had a special assignment; our company had a special assignment. It was to fly the deputy for CORDs—CORDs, C-O-R-D-s, stands for Civil Operations and Rural Development. That was a program that was designed to quote unquote win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese, to keep them from becoming Viet Cong and those who were Viet Cong maybe come over. And so, what the mission of CORDs—they had a number of missions—it was involved in building the infrastructure—I started to say rebuild but there was no infrastructure before we got there since it was—building up the infrastructure, setting up and planning for elections, so we got into politics. There were operations, intelligence operations, trying to locate insurgents, Viet Cong, the Chiêu Hồi Program where they would come over and we'd pay them, if you were Viet Cong and you wanted to give yourself up in the Chiêu Hồi Program, so there was involvement in that. So, it was a mission—it was a civilian—it was actually under the offices of the CIA and the military. So, it was a join operation. That was going on in Vietnam while the combat war was also going on. There were deputies of those regions. There was a deputy in charge of military region four for CORDs in military region four. This man's name was Wilbur Wilson. He was a retired Army colonel. Our mission—the company that I was in—one of the Bell Jet Ranger Helicopters had an exclusive mission to fly him wherever he wanted to go whenever he wanted to go twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. So, the commander called me in—the Company commander called me in one day and said, "Okay, you're the Dep CORDs pilot." I said, "Okay." So, that was my mission at the last almost three months that I was there. I moved off the base. I was stationed—I lived in a hotel in downtown Cần Thơ. There was a helipad on the top of the hotel.

AW:

And that's where your machine was?

ER:

That's where I parked the one machine. Right next door to the hotel was the CORDs office. And so, I would—Wilbur Wilson would say, "I'll be ready to go at eight o'clock in the morning so I'd be up there cranking up and when he'd come out, we'd take off. He would go—sometimes

we'd go to ten or fifteen different little nooks and crannies all over IV Corps, the whole damn country. I mean, we went to every little nook and cranny in IV Corps. And often, usually three to four times a month, he'd fly up to Saigon to meet with generals and stuff.

AW:

You'd fly him up in that—

ER:

Yeah, in that Bell Jet Ranger. We'd land there about nine o'clock. It'd take us an hour to get there, hour and a half.

AW:

Just when you said you parked it on top of the hotel, how'd you provide security for it?

ER:

The hotel had Vietnamese soldiers, South Vietnamese soldiers, stationed there. There was a tower there and there was always somebody there armed.

AW:

Seems like a right target.

ER:

Well yeah. There was a Vietnamese military installation nearby, too. Sometimes we'd get back late and I didn't like to fly into town over the downtown area. That thing makes a hell of a lot of noise. I didn't like doing that. I'd drop him off but see, my—what I would normally do is I would land there, drop him off, then I'd fly over to the airfield which was just a couple miles away to refuel so I'd be ready for the mission tomorrow. But if it was late at night, I would stay at the airfield. I just didn't want to fly back over town because I didn't want to make any more enemies than I already had because the thing's noisy.

AW:

Well, helicopters are noisy.

ER:

Especially at night.

AW:

Beating the air into submission takes a lot of—

ER:

Right. So that mission, it was interesting flying—this man was very quiet. He was, oh, he was a powerhouse too.

AW:

But he wasn't talking to you so you didn't—

ER:

No, he didn't say very much. In fact, sometimes he didn't wear the headphones. Often times he would just sleep while we went to places. And he knew every nook and cranny. I mean, he knew every—I'd get going, he'd get in, he'd say, "Ninh Hòa [1:17:59]. I want to go to Ninh Hòa." I'd plot my map—I had this map. He'd just say, "No, it's that way." He'd just point. So, that was fine for him but that wasn't fine for me because I need to know where I'm going. I need to know. So, I didn't want to look like a complete idiot. So, what I did, Andy, was I would stay up late at night and I'd study the map. I'd look at all these little nooks and crannies and places and I knew—and I created myself a cheat sheet where if he said, "Pleiku," I'd have this little cheat sheet and I'd know what direction to take off in, what the—

AW:

So he felt comfortable.

ER:

Yeah. He would tell me—he would direct me in flight exactly where to go, but that wasn't good enough for me. I was the pilot. That wasn't a good a thing. I need to know. I can't follow—I couldn't follow his directions. He was not a pilot. Because there are other things that are going on, which I'll mention in a minute. So, I created a little cheat sheet. If he said, "Bạc Liêu," I'd just know I'd look at this thing and I'd see "080" and I'd know to take off in that direction. Then I could look at my map airborne. Because, you see, when you flew from point a to point b in Vietnam, you have to call the artillery sectors.

AW:

So you didn't get shot at.

ER:

Right. You had to call to see if they were firing artillery. You couldn't just go flying. So, it was important to know where the devil I was going. So, the cheat sheet helped me but then after a while I got to know places that I would never have known.

AW:

I think a job like this you would really have gotten to know Vietnam a lot better than—

ER:

Every little nook and cranny. Down in Năm Căn I would lose radio contact because we were so far away from every place. We actually went out on a little island out there and ate crab and shrimp. [AW laughs] Wherever you went—I mean, this guy was Wilbur Wilson. Oh, let me tell you, they would—when he would go places, they would do a presentation for him on what was going on, like if they had certain things—if there was an election coming up, they would report on activity in the community, or how well the road was being developed, or if the water supply—and things of that nature. The military—the U.S. and Vietnamese, South Vietnamese officials, would be involved in that and they would put on this presentation. If he wasn't satisfied, oh, it was holy hell. I mean, he would let them know in a heartbeat. He was terrifying. These people were frightened of him. So, in fact—

AW:

So were they scared of you, too?

ER:

No, no, no. I was nothing. I would call them and let them—because sometimes he would show up unannounced but generally they knew he was coming but they didn't know exactly when he'd get there. So, I'd call. I'd make sure they knew well out, as far as the radio transmission—because often times he didn't wear his headset. Sometimes he did. Like I said, he's sleeping. So, I'd call them and say—he had a nickname. It was Coal Ben Willy, is what he was called.

AW:

Cold?

ER:

Yeah, coal as in coal—as in the bituminous. Coal, c-o-a-l.

AW:

So, Coal—

ER:

Coal Ben Willy. I looked up where he got that name from. It was when he was active in the Army. I don't know how he got that name, but he was known as Coal Ben Willy. Wilbur, W-i-l-b-u-r.

AW:

B-u-r, okay. I had it spelled two ways.

ER:

Wilson, W-i-l-s-o-n.

AW:

I'm going to look him up. It sounds interesting.

ER:

He died in 1972, shortly after I got back from Vietnam.

AW:

Oh really?

ER:

Yeah. I think he had a heart attack or something. But yeah, he was one of the deputies. He was the deputy for CORDs for military region IV. There were deputies in the other regions, too. Yeah, look him up. He was, oh, he was holy terror on them if they didn't have their act together. He hated Second Lieutenants. [AW laughs] He'd chew them up and spit them out, man. In fact, we were at a—

AW:

So he was old school.

ER:

Oh yeah. And sometimes I would sit in on the—usually I would sit in on the meetings as a pilot. I was sitting in on one meeting—we'd talk a little bit. He wasn't very vocal. I was sitting there and they had an easel. This captain was putting on a presentation and there was an easel there. It kept moving because I guess the chain was broken and it kept sliding. He kept trying to fix it and Wilbur was kind of fidgeting. He said, "You, get up there and hold this easel." I was kind of just chilling in the back. He said, "You, get on up here." I looked around and I go, "He's pointing at me."

AW:

And this was the captain?

ER:

This was the captain, yeah, which outranks warrant officer. So, I go—I get up and I start walking up there. Wilbur Wilson looks and he goes, "What the hell?" He said, "Eddie, sit down." He said, "This is my pilot. He doesn't hold a damn easel up. You get one of these sorry Second Lieutenants out here to hold that damn thing up. He's a pilot. He doesn't hold up a thing." [AW

laughs] And I was shocked. I said, “Oh, that’s what he thinks.” I mean, I was imp—I mean, I didn’t know he felt that way.

AW:

You didn’t know you were important up till that.

ER:

He said, “He’s my pilot. He doesn’t hold anything. Get these sorry Second Lieutenants up there to hold that damn thing.” [Laughter]

AW:

That’s a great story.

ER:

I said, “Oh okay.” But sometimes I would stay with the helicopter because they would have maybe a South Vietnamese soldier sentry watching it when I—and sometimes they just didn’t look like they were—might do the job, so I would stay with the helicopter sometimes. But we went everywhere. And a lot of times I’d fly him up to Saigon and drop him off at 8:30. He would say, “Pick me up at five,” so I said, “Okay.” So, I’d fly over to Vũng Tàu, go out on the beach, lay out on the beach, go into Saigon, shop at the PX. Whenever I’d go up to Saigon, the guys would give me a grocery list of things they wanted—

AW:

Things to bring back, yeah.

ER:

—because the PX at Saigon was a lot better than the one at Cần Thơ so I’d go shopping and things of that nature. I visited my friends from flight school. One of my friends, Dennis Taliercio, look for him up in Pleiku one trip up to Saigon.

AW:

In this kind of duty, did you come under fire very often?

ER:

No, I don’t think so, Andy. There was an incident near the Cambodian border that we were drawing some fire. I was in the vicinity and there were some other helicopters with Wilbur Wilson there but he knew what was going on. I didn’t have any guns on that helicopter. I had a radio. That’s all I had, a radio, to call for help. And so, Wilbur Wilson knew the areas that were—

AW:

And he didn't want to go in those areas either.

ER:

No, he didn't want to go over in those areas. And sometimes I would—even during that mission I would fly others. He would have me take other people and I had to be careful. Occasionally I'd have to tell some of these officers from Saigon who didn't know the way around down in IV Corps that was not good, especially near the Cambodian border. There was a lot of—there was activity there. We tried to be real careful when we got close to the Cambodian border. But generally I—never got—I don't know. You don't know if you're getting shot at. Somebody pops up with an AR—AK-47 and shoot at you.

AW:

When I was in police work, more than once I came back after an evening of patrol and there was a bullet hole in the car. So, I knew I'd been shot at but—somebody said, "When did that happen," and you—

ER:

You don't know.

AW:

All I can say is it's sometime over eight hours but you don't know that kind of stuff.

ER:

Unless they had a big gun and of course you'd see the muzzle and then that wouldn't last long because you'd get on the radio and you'd call to take that thing out. No, there were no large guns in South Vietnam. We didn't worry. We had total air supremacy. We didn't worry about anything but maybe somebody popping with an AK-47 trying to hit us. We had rules: fifteen-hundred feet or better, reduce the probability of somebody being accurate enough to hit you.

AW:

You didn't fly any lower than fifteen-hundred feet.

ER:

No, no, unless—

AW:

Until you were—

ER:

Yeah, unless the weather forced you to do so and then we generally just went right over the deck because—

AW:

So, weather. Was weather a constant issue in Vietnam?

ER:

Weather was the scariest thing in Vietnam for a pilot. More frightening than getting shot at.

AW:

Lots of thunderstorms there, right?

ER:

Oh my goodness. The weather patterns, they came—they would come off like Lubbock. The patterns would come off the southwest off the gulf of Thailand. Giant wall, big black wall of rain. Just roll over the south. You could set your watch to it during the wet season. When you first got there, you'd try to get out of the rain and then you realize you can't get out of the rain because the rain's everywhere. So, six months out of the year it would be wet and hot. By the time those storms got up into the Central Highlands, much of that water would be dissipated. So, this would be their dry season up in the upper—up in I Corps or II Corps. Then the winds would shift. There were no cold fronts, so to speak, out in Southeast Asia. I guess it was the doldrum belt weather. I'm not too sure. But anyway, the winds would shift and come out of the northeast and would bring the water off of the gulf of China. Yeah, the gulf of the China Sea—South China Sea, excuse me. They would bring the rains in so this would be the wet season for I Corps and II Corps. Much of that would dissipate. There were hills in the Central Highlands, is what we called them. Then that would be our dry season in the south. So, there were issues. In the wet season, it was the thunderstorms. You had to either fly over them—but generally the tops were thousands of feet, ten and twelve thousand.

AW:

I was going to say, how do you do that in a helicopter?

ER:

You can't. Our limit was ten-thousand feet but we never flew ten-thousand—we needed oxygen for it. We didn't have oxygen masks. By the time you got up to ten-thousand feet it was time to come back down because you were probably at where you needed to be.

AW:

The turbine could operate at that altitude?

ER:

Oh yeah. Ten-thousand feet, yeah. You either go over the thunderstorm if you could, or go around it, or the only other—well, the two other alternatives is abandon the mission or go what we call “nap-of-the-Earth”, fly right over the—well, we call it IFR, I follow roads. That was the only way you would know because when you’re over the treetops, you lose all reference. You have no reference. Your point of references go away because your references are flying under you at a hundred miles an hour and they look different when you’re over the treetops. So, if the mission required that and you needed to be from point A to point B, it wasn’t smart to fly at six-hundred feet because that was the ceiling if there was a ceiling there. You didn’t want to go in the soup. You just don’t do that. Although, the Bell Jet Ranger that I flew—although I was instrument rated—the Bell Jet Ranger that I flew was not instrument rated; didn’t have all the proper instruments. But I could fly by instruments and I did a few times inadvertently. I mean, not inadvertently. Just to get through the soup I could do it. I had enough instruments but if I was challenged—I mean, if something happened and I was in the soup, I would be in serious trouble because the aircraft wasn’t instrument rated but it had enough instruments for me to get out of the bad weather, which I had to do a few times. I mean, you just go around it. The Huey’s were rated but you don’t fly in a thunderstorm, you go around. So, what we would do is we go nap-of-the-earth. We just go—and the thing about that is you still—there were few towers, very few guide wires and things like that. It was Vietnam. So, you didn’t worry so much about that or tall buildings. You didn’t worry about getting shot at because the Doppler effect, if you know—if a helicopter is flying low, you don’t hear it until it’s almost right up on you, and then by the time you gather yourself up and get your AR—AK-4 situated, it’s over you. You hear a light faint and then it’s loud then it’s gone. So, we used that characteristic of low-level flying. You fly it really fast right over the trees. Of course, that makes it more dangerous but that’s how—

AW:

Just one little mistake and you didn’t have much time to correct.

ER:

Right. But you didn’t just go lollygagging around over the terrain because then you could get shot with an AK-47. But it was dangerous because you could get lost; your point of references were different. But we’d take—I can’t remember this highway—there was a highway, main highway, from Cần Thơ to Saigon that you’d just get on that highway and you just fly right alongside that highway as fast as you could to get where you were going. You’d pop up and try to land. We had to do that a few times but sometimes we’d have to abandon the mission if the weather was just incredible.

AW:

What the weather problem during the dry season?

ER:

Dust. Heat always—heat—there's something called density altitude.

AW:

I've been stuck in Phoenix one time because it was so hot the jet couldn't take off.

ER:

That's correct. That is correct. The thinner the air, the less lift it can provide to the airfoil. So, there was always an issue because it was always hot in Vietnam, relatively speaking, but more so when it was dry. But the dust was the issue. The thing about that is, normal operations in the helicopter—generally you'll land to a hover, a three-foot hover. That way you can actually survey where you're going to land or set it down then you just go ahead and set it down from a three-foot hover. A three-foot hover is a standard maneuver. In fact, if you're taxiing in a helicopter without wheels, you lift up to a three-foot hover and that's how you position yourself. But in the dusty season, that could—you could go IFR. The dust could blow and you could lose your visual reference and crash from three feet. So generally, you'd have to kind of go all the way to the ground then and lower the pitch to get that pitch out of the blades before it starts blowing up dust and things of that nature. So, that was—the dust was a problem during the dry season.

AW:

Did that kind of dust affect the mechanical part of the engine?

ER:

Yes. Yes it can. Bearings. If you get too much of it in the engine it's not a good thing. But yeah, it wasn't really bad because it was a jungle. It was mostly jungle and there was not a lot of dusty areas; around the beaches and certain other places. But during the dry season we had to be careful of the dust. And that was a critical problem in Afghanistan in the Middle East. Dust is a serious problem.

AW:

Yeah, the ill-fated rescue in Iran.

ER:

Yeah. I have ideas about that, Andy.

AW:

Well, our idea here in Lubbock was they should've trained out here where we had dust and knew what they were doing.

ER:

You know, I don't know about that, Andy, because here's the thing, that was one of the most important missions.

AW:

We're still suffering from it.

ER:

That was one of the most important missions that we, as aviators, we could do. So, generally the military chooses the best pilots to do those kind of missions. It strikes me as odd that the best pilots would fly all the way over there and run into each other. I just—I'm thinking, Did a tank come over the hill and disrupt that operation? Did something happen? I mean, you just don't—you can—it can happen.

AW:

What I read in the analysis—of course, you don't know how much you're really reading or getting told—they kept talking about the dust, that they weren't trained for that dust and I thought, That doesn't make sense.

ER:

No. I find that hard to believe, to be surprised that there would be dust over there. No. I just, I don't know if we will ever will know the truth unless we talk to somebody who was part of that. But as a pilot, as a pilot who was called upon to do missions, some of them, very specialized missions I find it hard to believe that those experts would go over there and—not just the dust but they ran into each other supposedly because of the dust. I just—[smacks lips] it's hard to believe. I mean, it can happen but I've always that something else, something else, happened. You don't go there and you don't tear up your own transportation to get back. You can't—

AW:

Can't get back if it's torn up.

ER:

Then you can't complete the mission. So, I got to come home from Vietnam.

AW:

But you still had some duty time left with—

ER:

I did.

AW:

How much? At this point about a year left? You had three.

ER:

About a year left, yeah. When I was in Vietnam it was called being short. You're counting the days down. When I was counting my days down—oh, I got to tell you this incident. I'll be brief.

AW:

We've got—we can do—we're not going to get everything done today anyway, I can tell right now.

ER:

We might.

AW:

I don't think so.

ER:

I'll go quickly. I came home—we have—each soldier was given an R&R [**rest and recuperation**], a week or two, I don't remember how—and so, I chose Hawaii. The military pays you to R&R. There was—Bangkok was one.

AW:

Or you could go to Australia.

ER:

Australia. I chose Hawaii because I wanted to come home. I paid my way from Hawaii to home. The reason I wanted to do that—

AW:

Because they wouldn't pay your way back to the States.

ER:

No.

AW:

I mean, Hawaii is a state but you know what I mean. Not to the continental—

ER:

The mainland, yeah. So, because I wanted to see my family. I didn't know—going to Vietnam, I

didn't know what it was like. Let me tell you, when I step—first time I stepped off—and I went over in a civilian aircraft, the Flying Tigers. I think it was a 747. When I stepped off that airplane, the smell—I'll never forget the smell. Any veteran who was there will tell you, the heat and smell just [claps] knocks you off your feet. But anyway, when I came home from—I came home because I wanted to see my family again. I didn't know what I was getting into when I got there but then I did know once I was there. What I knew was that I could just be in the wrong place at the wrong time and something bad could happen. So, I wanted to get home to see my family again when I had a chance to. So that's why I came home. Then on the way back, I was in civilian clothes. I was in Cần Thơ—I was in Saigon, Bien Hoa, the air base there. Whenever—as pilots, whenever we flew from point A to point B generally we would—if we had an empty seat, we would tell the tower that we had an empty seat. So, if there was a soldier—

AW:

So someone could hitch a ride.

ER:

Yeah. If there was a soldier that needed to be someplace, the tower would know and we'd just hitch a ride. I was in my civilian clothes so I hitched a ride from Cần Thơ—from Saigon to Cần Thơ. We took off. It was in a Huey. I was sitting back there in my civilian clothes. We took off and we got out about twenty minutes out and all of a sudden the bottom fell out of the helicopter. We just went down [hits desk] and I thought, Oh not really. This can't be happening. And then I heard the engines crank up. Well, they didn't shut down, I just heard them wind back up then we lifted back up out of the—we got down near the treetops then came back up. There were some other people—there was another soldier, I think, and another person in civilian clothes on the helicopter. They were like terrified. Their eyes were like huge. I wasn't too afraid because I figured these guys can handle this. They've been to where I was. And I look at them talking and I look and they're kind of laughing and I go, "Oh no. Not really." So, I tap the crew chief on his helmet and I ask for a headset. He gives me this headset, I put it on, and I click the mic button. I can't use the words that I used in Vietnam on the recording but I basically said, "Okay you guys." I said, "If you guys do one more autorotation like that with us back here in this helicopter, this is the last flight you're ever going to fly as a pilot." I clicked the mic button off and gave the headset back. They looked at each other and I could see them talking and talking and they didn't know who I was. They didn't know what I was but they knew—

AW:

Because you were in civilian clothes.

ER:

I had civilian clothes on and I—

AW:

And you knew what an autorotation was.

ER:

The color of my skin didn't give me away as a pilot, because there were very few of us who look like me. So, they were completely confused but they didn't do that again. Those clowns were doing autorotation's with people in the helicopter.

AW:

Just to scare them?

ER:

I don't know. Just to play around, I guess, to scare us. I was really mad. I thought about turning them in but I didn't. But I think the message I gave them was enough that maybe they shouldn't do that. They knew I knew something. They knew I knew what they were doing. That brings up a point, Andy, where just silly accidents and things like that. You could make a—you could've gotten shot at. They could have failed to recover properly. When doing autorotation's, that's all—you only do autorotation's in a training mode when you're recertifying or you're training and you never do it with passengers.

AW:

You don't do it for fun.

ER:

No. You never do it with passengers. And if you're doing it in a Huey, you don't do it with your crew chief and your door gunner either. You don't do those things but these guys did. But anyway, but I wanted to put that—

AW:

What was it like to be back in Detroit on that visit?

ER:

It was nice to see my family.

AW:

Was it still home?

ER:

No. I felt like I didn't belong there.

AW:

Because you'd changed a lot.

ER:

Yeah. I felt like I knew to be back in Vietnam doing the things that I was doing to try to help keep people alive, to the missions that I had. I felt like if my job was to take somebody from point A to point B, I felt like I could do that safely. I knew how high to fly. I knew the area of operation. I knew where the conflicts were. I knew who to call. I knew how to get people safely from point A to point B because I would tell people, "Don't worry as a passenger. My job, my primary responsibility, as an aviator is to take care of this aircraft and take care of myself. So, once that's done, you're in the green. You don't have—don't worry. Don't worry because I got this." So, I just felt like I needed to be back there. But I was able to take a breath and see my family and just—I think I hugged them more than I normally did and just listened. I just listened to what—tried to see every one of them. Going back was kind of somber for me. I mean, I was—it was—

AW:

Were you—I'm sure you were aware of all the anti-war protests and all of that sort of thing. What was that like in Detroit? Was that a factor for you?

ER:

No. I saw my old friends. They knew. I didn't really run into that. I didn't go onto a college campus or anything like that. I didn't get directly involved in a protest or anything. No one approached me and yelled at me at the airport. I didn't have that, nobody throwing things at me or anything like that. I just basically stayed home, stayed with my family and visited my friends. Didn't go to the movies or any of that kind of stuff. I just enjoyed my family because I just felt like I needed to do that because I didn't know if I was going to get a chance to do that again because the war was standing down. I ended up in three companies in Vietnam. I was assigned to the 271 Assault Support Helicopter Company. I told you that. Briefly I was—that company stood down and the Chinooks were returned to the states, the Chinook pilots. They were—they DEROSed. They kept the 58's, though, the OH-58 platoon, our platoon. We were called the Bartenders, by the way. My call sign was Bartender10. When I flew Wilbur Wilson in the DEPCORDs mission I had a different call sign, and that was Bartender triple 66. The interesting thing about six, if you know anything about military, about the military, six is the unit number for the commanding officer. So, with three sixes know that there was somebody important. I can't remember what his GS [**general schedule**] ranking was. So, that was my call sign when I flew that mission. But anyway, the 271 stood down and we were temporarily assigned to the 147 which was a Chinook company. It was on the western side—eastern side of the airfield, the Cần Thơ airfield. Then we were finally assigned to the 18 Corps Aviation Company, which they had Huey's. So, the OH-58 unit, we moved across the airfield, moved into those barracks and we

were stationed. I finished out my tour in the 18 Aviation Company with the Huey's. They were like slicked up, really slick. They had polished skids. They had elite colonels. In fact, most of the South Vietnamese—high-ranking South Vietnamese military officials, they did not have South Vietnamese pilots. They had American pilots. [AW laughs] Yeah, us, they had us. I don't mean "us" as in—"us" as in our unit. So, we were then with the Huey's. I kind of got off. You asked me something about—

AW:

Just a quick question: what was it like being around the South Vietnamese brass? Were they the same as American brass where they—different relationship.

ER:

You know, I didn't have very much interaction with them in terms of on a personal level because, like I said, one of the beauties of being a pilot was your job was to fly that helicopter and nobody messed with you. That was a good thing. So, I didn't—distant, maybe, I want to use that word. There was a lot of corruption in South Vietnam. A lot of corruption. And it began at the top and went down. Many of the South Vietnamese soldiers were not supplied properly because the supplies ended up in the black market. It got there because the high ranking officials diverted it.

AW:

I remember reading one commentary that said, "We should've been in Vietnam. We just should've been on the other side." [Laughs]

ER:

Right. A lot of that. We ran out of flight gloves. Our flight uniforms were made out of this material called Nomex, which was a fire retardant material and so were the flight gloves. Of course, over a period of time, the gloves—we'd wear through our gloves and we were out. We didn't have any—we couldn't get any in the flight unit. So, I had to go downtown, [laughs] downtown Cần Thơ—

AW:

To get your gloves.

ER:

—and there was a little shop that had gloves. You had to pay your money to—yeah. So, stuff like that got diverted. The South Vietnamese officials—I don't want to paint a broad brush, but there was corruption. I think that impacted the soldiers quite a bit. There was a time when I'd picked up a soldier who was injured. There were South Vietnamese helicopter pilots and they were waiting for a mission but none of them would pick up this soldier; stepped on a land mine. I

picked him up. They wouldn't take off. They wouldn't allocate one of their Huey's so I picked him up in my Jet Ranger and took him. I think I was on a mission with one of the Chaplin's and we skipped the mission to do that; took him to Vinh Long. I could see the writing on the wall, Andy. I knew that thing was going to crash and burn pretty soon. We were turning over all of our combat operations to the South Vietnamese. We were turning over airfields to the South Vietnamese Army. We were turning over the artillery battery operations to the South Vietnamese. Of course, they were doing almost all of the combat missions. So, when I got back to the states—you mentioned my time. Most of the aviators didn't have a choice. They had to leave the service because there were just too many of us. So, I was fortunate enough, based upon my officer efficiency reports—those were reports that your commanding officer writes up about you—that I didn't have to leave. I could've stayed in and I really wanted to. I wanted to go. I wanted to teach other pilots. I wanted to be an instructor.

AW:

So you thought about coming a lifer and retiring?

ER:

I don't know about a lifer but I enjoyed flying. It was the most fun I had. I didn't like the potential for getting shot but at it was a scream, just a great, great, great job. And I enjoyed it very much and I felt like I learned enough that I could help other people do that job but I knew that aviation and, I guess, anything having to do with logistics, supplies and stuff. Those kinds of units—if you were in those kind of—if you had those kind of job, you were going back to Vietnam. I just didn't want to go back, Andy. I didn't want to go back because I would have to rely upon the South Vietnamese military for support. Point in case, I mentioned when you fly from point A to point B you call artillery sectors to see if they're firing 105 Howitzer or, heaven forbid, 155, big ole round. You don't to fly into one of those because that's the end of you, the round and everything else. So, you call. You ask if—you call, "Bearcat12, do you have arty?" What the unit's supposed to say is, "We have no arty," or, "Yes we have arty." They tell you where it's coming from, where it's going, and the maximum ordinance, maximum elevation. Then I get out my map. I used to fly with my knees because I didn't have a copilot so you had to be ambidextrous. I'd put the cyclic between my legs, I would friction down the collective, get out this map that I had in this plastic cover and get my grease pencil. When they would give me the artillery I would write it on the bubble, up top on the grease pencil then I would get out the map while I'm flying and I'd have to plot this to know, "Do I got left, right, over the artillery or it's not in my way." When I'd call an American battery, they would [snaps] give me the information just like that I know what to do. I call the Vietnamese battery sometimes and—first of all, there's a communications issue from the beginning. The information they give was the spotty, it was not accurate, the coordinates would be—when I'd go to plot them, they'd be like in another sector, those kind of things. I landed at one airfield to refuel and it was under the control of the South Vietnamese. They were out of fuel, jet fuel. You just don't—those kind of things

just don't happen on a base that's controlled by the Americans. That was going on when I was in Vietnam. So, I knew it was only going to get worse and I needed that support. I need to know when artillery batteries are firing. I need to know that I can land and refuel. I just shook my head and I said, "I need to get out because I don't want to go back." Not that I was afraid but I didn't want to be the last one there in that situation.

AW:

So what did you do?

ER:

So I got out.

AW:

You had the opportunity to do that.

ER:

Yes. I chose to get out, yes. Yeah, I chose to get out. And the rest of the story.

AW:

So, did you have an idea of what you wanted to do when you got out?

ER:

Yes, finish school, correct that error.

AW:

Where did you go back to school?

ER:

Well, first of all, I just chilled out for a while.

AW:

Sure. That would be the logical thing, I would think.

ER:

Just did absolutely nothing but relax, take a deep breath, enjoy my family, get in touch with that women I met in Denton.

AW:

Well, that was the other thing that we hadn't talked about was—

ER:

Oh yeah. We spent a lot of time writing letters. Oh yeah. Never lost track of her. She has every letter that I wrote her from Vietnam.

AW:

Those are really important.

ER:

She has those.

AW:

I mean, those are—

ER:

[whispers] I don't have every letter I wrote her.

AW:

We won't worry about that.

ER:

Okay. Did it get on there?

AW:

I don't think so. Those things, correspondence journals, diaries. Those are—as one of my colleague says, “That's the milk of history.”

ER:

Yes it is. I think I kind of knew I wanted to marry that lady but I didn't want to marry her before I went to Vietnam. I had a whole family worrying about me and I just couldn't add someone else in a different way. I just didn't want anybody else to be worried. But we picked right up; calling as soon as I got back. In fact, when I came home for my R&R—I failed to put that part in—once I hugged all of my family members, I took off to Texas.

AW:

So you did.

ER:

Of course. She was important and special to me.

AW:

And she was still in school at that time?

ER:

Yes, she was still in school. It was between '71 and '72. She didn't graduate until '72. It was Christmas, December of '71.

AW:

That's when I graduated.

ER:

Was it? She didn't graduate until the spring—

AW:

No, I graduated December of '72.

ER:

But my R&R was in December. I came over for Christmas.

AW:

Seventy-two was when I graduated.

ER:

So, yeah. We corresponded. I came to Texas and I went back to Detroit. We kept doing this. I didn't have a job lined up. I didn't give a damn. I wasn't too concerned about that. I was just happy to be home and alive. One of her teaching job offers was in Lubbock. She started out in—special education was her specialty. She understood that the Lubbock Independent School District had a remarkable special education program so she was offered a job here.

AW:

This was in '71?

ER:

Seventy-two.

AW:

Seventy-two?

ER:

Yeah, '72. So, we talked about kind of getting married; wasn't too sure. So, it was time for her to

come here. I came down to Texarkana, packed up all her stuff in my car—I bought a car when I was at Fort Walters, by the way. So, I left my—

AW:

You still had it?

ER:

I still had it. I left it with my oldest sister when I was in Vietnam. When I got back, I liked the way it looked so I bought it back from her.

AW:

What kind of car was it?

ER:

Nineteen-seventy Monte Carlo. Still have it.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Yes. It's in the garage.

AW:

That's pretty impressive.

ER:

I need to fix it up and drive it before long.

AW:

It'll cost you more to fix it up than probably what you paid for it.

ER:

I'll pay to fix that up. That has a lot of memories in there. So, we hopped in my car, packed up everything in the trailer hitch and came to Lubbock. We talked and we decided, you know, we were made for each other. I couldn't—I didn't want to go—I mean, where was I going to go? I was where I wanted to be with her. And I wasn't worried about a job. I could get a job. I said, "I could get a job. I could dig a ditch. I can do anything. I'm not worried about a job. I can find a job." So, we decided to get married and so we did here, as soon as we moved here.

AW:
Here in Lubbock?

ER:
In Lubbock, yeah.

AW:
Nineteen-seventy two.

ER:
Um-hm, nineteen-seventy two. Justice of the Peace in downtown Lubbock.

AW:
What month was this?

ER:
August 23, 1972. Justice of the Peace Smith hooked us up. So yeah, I decided I needed to be with that woman. I don't think it sat well with a lot of people because they were ready for meeting her parents. They wanted a big wedding such as that and it was sort of a surprise for everybody. Everybody was thinking that we had a surprise for them but we didn't. We just knew that. It wasn't—

AW:
My son and his then girlfriend got married then called us. They were living in Houston. When it came time for my daughter to get married I said, "This was a great plan." You've been trying.
[Laughs]

ER:
It was cheap. It was very cheap.

AW:
No anxiety. None of that buildup.

ER:
No. But I guarantee, they were honest. They were checking us out wondering what was going on, what is—

AW:
So, she had a job here and you didn't—so, did you go to Texas Tech?

ER:

I went to work. I went—

AW:

Where'd you go to work?

ER:

First I went to the employment agency downtown, to the state employment agency and told them what my—I said, "I had a year and a half of college so I know a little bit and I've been in the military. I've done a few things in the military. I need a job where I can use my mind. I'm a thinker. Just whatever's available. So, they sent me this plant to sand fiberglass. [Laughs]

AW:

That's right in the park.

ER:

It was up on the north Loop or something. It was right in my bailiwick.

AW:

What was the name of the company? Do you remember?

ER:

I don't remember. I don't remember but it was working with fiberglass.

AW:

There was Grinnell.

ER:

It might've been Grinnell.

AW:

They built fire suppression sprinkler heads mostly but they had other things that they did.

ER:

It was working mainly with fiberglass. In fact, the guy told me there, "This fiberglass, it just itches"—

AW:

And get in your lungs.

ER:

He said, "The best thing to do is when you go home, take a bath and put vinegar on. That helps the itch. So, I went back to the employment agency and I said, "That kind of wasn't what I had in mind. I was thinking about something a little more on the cerebral level. So, I realized that the employment agency didn't have what I was looking for so I went to this other place. I didn't know their places existed like Snelling & Snelling, private employment agencies that you have to pay money.

AW:

You become an indentured servant for a time.

ER:

I thought, This is not right. The State Unemployment Commission should know about these jobs. One of the jobs that Snelling & Snelling knew about was this state job. Imagine that.

AW:

The state didn't know about it.

ER:

Well, the state knew about it but it turns out that there was—the state agency at that time was known as the Texas Highway Department. You know, the road-bridge—

AW:

TxDOT.

ER:

Yeah, TxDOT. But they would call it—actually the name was the Texas Highway Department. One of the divisions of the department, which we always called ourselves the bastard division, was the motor vehicle division. Not many people knew about that. There was the Tourist and Information Bureau at the borders, then there was the main road and bridge that everybody's familiar with. Then the motor vehicle divisions was one of the divisions. It's my understanding that that division was sort of in trouble with the federal government on employment practices because they didn't have—they had little or no people of color in that department. So, that was a time when agencies were trying to get on the stick trying to do the right thing. So, I like to think that part of my qualification has helped me but I think I was a benefactor—beneficiary of agencies that had not done a very good job of hiring minorities. So, I got an interview for the motor vehicle division. In fact, the director—no, he was the regional director of the state motor vehicle division for Lubbock and seventeen other counties. His name was Deck Johnson, D-e-k, I think. D-e-c-k Johnson. He came up from Austin to interview me. We had this interview and he

was telling me, he said, "Eddie, this is going to be a new experience for you if you do get this job. You'll be working with white people." [AW coughs and laughs]

AW:

You said, "Well, I've never seen any of those before, boss."

ER:

I said, "Well, Mr. Johnson, probably not." I said—we had white people in my grade school. Heck, I even had them at that high school I went to. I went to the University of Michigan. They were there too. There were a whole bunch of them in the military." I said, "I think I'll be all right." And he meant well because I got to know him later on. But I think what he was—he was—I think that was his experience. It was probably the first time that he actually had a conversation with a black person. He was just trying to tell me that I was going to be working with white people and it was just remarkable. But that was our conversation. So, I got this job working for the motor vehicle division. I worked there from 1972 to 1979.

AW:

Where was that? Was it out on the Slaton Highway in the big building?

ER:

No. It was in a little building, little house on Municipal Drive just west of I-27 right now. It was up there—it was a little building—

Margaret Randle (MR):

[in the background] East of I-27.

ER:

Excuse me, east of—thank you, honey—east of I-27 on Municipal Drive.

AW:

Municipal Drive is where we used to fuel our police cars.

ER:

Is it? Yeah, right. Sure.

AW:

Yeah. They had a big shop building there.

ER:

It was a little building on the south side of that Municipal Drive. North side. So, that's where the

motor vehicle division was. We were there for a couple of years then we moved to the Briercroft Shopping Center down just south of 50th on Avenue Q. And that's where—when I left there it was still there but then it since moved out on the Slaton highway in the TxDOT building.

AW:

Yeah because I had to go get a replacement title.

ER:

You get one quickly there. So, I was a hired as a title examiner. My job was to examine the title papers. Many years ago, the state asked the county tax assessors in the two-hundred and fifty-four counties of Texas, "Do you want to do this paperwork for us and we'll pay you a commission." That was a good thing for the department, the state department, because they didn't have to—

AW:

Which is why I now write a check to Ronnie Keister.

ER:

Right, because the state didn't have to build buildings in the two-hundred and fifty-four counties. So, the tax assessors said, "Sure. We'll do that work and you'll pay us a commission. That's how that got setup. So, all that paperwork, we picked it up each day from the Lubbock County courthouse and the others would mail it in. Then we, being—there was me and there was one other title examiner—we would examine those papers to verify that everything was done correctly and then we would ship it off to Austin—well, to Huntsville—well, to Austin first. Austin, where they would issue the titles then it would go to Huntsville prison where they would microfiche it and make it available. So, that was my job for, I guess about two years then I was promoted to an investigator. My job then was to go around to those seventeen counties and call on the tax assessors to solve any kind of problems they had with title papers, to help the implementation of any new policies or procedures. Our job—also we were charged with issuing automobile dealers their license is to sell new and used automobiles. So, our job was to go—on every application we'd go out and make sure they had a permanent building assigned and a telephone listing.

AW:

And there's a job for an investigator.

ER:

And a place enough to display three of the types of vehicles that they were selling. So, we forced the automobile dealers license laws. We didn't get involved with disputes with people saying, "He sold me a lemon car." That was not our department. We also enforced the automobile

salvage yard laws. So, when you turn in your automobiles to a salvage yard, you have to give them a title.

AW:

What happens to the serial numbers and all that sort of thing.

ER:

You have to give a title. You can't just do—and so we would pick up the titles and the tags. Occasionally we would go out on the yard and we'd look at the serial numbers on the cars then we'd go back to the computer. That's what got me into computers.

AW:

As a policeman, one of the things, particularly when you were dealing with people that were—

ER:

The VIN, the vehicle identification number.

AW:

—bootleggers or biker gangs, the first thing you do when you stop them is you look for the VINs. You knew who you were stopping so you were almost guaranteed to find an altered VIN and that was all you needed.

ER:

And I was an expert at telling you whether it was altered or not and where it was located and what was in the number, like 135870 are the first five digits to my Monte Carlo's vehicle identification number. It tells me it's a Chevrolet, it's 1970, where it's manufactured. There's a lot of information in that. But we knew all of that stuff. Now interestingly, the DPS [**Department of Public Safety**], they did not have authority to go on a salvage yard unless they had probable cause. But if they suspected something, they would call us and they would say, "Can you help us out?" So, we'd go out there.

AW:

Well, that's kind of—we would call—in police work, we would call building inspectors, because they could go when we couldn't.

ER:

So, we worked with them sometimes too. So, that was my job until 1979. Also, we implemented this new registration for large trucks. It was called the International Registration Agreement—the IRP, International Registration Plan, because the federal government said—if you recall years

ago, you'd see a big—people call these things semis but they're truck tractors. The trailer is a semitrailer because it cannot stand alone. There's a full trailer and there's a semitrailer.

AW:

In fact, when I was in police work we called them road tractors.

ER:

Right, they're road tractors or they're truck tractors. They're actually a truck tractor. Tractor comes from the Latin "tractus", to draw or to pull. So, we implemented—if you recall, they used to be plastered with tags on the front because every state had its own deal. So, the federal government said, "You states have got to do something here. This is out of control." So, Texas was one of the first four, four or five, states—Missouri, Texas, I can't think of the others. But we started the International Registration Plan, which we implemented it. What that did, Andy, was it allowed a company that traveled in other states to file one application to the state for their tags. You would have to submit your mileage records and based upon the mileage that you traveled in each jurisdiction, we would apply that percentage to that jurisdiction's full base plate, issue one registration receipt with all the states and the weights that you paid for on that receipt, and issue you one tag. So, the companies loved it and I helped implement that. The practices and—we would—my job was to go out and audit to audit the companies. Once they submitted theirs we'd go out and audit them. Time DC was a big company here. You couldn't—it was huge on the south Loop. A company like that, you couldn't audit all the books. You would do spot checks. You would say, "Let me see April of 1976 and June of 19—October of 1976. Then you would do a spot check on that thing and make sure if it's—but mostly what I did in those first years of the plan—it started, I guess, in '74—mostly was educating these companies on how to keep proper records so they wouldn't be in violation. The violation was that you had to buy the base plate. If you were lying or cheating, you would have to go back and buy the full base plate for that state. So, it was an incentive to do the right thing and it was always the easiest to do the right thing. So we did that too. So, that was my job for those years. Now, I was going to school at Tech. I was working from eight to five for the Motor Vehicle Division going to school at Tech from six to nine and ten.

AW:

What were you studying?

ER:

I was studying—zoology is my undergraduate degree.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Yes. Heading to medical school, which I did do, by the way. But that was my goal. My goal from probably long before high school was to be a physician. I got close. We can talk about that later. But anyway, so I was working eight to five and I would go to school at nights at Tech from six—and then, in the seventies, there were very few classes in Tech, very few choices.

AW:

I went—I got my undergraduate degree at Tech working nights on the police department so I could go to class, which ruined my eyesight, ruined—because you couldn't take classes—you couldn't work eight to five and take very many hours.

ER:

Right. Well, that's why I had to quit working for the state because the courses I needed were all at eight o'clock in the morning. In fact, sometimes a course would come up like the second half of a chemistry course would come up before the first half at night. I would go in to talk to the counselor and I'd plead and beg. I was ready to offer money and they would. None of them ever turned me down. They would let me take that second half before the first half and I did. I never failed any one of those because I was committed. I remember what happened when I didn't do it like I should have. I was a little older than the rest of the students. The other students at night, those are the ones who didn't do well in the daytime and they didn't want to be there. I was there.

AW:

I flunked out my first year because Spring Break because I just left and didn't come back.

ER:

That'll do it.

AW:

So, after I got married and started back and I was working full time, I was a straight A student. There was a big difference in attitude.

ER:

Sure. I was committed.

AW:

I know what you're talking about.

ER:

Didn't have to tell me anything. So, I finished and got my undergraduate degree.

AW:

What year?

ER:

Nineteen eighty-one. Applied to and got accepted at University of Texas medical school and Texas Tech's medical school and chose Texas Tech.

AW:

So, why did you not wind up in a doctorate?

ER:

Well, I guess I didn't perform academically well enough. I don't have any good answers there. It was what I wanted to do but I guess I just didn't execute that properly. There were some other things going on. We had our first child. Our boy was—Bradley was born in 1980 so we had an infant.

AW:

That makes a big—my—I was in a doctoral program in Colorado when my son was born. It makes a difference.

ER:

I tell people, "If you're going to law school or if you're going to medical school"—I'm not blaming it on my son. I'm just saying you want to hold off.

AW:

It just changes your life.

ER:

But I didn't do very well in that first year so I didn't get invited back. So, I was thinking about going—I was going to apply to another school and I decided, "You know what, I don't—maybe this is not right for me." But while I was in medical school, I was introduced more so to computers. We had a Teletype machine when I was working for the State Motor Vehicle Division and I was able to do some work with computers and I was kind of fascinated with them. In fact, when I was in high school at Cranbrook, we had an old Burroughs machine, I believe—computer—that one of the kid's dads had donated to the school. So, I was kind of familiar with computers. But I was fascinated with computers in the study of my medical school. So, when that didn't work out, I met this guy named Blaire Rowley. He was a professor of biomedical engineering at Tech.

AW:

Rowley?

ER:

Rowley. Blaire Rowley, biomedical engineering. So, he said, “Well, come on. We have a graduate program, a masters and—well, it was through the interdisciplinary program is where my degree is from, the interdisciplinary program, but it focused on three areas: computer science, medicine, and business. So, what I did—I had to apply for and be accepted at the business school. I had to have so many hours in business. Some of my business—I needed some of the courses in business. I continued medical training. Some of the courses were in medicine at the medical school on campus—and computer science. So, I graduated in 1983 with a—

AW:

That’s a really interesting program.

ER:

With the—most of the hours were medical science.

AW:

MS [**Master of Science**]? © Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library

ER:

It was MS, yeah. It was through—

AW:

And it was called?

ER:

It was just a MS in interdisciplinary studies, is what it was. But the focus—but you could sort of, I guess, do your own thing. I had—Blaire was my—I had to do a thesis at the end and et cetera—but Blaire Rowley was my professor. So, you had to be focused. You had to have so many hours in so many different fields. And those are the ones that I chose. The bulk of them were in computer science. So, my goal was to take that education and use it, use computer technology in the field of medicine. That’s where I was headed, although I didn’t really get to do that. I have some clients who are physicians now, so I’ve been in the computer business since then.

AW:

Now, for yourself or did you go to work for—

ER:

I started working for a company, a local company here from 1983—

AW:

And what's that company.

ER:

It's CTSI, Computer Transition Services, Incorporated. Well, I'm leaving out a very important step there. I'm leaving out a very important company there. I worked for Tandy Corporation. I failed to—

AW:

Oh, did you?

ER:

Yeah, when I graduated—excuse me—when I graduated in 1983, I started working for Tandy Corporation. Boy, they're going to—somebody's going to hear this and go, "Boy, he just dissed the entire Tandy Corporation." No. From '83 to '91.

AW:

And then CTSI.

ER:

And then CTSI. And while I was at Tandy Corporation, I was in technical support, computer technical support, exclusively. I didn't do sales.

AW:

And you were able to do that from here in Lubbock?

ER:

Yes. Yeah. The store was on 34th street. It was the only computer center in Lubbock. There were the RadioShack stores but there was one computer center. And Tandy Corporation—

AW:

They were actually ahead of the curve.

ER:

They were poised to be the dominant computer company but they failed, Andy. They failed miserably because, I believe, the management did not understand what they had. I mean, the managers in Fort Worth, which is where the headquarters was—was a Tandy RadioShack. The

managers were accustomed to managing what we called 01 stores. There's a store number, 01 dash something was a retail electronics store. Then the computer centers were a different category. But the managers were all from the 01 side of the company but they were managing the computer centers and they didn't understand this technology, this powerful technology. We had technology that people wanted then and could afford.

AW:

Well, plus they had a customer base that was used to building things.

ER:

Right. Building things, right. But it moved from that.

AW:

And those early computers were—

ER:

Right. But it moved from that. It moved from companies. Once the software was available, like VisiCalc, that electronic spreadsheet. They didn't have to buy a minicomputer from IBM. You could buy this Tandy RadioShack computer and service workstations. Then we had that in the store.

AW:

What was the name of that famous—

ER:

The TRS-80. The Model 1 was the first one.

AW:

We bought—in our household, we bought a TRS-80.

ER:

Model 1. Model 3 was the other one.

AW:

Plus it was the—it was—

ER:

The Zilog Z80 microprocessor is what it used.

AW:

The business model was decades ahead because the idea was, “We’ll sell you the computer for nothing, basically”—

ER:

Oh no.

AW:

Well, but I mean, then you had to—

ER:

Compared to a minicomputer from IBM.

AW:

But you bought that computer at what was a low price but you had to add things to it, right? Software.

ER:

Yeah. Right. Right. Right. Right.

AW:

So, it was an early component idea.

ER:

That’s true. For some people, the basic computer was fine. Others—the hard drive was remarkably expensive. The floppy drive was remarkably expensive. My first floppy drive was three-hundred dollars for a floppy drive.

AW:

Of course, all that stuff—what it cost you for an outboard disk now is nothing.

ER:

Free almost. But Tandy Corporation was poised to be the dominant company in the industry because they had us, us being the computer centers. They had sales people there, knowledgeable sales people. We had the product.

AW:

Who could explain to people what to do with it.

ER:

We had the product. We were backed by technical support people, like me, this is what I did exclusively, and we had the repair facility right there onsite. So, we could do it all. But Tandy was late in the game for deciding or understanding that the IBM product was going to be the standard. When IBM came out with their IBM PC, that technology, that architecture, was different from the Tandy's architecture. The Tandy had computers in tons of schools all over the country: the Model 1, the Model 3; ubiquitous everywhere. But the IBM was going to set the standard. It was just the name, just the name, and Tandy was late to develop a platform that could use the IBM software. Because, see, the thing about IBM, it opened up the opportunity for third-party companies to manufacture components that would work on the IBM. Although, they did maintain some of their—and then, of course, Bill Gates came along with a Microsoft operating system. Well, it was MS-DOS, the DOS operating system. It started out with CPM operating system and Bill Gates wrote the software for the IBM PC. But Tandy finally got on board but they were late at the game, just like UPS [**United Parcel Service**] was late at the game when FedEx showed up and said, "We'll do next day," and UPS goes "[makes fart noise] Who wants next day?"

AW:

"And who will pay for it?"

ER:

Yeah, "and who will pay for it?" They were late at the game and they spent twenty—ten years trying to catch up. So, Tandy was late at the game in deciding to go to that architecture, the IBM compatible architecture. They made a gallant attempt at first with the Tandy 2000, which was not compatible but they later on came out with the Tandy 1200, which was, for the most part, IBM compatible but it took them too long. They were still holding onto the TRS-80 model. Then that—like I said, they had the people at the corporate level who didn't understand what they had available to them. And it wasn't until later on that they decided to even start repairing and working on other computers besides the Tandy product. So, they just—but they were poised to have it all, to do it all, but they failed. So I left them because I got a better offer from CTSI.

AW:

And how long were you at CTSI?

ER:

Until 1993. And they were a good company. Hired quality people, qualified, very knowledgeable, upfront, honest, reliable.

AW:

Who was running that shop here? Because I think I played one—

ER:

Two guys.

AW:

I think I played the Christmas party one year. I played music. You might've been there.

ER:

David Baucom and—Margaret.

MR:

Craig Alley.

ER:

Craig Alley. Thank you, honey. Craig Alley.

AW:

I played a Christmas party for CTSI.

ER:

Did you?

AW:

Yes, one year I'm trying to think of where it was. It was at the Lubbock Country Club, I think.

ER:

I'd known David. David would come into the computer center. He knew me. He kind of stole me of from Tandy RadioShack. And that worked out fine. We had a good relationship. It was not a good fit near the end. I need more control over what I was doing.

AW:

What were you doing? What was your—

ER:

Technical support. We would—

AW:

Okay. How'd your thing go this afternoon?

MR:

It was good. He doesn't hear well so I had to do a lot of prodding then even after that I had to keep repeating myself. But anyway, it was good.

ER:

Can we pause this for a minute?

AW:

Hmm?

ER:

Can we pause this for a minute?

AW:

Yeah. We'll pause it. [Pause in Recording] So, 1993.

ER:

Yeah. CTSI. We left on mutually agreed circumstances. It just wasn't a good fit, and that was a good thing for me, I think, because in the long run, Andy, it's nice when you work in a company where you have cohorts, partners who you can corroborate—collaborate with, ask questions and so forth, but by and large—

AW:

Can I get the door for you?

MR:

I'll get it.

AW:

Okay.

ER:

You sure?

MR:

I'm teacher, you know teachers can carry—

AW:

That's right.

MR:

—boxes and still kicking open doors. Bye.

ER:

But by and large, my knowledge and my skillset was what I was selling. So, I felt like I could do that on my own without—the day to day was not a problem but sometimes there would be issue where a client would have something else more important than what I came there to solve. So that took priority, so that became an issue and so forth. There was this one to three, three to five. That kind of stuff is difficult when you're in technology. And sometimes managers don't understand that. But anyway, it was my skillset, my knowledge that we were selling so I felt like I could do that on my own. Plus I had—my first son was born in 1980. My second one was born in 1983. The first one was Bradley Randle, October 1980. My—I say, “my”—our second son, Ryan Randle, was born—

AW:

R-y-a-n?

ER:

Ryan, R-y-a-n, was born in June, June 3 in 1983. Then our last son, the third, Jonathan, was born October nineteenth. No, excuse me, Bradley was born—did I say October nineteenth for Bradley?

AW:

You said October.

ER:

Nineteenth. Johnathan is September the twenty-fourth. I know these.

AW:

J-o-n-a—

ER:

T-h-a-n, in 1985. So, I had those three boys. And that was important to me, Andy, because—I mentioned that my dad died and my mother didn't remarry so I had surrogate fathers. So, I know what it's like to grow up without a dad. So, one of the things that helped me make a decision to work on my own was wanting to spend as much time as I could with my children. And I felt like that would give me the opportunity to do so. Plus, my wife had a good job and so, you know, when you go out on your own, if you don't work you don't get paid.

AW:

That's right.

ER:

So, it's a scary thing. But having a spouse, my lovely wife, who has a job, helped me make that decision.

AW:

It gives you the anchor.

ER:

It does. So, it was the best decision I think I've made in terms of what I do for a living. From 1983 until even now—and I'm still doing the same thing. I have a number of clients. At one time or so I had maybe forty clients, thirty-five or forty clients.

AW:

Now, are these corporate clients or are they individuals?

ER:

Some of them are. Some of them are individuals. Businesses, I don't do businesses. Well, someone who works at a company, I may work on their personal computer at home but I don't solicit the general public. It's all business to business. And mostly word of mouth. I don't take on more than I—I had someone working with me for a while. He since died. So, it was just me, my client base has diminished a little bit over the years, which is understandable. But I have clients I've had for thirty years. It's a good relationship because they trust me.

AW:

Give me an example—you don't have to release any clients—what kind of business—

ER:

Pump manufacturers, lawyers, physicians, tax preparation companies, pool manufacturers, pool salespeople, housing authorities.

AW:

That's a good—

ER:

Everybody uses a computer.

AW:

When you started up on your new—on your own, did you operate out of your home or did you—

ER:

Mostly out of the house. I have an office. I have an office on 34th street simply because it's nice to have an office because people won't even—may not take you seriously if you're working out of your house.

AW:

Well, you don't ever want—you don't always want to invite people to your house anyway.

ER:

No one comes to my house. I don't have any clients coming to my house. So, mostly it's on site. If they want to bring something to me or whatever, I have an office on 34th Street. I'm rarely there, but I do have an office and it's for that reason. And that's worked out well for me, too. But yeah, I have these clients I've had—they trust me and that's valuable commodity. When I make recommendations, they can trust that I'm making a—and the thing about what I do is, I have to backup what I say. You can't fake—you can't trick people in computer support. You have to be able to solve the problem otherwise it rears its head again and they know.

AW:

Do you specialize in a particular kind of software or hardware?

ER:

Well, yes. Hardware, yes. Platform, yes. PC compatible platforms is what I focus on.

AW:

So an Apple guy like me is out of luck.

ER:

Well, I can help you in certain respects. I mean, I can hook you up to a network. I don't specialize in that. I will tell you I'm not the first person that you need because I haven't invested an energies, in terms of training and certifications.

AW:

For the work you do, most people are on a PC platform anyway.

ER:

Right. But historically, there's always been some Mac in the corner somewhere doing desktop publishing. So, I can connect them to networks. I specialize, in fact, I didn't mention this, in

networks. What my specialty is networks, maintaining the servers and the network infrastructure and here recently, the internet. But if you have a Mac, I mean, I can hook you up to the network.

AW:

Oh no. The a reason I—

ER:

I don't mean—I'm saying, if you have a Mac, I can hook you—I can hook that Mac up to a network. I have to know how to do that. There's some minor deal but I don't want to learn on someone else's dime because I haven't invested any time in Apple products. But that's changing a little bit. I've done a little bit more of that but still that's not my focus. And I tell my clients upfront because that's just not what I do and it hasn't been an issue for me. Recently, many of my clients are going to—

AW:

Cloud based?

ER:

—mission critical software on the cloud. So, my focus changes—has been changed from maintaining that in-house server to maintaining their local network infrastructure and their internet connection, making sure that that is reliable because—

AW:

And what about security?

ER:

And security also.

AW:

Your clients have got to be interested in security connected with the Cloud.

ER:

Yes. Firewalls, locally installed software for antivirus network.

AW:

And do you have—do you specialize in redundancy?

ER:

Absolutely. Backups, sure.

AW:

Like, right now, I do so much stuff in the cloud but I'm still stuck on Dropbox because I can keep a copy locally. I'm so old-fashioned that I'm not quite ready to give up having a local copy of my hard drive.

ER:

Once again, backup is your most important insurance against any kind of problem. One of my clients is a bank and I acquired that client because someone who does what I do went into that back to replace a hard drive with a bigger one. Their backup device, which was a tape backup at that time, didn't have the capacity to back up the existing drive properly. So, that consultant just took the liberty to go on without backing up. Needless to say, when he prepared the new drive, he didn't prepare the new drive by formatting it. He prepared the old drive. He formatted the existing drive without an adequate backup. So he was no longer the consultant for that bank. Bank—I didn't mention banks are—one of my clients is a bank. So, it's that kind of thing. It's changing. Things are going to the Cloud so I'm focused on keeping that internet connection intact and protecting that local area network from the dangers on the web. And I enjoy what I do. I love what I do. I get a chance to—I've had a chance over the years to manage my schedule, for the most part, but my phone could ring anytime so my clients actually run my schedule. But it allowed me to spend more time, I think, with my boys.

AW:

What are those boys doing now?

ER:

The oldest one is in real estate. He sells mortgages. He's the president of a mortgage company in San Antonio.

AW:

Oh, in San Antonio?

ER:

Um-hm. The middle one is also in mortgages. He works for a bank but he's in the mortgage department at the bank, at Key Bank in Parker, Texas—excuse me, Parker, Colorado, just south of Denver.

AW:

I finished out my second half of my police career in Lakewood.

ER:

Oh, did you? Right around the corner there.

AW:

Oh yeah. So I knew that area.

ER:

And the youngest one, Jonathan, he's the assistant director of the intramural sports program at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. Loves that job. It's a fun job. In college—

AW:

Lawrence is a nice town, too.

ER:

It is.

AW:

I like it.

ER:

That's where the students go when they want to get away from academics. It's the fun place, right?

AW:

Yeah.

ER:

So, you're running that place so what could be better? Plus you're on a campus. You're around academics.

AW:

Grandkids?

ER:

Two girls. The oldest boy. One is just three years and one month and then another one—the youngest one is one year and one month. Nguyen Elizabeth Randle. Nguyen is Bradley's wife's, Emily's maiden name. Elizabeth is my oldest sister's first name. That's Nguyen Elizabeth Randle then Tess Randle. I don't know if she has—if they gave her a middle name. Tess is the baby. I only have two. The middle son is married. He got married in—don't get me to—well, I'll have to—

AW:

I have trouble remembering those kinds of things too. I have to count on my fingers usually to come up with that.

ER:

Jonathan is still single but he's engaged. Samantha. His fiancée's name is Samantha. If all goes well, he's going to be married this coming summer, in 2018. So, I'm really proud of them. They're all doing well. They like each other, too, Andy.

AW:

That's a big deal in a family.

ER:

Um-hm. And that was one thing that would get them in trouble when they were growing up. I think they were—they compete. You know how boys are. They're all athletics. They were all involved in athletics so they're competitive. But the one thing that would get them in trouble with me is when they were not being fair to each other. I would always tell them, "You can't do that. You've got to take care of your brother." And they do. They go places. Here recently they went down to New Orleans, just the three of them, just to have a good time. So, they do those kind of things and that warms my heart to know that they like each other and they take the time to spend some time with each other and they get along. I'm living the dream.

AW:

My two kids get along, and it's a big deal. I mean, it's a big deal for a parent to know that when you're gone they're going to still have each other.

ER:

And I made a promise to them. I didn't tell them. I guess I made it to myself, is that I'm always going to be a part of their life because I didn't have a dad. My mother did a great job, but there's just—as a boy, it's kind of nice to have a father or a father figure around and I wanted to make sure that there were—nothing would come in my marriage that would keep me from being the father—whether we made it or not. This is our forty-fifth year, so we're doing all right. I think I'm over the hump on this one.

AW:

I don't know. We just celebrated our forty-ninth and I still think, I've still got a lot to learn about this.

ER:

But what they didn't know, Andy, was that I was going to be there for them because I didn't

want them—of course, they're old now. I don't guess they need me like they did then. But I've seen a lot of young boys whose dads are not there and I know what that's like.

AW:

No, it's not good. It's not only not good for the boy, it's not good for the community or the country.

ER:

So, to end on a happy note, this lady that I met in 1970 allows me to live with her even now. I'm blessed. I have children who, I think, they like me. I have grandchildren. I know my granddaughters like me because I just love them. I mean, I can't tell you how special that is. Girls are a little different now. To wander off a little bit, I went into a store to buy something and the first time in my life I looked at little girl's clothing. I realized there were like five racks of little girls clothing and one half-rack for boys.

AW:

And the little boy didn't care what you got but the little girls care a lot.

ER:

A lot. So, I'm learning. I'm learning. I'm learning new stuff as I go along. But I have my family, I have my relative health, and I don't need anything else. No regrets.

AW:

Okay. I'm going to stop it right there because that's a great ending. Thanks.

ER:

Thank you.

End of Recording