

**Interviewee:** Merkel, Charles  
**Interviewer:** Robin Sellers  
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**Sellers:** Chuck, are you aware that we're recording this conversation?

**Merkel:** Yes, I am.

**Sellers:** Do we have your permission to do so?

**Merkel:** Yes, you do.

**Sellers:** Fine. Why don't we start you by you telling me a little bit about your background and sort of what led you into being involved in Vietnam and that era.

**Merkel:** All right. It's an interesting question in the sense that it's something that was just instilled in me by my parents. My parents are of the World War II generation and it's one of patriotism and do whatever the government directs. The sense of patriotism – I'm really stumbling over this, and I apologize for that – but it's something that was always there. It's always been ingrained in me: duty, honor, country sort of thing, and it's not anything that I considered unusual. My father graduated from high school and got a job with Bell Laboratories and stuck with that for forty-five years. He was gone for five years during World War II and received credit for that time and stuck with the same company. I don't believe that's very unusual for that particular generation. My mother was a stay-at-home Mom. While we were young, my sister and — I have one sister — and she stayed at home until we were old enough to be on our own and then she did get some part-time jobs here and there and did spend the last fifteen years with Bell Labs along with my dad. She was able to get her own pension in that manner.

But basically it's very typical of that particular generation.

**Sellers:** So your dad was in World War II, but not as a career military?

**Merkel:** My father was in World War II. He joined before Pearl Harbor. He thought he was going to be in for a year.

**Sellers:** That's what happened to those guys who joined before.

**Merkel:** Exactly. He figured, "I'll be in for a year" and then the Japanese attack occurred and he was in for the duration. That's how my mother and father met. It was during World War II, they met at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia.

**Sellers:** Were you born during the war? Are you a baby boomer?

**Merkel:** I am a baby boomer, but I'm a very young baby boomer – in the sense of young at heart, if you will. My father was in the 10th Armored Division, preparing to go overseas. My mother was a hostess at Fort Benning, down in Columbus, and my father used to go into borrow the typewriter. It wasn't until many years later we found out that he didn't know how to type [laughter].

**Sellers:** Those World War II guys were sneaky.

**Merkel:** I know. But he was an only child and my mother came from a fairly large family, so they came from different backgrounds in that sense. When you mentioned Douglas MacArthur, my father was that way; he was very much tied with his mom.

**Sellers:** There is nothing wrong with that.

**Merkel:** So when you asked the question, 'how did I get involved', Vietnam was just something that was there and I was asked to go by the government, and I went.

**Sellers:** So you didn't go out and enlist?

**Merkel:** Oh, my desire as a child – my whole career – I had it all planned out – I was going to be a cadet at the military academy and I was going to go in the Army and I was going to spend my career in the Army and I never thought anything beyond that. So from a very young age, I have had a sense of being in the military, and I achieved that goal. I did have a career in the military and did have some post-military times.

**Sellers:** When did you graduate from high school?

**Merkel:** 1962. That year will be familiar to you.

**Sellers:** Yes. And what high school?

**Merkel:** From Martin Van Buren High School.

**Sellers:** Where?

**Merkel:** That was up in Queens.

**Sellers:** So you went into the military from the Northeast?

**Merkel:** Yes. Well, I went on to college and then went into the military.

**Sellers:** Where did you go to college?

**Merkel:** I went to Pennsylvania Military College. I was a cadet, it just wasn't at the military academy, and that's been one of the great regrets of my life.

**Sellers:** Why?

**Merkel:** Because it was a goal, and I cannot answer why it was such a strong goal. It's just like why did I go into history – I don't know – it's a passion. And I'm not really sure of the answer to that. That's an interesting question.

**Sellers:** What prevented you from going to one of the major academies?

**Merkel:** Well, the thing that prevented me was the nomination system. I was a second alternate for two years and the first alternate went. Then I was a first alternate and the principal went. I came close. The frustrating thing about it is that one year when the first alternate went, he didn't make it through the first summer – and I promise you, I would have made it through that first summer and I would have finished! So as I said, it's one of the great regrets of my life. But I did spend four years as a cadet.

**Sellers:** You graduated then from Pennsylvania Military College in '66?

**Merkel:** No, I did not graduate because — well, there's a year in there missing because I went on to the West Point prep school – Sullivan School – down in Washington, DC for a year after high school. Then I contracted mononucleosis my senior year and was out of school. I was out of school long enough that I wasn't able to finish up with my class. At that point, I went on active duty.

**Sellers:** Was that an option or was that part of the contract, that if you couldn't finish with your class, you would go on active duty?

**Merkel:** It was part of a contract. So I did that and went to flight school. Then right after flight school, I went to Vietnam.

**Sellers:** Where did you go to flight school, and tell me a little bit about that experience.

**Merkel:** In those days, the training was in two places. Everybody went through an initial orientation at Fort Wolters, Texas, which was located outside of Mineral Wells, Texas. We'd go through basic flight and we'd go through some basic instruments during that period of time, then we'd move over to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for advanced training. Advanced training included advanced instrument training, and then we would transition into the Huey, which was like a Cadillac from what we had been flying as initial flight students. And then we would get some training from pilots who had just recently returned from Vietnam. And then within a couple of weeks, I was in Vietnam.

**Sellers:** That quickly?

**Merkel:** Yes. In fact, we were sitting in an auditorium (I'd forgotten about this) — we were sitting in an auditorium and we were getting our assignments. They did it as a group. Initially when we came in to Fort Wolters, they put us into an auditorium and they were asking specific questions, and they said, "Look to your left and your right, and when you finish flight school, those individuals will not be there." And the attrition rate was fairly high. One of the questions that was asked was, "What was a 'stinger'?" A stinger is the part of the helicopter — it's a tube that is on the back of the helicopter so that if it comes in a little bit too hot, instead of hitting the tail rotor, it hits the stinger; it protects the tail rotor and protects the aircraft, of course, from damage. One individual in the auditorium knew the answer to that, and this officer looked at him and he said, "Well, you may make it."

**Sellers:** Not very reassuring.

**Merkel:** Well, it was kind of a shock and awe kind of thing, and they wanted us to understand it was serious business, and I certainly did take it seriously. Then when we were in the auditorium just ready to graduate from flight school, I remember they were going down the line and we were all sitting in rows and they'd point to the individual, "Vietnam," "Vietnam," "Vietnam," "Vietnam," "Germany," "Vietnam." We all said, "Wait a minute. Why did he get Germany and we're all going to Vietnam?" It turned out he had already had two tours in Vietnam in the Infantry, and then had gone to flight school. That's why he was going to go to Germany for a while and then Vietnam.

**Sellers:** So everybody was earmarked eventually for Vietnam.

**Merkel:** Yes. So we were clearly on our way, and as I said, within a few weeks we were there.

**Sellers:** How did you feel about that? When you went into the service, you knew that something was going on over there and you figured if it exploded, you'd be in it. But how did you feel about just all of a sudden being whisked over there?

**Merkel:** I recall one of my classmates — my fellow cadets from the academy — was heading back to Vietnam, and I had an opportunity to fly across country with him to California, then he went his way and I went my way. So I had a little bit of an inkling. As far as actually going over to Vietnam, it was almost surreal, if you will. We knew about Vietnam, we knew somewhat what was going on over in Vietnam, but the reality of it wasn't there. We were young, we were excited, we were going through flight school. I was having a great time flying helicopters, something I had never thought I would do. So I really didn't — as I said earlier, if the government wanted me to go, that was my duty and I would say, "Yes, sir. I'll go."

**Sellers:** You only had a sister —

**Merkel:** Yes.

**Sellers:** There was a military background, to a certain extent, in your family, but what did your parents feel about you going over there? Do you know?

**Merkel:** I don't know very much about how my father felt about it. My father was — our ancestry is from Germany; he is very stoic, never showed emotion kind of thing. I'm sure you've heard those words before of that particular generation. Just did not show much emotion, and was the patriarch of the family. So I'm really not sure about how my father felt about my going overseas. My mother, on the other hand, did not take it well. She was very upset about it, very concerned about it, and later on — there's a story (after I was overseas, which jumps way ahead) when I had had a fight with a mortar round and came out second in a field of two, and my mother did not take that very well, either. When I came home after having been gone for all that time, the first words out of her mouth were not, "Welcome home, glad to see you," that sort of thing. It was, "I want to see your wound." That preyed on her. So it's a long answer to a short question, but that had preyed on her mind and she wanted to — that was her concern.

**Sellers:** She needed to be sure you were okay.

**Merkel:** And I told her I was all right, but that wasn't good enough. And I wouldn't want her any other way. That's a long answer to a short question, but she did not take my time overseas very well. And I stayed there, and she didn't take that well, either.

**Sellers:** When you went over, were you with the Casper Platoon?

**Merkel:** When I went over, I was assigned to an aviation group. We would go into a replacement depot awaiting our orders, and I thought that I was going to be going — I believe, as I recall, it was the 12th Aviation Group, which was a large unit. While I was waiting, I was then assigned to Casper Platoon with the 173d, and I didn't know much about it but I very quickly did find out and did adapt to it.

**Sellers:** Where did you leave from when you went over, and tell me a little bit about your journey over to Vietnam.

**Merkel:** Well, I left from Oakland, California. I don't remember a whole lot about the flight over. It was on a commercial flight, which surprised me. We had flight attendants, and we did land, and I absolutely do not recall where we landed, but we switched from female flight attendants to male flight attendants for the last leg of the journey into Vietnam. When we crossed from the Pacific Ocean over the land (I arrived at night), and I recall [it was] absolutely pitch black, the darkness of it, and there were circles of light on the ground. That was unusual, because in the United States, of course, we do have concentrations of light where cities are, but then we also have a lot of lights around the countryside. It turned out that what I was seeing were fire bases, and the lights were where the Americans were stationed. We went into Tan Son Nhut Air Force base, and the other interesting thing I thought was instead of this nice gradual descent, we did a very steep maneuver where we lost altitude very quickly and circled in rather than coming in on a straight glide path. The reason for that, of course, is because the bad guys owned the dark

areas and there was a concern they could be shooting at us.

**Sellers:** So from the minute you got over Vietnam, you were in harm's way.

**Merkel:** Yes, that is correct. And that's when the reality first hit me, to think, "Wow, this is for real!"

**Sellers:** What happened then?

**Merkel:** We were in a replacement depot. We had to go to jungle school. It's kind of an orientation training. We were out on one exercise and we had set up an ambush, and the ambush was successful. I said to this fellow, "That's the most realistic training I've ever had." And he said, "That's not training."

Then, as I said, I was in the replacement area. And then I remember I had one of the other cadets who was two years ahead of me (he graduated two years before), and he was there. So I had some familiar faces here and there.

**Sellers:** Did you get over there and walk into any stories of what was to come that were intentionally to scare you? What kind of reception did you get?

**Merkel:** One of the funny things that did happen — when I got to Casper — Casper was stationed at LZ English Bong Son, and when I finally made it to my unit — I initially went to An Khe, which was our rear area, and I processed into the unit and then I went to the forward area which was LZ English. When I got into Casper, there was smoke thrown, there was a lot of confusion and people were saying, "Hit the deck!" and that sort of thing. And I'm crawling around and the group was up on top of a hooch and behind some sandbags, and they're all laughing their heads off because they were welcoming me to the unit. It was kind of an indoctrination. I could hardly wait for the next new fellow to come in so I could share in the fun there.

We had an extraordinary unit in the sense that the camaraderie was just awesome at the time, and still has been up to this point.

The other thing was during the first mission, when I'm walking out — they had me in a flak vest and they had me all dressed up, and at that time that was all tied in together — it was actually the first mission I was going out on and they had a lot of confusion. Of course, we didn't usually fly that way, but how was I to know.

**Sellers:** So they did everything they could you to get a chuckle out of your coming.

**Merkel:** Well, they were also testing me to see if I had a sense of humor, and I passed.

**Sellers:** Oh, good.

**Merkel:** There are some thing that people probably wouldn't find humorous that we did find humorous.

**Sellers:** What's your first week or so like?

**Merkel:** Oh, golly. I went out on an orientation, and I recall that the orientation I went out on was with a fellow named Roger Schuster (who was a warrant officer), and he was pointing out different things to me. We had a rule that we were supposed to fly 1,500 feet or above in order to stay out of the range of small arms ammunition or you were right on the deck so that you — there wasn't a whole lot of time for people to react. That distance between the ground and 1,500 feet we were vulnerable to small arms fire. He was pointing these different things out, and it happened that that particular flight, the commanding general was on board. In the midst of this orientation, I heard, "Would you two please be quiet? I can't hear the ball game on AFVN," which was Armed Forces Vietnam Radio. He was listening to it on the radio and we were on the intercom, so we were interfering with his ball game. So that was my indoctrination there.

As far as specifics about the first couple of weeks, I'm not too sure. I do remember when I went out for my check ride, I didn't pull the collective quite properly and I was just so excited about doing it and being in Vietnam, I had kind of a hard landing on my check ride, but the aircraft survived.

**Sellers:** So they were checking you out, even though you were a qualified pilot and were over there?

**Merkel:** Yes, we still had to go through check rides. One of the things about aviation is it's the only occupation in the Army where we have to go through an annual flight physical and have to go through an annual written exam in order to stay qualified.

**Sellers:** What type of helicopters did you have over there that you were flying, and who did the maintenance on them?

**Merkel:** We had a small unit – the Casper Platoon is about twenty pilots and about eighty crew chiefs and gunners. So there were only about 100 people in the whole unit. As I said, we were the only organic aviation unit in Vietnam. We had eight Hueys – they were slicks – in other words, they were not gun ships – and we had six LOHs, or light observation helicopters, which were also known as OH-6 Kiowa. That unit was called Inferno, and the Hueys were UH-1s. And I primarily flew Hueys.

**Sellers:** Did you prefer the Hueys, or was that just what you were assigned to?

**Merkel:** That's what I was assigned to. We would get missions – assignments – on a daily basis. They'd say, "You're going to go out and fly XYZ mission." It depended on what the mission was planned. But quite often, and more often than not, we would have missions that weren't planned. It would be whatever was required at that particular time, whether it'd be command and control, whether it'd be resupply, whether it'd be combat assaults, Snoopy missions, whatever it happened to be, we would draw those missions. We flew a cross section of everything in Vietnam that was flown. We were the organic aviation unit, which meant that we were the unit that was required to support various operations for the 173d. We had one battalion

at LZ English and we would fly in support of the 2nd Battalion as well.

**Sellers:** Back up just a minute and tell me exactly when you arrived in Vietnam.

**Merkel:** I got in Vietnam in September of 1968. I had graduated from flight school in late August of '68.

**Sellers:** So you were right over there. What was the attitude about the war in the United States at the time that you went over?

**Merkel:** I'm not really sure, and the reason I say that is because I was so enmeshed in trying to get through flight school and I was so focused on trying to fly in the environment I was in, I was not as aware at that time of what was happening outside of my little world, if you will.

**Sellers:** So obviously it was not intruding on your world.

**Merkel:** No, it wasn't intruding on my world. But I was on a military installation and I was very isolated. We didn't get much time off, and when we did get occasional time off, we would just be in the local community and then we'd go right back to the training. And the training was very intense.

**Sellers:** When did you first become aware that there was some dissatisfaction in the United States about what was going on where you were?

**Merkel:** I guess while I was overseas, my mother would send me clippings and that sort of thing. Not necessarily anti-war items, but reports of actions that we'd been involved with. One of the things that I realized very quickly was that any resemblance between what really happened and what was being reported was just strictly coincidental. It was not being reported very accurately, and it bothered me, that part of it. I would write back to Mom and say, "It's not really that way; it really wasn't that way," that kind of thing. But I was never distracted by what was going on. I was very focused, and not necessarily just my mission but my off duty time. My off duty time, I spent with the kids – orphans – and I've got a very soft spot for kids. So I was doing things like writing back to civic groups or church groups or anybody who would respond, asking for packages that I could distribute to the kids overseas, because they literally had nothing. So I was not distracted, because I was off doing something I felt was very worthwhile and was very necessary. I was trying to do something positive with the time I was allowed.

**Sellers:** What were your living conditions over there?

**Merkel:** Initially when I got overseas, we were in kind of a bunker affair – it was a hole in the ground covered by metal and sandbags. We had a little cot down there – we had some pallets, and we had a cot and candle, and that's where we lived.

**Sellers:** Sounds very cozy.

**Merkel:** It was cozy. We actually got plywood, and there were some hootches that were built. Then when I went to An Khe – An Khe was more settled than Bong Son was and LZ English, because Ah Khe had been established by the 1st Cavalry Division, and they had set up the camp there. But primarily they were metal roofs, there was 2 x 4s and plywood and screening and that was it. We got an old parachute and we put it up on the ceiling, and that was kind of decoration.

**Sellers:** Food? What were meals like?

**Merkel:** Let's see – we had something called C-rations at that time, which we had when we were flying around different places. And we had living conditions that were a lot better than the troops who were going along the rice paddies and doing the patrols. So we would go back into a rear area, and we did have a mess hall. We would eat — I'd forgotten this — but we would go over to the 2nd Battalion, and they did have a mess hall over at the 2nd Battalion, and that's where we were having our meals. Then later on, I was assigned to fly the commanding general, so I wasn't part of the general's mess, but I would get the same food that they were eating, so that wasn't bad.

**Sellers:** You were assigned to fly the commanding general under what circumstances and how did that come about?

**Merkel:** This was later on in my tour. I had been down in Phu Hiep supporting the 4th Battalion, and I came back up and — there were pilots who were specifically assigned to fly the commanding general. Roger Schuster, as I mentioned (who gave me my initial check ride), he happened to be one of the general's pilots early. I don't recall if it was Roger who was leaving country or somebody else, but I had just come back from being down in Phu Hiep for several months supporting the 4th Battalion, and since I had been away from the unit, I hadn't had a specific assignment there. So that assignment came up and I was assigned to fly John W. Barnes.

**Sellers:** And where did you fly him?

**Merkel:** Anywhere he wanted to go. We were at his disposal. We flew other missions besides just flying the general, but our primary job was to fly the general.

**Sellers:** Was he like a supervisor or — what kind of missions was he going on?

**Merkel:** Well, he was the brigade commander, one star general, and we would go out to different fire support bases. We would go to different areas. When there was a combat assault, he would observe those combat assaults from a distance, if you will, so he could direct troops on the ground and be there to see how the operations were proceeding. We would fly whatever he wanted us to fly. If he needed to go some place, if he needed to check out a particular area, we would take him there. In Vietnam, our general mission changed from what was called "search and destroy," "search and kill," to a pacification mission. General Barnes, when that mission changed, was involved with checking out different programs that were being implemented. For

example, we would replace the roof of an orphanage or some other building that was damaged or destroyed. We were trying to allow the Vietnamese to carry on commerce without being harassed by the Viet Cong.

**Sellers:** Did it work?

**Merkel:** During the day it did. It worked very well during the day.

**Sellers:** Before you started flying for the general, what was a day or two in your life like?

**Merkel:** Well, I mentioned I was with the 4th Battalion at Phu Hiep, and we would fly support missions for the deputy brigade commander or the battalion commander who was down in that area. They would consist again of whatever was necessary in order to perform the mission. If that meant carrying water to troops who were out in the field and who needed a resupply of water because of circumstances, we would take those supplies out there. If that required us to be part of a combat assault going into a landing zone, we would transport those soldiers. If there were an incident that took place where there were wounded who had to be removed and there were no other aircraft in the area, we would perform that duty as well. So it was whatever mission had to be performed; we would provide that support.

**Sellers:** How did you think about what was going on at the time? Did you have any thoughts other than just being busy and not having time to think? What was going through your mind, if anything? You might have been too busy to worry about it.

**Merkel:** We were pretty busy. We were putting in some very long days. One of the missions I recall very vividly was Thanksgiving with Jack Nicholson – not the Jack Nicholson, but – he was a lieutenant colonel. It was Thanksgiving and he was determined that every troop in his command would have some turkey that day – every single troop, no matter where they were. So we were carrying Mermite cans filled with — we would go back to the mess hall and they'd fill these Mermite cans with turkey and mashed potatoes and gravy and that sort of thing and we'd carry them out to the field to various units. We would land and provide those supplies to those troops. We did that – it was about a thirteen-hour day, and that's a very long day to be flying. It far exceeds what we should have been doing, but when he was satisfied then that the troops had been fed, we went back and we landed and we were very tired and he looked at us and he realized that we hadn't been fed. We had had nothing all day. So he made the mess sergeant open up the mess hall again, and they had some scraps left over, and those really tasted good. So that's the sort of thing that — we were very busy and very tired and we would work very hard, but I felt like we were doing something productive.

**Sellers:** Did you ever have any close encounters? You implied that you had been wounded. Do you want to talk about it?

**Merkel:** Oh, that was a pretty close encounter, but not to make light of it — one of the things I want to say is that I was there with half a million other guys, and I was part of this group.

It wasn't like Chuck Merkel won the war or fought the war – I was part of a unit. I don't want to imply for one second that I did anything unusual or anything over and above what thousands of other people were doing on a daily basis, and more.

**Sellers:** But this interview is about your experiences, so we do need to kind of focus on that.

**Merkel:** Okay. I have a hard time with this part. When I was down with the 4th Battalion at Phu Hiep, there was one other pilot with me, Bob Nelson, and there was a gunner and a crew chief. The gunner's name was Larry Smith. Larry Smith had been in Vietnam for almost two years at that point. We went back to LZ English, as I mentioned, after our mission was completed down there. We were going to be turning Phu Hiep back over to the Vietnamese. In fact, the next time I saw Phu Hiep, it was just a sea of cement slabs. The Vietnamese had used everything, made use of every single nail in the place – they'd removed it all. But I was in my hootch up at Bong Son and we had a small crank phone with a couple of D-cell batteries, and the phone rang (and I want to say I believe it was Bob Nelson but I'm not 100% sure at this moment), but they were calling from Phu Hiep to tell me that Smitty had been killed. It was a sapper attack, sapper attack being a small unit that would infiltrate in and set satchel charges by hootches, and they would detonate those and the idea was to kill as many Americans as possible. Smitty had been in a hootch; he was out-processing after having been overseas for all that time. Smitty caught a big chunk of wood in his abdomen and got to the door and was stitched with an AK-47. He was not killed right out, but was badly wounded at that moment, and he did die from it. So Bob had called me. I was lying in my cot — we had a little cot in my hootch, as I mentioned, with the plywood and the screening — and I heard a “pop-pop,” and the “pop-pop” I heard were the mortar rounds being fired from the jungle. So we had just that moment to react, and Jim Revoir and I, we were in the hootch together, and I yelled to him there's incoming, and I rolled on the floor. About that point, it exploded and blew out the wall. What really upset me on that the next day was the fact that I had a nice fresh uniform that was hanging on that wall and it was just shredded. That made it up close and personal. Normally, what would happen is that the Viet Cong would fire a couple of rounds, and they didn't have a whole lot of ammunition – they just let us know they were out there. We would get peppered every once in a while with some mortar rounds. And that particular night, because of that warning obviously, I was not lying in my cot when the wall was blown out, and I thank Smitty for that – I would not have been awake ordinarily. But the point I wanted to make was that I got outside, the group of us – we were heading to the bunker – and the Viet Cong had more ammunition than we thought that they did, and they popped a couple of other rounds into our area. That exploded right in front of me, and it took out five of us.

**Sellers:** What was your evacuation and medical experience? Do you remember much about it?

**Merkel:** Yes, I do. That's one of those things that's kind of indelibly marked, if you will, in my conscience. Let me explain one other thing, too – we lived in an area called — at Bong Son, we lived right close to an area called “the crap table.” The crap table was where we had

aircraft; we had helicopters that were parked up on this blacktop flat area, and it was in the shape of a U. We lived in the middle of the U. So the Viet Cong were not aiming for us, they were trying to get the aircraft and their aim was bad. So they were actually trying to destroy the aircraft. But because of their technique, they dropped them right in on us.

But to answer your specific question, my gunner, Gary Irwin, was out in front of me and to my right as we were making it to the bunker. He took the worst of it. He was evacuated to Japan and did not return. Jim Revoir was wounded (he was my copilot) – he was wounded in the hand. Doug Haviland, I recall, was wounded in the abdomen. I did not realize that I had been hit. I had been blown down and I had been lying there, the concussion had knocked us all down, but I frankly did not realize that I'd been injured. My concern was with Gary because he was hurt. We got a cot and we carried him over to the aid station, and the aid station had a circle of light where they had the light on. I called to one of the medics and told him that we had an injured man. He looked at me and he said, "No, you have two." So quite frankly, I wasn't even aware of the fact that I'd been hit until that medic told me that.

**Sellers:** All of you that were injured, was it some of your helicopter crews that evacuated you to medical treatment?

**Merkel:** No, I was not hurt badly enough that I had to be evacuated at that moment. Gary was the one who was injured badly enough that he had to be evacuated. So my wounds were not — I had some shrapnel, and still do — I still have a few little pieces here and there — but it was just peppered kind of thing; it wasn't like it was huge slivers. Gary really took the brunt of it, and it always bothered me, and I was never able to tell him that until years later we spoke on the phone, just about two years ago, and I told him that. I said, "I really felt bad that you were the one that got hit." And he said, "It was just the luck of the draw; it could have been the other way around."

**Sellers:** Have you had trouble — you said you never could tell him that — was that because you never made contact with him until recently or because in all the years you had made contact with him, you just weren't comfortable telling him?

**Merkel:** No, it was because we hadn't had any contact. He went off to Japan. It's one of those things, you think of him every once in a while —. My world sometimes is built on good intentions and I think about doing things and I don't — plus, I didn't know how to contact him.

**Sellers:** So that it wasn't that it was too awkward for you to mention to him when you were in contact.

**Merkel:** Oh, no. No, no, it wasn't that at all. I just had not had any contact with him and it just always was one of those things in the back of my head — I said I really feel bad that he was hurt and I'm sorry that he took the brunt of it because he really — had it been the other way around, I would have been the one in Japan.

**Sellers:** How did you mark the days of your experience over there? You were over there

for a year and then — how did that work?

**Merkel:** I was over there longer than a year.

**Sellers:** Wasn't it originally a year's assignment?

**Merkel:** Yes, it was. In fact, I went to Washington after I finished flight school, and I asked my assignments officer, "What can I look forward to?" He said, "Well, that's very easy. You'll look forward to a year in Vietnam and a year home, and a year in Vietnam and a year home, and a year in Vietnam and a year home," and that was my career. I said, "Well, okay." So when I got over there, I decided to kind of break that cycle. But that wasn't a conscious decision when I went over; that was after I got overseas. And frankly, it was the kids. That was the reason I chose to do that.

**Sellers:** To go back?

**Merkel:** To stay. Please go back to the original question again – I got off on a tangent.

**Sellers:** Your marking the days —

**Merkel:** Oh, marking. The days just kind of merged together, one after the other. But one of the things we did have was what was called a "short-timer's" calendar. It was 100 days, marking off the last 100 days. People would have these various jig-saw puzzle calendars where you'd color in a day for each and every time. These became quite valuable to the individuals, very personal, and one of the pranks that was pulled was making an exact duplicate —

End side A

**Sellers:** Carry on – the count —

**Merkel:** The count-down calendars, short-timer's calendar. There was a chaplain there, Charles J. Davis, who had a short-timer's calendar, and as a prank we made an exact duplicate of it and substituted it on the wall and one day walked in and grabbed the thing in his presence and tore it into little pieces. He just went ballistic; so upset with us! That had become so personal to him. Little things become very personal when you're in that kind of an environment. We let him go for a while until we brought out his original and he looked at us and said, "You Guys!" We marked the days toward the end, but not in the beginning and then the end. One of the things that I was told when I got to Vietnam and to the 173d was, "Don't unpack your bags. We're going back to Okinawa; there's big signs there saying 'Welcome back, 173d,'" and I'm thinking, "Well, that's not too bad. I get to Vietnam, I go to Okinawa." Well, when I left the unit, they were still telling new people coming in, "Don't unpack your bags; you're going to Okinawa." That kind of thing.

**Sellers:** That's cruel.

**Merkel:** Well, I think somebody believed it; there's probably a tale there. I don't think that they were doing it to be malicious. I think they truly believed that we were going to be pulled out.

**Sellers:** Maybe that's the only way that they could stay sane.

**Merkel:** I don't know. But camaraderie becomes very, very important in that environment.

**Sellers:** I can imagine it does. Did you ever have to deal with any of your crew or any of the people who were tipping towards the edge? How did you-all help them, and help each other?

**Merkel:** We had a unit that was a very, very cohesive unit. The 173d is an airborne unit, meaning that everyone in that unit was a volunteer, because people would have to volunteer to go to jump school. I and my crew members were a few of the legs, if you will, the term "leg" meaning not airborne – not jump qualified. I'd gone to flight school, not jump school. But they can't jump without an aircraft, so we provided organic aviation. So when you say, "over the edge," we had a highly motivated unit, and although we did have difficulties here and there, I'm not aware of a sense of any one group or any individuals who would really react badly. I'm not expressing that exactly the way I'd like to, but what I'm saying is —

**Sellers:** You all were pretty stable.

**Merkel:** We were pretty stable. Looking back now at the unit and the people and what they've done with their lives, most have done fairly well although there are a number of individuals who have had a difficult time since Vietnam. But we as an aviation unit depended on one another because we're not only talking about being able to go laterally and horizontally, we'd go vertically as well. So as a result, we depended on one another. And I had a great crew. And I saw my crew chief for the first time since we left country last summer, and it was an extraordinarily emotional experience, having my crew and I together for the first time.

**Sellers:** Tell me a little bit about the crew – how did you end up together and what positions were they and things like that.

**Merkel:** Each aircraft had a crew of four. There was an aircraft commander, there was a copilot (which is called the Peter Pilot – and I can't tell you why). We also had a crew chief and a gunner. So it was a crew of four. We had two M-60 machine guns. We carried a basic load, as I recall, of about 3,000-5,000 rounds of ammunition on board. I can tell you with all candor that my crew never failed me; I never had an instance where I needed them that they weren't there and they didn't do well. I'm very proud of them.

**Sellers:** What would have been a situation where they would have had to — would you have had to fire on the enemy in order to complete your mission? What was your artillery there for?

**Merkel:** That's an interesting question, because we had rules of engagement. One of the rules of engagement that was very frustrating was in certain area we had what was called "free fire zone." An Lo Valley being one of those, it meant that if we were fired upon or if we saw movement there, that was pretty much owned by the bad guys, and it was a free fire zone, so we were cleared to engage without any prior request. But in other areas, we had to request permission to return fire. I recall very vividly one pilot who was up at a place called North English being fired on, and he requested permission and there was a long pause, quite a while, and it came back, said, "Permission denied; there's too many friendlies in the area." His comment was, "Well, I can tell you one that's not very friendly," for which he got chewed out for having said that over the air. But that was a frustration. So when you say what was the — it was there as protection and we did engage when we had to, but we were under some pretty restricted rules of engagement, and I never violated those.

**Sellers:** So you basically were a transportation and cover and backup platoon?

**Merkel:** No, not necessarily, because when we would be part of combat assaults — when General Barnes left, General Cunningham came in, and General Cunningham and General Barnes were two different personalities, two different leadership styles. I'm not saying one was better than the other, I'm just saying they were two different personalities, two different ideas. General Cunningham's idea was to — he wanted to be like the second or third ship in a hot landing zone. He would jump out and he'd go around and he'd be cheering the men on on the ground to engage the enemy. And we did get a chance, an opportunity at that point to do some suppressive fire.

**Sellers:** How was that? Was it scary? Did it make you uncomfortable? Did you feel in control when that happened?

**Merkel:** Well, I felt I was well trained. My biggest concern was for the safety of General Cunningham, making sure that he got back in one piece. We did what we had to go do insure that he was okay.

**Sellers:** Did you feel that was reciprocal?

**Merkel:** Oh, yes, absolutely. Absolutely. General Barnes and I to this day are great friends, and General Cunningham and I, until his death, were great friends. General Cunningham, his wife on one occasion — after I had left, Don Charleton took over, and she thanked Don for looking after him. She knew the kind of personality he was and that sort of thing. But as far as being reciprocal, General Barnes and General Cunningham never ever asked me to do anything that I wasn't comfortable doing. They would say, "This is what we'd like to do. Do you think we can do it?" See, I was the aircraft commander, which meant that when we got on that aircraft, I was the highest ranking individual in that aircraft. I would do what the general wanted me to do or I would do whatever the battalion commander wanted me to do or I'd do whatever the individuals wanted me to do as long as I was comfortable. If I were uncomfortable doing it, I would tell him that and he never forced me to do anything I was uncomfortable with.

**Sellers:** So you never had to deal with a couple of hotshots or something? Generals who were out for the glory and were not concerned about if it was going to put the people who were expediting their wishes in some kind of a situation.

**Merkel:** No. I mean, there were times where we did things — looking back on it, I think to myself, “That wasn’t too bright.” The judgement box wouldn’t have been checked on that one. We were in an area where it was very, very foggy, very dense, weather was terrible, and we wind up literally hovering, following a river, because that’s all we could see was the river. We hovered down, and I thought, “That was really pretty dumb.”

**Sellers:** Does make you an obvious target.

**Merkel:** Yes, it does. But like I said, what am I? Twenty-two, twenty-three years old? And I’m invincible.

**Sellers:** Did you actually feel that, or do you think that now that you’re older and you look back?

**Merkel:** I don’t know. I’m not sure. That’s a very good question. I’m not sure; I don’t know.

**Sellers:** Because I hear that a lot from the World War II veterans, too. And I’m not sure if it’s just something that they’ve managed to forget the fear and the quaking, and now they use that to explain why they did things, or just what.

**Merkel:** I’m not 100% sure, either. I was not apprehensive when I was overseas — I mean, I was aware of my environment and all that, but on a day to day basis, I did just what was asked of me and I never felt like — it’s always a situation, you feel like it’s always going to be the other guy and not you. I felt like I was part of a family there, very much so. And when we lost members of our family, I was very angry about it.

**Sellers:** So you really did feel like it was always going to be somebody else?

**Merkel:** Maybe in a certain instance. I mean, you feel like — that’s a tough question. Because I did get hit, and I thought, “Okay,” and I just shook it off. Okay, that happened, and now we go on to something else. I continued to fly my missions and I continued to do my job and that sort of thing.

**Sellers:** Did getting wounded in any way relieve some of the anticipation of perhaps you’re going to get wounded?

**Merkel:** No, not really. Actually I was more angry about my uniform than I was getting wounded. I mean, they actually shredded my uniform. I also recall lying there — I could hear water dripping — like water was running someplace. What had happened was some of the

shrapnel — we had a 50-gallon blivet, and that was our water supply, and it had peppered our water. Also, it knocked out all five tires on our jeep, to include the spare; they were all flat. And I did go back up on the crap table, where the area was where this thing had come in, and I dug out — I found not one but I found two tail sections which I brought home with me. So I have those tail sections here, and I'm not sure which of the two got us, but one of the two did.

**Sellers:** What do you mean by “tail section?”

**Merkel:** The round has a primer in it that's in the tail. When you drop the mortar round into the tube, the primer is ignited and that's what gives it the thrust, and it's a big arc. Then when it comes in, it has a detonator on the front of it and it detonates and then the rest of it is blown up. But the tail section, the fins, are what are left, and it's a small fin. It's just a little tail fin. It buried itself into the blacktop, and I dug it out. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to have those or not. There's no powder or anything on them; they're just tail sections. So I stuck them in an old pair of sneakers I had and I said, “If anybody wants to go rooting around in my old sneakers, they're welcome to do so.” But I have those on the mantel there, and one of the two of them got me.

**Sellers:** Were there regulations about bringing things like that back from —?

**Merkel:** Not so much that, but you couldn't bring back AK-47s, which were automatic weapons. You couldn't bring back any automatic weapons. I have an SKS, which is a semi-automatic weapon that is legal.

**Sellers:** How did you know when you were coming home?

**Merkel:** General Cunningham is the one who finally sent me home.

**Sellers:** You didn't want to go home? You wanted to stay there to work with the children.

**Merkel:** I was very much involved with kids. And I have to absolutely mention my dog, Ho Chi Minh (which we thought we were very clever, naming him Ho Chi Minh), because I had more adventures with him and he flew missions with us. He was my absolute constant companion, and I brought him home with me. So I absolutely have to mention him. He was my constant companion. He gave me a great deal of pleasure, too.

**Sellers:** What kind of a dog was he?

**Merkel:** He was mixed breed. The vet thought that his father was a German shepherd and mother was a chow. I took him down to Qui Nhon after I had him as a puppy – I got him down in Phu Hiep when we were with the 4th Battalion.

**Sellers:** Was he a stray?

**Merkel:** Yes, he was just a stray, a puppy. He would sleep under the radios for warmth. We couldn't get milk, so we raised him on beer. I just adored that dog and he was absolutely my constant companion. We had a lot of dogs around LZ English and Bong Son. I was not going to leave country without him after what we'd been through. But I went down to Qui Nhon two times — the first time I went down was because he had a black tongue, and I said to the vet, I said, "There's something wrong with this dog, he has a black tongue." And he started laughing. He said, "He's a chow. They have black tongues." I'd never seen a dog with a black tongue before. So then the second time was when I went down and had him checked out because there was a disease that was inherent in Vietnamese dogs that the dogs in the United States did not have an immunity for it. He had the test for it and he was proved negative. If he had proven positive, there would have been no way I could convince them that I could take him home with me. They would have kept him. So he very fortunately turned out to be okay, and I took him down to Saigon and shipped him from Saigon.

**Sellers:** So he came back with you?

**Merkel:** Well, no, he didn't come back with me because I got extended. He spent some time at the SPCA, unfortunately. When I finally did get back, he was depressed and hadn't eaten and came over to the cage and sniffed me and perked up, said, "I know who that is."

**Sellers:** How did you know where he was?

**Merkel:** Well, when I shipped him back — and the airline, because I had gotten extended, and I didn't realize I was going to be extended — the airline had to put him somewhere, so they put him at the SPCA.

**Sellers:** Did they notify you?

**Merkel:** No, I did not know where he was. I lost contact with him, and I was going crazy trying to find him, because I was still overseas. So when we finally were able to get together then, as I said, he was in the cage and I let him out and he never was in a cage again, ever. But he was truly very faithful, and did warn us one night when we had sappers in LZ English. A lot of experiences with him, which is a whole different direction. But as you can tell, I'm a real marshmallow when it comes to kids and animals. And I still am, to this very day.

**Sellers:** When you finally were sort of "forced" to come back, when was it and what did you experience on your way back, and your reception?

**Merkel:** Well, I already mentioned to you when I saw my parents for the first time. I don't recall much of the trip back; I do not remember. But I do recall — you had asked me earlier about was I aware of the protests, and I had forgotten this as well, but when I got back and I was in uniform, I did have obscenities yelled at me and I did have — some people, just by virtue of wearing the uniform, were less than friendly toward me. I couldn't figure that out because I'd just come back from overseas, from Vietnam, and I was sent there by my government, not

because I necessarily wanted to go. So I didn't quite understand that. And I guess when I came home was when I really experienced it.

Just as an aside (I'm sorry to keep going down these rabbit trails), one of the things I did was visit a friend of mine in Monroe, Michigan, who was a great historian and has had a tremendous impact on me until he passed away a few years ago. He had been a former mayor of Monroe, Michigan, which is Custer's boyhood home. And there we are — and the reason I was in uniform is because we could get 50% rate on the airlines if you traveled in uniform, so we would travel in uniform. I was walking across the River Raisin Bridge with him and had some people on the other side going in the opposite direction yelling obscenities at me, and it embarrassed him, that somebody in Monroe, Michigan, would actually do that toward the uniform of the United States. It bothered him till the day he died, because he was of that World War II patriotic generation, and it just really bothered him a lot. A very, very patriotic individual. Now that I've gone down that rabbit trail, now I do recall that when I was back was when I was more aware of it rather than when I was going to Vietnam or while I was in Vietnam.

**Sellers:** You've said that it affected some of the people you knew and were associated with, but how did it affect you?

**Merkel:** It affected me in a couple of interesting ways. One was I had a strong desire to get an education. I had been a so-so student up to that point and had not really taken education as seriously as I should have, and the result has been now two Baccalaureates, two Masters, and a Ph.D. And I don't know exactly what the motivation is, but that was what spurred me on to continue education, and I've been a very strong proponent of education ever since. Personally, one of the things I can't do (I'll admit this) is I cannot sit in a restaurant with my back to the door. I just feel very uncomfortable, and I like to have my back against something solid. That's just me; it's a quirk of mine and I don't know whether —

**Sellers:** And you think that comes from your experiences?

**Merkel:** Well, I don't know. I can't attribute it to anything else, because it's been since Vietnam that I have a great deal of problems sitting — and I just won't do it, sitting with my back to an open room. I don't feel comfortable.

**Sellers:** Is this something that has come along way after the war?

**Merkel:** Oh, no.

**Sellers:** It came back with you?

**Merkel:** This came back with me. I wasn't aware of it until my wife pointed it out to me. I just would always position myself so that I wasn't facing a wall. I'd switch seats with her and do things like that just so I wouldn't have to face — and she's very accommodating that way.

**Sellers:** That's interesting. A Wild Bill Hickok syndrome.

**Merkel:** I guess so. But I have a very hard time doing that; I feel very, very uncomfortable doing it.

**Sellers:** What are some of the more positive things that you came back with besides a dog? Not that that's particularly negative, but just more unusual.

**Merkel:** I know it's unusual, and I really have never admitted that publically. But I came back with a strong desire to have delicious apples, big, red, juicy, delicious apples, and I thoroughly enjoy those to this very day. But I felt like I came back with — as I said, I was more mature, I felt different, I was different. I was more a serious person, I took life a little more seriously. But also, I find that little things don't bother me.

**Sellers:** Don't sweat the small stuff.

**Merkel:** That's exactly right. And I mentioned to you earlier, people who are waiting for a particular flight and then they miss that flight and they get all excited about it. I'm thinking, "Who cares? You'll get there." And it sometimes frustrates my wife in that I don't get upset about the little things, what I consider little things.

**Sellers:** Which to her may be big things.

**Merkel:** Correct. The day to day kind of things that in the grand scheme of things, it's okay. If you do them today, it's fine; if you do them tomorrow, it's okay, too.

**Sellers:** Chuck, what else to you want to put on the tape?

**Merkel:** I don't know. We've had quite an interesting journey here of things that I have not thought about in a very long time. I consider myself very fortunate to have served with a group like the Casper Platoon unit. I consider it one of certainly the highlights of my life, and overall a very positive experience in the sense that if I had to be thrown in with a group of people from various backgrounds and diverse areas of the country, I couldn't have asked for a better group during that point. I mean that with all candor and with all sincerity.

You asked me what else I came back with – I came back with one foot in the '60s, I think [chuckles], and some of those things I've never gotten over. I still enjoy the music and the time and that sort of thing. I did not come back with bitterness toward the Vietnamese people.

**Sellers:** How about towards the American government?

**Merkel:** Not until later, when books were being written and things like that, and people who had literally sent me overseas were saying, "Well, I never really believed in it, anyway." I thought, "How can you do that? How could you possibly do that?" That's again the duty, honor, country, if you will. I don't mean that at all in a trite way; I mean that in a very sincere way. I take honor and duty very seriously, and I will do whatever I can do to help our country. I don't mean just Chuck Merkel – I realize that whole generations of people do that, but I do take that

very seriously, that responsibility. And I'm still involved with that, as you know, with the Air Force.

Was there anything that I didn't say that I should have said, that you would liked to have heard?

**Sellers:** Not that I'm aware at the moment.

[conversation about a follow-up interview not transcribed]

**Sellers:** Let me just confirm that we've had your permission to tape record this?

**Merkel:** You absolutely have had my permission. Thank you for your time.

End