

**Interviewee:** Anderson, Gordon  
**Interviewer:** Robin Sellers  
**Date of interview:** July 25, 2006  
**Category:** Vietnam, Casper Platoon  
**Status:** Open  
**Tape location:** Box #52

**Sellers:** Gordy, are you aware that we're recording this interview?

**Anderson:** Yes.

**Sellers:** We have your permission to do so?

**Anderson:** Yes.

**Sellers:** Start out, if you will, by telling me a little bit about where you were born and grew up.

**Anderson:** I was born in Woodstock, Illinois, which is probably an hour northwest of Chicago, and grew up in a small area called Wonder Lake. Grew up on the lake, interested in water sports, and got an interest in flying at an early age. There was a farm nearby that had an airport; Art Galt was the farmer that gave me my first airplane ride. And after school I would ride my bike over there and do farm chores. Instead of getting paid – not that you would earn a lot when you're eight or ten years old, he would take me for airplane rides. Eventually, as a senior in high school, I decided to take formal flying lessons and got my private pilot license in August of '66. Then of course, at the time the Vietnam thing was going on, although like most high school students, you were pretty much not aware of what's going on halfway around the world and you're interested in sports and the girls and all those kind of things. But post high school, I wanted to pursue – actually, had wanted to pursue aviation as a career since I was young. I went to Marian Central Catholic High School in Woodstock, Illinois, and they were — you know, at the time, if you don't go to college you're going to fail and this and that — but I really wasn't what I'd call a real good or disciplined student at the time. I'd lost my mother when I was twelve years old, so I pretty much was unstructured and undisciplined and ran my own life. So with reference to the four militaries, the Army was the only service that would allow you to enter flight school with a high school diploma. So that really was my only option as far as military service. And of course, the draft was still active and if I didn't — you know, I wanted to fly anyways, and this looked like a good alternative, albeit it would be helicopters. I was just interested in getting flying experience. So shortly after high school, I had taken what was known as the "idiot tests" in the military, you're aptitude tests, and qualified for flight school. I had about ninety hours of flying time as a private pilot before I went into the military, and November of '67 is when I enlisted in the army.

Like almost all of us, I went through the warrant officer program. You started out, your

first two months was basic training. That was at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Then after that I went to Fort Walters, Texas, and that was the primary helicopter training location. It typically was a nine-month course, total, and the first month was what was known as pre-flight, military schools, part of your flight ground schools, maintenance ground schools. After that first month, then we actually started to fly. So it was a four-month program at Fort Walters. We got a week off and I drove back home for a short leave like most of us did.

Then the two locations at the time for the Army were Savannah, Georgia, and Fort Rucker, Alabama. So I was shipped to Fort Rucker, and that was for our advanced helicopter flight training. Four months there, graduated from flight school, which was just really a couple days short of a full year. The window, as I recall it — of course, it was a production line of a sort — you had to have at least 200 flight hours not to exceed 210 — that was kind of a window that the military looked for to get you qualified.

**Sellers:** Why such a narrow window?

**Anderson:** I don't know. Maybe you've never heard of those windows before, but it was — apparently they have to budget, too. To me, the military government is just a huge business of a sort, except they don't have to report to anybody [laughs] for all their loses. One, there was a need for helicopter pilots, a tremendous need. Matter of fact, another number that might knock your socks off, but as far as I was concerned, I think they were training 5,000 helicopter pilots a year. I'm a cornucopia of worthless trivia; it's accurate, but it's worthless. I don't know why some of these numbers I remember.

I remember I had 206 hours, so I fell right in that window. But there was a situation — I should back up a little bit. Just before I went into the military, I had two of my high school friends had enlisted for the warrant officer flight training program, and one of them was washed out medically. You know, the helicopters do have a certain amount of vibration, and for whatever reason, his back could not handle the vibration — or at least that's what we were told when he left the military. Although when you enlist for the warrant officer program, it's a four-year enlistment. So really, that first year is all training and then you have three years left for the military. If you did not get through the warrant officer program, then you would be reassigned, and then you could get out in about two years, which I believe is what the draft was at the time. If you were drafted, you had a two-year military obligation. Then one of my other friends, he basically just washed out because of his lack of flight abilities.

So anyway, those two gentlemen did not make it, and of course, I had gone in right after that. But keeping that in mind, they did have a program that on occasion they would use, that if you washed out, but there was a chance that you could still get through, they would recycle the students. Let's say they want you to be a 3.0, solid B student to graduate but you're just struggling a little bit and maybe you're a C+ or a B-. You still have the potential; we all have different learning curves. They would recycle students and give them another chance if they were just struggling a little bit in a particular area. I don't remember a whole lot about that except they did have a recycle-type program.

**Sellers:** But you didn't need to be recycled.

**Anderson:** No, I fit right in what they called the norm, between that 200 to 210 hours. Like I say, the number I remembered was 206.

**Sellers:** All this time that you're going through this training, you're watching the situation in Vietnam escalate?

**Anderson:** I would say no. We were so busy. The military kept us so busy. If you go back to the very first month of flight school — when you go back to your basic training, and this is certainly how the military — I don't call it brainwashing, but they condition you. Let's face it, 999 out of 1,000 are going to be going to Vietnam — that's the hot spot. So while you're marching during basic training, they're teaching you these songs about "I want to go to Vietnam, I want to kill a Viet Cong —." So like I say, if you look back at it, it's brainwashing of a sort, but I call it "conditioning." But as far as having access to the five o'clock news, I would say absolutely not. I just don't recall any free time. We were so busy with all the — especially basic training; you didn't have time to do anything. You'd be getting up at two o'clock in the morning, shining your boots and your belt buckle. It was a great experience, but I don't know if I want to do it again. I wouldn't sell it for a million bucks.

**Sellers:** So you get there the basic training and you get into the helicopter thing. And you still aren't that much on the radar screen — Vietnam is not there. You're not thinking, "Oh, gosh, I've changed my mind; I don't want to go."

**Anderson:** Well, there were opportunities, and some of the students did resign.

**Sellers:** That was an option?

**Anderson:** Well, it was. Of course, I never did resign, so I don't recall what the circumstances were around that. I do know one of the guys that — when you're in basic training, you live with these people day and night, and my bunkmate or the guy next to me, I remember he was going to flight school. There was like three of us right in one small area that were all planning on going to flight school, and I was shocked that when we got to Fort Walters, he didn't show up because he had resigned. Now what happened to him, I don't know, except instead of a four-year enlistment, now he's into a two-year enlistment.

**Sellers:** So there was not really a penalty for resigning?

**Anderson:** Not a penalty, no. And if anything, you reduced your four-year commitment to two. Again, I believe this is how it worked. And then, of course at that time — now the military can put you in a — remember the MOS, the Military Occupational Specialty? So now they can assign you to an MOS that they need, whereas before you had control because of your enlistment.

**Sellers:** So basically it was to their advantage to let you opt out of that training. That

sounds more like the military.

**Anderson:** But like I say, that was the one that stuck out in my mind because we got to be really good friends, of course, and you go through all that garbage in basic training together and I was just floored that the guy didn't show up. But he had different thoughts, and that's fine; it's not for everybody.

Then actually the very first month of that nine-month program, there were no flying activities, period. It was just some of your ground — like maintenance ground schools or they were teaching you to become a military officer, so a lot of military-oriented classes. But that pre-flight was basically living hell because they were trying to weed out any candidates that they didn't think — if you can't handle people yelling and screaming in your face, then you're probably not going to be able to handle a combat situation.

**Sellers:** In your pre-flight, you did some flying – a little bit?

**Anderson:** No, the pre-flight month, that was like the first month of a nine-month program. There was absolutely no flying at all. All administrative, and of course your PE and your marches and running and things like that.

**Sellers:** Any kind of opportunity for leave or anything like that during this first year?

**Anderson:** I would probably say emergency leave only, although when I was in basic training it did go over the Thanksgiving period, so we had a few days off for that. And also, like I say, between — if you can look at the flight school as a nine-month program, and then Fort Walters was five months and the first month was pre-flight. So the other two four-month segments were flight school. The first four months in Walters was your primary and then the second four months at either Savannah, Georgia, or Rucker, Alabama, would be your advanced. In between there, we had some time off. I don't know if it was five days or seven – certainly not two weeks. I would think we had about seven days off, was all.

**Sellers:** So you're really into it hot and heavy at this point. Keep going.

**Anderson:** Okay. So it's back to Fort Rucker. You had some instrument flight training. They took these old World War II – they call them Link simulators – they were airplane simulators – and modified them into helicopter simulators, and that's where you learned your basic instrument flying.

**Sellers:** How much instrument flying do you do in helicopters?

**Anderson:** Minimal. At that time, it was minimal. What they basically did was they trained you and you were issued a tactical instrument rating. And basically, in the demands of combat, if you had to go get into the clouds, fine. But it was really just minimal training. I wouldn't call it marginal – it was good training – but it was minimal training. Matter of fact, I do recall one of

the missions we were trying to do, a pair of star-blazer gunships that provided us support – they call it IMC, instrument meteorological conditions – they accidentally got into the clouds and we never did find those helicopters. Personally, I think they ended up going into the ocean. But with the landscape of Vietnam and all the jungle and everything else, who would know. They could have been a half mile away and you'd never see them, either. And those guys, we didn't know them personally, but we certainly knew them because they supported us routinely.

But we certainly got into very marginal weather conditions in Vietnam. I flew commercially – I've been flying for over forty years and I just took an early out with my airline. We would fly in weather routinely, obviously. But in the military, especially a helicopter because a helicopter's a very unstable platform, incredibly unstable.

**Sellers:** Is there nothing they can do to minimize that, with all the aerial technology that we have?

**Anderson:** I retired from the Guard in '88, which was quite a while ago, obviously. There's certainly — there would have to be much more advanced civilian versions of helicopters, but I can't even speak for the military.

**Sellers:** So at the time there wasn't anything that they could do about it.

**Anderson:** No. And at the time, remember, we were needed and the production — they gave us — I felt qualified, but I wasn't a veteran by any means. I felt comfortable flying helicopters, but it's like anything else, when you first take on a new job your comfort zone builds after a time.

**Sellers:** When did you find out that you were actually going to be a helicopter pilot and — what did you know about the Casper Platoon at this point?

**Anderson:** Nothing. Never heard of it.

**Sellers:** When did you get orders for Vietnam?

**Anderson:** That would have been the last part of our advanced helicopter flight training in Fort Rucker.

**Sellers:** So at the end of the first year?

**Anderson:** Yes. And that would have been orders — actually, this is very typical — you would be assigned — I don't want to speak for everyone, but pretty close — when you're stateside, I was actually assigned to the 4th Infantry Division. On my fatigues or whatever, we went to the little seamstress shop or whatever you want to call it there on base and we had our new patches sewn on. But when you get to Vietnam, Camran Bay was one of the major entry ports, and that's where you "in processed." That's when I was assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade / Casper Platoon. I'd never heard of them. I'm sure I had heard of the 173rd Airborne

Brigade —

**Sellers:** But there was no reference in your mind that connected it to anything.

**Anderson:** No. And especially the Casper Platoon. I had never even heard of that at all until we were in-processing.

**Sellers:** Tell me a little bit about your transport over to Vietnam. Did you stop in Hawaii? How was your transportation – did you go by ship, air, what was your first impression of landing in Vietnam?

**Anderson:** Okay. After we left Fort Rucker, I drove back to Wonder Lake, Illinois, which was hometown. I think I sold my car to my brother because I wasn't going to be using a car for several years. I'm thinking I probably had seven to ten days off, but it certainly wasn't two weeks. So that was a little bit of leave before you go overseas. I was flown commercially from Chicago O'Hare to Fort Lewis, Washington. And actually, we spent several days there. I remember it was just very gloomy, the typical northwest corner of the country, especially in the winter, does that – almost depressing, rainy and fog and damp and cold. We spent several days there like basically kept busy doing nothing, but some in-processing. I don't remember a whole lot about it.

**Sellers:** This was November or December?

**Anderson:** This would have been December of '68. From there we flew commercially — and back then, and I think the military still does a lot of — like in my industry, the airline industry, we call them “non-scheds” or airlines that don't fly a schedule, like say United, Delta, or American are scheduled – a non-sched is more like an on-demand charter. The name of the (boy, this is digging in the memory vault) – Seaboard World is what I want to say. That was the name of the charter, Seaboard World. Almost for sure. And I even think it was a DC-8. So we flew the DC-8 to Hawaii, and then after that it was Okinawa. And the reason I remember that is I had four older brothers and my second oldest was based in the Army in Okinawa.

**Sellers:** At the time?

**Anderson:** No, just prior. Because I thought, “What a god-forsaken place this is,” and his stories made sense then. Then from Okinawa we went to Camran Bay. I do recall just about all of us had our faces plastered up against the window. It was cloudy, quite cloudy, what I would call broken clouds but still a few holes in the clouds. Definitely an image, like “Oh, my god, there it is.” When you first saw that land, like “Oh, crap, we're here.” It was probably some other words, but I won't share that at the moment. It's like, “Oh, my god!”

Speaking of this — at the tail end of flight school, probably the last month or so – because you know you're getting through – and myself, I was doing pretty decent from the flying point of view and academics and I got selected to go through a gunship program, I learned to fly

gunships in flight school. So things were going well. Of course, you weren't allowed to live off base, but of course, you know what we did – four or five of us rented a house off base. The sergeants who came in and inspected your rooms every day, we'd give them a bottle of booze every once in a while —. But toward the end (and this was kind of a joke), when you're that close to graduating, the buzz word was "What are they going to do, send us to Vietnam?" See what I mean? They had so much time and money invested. I mean, if you were on the bottom of your class, I'm sure you'd be doing everything absolutely positively —. And it was nothing that was really out of control. It's not like you're downtown getting into trouble and that kind of stuff. It's just a matter of you're spreading your wings a little bit. But that was kind of the buzz, "What are they going to do, send us to Vietnam?" Kind of cute.

So back to the arrival in Vietnam. There was no doubt about it. I'm looking out the window in my backyard right now and I can almost visualize — that was a life impact moment. That was just one of those moments you'll never forget. I don't even hardly remember the landing and whatever, but we spent several days in Camran Bay. We'd hang out at the Officers' Club, whatever, because we're technically an officer, the warrant officer, so we're an enlisted man with officer privileges. It was very, very true, understanding the impact – you are in-processing and other guys are out-processing. And there was a tremendous amount of harassment. The out-processing guys are like, "You're my replacement," and they let you know it. They're on their way home. These are people you don't even know. It's a very large processing center, thousands of people in a course of weeks or a month. But in the little bar setting, that definitely was a topic of discussion routinely. The acronym was you were the FNG – the "Funny" New Guy. But that's really part of the whole story. They laid that into you all the time.

So you were kind of excited to get there and get going, but at the same time there was — it didn't scare me, but they added that little sense of uneasiness because they were just coming up with all these stories – none of them were good, you know.

**Sellers:** What did it do to you?

**Anderson:** I just remember being a little apprehensive. At the time I'm a twenty-year-old punk kid and I want to get going and let's get on with this thing, but at the same time I just felt a little sense of unease and apprehensive which I hadn't really felt until that point. But they were very effective with their hazing. And they didn't care because they're going home. It wasn't done in a malicious sense – it was just what they were doing. But I remember that having a huge impact.

**Sellers:** How long did you hang around in Camran Bay?

**Anderson:** I would say days, certainly less than a week. Maybe four or five days.

**Sellers:** Other than hanging out and sort of being harassed, is there any kind of conditioning or anything else as an introduction to what you're going to be doing?

**Anderson:** Not at all. This is in-processing, which means a lot of sitting around. Going to this building to do this — but this is where we got our assignments. Part of this in-processing — and see, that would be as the different units that are spread throughout Vietnam, as their needs changed — that's why when you first hit country, they say, "Hey, we need two pilots here," and "We need ten pilots here."

**Sellers:** So you're kind of like a repo-depot from World War II. And you're hanging out there and they're just letting you hang. Do you bond with anybody at that point?

**Anderson:** Yeah, Jim Boswell. That's where we met each other and we were both going to Caspers.

**Sellers:** You hadn't known him before? He came in from a totally different training system?

**Anderson:** When you go through flight school, they have different classes. I don't recall knowing him at all until that time.

**Sellers:** How did you meet him?

**Anderson:** Probably at the Officers' Club, just hanging out, but I don't recall. He may, but I don't.

**Sellers:** So keep going.

**Anderson:** So after this, then we get our assignment to the 173rd Casper Platoon. So the 173rd was at An Khe at the time. So we flew up there, and again more administrative things. No flying yet at all. There was at least one week of what they called "jungle school." Jungle school was more of a in country orientation primarily for what I would call the "grunts" or the "ground pounders." They issued us rucksacks and all this stuff that you need to be out in the boonies with. I remember after we got a lot of this junk, we just turned our stuff back in because one, we wouldn't have room in the helicopter for it and two, there was no need for it. Everybody gets it whether they need it or not.

What's interesting is when I actually got to our unit — you know, they give you equipment like that that you didn't need, but we did not even have one survival radio in Casper Platoon. No survival radio, no survival gear; the only survival gear we were issued was a pistol with a little ammo belt. That was about it. But a lot of stuff we confiscated. Actually, I got to be our unit barterer or scrounger when we had moved — we spent about a month up in An Khe and then the whole unit moved to LZ English. So we were sharing tents, living in tents, and about five or six months later we were all living in wood-type buildings.

**Sellers:** I take it they were not army issue?



**Anderson:** Oh, no. It was all literally negotiated for — and I'm very serious about this, because I'm the one that did it — but it was always in the military. It's not like we took these pieces of plywood and brought them home. I had made contacts with different people at Phu Cat, which was an Air Force base to our south. We would take captured weapons or poncho liners or army C-rations (which was packaged food) and literally trade. That's how we got out very first — I mean, I kept my priorities straight when I learned the system. One of the very first things I got, I got our unit six survival radios, and I got them from the Air Force. The quick comparison — the Air Force fighter pilots in Phu Cat were living in air conditioned house trailers and we were living in tents. Does that sound familiar — Air Force versus Army. But I guess that's why they have the Air Force Academy and four year degrees and we learn to fly with a high school diploma.

**Sellers:** So you're getting sent out now —

**Anderson:** So back to An Khe then. We do our week of jungle school, and then the 173rd was already in the process of moving from An Khe to LZ English. So after my week of jungle school and Jim Boswell there — and I'm almost sure he was there the whole time — then we went to LZ English and that's where we got assigned to Casper Platoon, which was also known as "Ghost Town." There was a damaged old crappy pair of rotor blades that they had at the entry, and it was ghost town — you know, Casper the ghost. So that's where we lived and that's where our maintenance was and that's where our helicopters were.

**Sellers:** What was your introduction to Casper? They obviously felt that they were special, and they were special. When you first came in to become a member of the platoon, what did it feel like? How did they acknowledge you?

**Anderson:** Everything was very positive. I don't have any negative memories whatsoever. It was pretty cool. I don't think I understood the concept that we were the — I mean, I certainly knew that we were an aviation platoon — that was obvious, because you understand the military structure, of course. But I don't remember when I learned that we were the only separate aviation platoon in all of Vietnam, which made us tremendously unique. I remember meeting the guys and there was a volleyball court there with the outline of the volleyball court with sandbags, and there were two tents that the pilots lived in, and the enlisted men, they had their area. They kind of kept us separate, you know, the military thing. And they had their area off to the side. Then we had our maintenance — the maintenance building was the only wood structure that I recall, because I know eventually that burned down and we had to build another one. But our little operations tent or area, tiny little buildings, couple fans in there and kind of an assignment board, you know, done with grease pencil. Just a typical M\*A\*S\*H setting. And of course, the sandbags around the Ops Center. The aircraft assignments, we had eight of the Hueys and six of the Loaches (or the acronym LOH — light observation helicopter), so we typically had — those were the aircraft numbers that we had. Obviously through combat or whatever you lose some of them and they get changed out; that was the aircraft assignment. Stan Streicher, he was our platoon leader and just a great guy, really good attitude. I think the

majority of the guys had a lot of respect for him. So it was a pretty interesting setting.

**Sellers:** How did you feel about being there?

**Anderson:** At that time, I don't recall any negative feelings. The only — and this is a little strange — but my overall feeling of Vietnam (and generally I'm a very upbeat, optimistic-type person — you know, you keep your beer glass half empty or half full, that's how you approach your life) — I always try to keep my beer glass half full. But although we had many, many bad days, I always tried to focus on the better days. And I always am very guarded when I say this, but I actually enjoyed my experience in Vietnam — so a lot of people think I'm nuts. I don't know how to preface that. The experience was just tremendous, but I sure don't want to do it again.

**Sellers:** Is that hindsight talking, or do you actually think you remember feeling positive while you were over there, for the most part?

**Anderson:** For the most part, I felt positive, yes. I know I'm probably way — I mean, there's not a whole lot of Vietnam vets that have that same attitude. And like I say, I always am very guarded because there were many situations that were terrible. But I'm not one to dwell on the negative. Like I say, one of the coolest things I've maybe done in my aviation career, and I've done many cool things, but we would take some of the Vietnam kids flying with us. I mean, I got slides of them sitting in the helicopter. I don't know if you've heard the name Bill Bassignani, he was killed about a week after this photo, but Bill was sitting on the side of the Huey with me and in between me was a young Vietnamese boy who had lost his left leg below the knee, and the makeshift prosthesis or whatever only went to like maybe the ankle, so it was almost more of a pegleg. But to put him in the helicopter — and even if you didn't take them flying — to put them in the helicopter and put the flight helmet on them — those are Kodak moments.

**Sellers:** So there were some satisfying moments. Can you take me through your first two or three weeks there?

**Anderson:** Sure. Stan Streicher, who was our platoon leader, he would have to fly — this will be on my first flying experience at LZ English — so he would have to take you up for an in country orientation. Obviously not flying around the whole country, but just locally around LZ English, and just to the south was Two Bits, which was another base. To the north of that was North English. So you just kind of get a local orientation, and possibly two or three simulated engine failures. Just kind of a review, because we hadn't flown now for quite a while. I don't remember it being like an all day type thing. I would think we flew for maybe an hour or so.

**Sellers:** So it was more of an orientation flight. And what did you think of the country itself? Is the climate oppressive or what?

**Anderson:** As far as I'm concerned, I think South Vietnam (and I obviously never got to the North, and I'm fortunate for that, because that was not a good place to be), I always felt — LZ English was literally a few miles — I'm going to guess four miles, maybe, five miles — to the ocean. And do you understand how it was divided into the different four corps? So we were northern II Corps, right near the town of Bong Son. The impression I had, which a lot of us did, was although it's a third-world country, this has all the potential of becoming a huge resort area. The mountains that cascade into the water and the miles and miles of beaches — it was beautiful. Then the beauty was interrupted by all these bomb craters on mountains or whatever. But my overall impression was the country was beautiful. And when those rice fields were maturing, it was just beautiful, because you know how they were laid out in like a grid. Then the newer plants, the greenish-type plant, you'd just see those for miles and miles, were just beautiful. Of course, then you had your monsoon season.

**Sellers:** When did that come? Wasn't that in the winter?

**Anderson:** I don't recall exactly, but they would call that their winter time, but it certainly wasn't dovetailed to our winter. I'd have to look at a globe and see exactly how the country was laid out to our, but —

End side A

**Sellers:** Tell me about that first two or three weeks when you were getting oriented and things like that. What kind of duties did you have, what was a day-to-day experience like, food-wise, everything.

**Anderson:** After the orientation flight — let's talk about food. Food — we didn't have any of that at our own site. We were assigned a particular mess hall, and under the circumstances, I thought the food was very good.

**Sellers:** The mess hall was how far from where you were?

**Anderson:** Well, obviously we didn't have any transportation unless you could snag a jeep, but that was probably because you had something to do. But I would say less than ten minutes, five minutes. So not too far.

What I personally didn't like is — certainly I still enjoy milk to this day, but the only milk they had was powdered milk, which did not turn me on at all. And soda was a big beverage, but I'm not a big soda drinker, and the thing is, all that sugar — I can remember thinking, "My teeth are just going to rot off." So I didn't do much of that. Water was all purified type water. So the only beverage I enjoyed was iced tea.

**Sellers:** The purification system for the water didn't mess up the flavor of the tea?

**Anderson:** Well, they must have used enough tea to counteract that. That's true for a cup of

coffee – if you have really poor water, like highly chlorinated —.

**Sellers:** What was your first excursion into a danger zone?

**Anderson:** Actually, this was a little bit of a nasty situation, which I guess would be my wake-up call, like “this isn’t a nice place!” I did not have an assignment, and the guy from Ops – I think his name was Glen Heyner, he came in and says, “Hey, you got to fly with Stan Streicher right away; it’s a scramble.” “Oh, okay, whatever.” You know those six Loaches I told you about? Four of them were used for mini-cav missions. They primarily flew in pairs. It’d be one pilot, the door gunner / crew chief (which is one person), and then the pilot controlled this – you know the Gatling gun? And they apparently had caught some bad guys in the open, so we were going to — we were scrambled to go up and retrieve the bodies. I don’t recall even being told what the mission was because I’m brand new, all I’m doing is sitting there, because I’m with our platoon leader, Stan. Again, it’s one of these lifelong memories. I totally can visualize it. We’re just kind of sitting in this swampy kind of area. It’s not like it was three feet of water, but it was early in the morning so the rotor blades were kicking up some of the moisture on the windows. Of course, we got the crew chief on the left and the door gunner on the right. You know how that works, by the way?

**Sellers:** No.

**Anderson:** In a Huey, you have a crew of four. The front left is your aircraft commander or AC; in the civilian world you’d call him the captain. Then in the right seat would be your copilot. So like Stan would have been the aircraft commander and I would have been the copilot. On the ground, you have a crew chief, which is the mechanic, and he is responsible for the maintenance of the aircraft. And on the ground, the door gunner is responsible for the maintenance of the two M-60 machine guns, because there’s one on each side. Then another number I’m like 100% sure of – each machine gun would have about 1,500 rounds of ammunition. Primarily we were not offensive, we were just defensive, like defending ourselves.

Now, if you can visualize, once the aircraft is airborne, that crew chief sits in the left rear and now becomes a door gunner. And of course, the door gunner who’s in the right seat, right rear, he’s a door gunner anyways.

**Sellers:** So you’ve got two of them now, one on each side.

**Anderson:** Yes. So we’re sitting here, and I remember looking to my left and I could just see this activity and they’re dragging these bodies through this swampy grass, messy, whatever, and in a flash there’s five dead Vietnamese sitting in this helicopter. You know, they’re just in a heap. Like I am pretty much — I wouldn’t call it shocked, but I’m like, “What’s going on here?”

**Sellers:** Why would they collect North Vietnamese bodies?

**Anderson:** Well, there were two North Vietnamese soldiers and there were two local village chiefs and then there was a military pay officer. Well, the bottom line is, they want to collect the bodies because this is how you get your intelligence. And amazingly, they were able to pick up \$50,000 of American cash.

**Sellers:** On these bodies?

**Anderson:** Yes. But see, this is just how things worked. You've got the NVA, which is your North Vietnamese Army, they are a trained military, they are in uniform. Then in South Vietnam, you've got the Viet Cong, the VC. They are people that live in South Vietnam, but they sympathize with the government to the north, because they don't like the government in the south. This is just the pure and simple of it. So they were what we would call farmers by day and Viet Cong by night. So anyway, the North Vietnamese were coming down and paying off – again, I don't know why – but they were paying off this local village chief.

**Sellers:** But if they were dead, other than being able to pick up things off their bodies, you weren't able to get any information out of them.

**Anderson:** Well, no. But first of all you have to realize it is just the essence of a combat environment – you live and die in a matter of seconds, not minutes. So they don't have – you know, you're not going to pull out your canteen and make a cup of coffee while you decide how to — it's a combat situation, bullets had been fired which could alert other bad guys in the area. So you need to get in and get out. This whole thing was such a flash as far as time. I don't think we were on the ground two minutes. That's all I can remember – like a blur, there's an absolute blur.

**Sellers:** So that was your first introduction to the real world of the war. Did you have any decompression time when you got back to the base?

**Anderson:** The only thing — I remember — of course, Stan is maintaining control of the aircraft, although we're on the ground, and I remember looking over my left shoulder. “This is just a mess!” And apparently one of the last guys that they had piled in the helicopter, he was like almost laying over backwards with his chest exposed – not exposed, but the front part of his body — again, probably one of the most – I wouldn't call it traumatic, but like he literally like sat up and almost put his face right into my face as he was gasping for his last breath. And that was my very first exposure and I'll never forget that! I'm only twenty years old! It was pretty crazy.

But going back, as far as down time, I don't recall if I flew the next day or when. But again, this is where you almost start to become callous, because they're the enemy. You have to remember way back in Fort Polk, “Hey, I'm going to Vietnam to kill a Viet Cong!” I mean, I shot at a couple of guys, but I'm sure I — I mean, I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn from a helicopter. So I don't think I hurt anybody. I did not feel any emotion. That was very emotional, but I mean, shortly thereafter — I think that was the wake-up call, and like all of a

sudden — you get seasoned very fast. You get seasoned very, very fast. And of course, when you're a twenty year old punk kid, no one's going to hurt you anyways.

**Sellers:** What was the average age of the platoon while you were there? You were all pretty young.

**Anderson:** We were. I don't know an average age, but I know a good friend of mine, he told me at one of the reunions, he was twenty-three and he was the old-timer of the group. So there was a pretty young average but I don't know.

**Sellers:** You're there from early '69, basically, through part of '70 —

**Anderson:** December of '68, because I had about fourteen months total.

**Sellers:** There's stuff going on back in the States that is getting kind of nasty. Are you all aware of the opposition to the war as it's growing over here?

**Anderson:** Yes. One thing that I think is pretty obvious for anybody in the military is that lack of communication, you know, getting a letter or — of course, you'd never get phone calls. I think I had one call, and I don't know — that was on a ham radio — how they did that. I can't remember any more. And when you did get mail, you might not get any for three weeks, but then it'd all catch up to you. My dad — someone had signed me up for a subscription to our local newspaper, and so although you don't get anything from a national theme, you pick up a little bit there. But part of my fourteen months is I had gone back to the States for a month's leave, because I had extended in Vietnam. Then that was very disappointing because of the — and I have a very negative bias toward the news media, especially when it comes to commercial aviation. If there's one airline fatality today, they'll advertise it for months. But there were things that I was reading that was just point blank not true.

**Sellers:** But that wasn't helping the cause over on the other side of the world.

**Anderson:** Hindering it, huge.

**Sellers:** Did it affect your morale at all? Was it that big a thing over there?

**Anderson:** One, it did not affect the morale as far as my group because we were — you know, the Caspers were a very small group, very close-knit. I think we took pride in our job, in our unit, in the Caspers. Mission oriented — we're going to get the job done.

**Sellers:** So you were kind of a self-contained unit?

**Anderson:** Yes.

**Sellers:** As far as just keeping each other things.

**Anderson:** Yes. Very unique. The only aviation platoon in all of Vietnam, a separate platoon.

**Sellers:** Did that engender any curiosity or any kind of feelings, good or bad, with other units or platoons? Or did it ever come up at all?

**Anderson:** One, I don't recall it really coming up. It may have, but you know, we had, like I say, the Star Blazers and another lift company, part of LZ English. They were back toward the normal company size or larger – a lot more helicopters, a lot more pilots. But I would say that was mostly in-house, our own *esprit de corps* within our own little group.

**Sellers:** And if you were going to be over there, that was probably the best type of group to be in.

**Anderson:** In my opinion it was the best, because we literally got to do everything, from combat assault — I flew Jimmy Stewart and his wife Gloria, I landed on a destroyer a couple of times, we did maintenance runs, we did combat assaults, we did med-evac, we did resupply, command and control. We absolutely were able to do all these different things. We had a Playboy Playmate there; I didn't fly her but [chuckles — well, the USO, you know. These people were over — like the Bob Hope thing — they were over entertaining the troops. But yeah, again, as a twenty-year-old, to be able to fly Jimmy Stewart and his wife. Matter of fact, after this incident with Streicher, my very first mission was to fly General Westmoreland. He's the man! He's a four-star general, and again, I'm a twenty-year-old punk kid and to this day I'm always laughing, like if he only knew how inexperienced I was! Although the aircraft commander had more experience, you know. But that's the ultimate. So we had this exposure to all these different types of flying elements, whereas I think if you're in a larger unit, you're going to be much more specialized. You're going to do combat assault all the time; you're going to do gunship runs all the time. But we had that diversity, which was awesome.

**Sellers:** You said you re-upped, so you got a month leave. Did you ever have R and R during the year that you were there?

**Anderson:** Yes, I actually had a little time in Hawaii and a little time in Sydney, Australia.

**Sellers:** Was it something that actually was of benefit to you?

**Anderson:** Oh, yeah. It was nice.

**Sellers:** Where did you go, once you were in Hawaii or Sydney; what did you do? How did you use that time?

**Anderson:** I didn't really have a steady female friend at the time and my mother was gone, of course, so my dad, he came to Hawaii. He was very pro, you know, all of his boys. He'd come to my graduation and had an opportunity to go to Hawaii. Plus we had friends out there, so it worked out good that we could hang out with some of the locals. So I just remember hanging out, driving around and going to the different islands. I can't remember how many islands we went to.

**Sellers:** But were able to get with some family members.

**Anderson:** Yes.

**Sellers:** Was that of great benefit to you?

**Anderson:** It really was. I think just — it was just so night and day, so totally removed, that it was very easy to get into the other environment.

**Sellers:** Really? You could just switch back and forth?

**Anderson:** That's what I felt, yeah.

**Sellers:** As your year ended, what made you decide to re-up?

**Anderson:** My buddy, Jim Revoir and I — we're to this day very, very good friends — we have remained in contact all the way since we met in Vietnam. But we had elected to get this R and R to Sydney, and right when we were leaving, the Army had come out with this program — if you extend in Vietnam for eight months, after you complete that eight months then the Army would let you get out. So we talked about that. In the meantime we're just on our way down to Sydney. So we got down there, had a blast down there. The 173rd is an airborne brigade, obviously, so everybody's a paratrooper. In the military, if you're not a paratrooper, the slang is you're a "leg." So all the pilots, of course, were legs, because we had never jumped. But anyways, in Sydney Jim and I went out to this local airport and went to jump school and we learned to jump so we could go back and brag to the guys, "Hey, we're jump qualified." So we did that, had a lot of fun.

But anyways, we both talked about that extension, and I — eight months, boy, that's —. But when we came back, shortly after we came back, apparently they didn't have many takers. So then they said if you extend for six months. And the package was pretty good. After you complete your first year — we were probably eight or nine, ten months into our year — Jim was actually there a couple months prior to me — but they would fly you round-trip anywhere in the world — obviously the military paid for it — you would have thirty days off, you would not get charged any leave time (so in other words, it's a free month), and of course when you're in a combat zone like Iraq right now, you don't pay any income tax — we're making a lot of money as kids. Of course, a whopping \$65 a month was your hazardous duty pay.

But anyways, I opted to extend and Jim did not.



**Sellers:** Did that engender any hard feelings?

**Anderson:** No.

**Sellers:** So you extended mostly for the benefits you expected to get from it?

**Anderson:** Well, no. I don't know if I might have missed this, but the major benefit was that you'd get out of the Army. That was the major benefit. Again, not that I disliked the military, but I wanted to get on with my civilian career.

**Sellers:** So you did it. Did you ever, during the fourteen months that you were there, feel like you were in a situation that – “this was a really bad idea and I'm in trouble now.”

**Anderson:** The day I got back. The day I got back to Vietnam.

**Sellers:** After your month?

**Anderson:** After my month off, the day I got back, like “Oh, my god, what did you do?” Not one of the brightest things I've ever done.

**Sellers:** Why? Was the situation so completely different or was it —

**Anderson:** Totally different. Most of the guys — one of my best friends, he had a family emergency so he was gone. A couple of the other guys had been injured or shot down, so they were gone. And remember I told you we built all these little buildings – well, my room had been locked and sealed for a month, and I came back, my flight helmet must have had two inches of mold inside of it. It was beyond disgusting, my entire room. And of course, the day I got back it's rainy and fog and damp and just crap! That was when I hit low tide; there was no doubt about it.

**Sellers:** But you stuck it out?

**Anderson:** Well, for two more months. Actually, only for about six more weeks. You should understand my personality so far, but this is kind of interesting. We had a pretty large day room between where the pilots had their rooms. Two of our pilots, Ron Hurst and Kirt Butler, who passed away years ago with cancer, they were getting promoted from W1 to W2. So we had this huge promotion party. And seriously, I have never been in a fight – up until that day, I had never been in a fight in my entire life, and I've never been in a fight since. But I was in three skirmishes in one night. And I never threw the first punch; they were all defensive. Anyways, the very short version was – I think my attire for the evening was just cutoff jeans and I was wearing unlaced combat boots. But you know, military functions, there's a lot of drinking, a lot of — I mean, I certainly had plenty of beer to drink, you know, I wouldn't throw stones on that. And there was a lot of gambling in the military. I mean, a lot of guys would just blow their

entire month pay gambling, you know. But we had this pool table that had been knocked over because they were like playing craps on it. So if you can visualize this pool table kind of laying on its support legs. But somehow in the third skirmish, I slipped and fell and got my leg underneath that table and broke my ankle. So that's why I did not compete my extension, that's why it doesn't add up.

**Sellers:** So that's one of those million dollar "wounds," right? Did they put you in the hospital? Send you back home right away? What did they do with you?

**Anderson:** Very depressing. Well, one is, I didn't even realize until the next morning when — I woke up in the middle of the night, and that's when I was experiencing this tremendous pain. I looked and here my ankle was about the same size as my thigh.

**Sellers:** You had had some beer.

**Anderson:** Yes. Starting to sober up. This is not a proud moment, but it's what happened. So obviously I couldn't fly. They took me down to the typical M\*A\*S\*H unit and X-rays came up negative, so I went back to my room and for three days, this excruciating pain. So that just kind of added — this was definitely the low tide of my entire life because I couldn't fly and I didn't know what was going on. Finally I said, "I've got to have this thing X-rayed again." So I went down there and sure as heck, they found it was broken. Go back to my room — I literally had less than an hour to get all my personal effects together and I was gone! So I didn't get the typical Casper send-off where when you leave after your normal tour, we do a fly-by and the guys pop these smoke grenades. So I missed out on all that. And I had no clue except I'm going to Japan. So away I went. I was med-evaced in a helicopter, which was very depressing. I mean, this was something that I usually do, helping these guys out. I just felt like I was on this terrible guilt trip because, because of a bar brawl, I am causing a lot of extra work for these people that should be working with the legitimately injured people. And so I swear to this day — and I was probably six weeks in Japan — I mean, I don't know if they had Tylenol at the time or whatever, but I never took anything for pain because I wanted to suffer, and I did! That was my own mental thing.

**Sellers:** Then you came back here?

**Anderson:** Yeah, I was there for like six weeks, came back to — they usually med-evac you back toward a hospital in your local area, so I was an outpatient at Great Lakes Naval Hospital there north of Chicago because that was an hour drive back home. So I did therapy there two or three times a week. In the meantime, the military doesn't know what to do with me, because I did not complete my extension.

Before I get into that — so anyways, after about six weeks I get orders to go to Fort Rucker. They're paying me twice a month, which sounds great, but I know better — in the military you're eventually going to get caught — it took me months to have them take their money back. That was a huge problem, because you don't want to keep it because then they're

going to put you in jail. And I just don't operate that way, anyways; I try to be honest and I am honest.

So I get down to Fort Rucker and I get a new unit assignment, so I'm expecting to start flying. Well, they wouldn't let me fly because when you come back from overseas, if you had a year left in the military, they would let you fly. But if you had less than a year left, they wouldn't let you fly anymore.

**Sellers:** So what did they have you do?

**Anderson:** Well, if you can imagine this – I worked one and a half days a week. Wednesdays I supervised the enlisted "Escape and Evasion" course, and Saturday mornings from like eight till noon I supervised the gas chamber. Can you believe that?

**Sellers:** The gas chamber? What is the gas chamber?

**Anderson:** Well, when I was going through training, just to demonstrate how — for training purposes – you'd walk in there with your gas mask and then you'd take the gas mask off and see how you cannot function. They had this gas chamber for the enlisted crew chiefs and door gunners. So they just had to have an officer there to supervise. That was me. And really, a day and a half a week, they're not even getting their money's worth out of me, because they're paying me warrant officer wages. So what I did, I was a professional administrative pain in the you-know-where — I had a supervisor and I basically pleaded with him — I was in there two or three times a week. I said, "Sir, either the Army's got to let me out or let me fly. I know what the rule is, but —." If you look at the full year period, I still have way more than a year to go, but I was in administrative limbo because the Army didn't know what to do. I was the very first person that had extended that didn't make the extension. See, I didn't qualify in that six months.

So anyways, I would say in less than two months, probably six weeks, we finally got a directive from DC that — "CWO" or Mr. Anderson, whatever, "can leave the military whenever it is administratively feasible." In other words, in forty-eight hours I was on my way home.

**Sellers:** Were you corresponding with anyone – you had mentioned that you didn't get anything and then you'd get a bunch – were you corresponding regularly with your father and anybody else in your family?

**Anderson:** Yes, my father; I had a neighbor boy that was three or four years younger than I was – he was like the sixth boy in our family – so we would correspond, albeit just every couple of months. The one that sticks out the most, I have a sister-in-law that she's nothing less than an angel. She was raising five kids at the time, but I swear she always could find time — I think she would write me at least once every couple weeks.

**Sellers:** So receiving mail, when you did get it, was pretty important.

**Anderson:** Huge. Nothing less than huge. And I think everybody felt that way. I can remember bringing in the mail once or twice, and the guys knew what time we'd be there and they were all there. It was just huge, nothing less.

**Sellers:** You said you had at least one brother –

**Anderson:** I've got older brothers.

**Sellers:** One of them at least was in the military, because you said he was on Okinawa.

**Anderson:** Yes, all five of us.

**Sellers:** Were you all in the military at the same time?

**Anderson:** My oldest brother Jim actually was in Vietnam; he was career Air Force, and he was — I don't think we could call him an official male nurse, but his job was as though he was a male nurse. So he was in Vietnam when I was actually in flight school. And I believe he was in Nha Trang — Nha Trang was quite a bit north up in I Corps. So if I recall, we overlapped by a couple months.

**Sellers:** Did you ever get together with any of them?

**Anderson:** No.

**Sellers:** Did you correspond with them?

**Anderson:** No.

**Sellers:** So your father, you were able to keep up with where they all were and the same thing, them with you?

**Anderson:** Yes.

**Sellers:** Apparently you have good memories more than bad of the situation. You came back and you went on – you are a commercial pilot – did you ever experience any of the “unwelcomeness” that a lot of the Vietnam veterans felt?

**Anderson:** Absolutely. Fortunately, when I came home the first time from Vietnam, I had twenty-five or thirty family and friends there. I was traveling with another pilot that I only met on the way home, and his brother picked him up, by comparison. I think that was the norm.

**Sellers:** That's kind of depressing.

**Anderson:** It was very depressing. I can remember when I was flying actively — again, I remember this point in time so vividly. In Toledo, Ohio, we had just finished up our trip and I was calling in our times to the company over the phone. This young man was coming back from Desert Storm I, and there must have been 200-300 people there with music, instruments, the whole nine yards. I felt like crap.

**Sellers:** Still.

**Anderson:** At that time. Yeah. Had no clue who the guy was, but just the whole thing was like, “Hey, that’s a bunch of crap!” I mean, it’s good — I felt just really — I don’t know if I have the right terms, but just let down or disappointed or —

**Sellers:** And how long after your actual return was this?

**Anderson:** This would have been early ‘90s. So that had to be twenty-two, twenty-three years – twenty-one.

**Sellers:** Desert Storm was ‘92, wasn’t it?

**Anderson:** Yeah, ‘91-‘92, somewhere in there.

**Sellers:** So you’re still carrying some of that with you?

**Anderson:** Oh, you do.

**Sellers:** Can you think of anything that I’ve not asked you that we should use as part of this interview?

**Anderson:** No. I think it’s been great.

End interview