

Interviewee: White, Clifford
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good morning, Mr. White. You understand that this conversation is being recorded?

White: Yes, I do.

Sigler: Okay, we're going to talk about your experiences in Vietnam. Why don't we start out with how you got into the service, and how you got to Vietnam?

White: I went through University of Montana ROTC program, the Army program. The Army ROTC.

Sigler: Yeah, but, do you have a particular service— ?

White: Yeah, my major in the University was physiotherapy. And I had four years of Army ROTC, and you didn't pick the branch until you were going to be commissioned, but with the physiotherapy, Medical Corps was what I was destined for. My fifth year, about three months prior to graduation from physiotherapy, I decided I didn't want to do that anymore. It became just something I didn't want to do. So I went back and looked at my points and everything else, talked to my counselor, and I flew back into education, because that's where most of it took me and I could probably graduate inside of one more quarter without too much trouble. But I didn't go talk to the ROTC, I didn't understand that that's not something they wanted, so they called me in and said I had left my major and since my contract with the government was with the understanding that I would be graduating and going to the Medical Corps as a physiotherapist, they said it was a breach of contract. So I said, "Okay, what do we do?" And they said, "Well, you have two choices: you can come in as a private, because you're going to be drafted, or as a lieutenant, because you have four years of ROTC. However, no longer in the Medical Corps; it will have to be in a combat branch." So I asked them, I said, "When do I have to make this decision, when are we going to do that?" And they said, "Right now." So, okay. I said, "Well, I'd rather go in as a 2nd lieutenant than drafted. Pay's a little different —" And, I said, "For combat branch, we might as well pick infantry." So they offered a fixed-wing flight training through the ROTC program, and I had taken that, so I had my pilot's licence, I passed the test and all that for single-engine fixed wing. I received my commission then as a lieutenant in the infantry. I had orders very shortly after that to go to Fort Benning, Georgia. I was married at the time with a new baby, so we packed up. My folks lived north of Chicago, we headed there. I was going to have her stay there while I went to basic training, as

far as basic officer's training in Fort Benning.

Sigler: Infantry school there.

White: Yeah. She didn't want to do that, so she came with me; we got a small apartment off the base and I got to see her about every other third day, because we were just that busy. While there, I got to see what was going on in the Army and saw some helicopters flying around. Crawled out of a swamp one day after being wet and cold for three days, and after we cleaned up I went into the company office for all the trainees there and asked them how to go to flight school. And they just smiled, gave me some papers and said, "Fill this out." It was too easy, I should have known better. Then from Fort Benning I went off to Fort Wolters, Texas, and started flight school. Went through Fort Wolters; the flight program is 200 hours. They start you in Fort Wolters, you go through that and then from there you go back to Fort Rucker, Alabama, and finish up there. And once I finished and had my wings, graduated from flight school, I had orders to report after a 30 day leave to Vietnam.

Sigler: Did you choose helicopters over fixed wing or did they just assign you?

White: I chose helicopters.

Sigler: Why'd you do that?

White: That was what was there when I crawled out of the swamp. I was always interested in the VTOL, vertical takeoff and landing, but the Army had since gave the Caribous and that whole short field program to the Air Force, so what I would have been interested in then was gone. So the helicopters looked like something that would really interest me from a flying point of view.

Sigler: Okay. So you got orders to Vietnam. Were you ordered to the 173rd Airborne Brigade, or —?

White: I didn't know where I was going. We got in country September of '68, and Tet happened in February, but it was a bit of a culture shock. You get off the airplane and there was still a lot of visible damage from February. I'd never been in a bus that was caged on the windows before, and you drive down the streets and everything is pock-marked from bullet holes and beat up and it was just — not quite seen anything like that before. They held us at — oh, god, where were we? I'm trying to remember the place we were at, it was just outside of Saigon —

Sigler: Oh, the big air base—

White: Yeah, Tan Son Nhut. They had a base there that everybody coming in country, you were either there or Cam Rahn bay. And went through a little bit of inauguration, some talks — what to do and not to do. And you watched every day for your name to come up on the

order sheet. And everybody was going to the 1st Cav, and as I'd go down the list, all the pilots that I'd run in to were all going to 1st Cav until I got to my name, and it said 173rd Airborne, and I was the only one there. I didn't go through jump school, so I couldn't figure that out. I didn't know they had an aviation section. But you just pack your gear and report and they put you on a C-130 going north. We went into Ah Khe, which was at the time the 173rd headquarters. Reported in there, go through their in-country training. The second night I was there, I ran into pilots from Casper, and they told me that's where I was coming, because they were the only aviation unit in the 173rd. And I said I couldn't go because I had to go through the jungle training, and they said, "No, you're a pilot, you don't have to do that."

Sigler: They were giving you the preliminary training once you got there?

White: Right. They'd take us out into the bush and give us an idea of what that was like. And they said, "Since you're a pilot, you don't have to do that." And I said, "I think I do." And they said, "No, no, you're mistaken. Come with us." And they packed my gear, put me on a helicopter, and we flew to English. It was a month later that Headquarters sergeant came down looking for me. He said I had never gone through this jungle training school and that I was going to have to report back and go through that, and they were rather upset at me because they had had me AWOL. But since I was with the unit, the unit commander took care of it. I never did go back for jungle training. They sorted it out and I wasn't involved.

Sigler: So you got up to English, and that was basically the 173rd's – the Casper Platoon's —

White: Correct, and the general command was there. That was his headquarters, that was 2nd Battalion was there, and the Headquarters Company for the 173rd. And the general's TOC was there.

Sigler: GOC?

White: Tactical Operations —

Sigler: Oh, TOC, tactical operations center. I had forgotten all those terms—

White: Yeah, I had to think about it for a second myself. They gave me an in country check ride, and I started flying as Peter [??] pilot, or co-pilot. In the aviation what they did is you had aircraft commander and you have pilots. So both pilot's flying and then you got first pilot time. You didn't have a pilot and a co-pilot. Officially both people logged first pilot time by calling one an aircraft commander and the other one — we called them "peter [??] pilots" just to keep them straight.

Sigler: So the Casper Platoon basically had two types of helicopters?

White: Right, they had the Huey, known as the Slick, and they had the Loach for the scouts. I flew the Huey, and was being checked out on the Loach. When I could I'd get a ride on that just to get familiar with it. Because you could end up flying both or you'd get focused into one specifically. But they wanted you checked out on both. I was only there three months.

Sigler: Three months? Tell me all you can about it. What you did and what the unit did.

White: Oh, basically in Casper we supported everything. I mean, whatever they needed a helicopter for, we seemed to do. We were in combat assaults, we flew primarily – I think the primary mission for the Hueys was a lot of command and control, but that got you into everything. If they needed medical evacuations, because you were there with the battalion commander, you immediately were used. He would get out and he would run what we'd call action trash [??] all day long; we flew it out, re-supplies all morning long, and then in the afternoon you'd fly back and pick up all the garbage because they couldn't leave it behind. So everything going out, you'd go back, you'd pick it up in the afternoon and take it back in. That was the routine stuff. The non-routine came when, for example, we had a typhoon come through, and they were evacuating a fire base out of the mountains. They didn't get them completely evacuated before the typhoon hit, and they left — the men up there, they got the guns out, they got a lot of what their supplies were but they didn't get the men out, so they were stuck up there without food or ammo. They had ammo for their individual weapons, but they didn't have any backup. All the aircraft were grounded. They came to us and said, "We know everybody's grounded, but can you try to get to them?" We flew back to where they were; the rain and the clouds were so thick that we literally hovered sideways up the mountain with the crew chief talking us up the hill because we couldn't see the trees sideways but he could. So we hovered up the hill. They could hear us, and you could hear the emotion in their voices because they had not been re-supplied for three days. And we had food and — they didn't need the water because of all the rain, but we had food and we had ammo. And at the same time on the radio they said a C-130 was doing a pallet drop by parachute on top of them. So we knew that that pallet with those parachutes was coming down. We didn't know where it was, and they missed the base completely. So while we were hovering in that area – I don't think the C-130 knew we were down there. He'd have never have dropped that on top of us if he knew we were there.

Sigler: No. I was going to say, that doesn't give you a very comfortable feeling. I've talked to some other helicopter pilots elsewhere that have run into those kind of problems.

White: [laughs] Yeah. It was exciting for a moment until we realized that the drop was over and it was down someplace and it didn't hit the base, and they never did find it. They supplied nice parachutes and a lot of food and ammo to somebody, somewhere. But it wasn't those guys. We didn't get to them, we got just below them and we just couldn't see anymore; it got so bad that we couldn't get to them. So we had to hover back down the mountain, and then the next morning we were going to go back out. I woke up at 5 o'clock and the sky was clear and by the time I got down to operations they said that somebody had already gone out, had left a half hour before that. So they got there at first light, and got food and ammo

into them.

Sigler: The unit that was up there, it was part of the 173rd Brigade?

White: Right, yeah. It was one of the artillery units.

Sigler: Exciting at least.

White: For a new guy, yes, it was. I found out later, even on my second tour things like that were exciting. That's a good word. [laughs] Pucker packer, I think you've probably had a few people use that.

Sigler: Yeah, yes. [laughs]

White: I guess on another occasion, Mr. Thompson, who we'd call "Gramps"— I flew with him actually quite a bit. We did a night operation in the An Loa, and I really, really dislike night operations because they're completely blacked out. You can't see, it's all by — you're like feeling. I mean, nobody on the ground can — you can't use your lights, can't use the landing lights — for obvious reasons.

Sigler: You didn't have many of the motored infrared?

White: Oh, we didn't have any of that. It was just black. And we were told to come up — for some reason we had to pick the company commander up. The colonel was bringing them all back in for a briefing for an operation that was going on, and he wanted him back. So we had to go out that night and pick him up. To find the unit, we used the FM radio, and ended up — you fly figure eights and watch the needle swing, and you can kind of figure out where the unit is, because the needle turns as you go past them. So you use a system of figure eights until you've located them, and know that they're underneath you. Then you start a — because that needle will point at the FM radio.

Sigler: And that's part of your own radio set up?

White: That was in the helicopter. They haven't done that for years. It's real basic locating ground unit, when you can't find them otherwise. You just set up and follow the needle to them, and as the needle swung, that meant they were behind you. Then you'd do a —

Sigler: And you'd do that on an FM radio?

White: Yeah. And you'd do a figure eight, you know, two or three times and you had them pretty well right where you're at. You still couldn't see the ground, but you knew they were below you. And you'd located them close enough that you could start an approach.

Sigler: With what kind of degree of accuracy? Couple hundred meters?

White: Well, yeah. We started the approach, and when we landed — we followed the needle in, but when we landed we looked around and we were in a cemetery. We could see the headstones and the mounds on earth; it was a Vietnamese cemetery and there was nobody around. And we were sitting there, just virtually all by ourselves. So Mr. Thompson, Gramps, he said, “I don’t think anybody’s here, they’re probably in front of us some place.” So he just went to a high hover about 100 foot in the air, and we hovered along until we saw a flashing light, and it was a GI laying on his back with this Zippo, and he was flipping his Zippo. And we landed, putting him between the skids, and basically he laid there while we landed. And that was my initiation to night landing in Vietnam. Gramps knew what he was doing. He’d obviously done this before. He was as calm and cool as like he was just driving down the highway someplace on a Sunday afternoon. He was fairly good pilot. They called him Gramps, and I doubt if he was very much older than the rest of us. I’m trying to remember — I would have been 22. I was born in ‘44, I was there in ‘68, so —

Sigler: He was probably a ripe old man of 27 or 28.

White: Yeah, that’s right. [laughter] I think the only other thing that stands out in my mind was, again flying with Gramps, was the first time we knew we were taking fire. We were flying from Ah Khe to English; we were just basically doing a mail run, and traces started coming up at us. We were 2,500-3,000 feet, but the traces were coming up, and as I looked down on them, it looked like they were arcing away. They were coming up and then arching out. So I mentioned that to him, and he said, “No, that’s an optical illusion.” He said, “That’s tracer burnout; they’re still going, they’ll go to 5,000-6,000-7,000 feet.” He says, “They don’t have the accuracy because the tracer burnout happens before it gets to our altitude.” But he says, “The bullets are still going by us.” And I said, “Well, why don’t we change what we’re doing, the direction we’re flying?” And he says, “Nah, we might fly into them. They haven’t hit us, just don’t worry about it.” So it was a nice little light show, because it was just dusk. And a tracer, I think you’re aware of it, but there’s five rounds in between each tracer round. Once I realized that — you try to get real small inside of that armor plated seat.

Sigler: [laughs] Now, what were they shooting at you?

White: Oh, they were red tracers, 7.62. It was a machine gun, it was probably equivalent to our M-60 at the time. It wasn’t the big .51 caliber or higher. _____[??] That was later. And I was co-pilot on 721. I don’t know if you read that. On the website there, it’s all the different stories. Down at the bottom, it’s the one that’s “Casper 721 is down.” I was flying with Mr. Henderson, Walt Henderson? His call sign was Sugar Bear. And we had a command and control mission. It was December 10th. We flew down to Uplift, which is the 1st Battalion operation; they operated out of LZ Uplift. We got there in the morning, I don’t know, 7:30, 8:00 o’clock for a briefing. We went in and they had the whole area of operations, the whole AO, on the map. We were going to have a large insertion that day of his battalion, using the 61st Assault

Helicopter Company, which supported the 173rd. We were to fly command and control. And Walt had been down south flying 4th Battalion — I'm trying to think where they were — anyway, he'd been down south and hadn't flown in this AO. So he asked specifically if there was any heavy weapons, because where we were going was an area just north of a valley we called Soilsow, it was just off the valley the Cav had named Happy Valley (why they named it that, I don't know), because it never was. But it was in that area, and it was in an area where the Americans never truly controlled it. It was far off the beaten path, and it was the North Vietnamese, it wasn't VC, it was North Vietnamese. We were going after a specific battalion of them

Sigler: North Vietnamese regulars?

White: North Vietnamese regulars. So they told them that the reason we were going into that valley and in that area was because there was no known heavy weapons. Although they did have them, they thought they could get into that area without running into them. We were told that we were to fly to Ah Khe, pick up a mortar crew, 4-deuce — that's a heavy mortar crew — and put them on top of a hill overlooking a valley so they could give close artillery support. We flew to Ah Khe, refueled, picked them up, flew out where we were supposed to put them, and it was a huge ridge line overlooking that valley. And as we came in, the grass parted and there was a sandbag landing pad already built up there with a 1st Cav patch on it. So even though you think you're in the middle of nowhere, the Cav had been there. We landed, we dropped off — it took two or three trips to get — the battery is heavy — that's three guns —. So it took a bit to get them in there. To get them in, get the three tubes, and get the ammo. I think it was three trips; we burned off a whole load of fuel. Went back, refueled, landed at Uplift, picked up the battalion commander and his OF (forward observer), who was going to do the adjusting the guns, his radio operator — we picked up five people, so we had a total of nine on board. We flew out — there was so much artillery being fired in conjunction with this operation that they gave us a specific route to fly. We can't fly too high because of artillery going overhead, and there was certain areas we couldn't fly in because of the gun target line. The gun target line is simply from where the guns are firing to where the shells are landing. You don't want to be in that unless you're underneath it.

Sigler: Yeah, and then pray that there's no short round.

White: Yeah. So we had a very specific route to fly. The cloud base was at 1,000 feet, so we couldn't go over the clouds because then the battalion commander wouldn't have any visibility at all. So we were flying virtually with the rotors in that cloud base, trying to get as high as we could, but at 1,000 feet everything hit's you. Small arms, they could hit you with a pistol if they could aim that well. You're in a real serious zone. He had us fly over where the landing zone was going to be so he could take a look at it. They were talking to the mortar crew, getting them ready to fire a round. We flew over it once, he asked us to go back again, and Walt was changing altitude quite a bit by, you know, 200-300 feet, and he was going back and forth a lot just to try to give us a little bit of chance instead of just flying straight and level, because

where we were was an extremely dangerous altitude to be in. He gave me the controls so he could turn around and talk to the colonel, and the colonel wanted to go by a third time, and he told the colonel there's no way that we were going to fly back the same area for the third time.

Sigler: They'd be waiting for you.

White: That just didn't make any sense at all. And I was looking out front, and I saw what I thought was a huge bird. I don't know where it came from, it looked like the size of a condor, extremely large. And I yelled at him, and I said we had a bird, and he looked back forward, saw it, and bent the controls over full left so we literally stood up sideways and started descending and missed the bird. I watched the overhead as it went by, and as it went by it, what I thought it went through the tail rotor. Now this wasn't a bird. This was a .37 mm anti-aircraft. But when the shell burst, the flak is a long, narrow line of smoke. It's not the big ones like the burst you see in the World War II movies. 37 mm's a smaller shell. I don't know if it's two inches, might be about that size. It's right around there somewhere. Call it an inch and three quarters; still a nice sized shell. But when it burst it just leaves these long smoke trail. We didn't know that. I had never seen it, he had never seen it, we didn't know we had a 37 mm in the area. 20 mm was as large as we had heard about. Anyway, when we thought the bird had gone through the tail rotor, it was an extremely violent vibration reaction. The crew chief, Ned Costa, advised us that we lost a tail rotor, which we knew – he didn't have to tell us that. But he said we lost a tail rotor. It literally was hanging; it was stopped rotating and it was hanging by a few connections. It wasn't even part of the aircraft anymore, which changed the center of gravity a bit forward. The aircraft wants to spin if you don't have that tail rotor. As long as you hold enough air speed – 70 some knots, 72, it's hard to remember, 72-77 knots air speed – you can windstream. You get going fast enough so that the tail can't come around. It comes partially around, but it can't go the rest of the way. And then the aircraft, because of the loss of the center of gravity, it wanted to roll over, so we were literally cocked over, flying about 20 degrees out of trim, and the aircraft rolled over to where we were looking through the greenhouse, which is the plastic above the pilots. It's green for a sun break, so we called it the greenhouse. So we were looking over our heads through that just to kinda see where the aircraft was going to go. We were in a valley. We didn't know it at the time but we were taking automatic fire from AK-47s, .51 calibers – they had three of them there so we were in a triangular of them. Walt at the controls, we were obviously losing some altitude because we were approximately 1,000 feet. He wanted to make a turn to take us back to where he knew there was a special forces base down at the river at the bottom of the valley. As he started to make that turn, I remember the explosion, and in talking to him — I didn't talk to him until 30 years after this — we went to a Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association reunion and that's the first time I'd talked to him. Not the first time – I talked to him in the hospital, but that's the first time we really sat down without the comforts of drugs and talk about what happened. But he tried to do that. I heard the explosion, he never heard it, but he saw the flash. And at that point we lost four and aft control; we lost the ability to maintain that airspeed. The aircraft, because she was already tucked over trying to roll, started spinning, but it was spinning nose up and tail down. Spinning fast enough that you could not tell the difference between the ground – the green – or

the blue sky. It was just all one blur. I got this information from the report in the 4-deuce team that was on the hill watching us. They were watching what was going on. I don't think we went around twice. I doubt it because if you don't do something to fix that, you'll tear the tail boom off. And we didn't do that. So what we did do — to stop that rotation you've gotta take the torque out, you've gotta shut the engine off, and as soon as you shut the engine off, you remove the torque, the aircraft windstreams, which it did nose down, and we headed for the side of the mountain. We were going down slope, we still thought we could get to the bottom of the valley because we were auto rotating. And as we came down the mountain I was looking at the air speed and the rate of descent; we were at 70 knots and rate of descent was about 750 feet per minute, which is pretty fast rate of descent. As we started coming in, the trees, the bottom of the valley, everything was coming fairly quickly. There was one dead tree, it stood up above the rest of them by about 20 feet, and it was dead, just like a great big telephone pole, and we hit that head on. Obviously both of us were unconscious at that point. Later we found out that when we hit the tree we found out that it tore the cockpit off from in front of our seats to above our heads. The main blade was gone with the impact. We didn't need it anymore anyway. The 4-deuce team up on the hill said we cartwheeled a couple times on top of the trees, I guess much like a skier who falls down in the water, a couple of flops before you slow down enough to sink in. We cartwheeled a couple of times and then went into the trees. There was no fire. We had a full load of fuel on, so when I came to, I could hear the engine, the turbine, running down. On the way down we did shut everything off. Killed the battery, shut the fuel, you know, we followed the procedure of a shut down just before you're going to crash. And I remember coming to, the engine was winding down, and I was trying to figure out where I was at. The roof had caved in to the top of my seat, so I was bent over and basically my chest was on my lap. The floor was caved in, so I was in a fairly tight ball. Couldn't get to the buckle because the way I was bent over, that was buried inside and there was no way I could get my hand in to undo the buckle. But the Boy Scout troop I was in back home, before I left they had given me a knife, just about a five and half inch blade, but just something to, you know — I had that in my boot and I was able to get that out and cut the seatbelt. It's still there someplace. I set it down and I just never saw it again. I found a hole that I could get my helmet through, my head. Fuel was coming down — we were on our nose, vertically, pretty much on our nose. Walt was up slope I was down slope. So where he was literally buried in the mountain, I had about 6 or 7 inches open space, and I used that to crawl out. Fuel was running down over us, which gives you some more incentive. In a combat Huey with the armor plated seats, they weigh 450 pounds. To offset that weight, the battery is put in the tail boom. So since we shut the battery off, there was no electricity in front, so all that fuel running down through there didn't have anything to ignite it. And the engine was up in the air. It just was so that the fuel ran away from anything that could ignite it, which is one of the lucky things. We crawled out and — the memory of that is different. We wrote that story over a period of several months, and learned to accept the fact that Ned, the door gunner, George, and Walt and mine's memory was different, but to each one of us it was accurate. So we just accepted that. What anybody said that they thought had happened to them we said, "Okay, that's the truth," even though we might disagree with them. And what we said, we were absolutely positive that's what happened to us, so that was the truth. We didn't try to convince each other different, which wouldn't have worked anyway. Your memory is your memory. It's

as vivid as it — and it still is.

Sigler: So you were able to get yourself out of the aircraft?

White: Correct. I crawled out. It was on its nose but I could crawl next to the aircraft. We were on a 60 degree slope so it was extremely steep. The tail boom had broken off and come around so it was laying next to the aircraft. The transmission had come forward and the roof had caved in. I got to where the people we were carrying, the passenger area, and started looking for anybody to see about what shape they were in. Ned came crawling out from around on the crew chief's side. He was pretty beat up. Both of us were in better shape than the rest of them. George, the door gunner, we had argued with him that morning about wearing his chest protector — chicken plate we called it — and it wasn't Walt's nature but Walt finally got upset at him enough to just say, "This is a direct order! You will wear that chicken plate!" Well, George was in the aircraft, and he was unconscious when we got to him, but he had about a three inch branch pressing that chicken plate, and it was bowed about six inches, so there was enough strength in that branch it had just gone through him if he didn't have that on. And that was holding him pinned in the aircraft. And as he was starting to come to, we were able to break the branch and get it off of him, get him out of the aircraft. Up behind us, behind the aircraft on the hill was a large teak tree with huge roots, so we took him up there. He had been hit several times. That's when we knew we had been hit by AK-47, because we took his arm and squeezed it and what's left of an armor piercing round — it's got a carbon core and it's got brass on the outside — well, the carbon core came out of his arm. Evidently the round had gone through the aircraft and stripped off; the only thing left was that carbon steel core. So that was like, we just pushed on that and that came out of his arm. So we knew what that was. There was other evidence of the .51s and the 12.7 [??] rounds hitting the aircraft all over. We didn't have anybody that we could find that'd been hit by bullets except George and Ned. The colonel we had on board, he was pinned under the left side of the aircraft; there wasn't much — I looked at him, he was unconscious. I could see his legs back up underneath the aircraft. There was nothing I could do for him at that point. I started looking for Walt. With the aircraft on its nose, the roof caved in, instead of having room to stand up, it was literally — I guess instead of five and half feet it was closer to four foot. And I heard him say, "Get off my back." Well, I was standing on the back of his seat without knowing it, because everything we had in there had gone forward — the tool box — everything that was loose was in the front. Those 400-pound seats you can't move. We couldn't get that off of him. I was able to find his face, I dug the dirt away from his face. He had tree limbs through his nose, much like all the old movies, with the cannibals with the bones? That was through his nose, so I removed that to kinda clear up some breathing space. I don't know if I should have or not, but that was all I could do for him. I couldn't do much else for him. To his right, to the right of the aircraft, the RTO, the Radio Operator that was there for the colonel — he didn't have — none of them had their seatbelts on. He came forward — his impact on the side of the aircraft — when I looked at him, he was curled up, his chin was in his crotch, his face was coming backwards, like if you just rolled somebody up in a ball and you were looking at their buttocks side, his chin was there and his face was there. And he looked at me and he said, "I can't breathe." And I said, "No shit." I said, "You're really screwed up here." So I

straightened him out, and as I straightened him out, I rolled him over and I could see his face, and his impact, he'd gone between my seat and the bulkhead of the aircraft, and there's only about an inch there. He caved in the bulkhead with his head, which he had removed part of his ears, most of his nose, and then all the fine cuts on his face started bleeding. And I stretched him out, cleaned his airway, and again there was nothing I could do for him. I looked at him, we didn't have any – I hadn't found a first aid kit, anything yet, and at the rate he was bleeding, he looked at me again and said, "I can't breathe" and I just told him to relax, and he passed out, which probably let him start breathing, because he survived. Everybody survived.

Sigler: Everybody in the aircraft?

White: Yep. I don't know whether some of them are walking today, because they didn't look like they should be, but we didn't have any fatalities on board the aircraft. I went back outside. There was a lieutenant inside and we took him out. I went back inside because we were missing somebody. We were missing the OF, I couldn't find him, and I finally heard him, and I went down slope away from the aircraft and he was completely wrapped in branches. Just absolutely cocooned in branches, small branches. He had obviously left the aircraft as we hit the trees. And he came through the trees by himself, and wrapped in branches and vines or whatever, but he was completely cocooned. I pulled the branches back so I could see his face, he opened his eyes and he says, "I can't move." I don't know if he had a broken back or if the branches were just restricting his movement, but I told him, I said, "I'm not going to try to get you out of this tangle, because I don't know what shape you're in, we'll save that for the medics. Just lay here and —." I said, "Are you in pain, I can't see any bleeding, I can't see anything." So I said, "You just lay here." He did. He didn't have a choice. At that point I went back up the hill to where Ned and George were, talked to them to see how they were doing. They were starting to feel their wounds – the shock's wearing off, they were starting to feel the pain, the bruises. I realized my knees were all messed up. I cut open my uniform with — I guess I still had that knife. I cut open the uniform with that knife, and my knees – and my left knee in particular was completely laid open, sideways, like a book. So I put it back, we had found a first aid kit, I pulled one of the bandages out, tied it around my leg, tied the knee back. I think I heard the colonel at that point. I tried to get to him but he was soaked in fuel, and in a lot of pain, if you get it on your skin it's extremely painful. Walt was covered in it also. It's extremely painful, it leaves blisters, it burns. Even without a fire, it gets in your skin, and it — if you want to experience it, just take some Zippo lighter fluid and put it on your leg in a small spot and just leave it there. Trying to get to him – he had a weapon, and every time you would try to get to him, he would shoot. His left shoulder was completely dislocated, his leg was under the aircraft, and he had this fuel on him, so he was in a lot of pain, and he couldn't see. The fuel had blinded him, he couldn't see. So if it made a noise, he'd shoot at it. So we left him alone and he finally ran out of ammo, the clip that he had went empty. We were able to look for weapons ourselves. All of them were broken, they were broken in half. On the way down, Ned had pulled the pin on his M-60 and thrown it overboard because that's what they train them to do. If you hit on that side of the aircraft, the gun and the gun mount bends back in and pins you and kills you with its own impact, so you drop the whole thing off. At the time I didn't understand that; when he told

me he threw the gun away, I got all upset because all we had was a .45. When we searched all our weapons, everything was broken except for a .45. So we had that. The colonel's gun, it was out of ammo and it wasn't useable to us, it wasn't something you could take from him. The radios we had on board, aircraft radios, were gone, but the colonel's radios were in a box, he had about six radios, and they were all over the place. I dragged them over, set them up — all the “push to talk” — the microphones — push to talk part — was smashed. There was one radio that had a head set left on it, and I was able to listen to part of the conversation. I could hear the 4-deuce team talking up on the mountain, but I couldn't hear who they were talking to, because FM radios —

End side A

Sigler: Okay, you're listening to the mortar team up on the —

White: Yeah. I was listening to them on the radio, and whoever they were talking to, they told them “there are no survivors,” because of the way they'd seen us go in. And I thought about that just for a second. And we always carried a case of smoke with us. So thinking that I would make everybody feel better if they got involved in a rescue, I passed out smoke to everybody that could. I think there was four of us — the lieutenant that was inside, George, Ned, and myself. Everybody else was too messed up. And I said, “Throw it in different directions, away from the aircraft.” Because it will start a fire. “Throw it away from the aircraft.” So we threw the smoke — purples, yellows, greens — and as the smoke started coming up through the trees, we started drawing a lot of fire. They didn't know exactly where we were. I didn't realize it, but without any wind down in that jungle, the smoke just really doesn't move. It slowly drifted up to where the 4-deuce team saw the smoke and advised people that there was somebody alive on the ground because they were getting smoke. But it told everybody where we were at. We're drawing 12.7 and AK-47 fire through the trees. They can't quite pinpoint us, but it was close enough that it got everybody back into the roots of the teak tree. They couldn't get the guns down, the angle on the hill where we were and where they were, they could not quite shoot the ground; they were going through the trees, but they couldn't quite get it low enough to hit us. Don't know why, but that was the way it was. Because they never did quite get rounds into the ground. We had a lot of tree limbs and leaves and stuff coming down, but nothing was really hitting any of us. It's scary, but we realized after a bit that that was the case. For whatever the reason was, they couldn't quite — and they still didn't know exactly where we were. Two things were happening while we were doing that. We had put out a Mayday call. One of the Casper ships heard that. He was picking up a major and a colonel, and he told them that they had a ship down, that he had to go. The major said, “No, this is the colonel's ship,” at which point the crew chief grabbed the major and threw him out of the aircraft. I guess they straightened that out later, because you don't usually do that to majors. And they took off. They came out and they were — I think they were the first ones to find us. He said they found us because part of the rotor blade was on top of the trees. The smoke would have dissipated by then, if we had even used the smoke, I don't know the time period there. I don't know whether that was before or after the smoke, or if that's who they were talking to that there was no

survivors, of the 4-deuce team. He said he found us by the rotor that was on top of the trees. He remembers coming to a hover, looking down, and seeing somebody running up slope, which would have been probably me going back to check on Ned and George. I was the only one walking around, so that was the only one it could have been.

Sigler: Yeah, even with your knee in the mess it was in.

White: Yeah. Well, it wasn't bothering me yet. It hurt, the back of the knee hurt a lot, the front hurt, but it wasn't bleeding, you know, like the shock was still there enough that I wasn't losing a lot of blood, either. So I didn't notice it at that point. He couldn't stay there, though. He couldn't find a way to come down to us; he didn't have any rappelling gear on board. He was getting hit with several rounds and because of that he was losing his hydraulics, so if he didn't leave, then he would have joined us. So he left, landed on a small LZ called Pony, a fire base, but he had to set the operation out there, there was nothing he could do about that. That was Mr. Kahila, Larry Kahila. And he was real good friends with Walt. In fact, talking to him later, that really disturbed him that there was nothing he could do. His radio calls – our smoke, his radio calls – turned the whole operation from one where nobody survived and it would be a recovery to search and rescue. It changed the whole scheme of the operation. And that we had a battalion commander on the ground with us, and we had all the operation maps, we had everything with us. So it became a higher priority, maybe, than if nobody had survived.

The first aircraft that came in was a Ghost Rider out of Pleiku, and he was just on his way to Qui Nhon. Heard the Mayday call when he was —

Sigler: Ghost Rider, what was that?

White: That was their call sign.

Sigler: Oh, okay.

White: They were another 1st Aviation brigade – unit. The Ghost Riders, they flew out of Pleiku, they flew a lot of special Ops. So they were on their way back to Qui Nhon, just on a ferry run to pick up equipment, et cetera. And over Ah Khe pass, which was probably, I don't know, an hour from where — 45 minutes to an hour, he'd heard our Mayday call, knew the general area and he flew up there. He never got radio contact with anybody, they didn't know he was in the area, he was on guard, calling on guard, trying to get contact, but he didn't have the frequencies for the units we were with. The first thing we knew that he was there was probably after 45 minutes to an hour. I had no track of time at that point, but from everything that went on, I guess it would have been at least that. And from the time it would've took him to fly north and find us, it would have at least been that. We heard him coming to a hover, and I could see him up there. And he found a old bomb hole down below us, down slope I'd say 30 yards or 40 yards, and he started hovering down that. And as he hovered down that, he had to cut his way through the tree limbs. The main blades were cutting two and three inch tree limbs, which is a hell of a noise let alone underneath, it was like an inside of a lawnmower. We all did it once in a

while, but only if you really had to, because it messed the blades up. The leading edge of the rotor blades have a large titanium leading edge, but the core of the blades, the rest of it, is honeycombed aluminum. So that leading edge could cut that stuff, but if you had too much pitch, then you're tearing up the back of the blades.

I talked to Ned and George. George was seriously injured, he was in no shape to move, and I told Ned, I says, "Somebody has to get on that helicopter and tell him what we have here. We have to tell him that we need a fireman or a tool the firemen have, which is a radial saw they use to cut people out of air wrecks – they are non-sparking blades —. And I said, "That's the only way we're going to get Walt out. He's still in there." I said, "The only way we can get him out is with the fireman tool, that saw." Ned advised me that he thought he had broken his leg, couldn't do it. Nobody else could do it, so I sat there – and they always teach you never to leave, you know? As an officer, you're the last man out. But nobody else was physically able to do it, and somebody had to get the word out – what we had, how many we had on the ground, what their injuries were, and what kind of help we needed. So I went down to the aircraft. He couldn't land; he was holding a hover over the bomb crater. There was a tree that had fallen down – about eight inches in diameter – so I went out on the tree and I could reach up to his skids. I'm six foot, so by the time I put my arms up, I'm reaching probably eight foot. That's as close as I could get to him. And I felt something, and Ned was crawling out on the tree with me. So he came out with me; he got underneath me and boosted me up. They had undone their seatbelts, hooked all the seatbelts together which made a rope – I grabbed that, they got me up on the skid, pulled me up into the aircraft. Then they dropped the seatbelts down to Ned, pulled him up, got him inside, and then he started back up through the trees to cut his way back out.

Sigler: Ned was the gunner, right?

White: Crew chief. As we cleared the trees, we were being shot again at with AK-47s, -51s. He was losing his hydraulics. He took off; I stood up behind him and I started yelling at him what we needed. And he got really upset at me, because he was really busy at that point, so I waited a bit until he got altitude and then I started over again, talking to him. And the way to you talk in the helicopter, unlike a movie, you can't even scream at people and get them to hear you. So for him to hear me, he has to bend his microphone over to where I can talk in the microphone.

And he pulls his switch so I'm really talking – I was talking to his pilot, who bent the microphone over so they could hear what I was saying. Told him what we needed, how many were on the ground, their conditions, and we needed that cutting tool for Walt. I'd seen it in a training film; I knew the Air Force had them. And I said the Air Force is at Phu Cat, they're about an hour away; if we can pick one up and bring one in or they can bring one in, that's the only thing that's going to get Walt out. So he made that radio call to Phu Cat which started their rescue operations – they flew Pedros. Are you familiar with the Pedro? Pedro is a square helicopter, the back door is open so they can put winches there and do jungle extraction. They're square boxes – they're twin blade helicopters, so that the blades mesh with each other as they go around. And they don't have a tail rotor. It makes – with those two blades, one turning one way, one the other —. They're an extremely stable platform, and they're perfect for what

they do, which is air rescue, you know? They scrambled. They got a tech sergeant who with his rank hadn't been in the field for quite a while, but he was available, he knew what we needed, he'd ben trained on the cutting tool, so he got in, they brought him out. They had three Pedros involved. The first Pedro that came out with the jungle penetrator to see what was going on – they took so much fire they had to return. I didn't know until this year at our reunion that the major flying that Pedro was killed that day. We didn't think we lost anybody, but he had been shot through the bottom, up through his torso. But he flew back and he landed in Phu Cat, and they said when he landed the aircraft didn't do anything, but he died after he landed. So it just sat there in idle. And they went out to see how come he wasn't doing anything, and he was dead. He only had one other crew with him, which was the SAR in back who does the rescue. And he didn't really know what was going on either. The next Pedro that came out brought out a tech sergeant (I'm trying to remember his name – he comes to our reunions. I'd have to look that up to get his name). He came out with one other fireman. They came down on the jungle penetrator. They rode it down to the wreck, and they proceeded to get people out, line them up. The Army came in with one Huey, several troop on board; they repelled down but they didn't have repelling gloves and stuff, they just slid the ropes down, so they ended up with burned hands. But they set up security around the downed aircraft. And it was the rest of the day, the Pedros coming back and forth, lifting people out of the wreck. Walt was the last one; Walt was there over ten hours. The whole operation took over ten hours. We went down at ten in the morning, roughly ten, and it was getting dark. There was a flight surgeon on the ground. Our flight surgeon, the doctor, the general had told him not to go, but he knew all of us. So he went out with a couple guys from Casper, and they landed way down the hill and walked their way up. Why they didn't run in to NVA, I don't know. They walked and they followed the trail up, and they were there, so he was able to give Walt morphine injections and treat what he could. They said that they would probably have to remove Walt's leg to get him out, unless they did something real quick, and that's the point the sergeant took the saw he had and just started cutting. And he removed that armor plate seat very quickly.

Sigler: What kind of equipment was he using?

White: It's a saw, it's a radial saw. It's powered by a small Briggs and Stratton engine. It has a special blade on it that doesn't spark, so in a situation of a crash it doesn't spark, it doesn't cause a fire. That's what they were worried about with it, but he knew it wouldn't. So they were trying every other means and finally – there was captains and stuff there, a doctor, and we tried other ways. Finally he stepped in and just used it, because he said it was better than seeing him lose his legs. So they were able to remove the armor seat, get that out of the way. They placed Walt on a jungle penetrator, took him up to the aircraft, and the rescue operator up in the aircraft as they flew Walt back kept beating on his leg that was injured, to keep him awake. I had already been taken back to Phu Cat, from there evacuated on to the hospital at Qui Nhon.

Sigler: One question, can they rig a litter to the jungle penetrator?

White: No. It comes down, it's shaped like a bullet. It has four arms that open up and you have to sit on it, and I imagine they had to set Walt on it, they had to strap him to it. And I don't know if the doctor rode up with him or not. That's never been clear. The doctor has since died of a heart attack. I was able to locate his family in the eastern part of the US, in Maine, I believe it was, but he had already passed.

Sigler: I knew, you know, basically, what the jungle penetrator was, but I, you know, how you get a person that badly hurt out on it —

White: You just strap him to it. Set him on it and strap him to it, maybe somebody rides up with him. I'm not clear, but that's the only way that thing works. It would have been very painful for Walt going up that, except he probably had enough morphine in him at that point he may not have known. But they got them all out. The last extraction, as the 173rd soldier who was there on security was being taken out, as he reached the back of the Pedro, the cable for the jungle extractor broke. They don't normally break, so the best assumption is they were being shot at and a bullet cut it. But anyway, he grabbed ahold of the ship, the co-pilot got out, came around and held onto him; they flew over to — so he wouldn't fall because the trees are about 100 foot high — they were putting out a 100 foot cable every time they brought somebody up. They flew over to where that 4-deuce team was, the mortar team, and they couldn't get him in the aircraft but they could set him down there. So they set him there and he was extracted from there the next morning by an army helicopter; they had to leave him. They went back to the wreck site. They could not get the two guys that were left, which were Air Force technicians. That's all that was left was those two firemen that came in to save Walt with that cutting tool. They couldn't get them out. So they told them they had to stay, find a place and hide, that they'd be back in the morning for him. So—

Sigler: What, they were running out of fuel?

White: They were out of fuel, they had no more cable to put down —. They had no way to get to them. So they said, "Find some place and hide, we'll be back in the morning." So in talking to them, they crawled up the hill to that teak tree trunks that I'd talked about earlier, got down in the roots and hid. And as it got dark, they could hear the NVA coming in all around. He said every bug that crawled through the leaves they thought was an NVA. He was afraid to open his eyes because, you know. He said the last training — he went through Marine basic training, but then changed from the Marines to the Air Force. So he said he really had very little training for this. They had one .38 caliber pistol between them, that was it. So they hid in those trunks. They could hear the NVA come in, going through the aircraft, digging stuff, looking for whatever they could find. And he said it was about two in the morning — he had his emergency radio and the radio came on and told him that he was going to have to use his strobe light. And he said, "If I use my strobe light, we're dead, they'll shoot us." And they said, "If you don't use that, we can't find you and we'll have to leave you again. So you have to turn on your strobe light." So him and the other guy kinda huddled together, he aimed it up, flashed the strobe light, and he said as he flashed the strobe light, everything around him exploded. The second they

knew where he was, they destroyed everything else. With gunships, gunfire. He said he always wondered what it was like when he watched the gunships practicing on the mountain, shooting rockets, what it was like. But he said he'll never ask that question again, because they were completely surrounded. Hiding in the tree, the shrapnel was hitting the tree that they were hiding in – it was that close. And they destroyed the aircraft that we crashed – they just destroyed everything. And then he said it was the Jolly Green, which is the huge 53 — the Sikorsky – the really big one. All of a sudden all his landing lights came on, and the fire continued, that suppressive fire continued all around them. The jungle penetrator came down, they both got on it, up and into the Jolly Green and they were gone. Which is quite a story. Again, I didn't know — 30 or 35 years later, we started talking and got all this information. That's what nice, I guess — our reunions – each reunion we sit down and we talk a little more and some guy – a little bit of memory comes out. And I carried a lot of guilt on that. And when I first met Walt, I saw him in Japan in a hospital. I'd gone in and gone through a leg operation. They were questioning whether they would just bend my leg and fuse it or — but the doctor there was able to not do that, save it, which I'm forever grateful. All I've got now is arthritis. But Walt was in — we had seven hospitals in Japan, and in '68 with everything that was going in, Tet, and then later, the gyms were full, the hallways were full, all of them were pretty full. After, I guess, 40 days, they released me to where I could go visit Walt. And I found out where he was at, took a local train, went over there, went up to see him and he was — as you might expect, he had the pins through the leg, he was strapped up, you know, arms and legs, he lost about 50% of the flesh in his left leg. So they were basically putting him back together. And he was upset at me – he was upset when he first saw me because I was walking. It was a reaction. We talked for a little bit about what each other knew about what had happened afterwards, and there wasn't a lot came out of us as far as remembering what happened. But after that I met him in Texas at a reunion for Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association. It was like the thirteenth or fourteenth reunion, and I didn't know the reunions were going on until I got on the internet. I bought a computer and got on the internet. I live up in Canada, I'm completely out of touch with everything that's going on. And for all those years I just never brought it up, never did anything, didn't go looking for anybody or anything. But I got the internet, started finding sites, and was able to find the VHPA, the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association. They have a chat line, got on that, and saw the reunion, registered for the reunion, and then they have a list of names of people who are going to be there. Well, Walt's name was on there; he had been part of the starting of it. This was his 13th – he'd been doing it all along. So I sent an email to the organization, asked them if they would give me Walt's phone number. They would not, they said, but they would pass my phone number to him. So he called me, we talked for a little bit, and he still – he said he had a hard time remembering me. Because we knew each other, but not that well, because he had been in the south flying for the 4th Battalion, I'd been up north at English —. So I'd flown a couple times with him, and I hadn't been with the unit that long, so he really had a hard time remembering me. He spent three years getting his leg back, because they kept wanting to take it. He had gangrene in it and everything else. He spent three years in hospitals until they were able to save his leg. He married his physiotherapist. So there you go!

But at the reunions, as soon as he saw me, you know, they eyes and the face and everything, then he remembered me. So we sat and talked, and I told him that I had this guilt

that I'd been carrying all that, you know, 30 years, that I'd left them there. And he looked at me

Sigler: When you pulled out to get help?

White: Yeah. And he said if I hadn't done what I'd done, he have never made it. Nobody would have come in; it just wouldn't have happened. And he said that he carried a huge amount of guilt because of the crash. He thought he had done something wrong, he'd flown it wrong, hadn't maintained airspeed to keep us from spinning —. And then we started talking about I'd heard an explosion, he remembered a flash. Larry Kahila was there – the pilot that first found us – he was at the reunion. And he said that at the hospital when they were operating on Walt, he was there, and they took a tail fin, the fuse section of a .37 millimeter, so they were able to identify it, and they took that out of his leg. They were able to specifically identify that that was the weapon that knocked us down. There was an investigation to try to prove that Walt had flown into friendly fire – the 4-deuce mortar team – but they never fired. The cease fire was given. They were hanging fire – the round was in the tube – and that's when Walt said – when we were flying, he turned around and said, "We have to get out of here." That's when we saw what we thought was the bird. And as soon as we were hit, the lieutenant in the back was yelling, "Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire." So they never fired a round. But the army wanted some way to —

I skipped a part. Later when I was searching the aircraft looking for whatever we could find to use, I got the operations map that was on the floor of the aircraft, that was the colonel's, and when I opened it up it had all these gun emplacements marked on it. So when he told us that there was no guns, he wasn't telling us the truth. Whether he thought we wouldn't fly the mission, or what, I don't know. We would have certainly flown it different. We wouldn't have been flying around at 1,000 feet.

So I remember taking that map, and it had a lot of frequencies written on the corner of it – call signs, et cetera. I remembered taking it over – I didn't want to keep it on me – I didn't know what was going to happen — I remembered taking it over to the side, away from the aircraft, digging a hole under a rock and putting in down there and then covering it back up. I remember that, but somebody said later they found it. Whether they found another map, there probably was more than one on there, on board the aircraft. The lieutenants would have had them, too. But all that was either burned, destroyed, or recovered. But it was the fact that I could look at that and see that those gun emplacements were clearly marked on the map just —

Sigler: Was the colonel with you an artillery battalion commander, or just one of the infantry battalions?

White: He was an infantry battalion, he was an lieutenant colonel. He was 1st Battalion commander. And then the evacuation, we went through Qui Nhon to Cam Rahn Bay. I was treated in Qui Nhon then flown to Cam Rahn Bay _____[??], thank you very much, waiting on a flight to Japan, and a fellow walked by that I went to university with who chose the Air Force. I hollered at him and he came in and talked to me. Him and I left

university at the same time, but he went to the Air Force and I went to the Army. So he was flying for the Air Force; he flew cargo. He wanted to fly fighters, but he ended up flying twin engine props for resupply. Then another guy went by that I was in high school with. Joe Innes went by and at that time he was an E-7, Special Forces, and he looked at me and said, “What are you doing in here?” And I said, “_____ [??].” I asked him and he says, he’s in checking on his own people that got wounded that were in there. So he was in checking on them. Small world. I went to high school at Antioch, Illinois, and then the University of Montana, and then to meet two guys that just — I was only there three or four days before they transferred us up to Camp Zama in Japan. From _____ [??], I got out of that. If you got cleared in the right number of days, I forget the number – 90 days I think it is – you got sent back to the your unit. And I was borderline; I was down to an operation status for about 15 days, and then the flight surgeon called me in, he said, “You’re borderline.” He says, “I’m giving you a choice – if you want to go back to your unit or get stationed Stateside. And I looked at him, and I said, “So if I want to go back to the unit —?” And he says, “Then I’ll hold you for five or six days for a psychiatric examination.” And he says, “You’ll be past the 90 days and you’ll be stationed Stateside.” I asked, “Where do I go?” Because I went through basic training, basic officer flight school, Vietnam – I don’t know what’s where. And he said, “Well, you just transferred over from Hawaii. It’s a great place.” So he put the paperwork in and got me stationed in Hawaii. And I was in Hawaii with the 29th Infantry, and then I transferred over to Fort Ruger with the National Guard aviation section, which was the greatest job anybody could ask for. I had my own helicopter, and I flew inter-island to get check rides for the master air pilots.

Sigler: In Hawaii?

White: Yeah, in Hawaii. My biggest job was to fly up to Diamondhead and pick up the colonel out of Fort Ruger and fly him out to Scofield so he could play golf.

Sigler: We’re getting some strange noise, I’m going to turn the recorder off.

Sigler: Okay, so you were in the Air National Guard?

White: Yeah. I can repeat the fact that that was a good job. Flying inter-island with the local guys. I mean, it wasn’t a tourist thing, I had the responsibility to give them their check rides, to be with them on their operations. We would go to the Northshore – now it’s a hotel, but at the time it was an old abandoned World War II airstrip, and we’d set up there for the weekend, and we’d be on the beach for the weekend. And it was tough job. I was there 18 months before I get sent back to Vietnam.

[some non-relevant conversation not transcribed]

Sigler: So you were there how many months, did you say?

White: 18

Sigler: 18. And then back to Vietnam.

White: Yeah, being a National Guard advisor, I was told that I had to be both fixed wing and rotary wing qualified. I was a captain in a major slot, so they didn't worry about that so much. But I was not able to complete all my duties which was the fixed wing check rides. So they put me in for flight school to go back and get fixed wing rated with the army, and that came back and they said I had to be at least if not regular army, I had to be (now what's the term – there's reserve, there was –) indefinite status. They had me as a reserve officer, so I had to put paperwork in to be indefinite. That's different than regular army but still it was more of a firm contract with them. So I put the paperwork in, I got the indefinite status. Then I applied back for flight school. They came back and they said they had no slots open for National Guard training, however, I could go to fixed wing school with Vietnam en route. If I returned to Vietnam, they would send me to fixed wing school en route. So I thought about it (I was married at the time), talked to my wife, and I said, "What do you think?" I said, "At least with fixed wing I'm at 10,000 feet flying some general from air base to air base." And I said, "It's a year, but it'll be a hell of a lot safer." And she didn't like it either way. But I was running out of choices, because my colonel called me and he said, "You're probably going to go anyway." He said your rotation on pilots back to Vietnam is 18 months to 24 months. So I thought, "Well, if I do it this way, I can get fixed wing en route." So I volunteered for Vietnam, fixed wing school en route. And it wasn't four days later or a week later that I got notified, the telex came back and said that they still didn't have slots open in fixed wing school, but they accepted my volunteer for Vietnam and I left in 30 days.

I was not happy. Went back to Vietnam, rotary wing, and ended up — it was my choice where I wanted to go because it was second tour, so I went back up to 2nd Corps. I flew 61st Assault, which flew support for the 173rd. So I was back still flying for 173rd. We also flew for the 22nd ARVN Infantry Division and for the Korean — the Tigers were there. So we had different units that we supported but basically most of it was the 173rd.

Sigler: What did they have you flying now?

White: Huey. Back to flying slicks again. Yeah. There's a strange story about that. When I got in country, I just told them where I wanted to go, I didn't say what unit. I didn't know what units were up there, anyway. And I had orders from Tan Son Nhut to go North to Qui Nhon and report to this 717th Air Cav. And you couldn't get north; every plane was taken. I don't know if you remember, but they were invading Cambodia at the time. So that mission was going on. I didn't know that mission was going on, but I couldn't buy an airplane, I couldn't buy a seat. And I finally went to the airport and just hung around, found a C-130 going north that said he would drop me at Qui Nhon, and it was full of ARVN soldiers. So I crawled in and sat with them. And they like to snuggle, so I had two of them sleeping on either side of me, cuddled up on the way north. We landed at Qui Nhon, I got off, found out where the 717th was, walked over there, reported in. They were surprised to see me. One, I was two days late, and

they didn't think they'd see me for another two or three days. But I reported in; two days late was probably the key to what happened after that. I caught a Huey out to An Son, which is Lane Airfield. That's where the 61st was, it was where the 717th squadron commander was, and C Troop, 717th is who I was supposed to report to.

I reported to Andrew, the troop commander, and he looked at me and he said he didn't want me. And I said, "Do you mind if I ask why?" And he said, "Oh, nothing to do with you." He says, "I got orders. We're leaving at first light going north." And he says "My only orders are north. I don't know how far north, I don't know if we're going all the way to Hanoi, I don't know." He says, "But I don't want a new guy in the unit when I'm doing this." And he says, "With your rank and time in grade —" (because by that time I was a captain) – he said that I would be a blue team commander. I don't know if you know what a blue team is. In a cav troop, they fly the helicopters but they have what's called a blue team, which is a platoon of infantry. And when you're the blue team commander, you fly out in a lead ship and as everybody lands, you jump out and you stay with them. You're the platoon commander on the ground, and that's usually a fairly senior slot. So he said he didn't want to try to break me into that. And I told him, I said, "Date rank doesn't bother me too much, I'm reserve. I'm not looking at this forever as a career." So I said, "I could care less. I just like to fly" And he said, "No. That wouldn't work." And he said, "Go down to the flight line, talk to the guys, see what's going on, come back and see me." Well, I went down to the flight line and I talked to a couple of guys. They're all busy, they're loading every helicopter they can get, and there was a two 1/2 ton truck sitting there, and they loaded two helicopters with just body bags. I looked at that and I went back up and I says, "Major, I can see what you're talking about." And I said, "What would you like me to do?" And he says, "Report back to Headquarters, they'll get another job for you." [laughs] So I didn't go on Lom Son, what was it? Lom San – '70 - '71? That was the year? Anyway, I did not go on that. And when that unit came back, they came with two of the helicopters they originally went with, everything else had been replaced. And the blue team leader that I would have replaced was shot down and wounded within a week of being there. I was fortunate.

I reported, then they put me into the 61st Assault. I was 2nd Platoon commander, and that was a good job. It was still in country, it was still flying, and we had a lot of enemy contact, but it was still better than where they went.

Sigler: So you spent a full year with the —?

White: I was there a year this time, but I was only the platoon's commander for six months. They tend to rotate people out. You'd get in for six months and then – they had so many officers trying to — because that was the only war they had, so for some of the officers who were career officers, to get promotions they had to have combat command time. They rotated people through pretty — so they rotated me out as 2nd Platoon commander and they put me in the S-4, which is logistics with the squadron headquarters. So I was back with the 717th as squadron assistant S-4 and moving beams and bullets and riding convoys, and doing everything but flying.

Sigler: [laughs] Yeah. So that's how you ended your last —

White: Pretty much. I finished there and was stationed at Fort Carson with the 4th Infantry Mechanized. Again, I was told for career movement I needed to get back into the infantry, so I reported in there. The colonel found out that I could fly —

Sigler: I was going to say, did you report in as a flight officer, or —?

White: No, I reported in to the 4th Brigade, 4th Infantry, and the colonel there is a full colonel, the brigade commander, and they got all your records. And he asked me if I still had flight status, and I said, "Yes, sir.." And he said, "How do you keep yourself current?" And I said, "Well, four hours a month, I just —." And he said, "Is it hard for you to get an aircraft?" And I said, "No, I just call them up, tell them I got a free afternoon and they arrange an aircraft." And he said, "You don't realize the paperwork I have to put through for aircraft." So he put me into a staff position, into the S-2, Intelligence, and any time he wanted to fly someplace he just told me to get a helicopter, and I became his personal pilot. We did a lot of downrange flying every time we had units in the field. That was fine; I enjoyed it; I didn't care. I was able to do my S-2 duties and stuff — besides just flying circles around and getting time in, I had a reason to get a helicopter and fly somebody someplace, and, you know, still land in the small landing zones and pretty much do what I used to do.

Sigler: Without getting shot at.

White: Without getting shot at, correct.

Sigler: So, how much longer did you stay in the army?

White: I was caught in the rift. I guess it was '73 when I got out. So it wasn't much longer. They went through the rift and the first group to go, I think, was when I was in Hawaii. They let a whole bunch go for cause. They got rid of a bunch that way. Then they got rid of another bunch, and the final bunch was about 2,200 captains and majors and lieutenants that were reserve officers that they just said, "You can go home now." A friend of mine was regular army, hated it, wanted out, wanted out. And I could have stayed, I rather enjoyed it. And so him and I went to see the commander, and he sent us up to see the general. And we asked why can't we trade, we're both pilots — one's armor, one's infantry — not a big deal that way. And the general says, "nothing to do with it." He said there's a computer up there regurgitating numbers, counting medals, and it's just that's the way it is. And he says regular army's not getting out, the reserves are getting out. So the friend of mine spent the next year putting in his resignation papers until they finally took him. We couldn't figure it out. If one wants to stay and one wants to go, would you rather have a happy guy? [laughs]

Sigler: Absolutely. Okay, anything else we should talk about while we're recording here?

White: Right off hand, I think that's got the peaks of it. Obviously a lot of things happened during that period of time but they're, you know, small things in my minds, so — . A lot happened when I was with the 61st that could take another hour.

Sigler: Well, since we're focusing on the Casper Platoon, let's end this one here. Let me turn it off.

[recording resumed]

Sigler: Okay, while we were offline we were talking a little bit about the search and rescue operation you were in the middle of. You started to tell me some more information about that.

White: Yeah, just to point out that – and it's important to note that all the Air Force crews, flight crews and the technicians that were put on the ground, the rescue technicians, all of them received Silver Stars from the Air Force for their effort – which is an extremely high medal and the Air Force is very judicious on who gets those medals. And the other thing is that for the Pedro unit, the SAR unit, that's the largest – and still is – the largest rescue operation that they've ever done. BAT 21 was a major rescue, but that was with the Jolly Greens, that was a different level. So I think that's something to be remembered in that.

Sigler: I definitely think so. Okay.

End