

Interviewee: Wilkofsky, John
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good morning, Mr. Wilkofsky. You understand that this interview is being recorded?

Wilkofsky: Yes.

Sigler: Okay. We're gonna talk about your experiences with the Casper aviation platoon of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Why don't we start with, before you got into the service how you got in and how you got into the Casper platoon?

Wilkofsky: Well, I was a senior in high school, had no idea or direction what I was gonna go in when I graduated. I joined the military on the delayed enlistment program. I did change my mind from the Marines to the Army because my next door neighbor was the first person in our town to be killed in Vietnam. This is back in '67, I believe it was. I stayed home for the summer, left for the military, went through basic AIT.

Sigler: Now, quick question, what was the delayed enlistment program?

Wilkofsky: Where you can enlist while you were in school or — I'm not sure if it was any time after school, but basically, I believe it was five or six months before you had to report for basic training or any other kind of duty. And then that time, from the time you signed from the time you reported, was taken off of your end time in the military, in other words, your three years as an enlisted person. And from there I went to basic, AIT, I heard about jump school —

Sigler: AIT, Advanced Infantry Training?

Wilkofsky: Yes. I heard about jump school and one other fellow in my artillery class said, "Hey, that sounds pretty neat, I think I'm gonna go." And well, [laughs] I thought so too. And so we signed up for jump school, went to Fort Benning, went through jump school, our 30 day leave, and then I left for Vietnam. My first tour in Vietnam was with the 3rd of the 319th Artillery, which was 105 howitzers.

Sigler: Mm-hmm. 3rd Battalion of the 319 Artillery.

Wilkofsky: Right. And I was a fire-direction specialist. In other words, I figured out how to aim the guns, since they were an indirect fire weapon. They fired a few miles away, I don't recall the exact length, but it was farther than the eye could see most times. So you needed charts,

maps, wind direction, all that. And I did that for a year. Sometimes you had to lop it in over the top of a mountain ridge where you couldn't get more of a direct fire type shot, kinda like throwing a baseball over a house. You can't throw it at the target right on the other side, you had to lob it over the top. So that's where it got a little complicated. And right around towards the end of that tour, they introduce a computer which, at the time, was about the size of the hood of a car. It was huge and it was slow; I was actually faster than the computer in the beginning, but they made new improvements on it and, of course, the computer took over. I just had a fascination whenever supplies came in or whenever they moved us, which was quite often, supporting the 173rd and especially 2nd Bat.

Sigler: 2nd Battalion?

Wilkofsky: 2nd Battalion. We moved quite often. I think it was something like 14 or 15 times during a one year tour that we had moved. And I thought helicopters were quite fascinating, and I thought it was a good way to get a good overall picture of what was going on in Vietnam. Another reason was I felt I hadn't done enough as a soldier in Vietnam, doing what I was doing. I mean, I was in a bunker most of the time. We pulled guard duty. Yes, we were up in the central highlands for almost a full year. We very seldom saw a rear area base, but I still felt I didn't do enough, especially thinking about my next door neighbor, when he was killed. And I thought helicopters were the way to go. I put in a request for another tour and requested Casper, and with the unpopularity of the Vietnam war, they didn't turn down any (or very many) requests for extensions. So I got it.

Sigler: The 319th, 3rd Battalion, was that actually part of the brigade or in direct support of it?

Wilkofsky: I was assigned to the 173rd, and the 319th was a part of the 173rd. Whether they were attached or where actually a part of it, I don't know the distinction.

Sigler: I believe they were a part.

Wilkofsky: In fact, I think they still are, even with the reinstatement of the brigade.

Sigler: So you requested an extension in Vietnam and asked for the Casper Platoon and got both of those.

Wilkofsky: Yes. Well, it was contingent that I get Casper. If I didn't get Casper, I didn't want to stay. I mean, I didn't want to get thrown somewhere else.

Sigler: So did you go back to the States or—?

Wilkofsky: Once I got out of the 319th and my _____[??] date was up, which was, you know, your full time in Vietnam, I went home for my 30 day leave. I was home just a few days and everybody else was either working or in school, as far as my old neighborhood. And believe

it or not, I went back to work for I guess two weeks or so before I went back to Vietnam. Of course, I hadn't told my parents where my next station was, and I just kept on saying, "Well, I don't know, they didn't tell me yet," until the last few days, and it didn't go over very well. My parents objected very much and were quite emotional about it and very upset about it, but there was not much they could do. I don't know if I should tell you what happened when I told them. Well, what the heck. My mother actually came after me with a kitchen knife and said, "I'll kill you right here and now. I'm not gonna go through another year of this, worrying about you" and this, that, and the other. She kind of lost it there for a little bit until she could regain her senses but —

Sigler: She was pretty upset.

Wilkofsky: She was extremely upset. And I had never, ever seen her get to that level of anger and despair and just gone crazy.

Sigler: On your first tour, had you any idea that your mother was that upset about your time in Vietnam?

Wilkofsky: Not to that extent, no. I know they were concerned. There was one time when we were, oh, I'll say quite busy, and I didn't have a chance to write home. I believe – whether it was the monsoons or not, I don't remember. But I hadn't written home for what I thought was a short period of time. You have a tendency to lose track of time simply because it was a 24 hour thing. I mean, it's not like a job where you go to work nine to five. Even being on a small fire support base out in the central highlands somewhere, something came in at night – well, you know, you had to do what you had to do. Long story short is I hadn't written home and the Red Cross had got in touch with me, and the CO, and you know, "Write home, let your parents know you're okay even if it's just Hi, how are ya?" A very disturbing incident – and it was very strange, too – incident had happened while I was away during that period when I didn't write, that nobody in the neighborhood told me parents about until after they made sure that they had heard from me and they were sure I was okay (this was quite a few months later) simply for the reason that the same scenario went down when Freddie, my next door neighbor, was killed. During the period that I hadn't written home, my neighbors – this was during the day so both parents were working – a military car had driven up our driveway with two officers in it. And they sat in the car, and I didn't get the full story, whether one officer got out and went to the door or not, but they sat there a while and then they had left. And then all the neighbors were, "Oh, my gosh." Because word traveled fast. And they wanted to make sure that I was okay, and not just wait for one letter, because my buddy Freddie, when he was killed, his parents still got two or three letters after he was dead, because of the delay in mail. So they wanted to make sure.

And I imagine that put a few gray hairs on their head, and was a contributing factor to her reaction when I told her I was going back to Vietnam. And especially with the news reports they had; of course we all know about the media. I found out when I came home, because there were several incidents that had happened in Vietnam that was in my area, and I know what happened firsthand and then when I saw it on the news it was like, "What are they talking about?" It was slightly twisted, distorted, and somewhat censored. The story was very, very different than what

had actually happened. So from that point on, I always took the news with a grain of salt and made sure I got other resources to get a diversified opinion. And that's about it until I got to Casper, or until I left for Casper.

When I was ready to go back, I believe I left out of Fort Lewis, Washington, and it was on a commercial jet. It just so happened it was all new guys going on the plane, you know, bright green fatigues, the brand new baseball caps. And here I was with my faded fatigues, I had a brigade patch on each shoulder, being a second tour. And there was one other fellow who had similar fatigues as me – worn, you know, faded, a patch on each shoulder, but he had his aviation wings as long with his jump wings. And we just kind of struck up a conversation, being that we were, you know, the only two veterans going back, and everybody else was kind of like in awe and afraid to say anything to us; they didn't talk to us at all. We got into a little conversation, and he said, "Where are you going, you're in the brigade?" And I said, "Oh, a little helicopter unit called Casper, you ever hear of it?" And he said, "Yeah! That's where I've been and that's where I'm going back to." So for the next 18 hours or so, we sat in a plane and we talked a lot.

Sigler: Who was he?

Wilkofsky: His name was Rick Canning. And unfortunately, months later Rick was killed. But Rick had taken me under his wing, so to speak, once we got to Casper, and kinda showed me the ropes, showed me around, taught me a few things, because I had explained to him I never flew before, especially on a helicopter. I had flown in planes before, but not in a helicopter, aside from going out to my — well, no let me correct that — when we moved from fire base to fire base, the first year we flew in helicopters all the time. But I had never flown as a crew member. So he kinda filled me in on a lot of things, refreshed my memory on the guns, just told me a few little things to look out for, different little things you learn with experience. Rick was going on his third tour. And he actually let me fly his Loach as a gunner, I believe it was twice. They called themselves "Inferno." They were the Loaches with the mini-gun and the -60 in the back. That was quite different from flying Hueys. It was quite an experience.

Sigler: Your assignment was as a gunner?

Wilkofsky: I was a gunner, I was put on the general's ship when I first arrived. After a few days a slot came open and then they put me on as a gunner on the general's ship to kinda break me in, being that the general's ship was assigned limited duties. Basically flying him around and/or one of his staff and it was – how can I put it? A bit safer?

Sigler: A bit less hazardous.

Wilkofsky: Less hazardous, thank you – to break somebody in on. You flew higher altitudes, you didn't go into hot LZs, things like that. You didn't do LRP teams. And I was only on that about two weeks.

Sigler: Who was the brigade commander at that point, do you remember?

Wilkofsky: Oh, gosh. You know, I don't remember. That's where my memory slips. Yeah, that was in – I gotta think now, was that in April? That was about April of '69. So whoever was assigned then, I don't recall.

Sigler: So you were there for a couple of weeks at least.

Wilkofsky: I was on that ship just for about two, two and a half weeks. And then there was another ship where the gunner had taken a round up through the bottom of the ship and got shot in the butt. It wasn't a serious wound but it was serious enough that he had to be hospitalized. And I guess he went to Japan for surgery or whatever they did there. He did come back, but in the mean time, I mean, they had to fill the slot right away, so they put me. That was Casper 17097, or Casper 097 as we, you know, that was our call sign at the time. And that's where I stayed until the end of my tour. I was on that ship and I just stuck with it and —

Sigler: So basically, almost 10 months.

Wilkofsky: Yeah, on the same helicopter, same crew chief. Different pilots; they rotated, but my crew chief and I became quite close. You get to a point where you know what the other guy is thinking. You know how to react to the different situations you ran into, you communicated well, you did everything together, you tried to work together as a team flying and on the ground as far as maintenance and taking care of the helicopter. In fact, we even went on R&R together. We got lucky because the chopper was in for maintenance and the CO, Stan Streicher, I guess had approved it and said, "Well, the chopper's in for maintenance, there's no point in having you guys hang around here. You want R&R, do it." So we went to Thailand together. So that was quite unique and quite nice.

Sigler: Yeah, you're the first person I've talked to who got that kind of a break.

Wilkofsky: Yeah, we were quite lucky in that.

Sigler: Basically what were the duties of the gunner on board Hueys?

Wilkofsky: Well, you maintained the armament system. When I first got on 097, basically it was two M-60 machine guns. They had to be cleaned every day, obviously gone over and make sure everything is in tip-top shape, ammo. And then the gunner also helped maintain the helicopters as far as windshields, the low bubble – in other words, the bubble at the pilots' feet so they can see when they're coming down – the inferior of the helicopter, the exterior of the helicopter to a point, and then helping the crew chief if he needed anything or needed a hand here and there, tying down the blades when you landed, if you landed for any length of time and shut the helicopter down. And that was pretty much it as far as the general duties of a gunner, but my duties became a little more involved later on because, well, I guess it was like seven or eight months into the tour, the Army had come up with an idea of trying to implement night vision. The end result was that 097 became the first successful night vision – what they called Nighthawk helicopter – in Vietnam. It was written about in *Vietnam* magazine this past year.

They had several helicopters like that in Vietnam on an experimental basis, and ours was the first successful one where they used an infrared scope, a big spotlight, and then we had a special aircraft .50 installed, and you had an extra man manning the infrared light and the beam light. Then of course, the crew chief operated the .50, but the .50 was my responsibility as far as cleaning, maintaining. But when they gave it to me, they failed to tell me that it wasn't like the ordinary .50 and instructions didn't come with it. They gave me no verbal instruction, so it was kind of a nightmare for a couple of days until I got it down to the point where we could get the thing to fire right.

Sigler: How did it differ from the regular .50, the vehicle mounted?

Wilkofsky: The barrel went in through the block of the .50. In other words, it went in through the back instead of screwing in through the front. And then setting your timing – the barrel went in through the (I can't remember the name of it now, whether I'm nervous or whatever the reason, I just can't remember it) – the main part of the body of the gun. And it went through the back, and that's how it screwed in; that's how you set your timing. Because if your timing was off, the gun wouldn't fire, it would jam on you.

Sigler: Was this an aircraft type .50, or —?

Wilkofsky: Yes, it was something they had designed for aircraft for some reason, whether it was low vibration — I know they had an extra cowling on the front over the barrel for cooling purposes, because it was probably used more, and on a more regular basis, than another .50 on the ground or on a Jeep or truck or whatever. And then we had several different types of rounds, too – not just, you know, steel jacket. We had incendiary, we had armor piercing, we had white phosphorus. It was quite a unique weapon.

Sigler: And this was on the, what? the right side of the aircraft?

Wilkofsky: Actually, as you're in the aircraft it was on the left side. Along with the infrared light and the spotlight. It was on the crew chief's side.

Sigler: Crew chief is on the left, gunner is on the right?

Wilkofsky: Correct

Sigler: So, now I read something — it was Warrant Officer Dale Morrison?

Wilkofsky: Yeah, Dale. Dale Morrison.

Sigler: Dale. Okay. I just ran into that the other day in something I was reading. So you flew with him some?

Wilkofsky: Well, he was actually the maintenance officer and the test flight pilot. So I

actually didn't fly any missions with him, but I did fly with him on the test flights. You know, when you came in for your 100-hour maintenance and they had to do a test flight. They take it up a certain number of feet, and they do certain maneuvers and this and that. I used to go on those. So that was actually the only time I flew with Dale. Dale had previous tours in Vietnam, and he was — I believe he was a Loach pilot and Huey pilot, so he had vast, vast experience. His nickname (I don't know if it was his nickname back then), but I know it's "the wizard" now. The man was a genius. He was a genius. He had an M-16 that he had — being in charge of maintenance, he had access to all the machines and everything — he had cut it down and he used to carry it in a holster; that's how small he made it. [laughs] It was quite the weapon. I mean, you squeeze it and "zip!" It was empty. So it was for emergency purposes only as a pilot. Well, he was the one who came up with designing and probably manufacturing the post and everything, and aligning everything, so that the night vision did work correctly. He was the one responsible for that.

Sigler: Lets go back to you in the Nighthawk.

Wilkofsky: Sure.

Sigler: Now, the .50 caliber, many of the machine guns, they've told me, were mounted on bungee cord.

Wilkofsky: Correct.

Sigler: And I still have trouble conceiving of that (again, being a tanker with a fixed mount). You know, the vibration on the machine gun is such that I find that hard to conceive of. Was the .50 also bungee cord mounted?

Wilkofsky: No, no. It was way too heavy. It was on a regular gun mount, as was the .60. The reason being — all the Hueys had gun mounts. Now what happened previously, I don't know. I had heard of guys using bungee cords, but the problem with that was you had completely free range and a lot of propellor blades were shot up.

Sigler: So by the time you were there, they actually used fixed mounts?

Wilkofsky: You're right. Correct. Except for the Loaches. Now the Loaches, some guys used a bungee cord, some guys didn't — they just held the .60 in their hands. Because there was no room for a gun mount and because of the range of angles that you shot, it just wasn't feasible. But on the Hueys, yes we used gun mounts.

Sigler: Okay. And so the crew chief handled the .50, you had a .60 caliber — an M-60, I'm sorry, on your side.

Wilkofsky: Correct

Sigler: And was there an additional crewman to handle the night vision and the spotlight?

Wilkofsky: Correct.

Sigler: Since that wasn't part of the normal table of organization, where did you get them, just assign them from other crews?

Wilkofsky: You'd use one of the members of Casper, and I believe we had different people at different times until we came up with a permanent person that operated it. Because everybody kinda wanted to get in on it, you know, and fly with this thing because it was quite unique and it was quite unique what we did – at least while I was there. We flew free fire zones and just looked for targets at night. So we didn't have to get permission, we flew with no chase so we had no backup or anything. And we'd look for convoys; with the infrared you could see a lot. And we looked for convoys, any movement, any little encampments, whatever. And once it was spotted, they would turn on the spotlight, of course, and communicate with everybody, "Okay the spotlight's coming on. I got a target." And the crew chief would just open fire.

Sigler: Now this was the first employment of infrared, at least with you people?

Wilkofsky: That I know of, yes.

Sigler: And that would have been what, about the end of '69, beginning of '70?

Wilkofsky: Yes.

Sigler: Well, tell me about some of those missions.

Wilkofsky: Well, it actually wasn't all that exciting for me, because I was on the other side. I never really got to see the target because of the way they circled. My biggest headache was making sure that the .50 fired correctly. I really didn't see a whole lot as a crew member being part of that because, like I said, it was the direction they would circle once they found the target. They would rely on the .50 more than they would the -60. I was just kind of a backup, you know, just in case something happened on the other side. But as I understand it, things got a little bit hairy after I left. They had done some different missions and they also changed from the .50 to a mini-gun. But that didn't last too long because the mini-gun, I guess, vibrated the helicopter so much that they had to tighten down so much on the helicopter after every mission of firing. I guess there was a big difference between firing mini-guns straight forward in the direction of flight versus firing horizontally.

Sigler: Now, the mini-gun was that Gatling gun type?

Wilkofsky: Right. Now, I never saw that. That was after I had left. The reason I heard about it after I got out was that my crew chief and I had hooked up when we both got out (he was about three months behind me), and that's the last I heard of it until I saw the writings in *Vietnam*

magazine and things on the internet. So I don't have very much —

Sigler: No personal experience with it.

Wilkofsky: No personal experience with that. I understand they got into some pretty hairy missions on that, but I wasn't a part of it. I was the first gunner, but unfortunately there just wasn't a whole lot happening when I did that, when I was flying. I think the most excitement we had was just prior to becoming Nighthawk, we did an awful lot of LRP extractions and insertions.

Sigler: Long-range Reconnaissance Patrol

Wilkofsky: Right. Four- and six-man teams. That's where we saw more action than I think anything, at least while I was there.

Sigler: Saw more action – I thought you'd want to do that rather quietly.

Wilkofsky: Well, that was the goal, but the goal wasn't always attainable. Insertions generally did go very quietly. You made them early dawn or just at dusk so you could kind of sneak in and out, and then they'd go on their way. Most of the time with small teams like that, they tried not to engage the enemy because just of numbers. But sometimes it was unavoidable, and then you'd get that call in the middle of the night, you know, "Can you come get us outta here? We're in a tight spot and we need an extraction." Well, that's when things got a little exciting, to put it mildly. You landed in a hot LZ, you got them shooting at people, people shooting at them, until the chopper showed up, and well, then the target changed to the gunners because we had the armament. So that's when things got a little bit hairy. But luckily, while I was there, nobody ever got hit on my chopper. The chopper took some rounds, but we never got hit.

Sigler: How would you even find an LZ at night?

Wilkofsky: They would give us a grid and you would kinda come in the general area. And then from there they had these mini strobe lights, and they were aim-able. In other words, you couldn't see them from the side or anything like that. And once they heard us, they'd see sometimes the beacon light on top, and they would talk us in, use the strobe if they could, if it wasn't, you know, too thick or if they had the opportunity. But it was either that mini strobe – it was like a mini flashlight size, so it wasn't very big, and / or talk us in to their position. Then of course, you had to wait till you spotted them, and usually they'd come make a mad dash for the chopper and dive on and get the hell out of there.

Sigler: [laughs] And in the meantime you were providing covering for them?

Wilkofsky: Yes, when it was appropriate. There were some times when there was no firing going on, and they didn't want to engage, and you were to come in as quietly as possible and leave. A lot of times those long range reconnaissance patrol, sometimes they ran into fire, sometimes they didn't, but they saw a potential danger and needed to report back. You didn't

want to draw attention to yourself or to that team, basically to not let it be known that they'd been spotted. But on other occasions it was unavoidable. They got in a firefight, and when you got to a hot LZ, once you spotted your troops, anything else was a target. Especially once you determined which side of the chopper they were coming on. That's when you communicated between yourself and the crew chief. They crew chief would say, "Okay, I got our guys coming in on my side." So I knew anything on my side was target – any movement, any bodies moving around – they were targets then or vice versa.

Sigler: Does the Huey have doors on both sides of the fuselage?

Wilkofsky: Yes.

Sigler: Oh, so you can load from either side.

Wilkofsky: Right. I forget when we did it, but I believe it was sometime during the period of nighthawk, that we actually took the doors off. They were just extra weight and not needed.

Sigler: So you simply flew without the doors.

Wilkofsky: Right. Those were the big sliding doors, by the way.

Sigler: Okay, so you've had a lot of missions so far – command and control with the brigade commander and nighthawk missions, LRP missions. What else did you —?

Wilkofsky: General resupply; we did everything from flying in food, mail, new troops, bringing guys out when it was time for the rotation. We had done medevacs; when there was no medical helicopter in the immediate area or available, we'd pick up wounded, we'd pick up — the one thing to this day still bothers me was picking up the dead. I don't know, it just bothered me; it still does. They'd just throw bodies in like cordwood, and it was very disturbing. We did have an interesting and unique mission while we were there for three days that nobody else had. We had landed – I'm trying to think where it was now – was it Qui Nhon? We had gone to Qui Nhon, and nine times out of ten we didn't know where we were going, and if we did know where we were going, we didn't know what it was for as far as the crew. The pilot knew, but we weren't always informed. Sometimes the pilot didn't even know. It was, "Go down to Qui Nhon, you got people to pick up and bring them back here." Well, I stayed with the helicopter whenever the crew left, I guess because I was low man on the totem pole. I don't know what the reason was, but I got to stay there and pretty much guard the ship. You had guns on it, access to — I mean, if somebody knew how to take it, they can simply get in it and start it up and fly it away otherwise. So I was there pretty much as security when they left it when we were not at LZ English or unless we were going to stay and we knew it was going to be secure, which was very seldom when we landed and the crew left. But I believe they were going to go for ice cream or something down at Qui Nhon. There was a big Air Force base down there. They came back and they had what I thought were two "Donut Dollies." Donut Dollies were the Red Cross girls. And that's who I thought we were flying around. Drop dead gorgeous! Oh, my god! And

especially after all that time in Vietnam, it was quite exhilarating. Well, we went to take off and one girl turns around towards me (because she sat up in the passenger cargo seat and I was in the gunner's seat) and she said something to the effect of, "Boy, that looks like fun back there. Think I could ride back there with you?" I said, "Well, sure, come on." She said, "Well, I think we better wait till we land." We were up at about 1,000, maybe 1,500 feet at that time. So when we did, she came in the back with me, I gave her my bulletproof vest that I used to sit on so I didn't get shot in the butt like Pete did, and I had her put that on. She sat next to me and we flew them around for – it was about two and a half days that they were in the brigade. Of course, this was before nighthawk; this was when we were doing C and C and everything else. Flew them around to the different fire bases and see the guys; just flew them all over the place, different fire bases, different encampments. It wasn't until the very last day when we dropped them off at the helicopter pad by the general's trailer that a major was walking up to the helicopter and he had a *Playboy* magazine and opened it up to the centerfold and handed it to her and she started signing it. I looked at the picture and I looked at her and I looked at the picture and I was like, "Oh, my god!" And it turned out – we had a great conversation. We were both originally from New Jersey, she lived down the shore, and it just so happened the beach I used to go to when we were in high school – so we had a grand old time. It was quite unique. She had written to me for quite a few months after that, after she had left and gone back home. But yeah, it was a Playboy bunny and her name was Kathy McDonald [??]. I've since tried to get in touch with her. I tried after I got out of the service and went to some of the addresses she had given me, but she was moving around —

End side A

Wilkofsky: So where do you pick up?

Sigler: Let's go back to when you found out her name.

Wilkofsky: It was Kathy McDonald [??], and I just called her Kathy [??]. I didn't know she was a Playmate until after this major had gotten her autograph. She was obviously very attractive, but dressed in fatigues just like everybody else. In fact, that's when I found out how the airbrush – you know, some of the pictures in the magazine and this, that, and the other thing, because yeah, there was a very good resemblance, but obviously they touch up photographs a little bit. But she was cute as a button; she was a sweetheart; she was very nice.

Sigler: You stayed in touch with her for several months afterwards.

Wilkofsky: Yes. She wrote me a couple of letters. In fact, I still have them. I have this sickness where I save any and every letter, card, postcard, whatever I got my entire life. People have told me, "You know, that's a sickness, John." Yeah, well, it is what it is.

[some general conversation not transcribed]

Sigler: You said you had tried to get in touch with her even recently.

[conversation about unsuccessful attempts to locate Playmate not transcribed]

Sigler: That was certainly a very unique mission.

Wilkofsky: Yes, it was, and quite enjoyable. She invited me to dinner at the general's quarters the very last night she was there. Of course, I was very honored and overjoyed about the fact, but unfortunately they put us on red alert that night and I couldn't leave Casper. And in all honesty, that was probably the one time that I came closest to going AWOL. But I didn't think the general's quarters would be the ideal place to do that. So I missed dinner and I never saw her again.

Sigler: Anything else about the missions you flew and the things you did there that come to mind?

Wilkofsky: I'm trying to think. We did rope extractions, you know, where you pull guys through triple canopy jungle.

Sigler: Did you have a _____[??] on the aircraft?

Wilkofsky: No. When you pulled them out by rope, it was strictly tying them to the floor rings and dropping ropes down. And they would tie themselves in and you'd pull them out like that. They'd be hanging down however long the rope was simply because you couldn't land a helicopter through this jungle. We only did that two or three times in the whole year I was there. And that was generally a situation where they had to get out and couldn't get to a clearing. The hardest part was not banging them against the trees as you pulled them up; you couldn't see what you were pulling up. So they had to kind of feel their way up, and you had to just go slow enough so you were – you were basically a worm on a fishhook in a bass pond all the time, but pulling a rope extraction, it was even moreso because you couldn't just zip in and zip back. You kind of had to hang there and hover and pull them up slow. It raised the hair on the back on your neck.

We did have another mission which really was not all that hair-raising to anybody else – I was actually the only one involved and I never really reported it or did anything about it. But we landed at LZ English one time and they had 155s up there. Of course, when we landed, we landed just outside the bunkers but inside the fence, the perimeter fence, and they landed with my side towards the outside of the perimeter. The crew had, again, left the helicopter to go inside north English for some reason, I don't remember what it was. The guns were pointed in the opposite direction; I had my back to them. We had the helicopter tied down and everything and I was there strictly as security. Not knowing they had swung the guns around directly over the helicopter and fired a battery one. And of course, the crew came running back out, they untied it. But in the interim when they fired the battery one, the concussion of it had lifted the helicopter right off the ground. Had lifted it and dropped it.

Sigler: How far away were the guns at this point?

Wilkofsky: I don't remember, because they were behind me. Fairly close, within 100 yards. It was deafening. I do remember that once we started taking off, I felt something warm dripping down my cheek, and I couldn't hear at all because just the concussion alone – well, like I said, it lifted the helicopter up. Here I'd blown my eardrum out. I never knew it. So I just wiped it away, and it was like, oh, well, I guess that will be all right. That was the end of it, and I never thought about it again until – well, the first year that I came back, I was just about deaf anyway from the whining of the transmission, but as time went on I realized I didn't have any hearing in that ear. So stubbornness and pride or whatever you want to call it, but I'm going for a hearing aid pretty soon because people are yelling at me, "Will you get a damn hearing aid? I'm tired of hearing you say What? What? What?" Yeah, I never got anything for that; I never even went to the clinic or the hospital for it; I just let it go.

Sigler: And your separation physical didn't pick it up?

Wilkofsky: They gave me less than 10% for hearing. So it's on the record after the fact, but that's the only time I said anything about it. [comments about treatment not transcribed]. I just let it go.

[conversation about medical problems in common not transcribed]

Sigler: So you were there in Vietnam until about what? April of '70?

Wilkofsky: Yes, I think it was April 13 of '70 that I was there. And then of course, the day I left, they threw colored smoke, you know, and I got my ride down to – I forget where I went – Qui Nhon or wherever, and caught a bigger plane down to Cam Rahn Bay.

Sigler: When you say they threw colored smoke – you mean they made a big deal of people leaving?

Wilkofsky: Yeah. That was kind of a tradition. When somebody went home, at least your crew chief if not other people went out there with smoke grenades, up on the landing pad, and kind of dropped them out and you did a fly-by. You know, once you took off, you did a fly-by and that was it – bye-bye.

There was a lot of incidents that happened there that were not official missions or necessarily on the record. In fact, I was reminded this past reunion of one – I was hoping nobody would remember it but somebody did. One of the guys in – I believe it was a crew chief or a gunner, I don't remember. His name was – well, maybe I better not say it. But he was in Iraq because he stayed in the Reserves, so he made this last reunion and he reminded me of a stunt that I had pulled that somebody had taught me. Now that I think back about it, it was probably a prank to see if I would do it, and of course I did. We had a well in our compound – you know, water well. And because the source and the exit were outside the perimeter, they had – when the built English, they had blown up both ends of it so nobody could get in there. We used to dump bad ammo and different things down there, because there was no water anymore at the time going through it. I was told through an individual (I won't give his name, either), "oh, yeah, every once

in a while we get rid of that stuff. You dump some JP-4 [??] down there and then throw an incendiary grenade down. You know, it will blow up and burn out.” Well, we dumped, I don’t know, part of a 5-gallon can down there and I was the one who had the incendiary grenade. I figured, “Well, I’ve got x number of seconds before this thing goes off, so I’ll just kind of toss it down and we’ll all back up and wait and see what happens.” Well, I completely forgot that once you released the spoon, you light a fuse. And when you have a big hole in the ground with no other exit but where you’re standing, the fumes of JP-4 only have one way to go. And when I released that spoon, there was a really big bang. Of course, we destroyed everything down below; that all went up. But we never did find the top of the well, which was like a little can of beer – cupola – whatever they call it – a little roof. That went off into the air somewhere. It made one hell of an explosion when all that stuff down there went off, and of course, the sirens went off on LZ English and they thought they were being mortared. Well, it raised a lot of hell, but nobody got in trouble over it that I know of. I got picked up and thrown through the clubhouse wall, I guess it was. Once we got our senses, we just disappeared. I don’t know if you want to put that down on the official record, because I don’t want to get anybody else in trouble.

Sigler: This isn’t an official record, so —

Wilkofsky: And it was almost 40 years ago, so statute of limitations is up. Like I said, we never did find the top of that thing or even a piece of it. It was gone. But we did destroy all the stuff down there. Actually, I guess I could say this, because he’s no longer around so I can’t get him in trouble, but it was Rick who was the one who told me to do that. Now that I think back on it, I think maybe it was a practical joke. That was one of many little incidences that happened. Here and there, off the record, you know, boys have to entertain themselves. You let off a little steam. You know, it’s not a whole lot of fun, getting shot at every day, whether you know about it or not. It relieves the tension. I mean, you find different ways of letting go, so to speak, you know, hopefully where nobody else gets hurt or anything like that. But as far as unusual experiences, there probably are some but offhand right now I can’t think of any others.

Sigler: So came April 13 of ‘70 —

Wilkofsky: 1970.

Sigler: — you moved out.

Wilkofsky: I moved out and on my way home, and five days later I was out of the military. There was no debriefing, no nothing. The only thing they did was send us down to Cam Rahn Bay, they gave us the re-enlistment talk, I thought about it for a moment. With the situation in Vietnam being the way it was – just some bad policies going on and things I saw, I just didn’t want to be a part of it anymore. I decided against it. I decided that was it; my military days were over. But I did — it’s funny, because that was it, there was no debriefing, no nothing. You got back to Fort Lewis, stayed there a day or two and you got your greens – you know, your dress uniform – not the blue first class but —

Sigler: _____ [??]

Wilkofsky: Right. And took a plane home. It was kind of strange in the respect that I got home on a weekday, and there was a big banner – because my parents had an idea that I was coming home, you know, within a certain period of time. I had taken a taxi from New York – one of the New York airports – and got home, and of course the house was locked; nobody was home. Nobody was home on the block except for the next door neighbor, my friend Freddie’s mother that had gotten killed, she was home. So I sat on the doorstep for, I don’t know, a couple hours, and then I went next door to see if she was home and we sat and talked for a little bit. And of course, she cried. Waited till my parents came home. But that was kind of an empty feeling coming home to an empty house I couldn’t even get into. Just sitting there waiting, it was kind of anticlimactic after all that time. Not that I expected anything, but it would have been nice to have been able to go into the house and get a hug and hello. Of course, my father was a total asshole about the whole thing, but that’s another story. Any time I brought anything up that was bothering me, it was “Ah, shut up, forget it, it’s over.” He was never in the military, so he had no idea.

And I had some problems when I got home, the first couple of weeks. I never did forget about the guys; I often sat on the step of the porch and looked around the neighborhood, and you know, my mind is flashing back and forth between looking at homes and apartment buildings and you know, flashing back to mud huts, bunkers, what are these guys doing? Is everybody okay? What am I doing here? Sitting there and crying for hours, I don’t know why. My parents ended up taking me to a VA somewhere and I just remember getting very angry at some of the counselors or psychologists, whoever they were. And I can remember just walking out and slamming the door twice in talking to them, in reference to their questions. Once, because it was an oriental person and I don’t know whether he was Japanese, Chinese, what he was, I knew he was oriental and it just spun me off. I mean, the clock went off in my head and I just couldn’t sit there; I just couldn’t even talk to him. That was about it. I finally got to a point where I buried Vietnam in the back of my mind, and 20-something years later is when it all came back and hit me and I had to go to the VA. I had an anxiety attack – I thought I was having a heart attack – I didn’t know what was going on. I became extremely upset, my body started going numb on me. I remember driving down the highway, trying to get to a VA, and I just passed out. The last thing I remember is falling out of my truck on the highway. I remember a state trooper there kind of helped me off the road, just kind of dragged me onto the grass there. Next think I knew was I woke up in an ambulance, and I’ve been on medication ever since, and in therapy. Not nearly as often anymore; I’m doing pretty good right now. But I’m 100% disabled because of PTSD.

[discussion of PTSD recognition theories not transcribed]

Sigler: When you first came back from Vietnam – a lot of people complained at the time about – you know, they came back and the reactions ranged from indifference to anger.

Wilkofsky: You mean on my part or individuals?

Sigler: Yeah, what did you see when you came back?

Wilkofsky: I initially tried to fit in, you know, and pick up my life where I left off. And that was a big mistake – couldn't be done. The friends I thought I had were not friends any more. They treated me very differently, so I couldn't just come back and pick up where John left off when he left. I was very disillusioned by everything. Just general lifestyles, after seeing a third-world country and people and seeing what goes on during a conflict or a war like Vietnam. And these people are totally ignorant to the fact. All they caught was what the media put out to them. Eventually I just went my own way; I've never seen any of them since then. And that was quite short-lived, less than a year. I just kind of packed it up. I left the area. I have looked back, I've tried to make contact with a few people that I thought I was close to, and it just didn't work. Just didn't work, and I never bothered again and really have no desire to. And I find today, with the Iraqi war – I went through many changes with the Desert Storm thing and everything like that – this Iraqi war is extremely disturbing.

[commentary about the current Iraq situation not transcribed]

End transcription