

**Interviewee:** Rick Tompkins  
**Interviewer:** Jack Sigler  
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**Sigler:** Good morning, Mr. Tompkins.

**Tompkins:** Good morning, Jack.

**Sigler:** You understand that this interview is being recorded?

**Tompkins:** Yes, sir.

**Sigler:** Okay. Why don't we start out by you telling me where you were before you got into the service, how you got in, and how you got to Casper Platoon?

**Tompkins:** Well, I came in the service in '66, and I previously had been basically a student in school and working part-time, living in Memphis, and got drafted. So I came in, went through basic training with the 101st and —

**Sigler:** The 101st Airborne?

**Tompkins:** 101st Airborne. And went to jump school with them and went to advanced infantry training with them. And then went to OCS from there. Actually I was "permanent party" (assigned to 'B' Co., 2/506, 101st Airborne /Div., after completion of training) I guess, for a few months and then I went to OCS at Fort Knox, armor OCS. And from there I went to flight school and army rotary wing. Right out of flight school was assigned to Vietnam without a unit, and got in country and I'm not sure if they connected my Airborne status with the 173rd or just they needed somebody there, but anyhow, I wound up being assigned to the Casper Platoon.

**Sigler:** And originally you had gone through armor school as well.

**Tompkins:** Right. Um-hm.

**Sigler:** And they were going to send you off to the air cavalry or something?

**Tompkins:** Well, I don't know. I knew I was qualified for OCS. Shortly after I went in, I took the tests, and I had made application, and I guess that's just where they had an opening.

You know, back then they told us you had three choices: you could list for OCS – and back then they told you that you had to choose the three combat arms, which I don't think was true, but that's how they got so many people into armor and infantry and artillery.

**Sigler:** So this was then in what, '67?

**Tompkins:** Uh '66, yeah, I think I entered OCS about September of '66, and then went directly from there to flight school and came out of flight school in November of '67.

**Sigler:** Where did you do the flight school? Fort Eustis?

**Tompkins:** No. The first half was at Fort Wolters, Texas; that was when they had it split up. You went to Fort Wolters, Texas, for the primary training, which was either in a OH-23 or a TH-55

**Sigler:** Now the TH-55 was a fixed wing?

**Tompkins:** No, no. TH-55 was a very small helicopter made by Hughes. It was a reciprocating engine, two-seater, strictly pretty much a trainer.

**Sigler:** Okay, thank you. Because I had ran into that in an earlier interview that I was looking at and I couldn't understand.

**Tompkins:** The "T" is trainer and "H" is helicopter, so TH is a training helicopter. Let's see, from there – I guess we spent about four months there, thereabouts. And then went to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for the I guess they called it the advanced training where you went through — well, first of all you got your transition to the Huey, and then we did tactical training, instrument training, spent some time in simulators, and that's where we graduated from.

**Sigler:** So you get to Vietnam, you get assigned to the Casper Platoon. Where were they located at that point?

**Tompkins:** The headquarters was in An Khe, but the 173rd, the whole time it was there, was like a quick reaction force and their area of operation was II Corps generally, so they moved all over II Corps. Normally they had a brigade headquarters station somewhere. As I say, at that time it was at An Khe. And then they would farm out their battalions. They would have usually one battalion at the base and then they would have at least two and sometimes three other battalions out in different areas around the country. And sometimes they were associated with a battalion of another unit, like they had a couple of operations where they were hooked up with a battalion of 101st. One battalion of 173rd, one battalion of 101st and then a battalion of the ARVN Rangers; that was pretty typical for large operations, that is. But normally, in the field they operated in company-size elements.

**Sigler:** And since Casper Platoon was part of brigade headquarters, did you stay basically at An Khe?

**Tompkins:** Well, yeah. I would say usually the Casper – I guess our rear area where we kept the aircraft and the maintenance and all that stuff was usually co-located with the brigade headquarters. But then just like the brigade, we farmed out elements. The Casper Platoon wasn't that big. We only had eight Hueys and six OH-6s for most of the time. So we were pretty small but we would farm out one or two helicopters to a battalion that was farmed out somewhere around II Corps. So when we flew out of An Khe, that's where our – we were in Ghost Town, they called it, was our rear area where the helicopters were parked and the maintenance section was. Each day we'd fly out to — at that time we were pretty much supporting a battalion up around Kontum, and then they farmed me out —. Well, let me back up. I went into An Khe and then they initially sent me to Tuy Hoa where there was a battalion. And Phu Hep [??] was a small town south of Tuy Hoa right on the coast. This was all south of Qui Nhon about a couple hundred miles, I think. So we flew out of there supporting that battalion for quite some time and that's — actually, I think we were part in An Khe and part in Tuy Hoa, and we had a pretty good-sized maintenance section and most of our aircraft were in Tuy Hoa. But we flew back to An Khe for the major maintenance. So we flew out of there. When I first got there I was assigned – because I was commissioned and most of the pilots in the unit were warrants – I was assigned as a general's pilot. And Marty Heck was another guy that came in about the same time I did, and he and I were flying the general.

**Sigler:** The brigade commander?

**Tompkins:** Brigade commander, yes. And one of the first missions we had, we were landing on this concrete pad and he was in a hurry, so he stepped off the skid of the aircraft (this was a Huey that we were landing, I was on the controls), and the center of gravity is such that if you're standing out on the skid and you step off of it, it makes a pretty big lurch in the aircraft. So he stepped off the skid before I touched down, about a foot off the ground, and the aircraft lurched and I almost landed on his foot. Well, after that incident he said, "I don't want that guy flying me anymore." So they took me off the general's ship, which was the best thing that ever happened, and I started flying with the rest of the guys on regular missions daily.

**Sigler:** Who was brigade commander at that time?

**Tompkins:** I think it was General Allen, but it might have been — I forget who was before Allen, but it might have been the guy before Allen. I just don't remember.

**Sigler:** You parted ways pretty quickly.

**Tompkins:** Oh yeah. But then we flew just general missions, and that's one of the great things about, I think, being assigned to the 173rd is we flew any kind of mission you could fly in

Vietnam, we flew it. You know, we flew troop lifts, we flew resupply, we flew medevac. We flew the Snoopy mission. Are you familiar with the people sniffer mission?

**Sigler:** I've heard of it. Tell me about it, though.

**Tompkins:** Well, what they did is they trained a guy on this equipment, this machine that he would bring with him and hook up into the aircraft, and it had two – you know, like the vent on a dryer, the round flexible tubing that's about six inches in diameter? He would hook one of those up to each skid and bring it back inside the cargo compartment where he would sit with this monitoring machine. And you would fly along right above the trees and it would force air up into these tubes which would go back and the machine would then assess the chemical content of the air coming through it. It was set up so that if it sensed ammonia in the air, it would register on the machine and this guy would mark a register or a hot spot. The theory was that the only thing that gave off ammonia over there was chimpanzees and humans. Since as far as I know, there's no chimpanzees in Vietnam, when you'd get a hot spot you assumed that that was a collection of human beings on the ground that were emanating ammonia into the air. So we'd fly around and mark wherever we got those hot spots and bring it back to our brigade headquarters or the intelligence section and they should respond to it, but it didn't always happen. I'm not sure – the accuracy of that machine, I think some of us questioned. I think it depends on how you fly the routes. If you fly the routes straight, I think it's more accurate. But if you do a lot of 180 degree turns, a lot of times you fly over your own exhaust. Although they say that that wouldn't matter, I think it did, because you'd get hot spots pretty much every time you did a 180 degree turn.

**Sigler:** So that would indicate there was a problem with the thing.

**Tompkins:** Yeah, I think so. But anyhow, we flew those missions, and we flew a lot of just command and control with the battalion commanders. Put them on board and go where they wanted to go, look at their units, which was another I think huge mistake of the whole war over there because if you had VC or NVA sitting on a hillside observing an area, you could watch the helicopter take off in the morning, go land somewhere and then take off and then come back and land at its lunchtime location or sometime later in the day, and then go circle over it just in the late evening. So you could follow, by just watching the helicopter, where it landed, where it circled, where the unit was moving.

**Sigler:** And spot where the companies were deployed.

**Tompkins:** Exactly. But nobody would listen to the pilots, you know, when we'd try to tell them things like that. The battalion commander said, "You go where I tell you to go." A lot of just picking people up and bringing them back, like either wounded or people going on leave or people rotating back to the States. Bringing food in to the troops, bringing ammunition, mail. So back and forth to the units during the day was a typical, as we called it, "ash and trash"

mission. We did that almost every day. And then from Tuy Hoa, I moved up to An Khe. I flew up in an OH-13, which is the old Korean War aircraft that you see on M\*A\*S\*H. We still had a couple of those. That was interesting. I was in the front seat; another guy was flying and he had the controls. It wasn't dual controls; there was no cyclic stick on my side, so I'm sitting over there with a B-4 bag, the large kit bag that we had with all my stuff in it. And the only way I could communicate with him was I had an M-16, I'd push on the intercom button on the floor because I didn't have anything to click on with my hands. So that's the way we communicated. And he flew low-level all the way from Tuy Hoa to An Khe, which – I mean, I was too new at the time to realize how dumb that was and I'm not sure why he did it. I think maybe he did it to scare me or something, but I was too ignorant to be scared so. But anyhow, we flew up to An Khe and that's when I started living in the Ghost Town area, as we called it. And my hootch-mate was Donny Kidd, who was killed in Vietnam, actually shortly after that. I think it was in February of '68, he was killed. He was flying from Camp Hanari up around Kontum back to An Khe in a -13 and he was low-level along the highway. He'd just gone through the Mang-Yang Pass, which was a famous French graveyard, and he flew through the pass and apparently was low-level along the road. He was single-pilot, and they found his aircraft about a week later with his body in it and he had been shot through the back. Apparently he had flown by somebody who jumped up and with an AK-47 fired up toward the back of the aircraft. It went through the fire-wall of the aircraft and into him, killed him, and he crashed along the side of the road. He was a really good guy.

**Sigler:** There was no armor plate on the OH-13s?

**Tompkins:** No. He was National Guard and volunteered to come to Vietnam, and he was older than most of us. I was actually older than most. I was about twenty-six, I think, at the time, and he was older than I was by a year or two and had five children. But he had volunteered to come to Vietnam. He was a great guy. But let's see, where was I? Oh yeah, An Khe —

**Sigler:** Why would you do low-level operations when there was no tactical reason to do so? To put yourself within range of some guy with an AK-47?

**Tompkins:** Exactly. I don't have the answer to that. I mean, anytime I flew from point A to point B and there was no reason to be low-level, I was at 1200 feet, probably. Unless – sometimes weather precluded that. But I don't know the answer to that. I mean, notoriously, helicopter pilots don't like altitude. I don't know why that is. I guess we just learn to fly low and that's how we liked to fly. But in Vietnam – I mean, low and fast is good if you've got trees and if there's a reason to be down there. But high is much better if you're – especially single-ship and don't have a reason to be low.

**Sigler:** So you were back at An Khe.

**Tompkins:** Yeah, we went back to An Khe and started flying out of there, and that's – I guess

at that time —

**Sigler:** You continued to fly Hueys?

**Tompkins:** Yes. And I guess I was lucky because I came in country about a month after Dak To, which was the largest battle the 173rd was involved in. That was around Thanksgiving of '67. At that time, virtually every one of our aircraft were shot up and totaled. You know, they had to be replaced. So when I came in country, they had the brand-new UH-1H model which was much stronger; the engine was stronger. So I was lucky I didn't fly the old D-model, I flew the new H-models. But we started flying out of An Khe and supporting the battalion up at — actually it was in Phu Hep — not Phu Hep — it was in Camp Hanari which is just south of Pleiku, which is just south of Kontum. So we were flying out of there regularly every day and then going back for the most part to An Khe at night. I guess we'd take off at seven in the morning, thereabouts, and we wouldn't get back until about ten at night. And many days the only time you were on the ground was when you were hot refueling and getting out to use the men's room in the back of the aircraft (which that was another tongue-in-cheek kind of thing). We had the enlisted latrine and the officers' latrine. The enlisted latrine was on the left side and the officers' latrine was on the right side. But anyhow we supported our people in the 173rd, and then the 4th Infantry was working out of the same area. I'll never forget, they said that their aircraft had to be on the ground, I think it was five-thirty or something like that, which was a ridiculous rule because their troops out in the field would just be lagering in for the night and they'd need water, ammunition, you know, extraction of people who were injured. So we wound up supporting both our people and the 4th Infantry, and we frequently would not leave there until eight or nine o'clock at night.

**Sigler:** Why would they insist on five-thirty? As a safety measure?

**Tompkins:** Another question I don't have the answer to. I mean, it kind of incensed us in the 173rd because it made our day much longer and we thought they — I mean the aviation is there to support the infantry, so what are they doing going back to the club at five-thirty - six o'clock? I don't know. Didn't make sense to me.

And then I guess one interesting mission we had coming back from that area — it was about ten o'clock at night, and An Khe's set up on a central plateau. I forget what the exact elevation was, but it had mountains on the west and mountains on the east. That was the An Khe and Mang-Yang Pass where through the mountains — Mang-Yang on the west and Ah Khe on the east — and then that plateau sat up there and it got socked in pretty frequently. So we were coming back and there was total cloud cover all over that area, and I was still maybe two months in country, so I was pretty new. Back then in flight school, you didn't get a true instrument rating. They gave you what they called a tactical ticket, which meant that you were supposed to be able, if you got in instrument conditions, you should be able to get yourself out, and that's about it. You weren't very competent instrument pilots at the time. Then of course, to be a competent instrument pilot, you got to do it regularly and nobody did it unless they absolutely

had to. Well, that night we had to. It was a flight of two and I was in the second aircraft. When we got there, we called for an instrument approach. And without getting too technical, there's a precision instrument approach which has a glide slope and there's a non-precision approach that directs you left and right but no glide slope; you don't have any height direction. So our second aircraft went into a holding pattern turning right, just making right circles, and the first aircraft started its approach. They called back. We were listening on the radio, of course, and they called back and said that they broke out right at the minimum altitude (which I think was 800 feet, if I'm not mistaken, on a non-precision approach). Well, after turning right for about, I guess, close to ten minutes while they did the approach (and the aircraft commander, the other guy, was the one on the controls), the controller told our aircraft, "Turn left, heading such and such." And as soon as he rolled out of that right-hand turn, he got vertigo, because that's a common problem: if you're on this constant right turn and you turn the other way, it messes up your inner ear. So he got vertigo, told me to fly it. Said, "You've got the aircraft" So I took the controls and very shakily did the approach, and very conservatively on my altitude. When we got on the ground, both of us – I mean, we could barely walk, our knees were shaking so bad. And the guys in the back of the aircraft – we had passengers – and they just said, "Oh, hey, thanks for the ride," and they went off and never realized how close they came. But that was typical. You know, I was the new guy and didn't have the experience that we should have had. But it was one of those things we were very happy to walk away from.

And then we supported Special Forces out of FOB-2, which was their forward base at Kontum. They did a lot of cross-border operations which you know, there was no publicity about that. We weren't supposed to be in Cambodia at the time, but they'd go back and forth pretty frequently. We supported them, you know, just dropping them and picking them up. The 173rd long-range reconnaissance patrols, the LRRPs, we supported them. They did a lot of the same kind of things.

**Sigler:** Now that got you in pretty close to some of the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese Army.

**Tompkins:** The NVA?

**Sigler:** Yeah.

**Tompkins:** Oh yeah, yeah. Well, see this was right before Tet. This was February '68, and we had actually — we went out and picked up this Montanyard. We went up to the special forces camp. It was either Poli Klein or Poli Jerang, which both are west of Kontum, and we went to this mountain top and picked up a couple of special forces guys and this Montanyard. He had information that they wanted to show him this area and see if he could pick out — what his report was is that he had seen two battalion of the NVA moving northwest to southeast through his area. So we picked him up and this guy's a Montanyard, now – he's got a loincloth on, he's got a longbow over his shoulder and a quiver. I was amazed that he got on the aircraft. He sat in the seat right next to the door, with the door open. We took off and he didn't seem to

be scared at all. Most people, even American troops, cower back from that door, especially if you start turning toward the side they're on. But this guy's just sitting there. He's got one foot like right on the edge of the floor, looking out the helicopter. This Green Beret's sitting next to him and he's got a map. And this Montanyard is looking at the ground and then looking at the map and looking at the ground, and pretty soon he starts pointing along the map. I can't hear what he's saying, but he's talking to the guy in the back. He pointed out from the air where he had seen these battalions moving through the area, so he must have had some experience, having been in the air or something. I don't know. A very competent Intel guy. So that was, I don't know, maybe less than a week before Tet. So he had seen the troops coming in. Then I think it was the next day, a friend of mine and I, we were flying out in the same general area. We had a transmission pressure failure and that requires you to land right away. So we landed in this old fire support base that was abandoned and spent the day there with just our crew, just pilot, co-pilot, crew chief and gunner, until they could get us out of there. We remembered the day before they said there was two battalions moving through this area. So we were puckered there for half a day.

**Sigler:** Now when they came in to get you out, did they come in and repair the aircraft as well?

**Tompkins:** No they slung-load it with a Chinook. We hooked it up to a Chinook and they slung-load it back to Kontum. Actually, the night after we took that Montanyard up, that evening we were flying back to An Khe and it was dusk, and we were at probably 2000 feet or at least 1500 feet, and we were flying west to east from these mountaintops back to Kontum. And about halfway back, flying in the opposite direction at the same altitude, not more than a few miles north of us was a French Alouette helicopter. To this day, I believe that was maybe Giap (General Giap, commander NVA) or some of his people, because it was either the next day or the day after is when Tet started. And I didn't know what to do. Do we shoot at it? Do we avoid it? Could it be CIA people? I had no idea. But as far as I know we had no French Alouette helicopters over there.

**Sigler:** No. This is the first time I'd heard of those and if it had been, it would have been left over after the French evacuated or captured at Dien Bien Phu.

**Tompkins:** Yeah. But I saw it flying east to west. This was probably thirty minutes after sunset, and the only thing west of there was Cambodia and a little bit north was Laos. So I don't know what they were doing or who it was. But anyhow, Tet of '68 happened, I think, about two days after that. I was at Camp Hanari.

**Sigler:** Camp Hanarie?

**Tompkins:** H-A-N-A-R-I, I think. It was just south of Pleiku. They breached the perimeter there. The first thing I knew, there was a 122 rocket that hit — our helicopters were parked in

this ramp area and it hit right in that ramp area and lifted me up off my cot. And so we all got up, went outside to figure out what was going on and tried to stay behind sandbags. I never saw anybody on the ground, but they blew up our ammo dump and that was a huge explosion. Actually, it came up as a mushroom cloud and I thought, "Oh, my God! They got nuclear weapons." I didn't realize what it was at that time, but the next day I found out it was the ammo dump. But Camp Hanari didn't get that bad. There were some people that were injured; I don't think anybody was killed there. I could be wrong about that. But Kontum just north of us got hit real bad. They had battles inside the perimeter that went on for thirty minutes, an hour.

**Sigler:** Where they actually breached the perimeter with ground troops?

**Tompkins:** Yeah. Sappers came in. They were throwing grenades into tents and a lot of confusion. So I saw some people running, which I still think were Americans. But it was so confusing, you know, night, and you can't tell who's who. And I was always afraid, on the ground and in the air, of shooting friendlies, so I often times probably didn't fire when I should have fired. But anyhow, we came out pretty good there at Camp Hanari. I guess and then I was up there at Hanari as assistant brigade aviation officer for some time, maybe a month or two.

**Sigler:** You were actually put on the brigade staff then?

**Tompkins:** Well, yeah. I had two duties, I guess. One was to fly and the other one was to receive the missions from the battalions and then assign those out to different pilots. And sometimes I would assign it to myself and I'd fly, too. But for much of the time, I would just sit back in the tactical operations center and receive missions and figure out what we could support, what we couldn't. Sometimes talk to — a lot of times it was company commanders that were calling in because it was they who were doing the operation on the ground. Then sometimes we'd sit down and look over a map and get exact coordinates and frequencies and number of troops and type of movement and all that. An interesting part of my assignment, too, is when I got to do that, I really got an overall picture of what was going on. So I appreciated being able to be in that position.

I was doing that job at the time Martin Luther King was assassinated, and I came out this particular morning to get in the chow line and there was a company ready to go back out on a combat assault. Everybody was sitting around on their rucksacks with their weapons and it was kind of misty and foggy and just about dawn. And nobody was saying anything. I, of course, didn't know what had happened and I got in the chow line, ready to get something to eat. You know, I turned to a guy next to me, I said, "What's the deal here? I know these guys are getting ready to go out on assault but I've never seen everybody so quiet and so moody." And he said, "Do you know what happened?" I said, "No." He said, "Martin Luther King was assassinated." And the 173rd had a fairly large African-American population in the unit, so I guess everybody was pretty much in shock that morning — a combination of getting ready to go out and that having happened.

I guess I stayed there at Hanari for probably a month, and then from there went back to

An Khe for a fairly short period of time. Then the Casper Platoon moved up to LZ English, which was an old 1st Cav base. The town was called Bong Son, I think. I was there for the duration of my tour, and I guess that was about the end of April that we moved up there.

**Sigler:** April of '68.

**Tompkins:** Um-hm, right. And then I was assigned as the scout section leader, and we had just gotten the OH-6 in at that time, which was another Hughes made helicopter, which was just a fantastic little scout helicopter.

**Sigler:** Some of the guys didn't like it, apparently. Tell me why you did.

**Tompkins:** Well, just everything about it. The mission was kind of dangerous but the aircraft itself was – it had more power than most of [Transmission problem, white noise] \_\_\_\_\_ [??] 23 which was terrible. The OH-13 which was okay but it was underpowered, had wooden blades, reciprocating engine, had lots of problems. And the Bell – what is it? The Jet Ranger is what they call it civilian-wise but I forget the number nomenclature for the Bell Scout right now. OH-58. And I thought that was underpowered. I never flew it, I just saw it. But anyhow, the OH-6 I thought was a fantastic helicopter.

**Sigler:** Maybe I'm mixing up the aircraft. Maybe the other one—

**Tompkins:** OH-58?

**Sigler:** 58 yeah. The Warrior.

**Tompkins:** I've heard both criticism and accolades, so I don't know the answer on that one. But I don't know anybody who flew the 6 who didn't like it. And they still use that now in Special Ops, the 160th. They call it the "Little Bird" now. But if you saw the *Black Hawk Down*, Mogadishu, they used those pretty much as gunships, which we also used them as gunships. Different units flew them with different configuration. We flew them with a mini-gun mounted on the left side and about as much mini-gun ammo as we could put in the aircraft on the left side.

**Sigler:** Now a mini-gun was one of those Gatling gun type?

**Tompkins:** Yes, yes. 762mm, rotating barrels. You had a trigger that you pulled on the cyclic stick and you could pull it to the first detent firing 2000 rounds a minute and you could pull it to the second de— [Transmission problem, white noise] \_\_\_\_\_ [??]. You didn't hear pop-pop-pop-pop. You heard arr-arr.

**Sigler:** Excuse me just a second because something went wrong there. You said you

pulled it to the second and then my phone went dead there for a moment.

**Tompkins:** Oh. On the second detent, I don't remember now whether it was either 3000 or 4000 rounds a minute, but it fired so fast you could see a red stream. It just looked like you were shooting red fire out of a fire hose when you shot it. So many bullets —

**Sigler:** Because the tracers were so close together.

**Tompkins:** Yeah. And of course, there's four non-tracers for every tracer. But that's how we flew it. And then the crew chief, who also was the gunner – we only had the two people, the pilot and the crew chief/gunner in the back – and the pilot was on the right side to counterbalance the weight of the mini-gun. Then the crew chief would sit in the right rear cargo door and he would work with a free M-60, an M-60 that was not mounted on the aircraft. What they would normally do is use a bungee cord that was hooked to the top of the frame above where he sat at the doorway and then the M-60 he would just hold in his lap. He had the ability to move it in any direction. The only thing they had to be careful of is that they didn't shoot the rotor blades off if they got intent on the target. If they kept firing as you turned to the right, since the rotor blades are coming down and if you're turning to the right, their line of sight is coming up, they could be firing at the rotor blades. The good gunners you didn't worry about, but the new guys, you had to be careful in any right turns. And we had one [Transmission problem, white noise]

**Sigler:** I lost you again there, that time for about ten, fifteen seconds. I'm going to hang up and call you right back. Like your computer, if all else fails turn it off and turn it on again.

**Tompkins:** Hello?

**Sigler:** Hi.

**Tompkins:** Hi Jack.

**Sigler:** Hopefully that cleared this up. I have no idea what that's — first time it's ever happened to me.

**Tompkins:** Well, and I switched phones. It could have been that that phone was low on batteries or something, I don't know. It's a cordless phone, so that could be part of the problem.

**Sigler:** We were talking about gunnery and the danger of an untrained gunner shooting the rotor blades off.

**Tompkins:** Yeah. And then I just went from there to talk about another one of the gunners we had. He was our NCO-IC of the scout section, and he and I flew together quite a bit. We

liked each other and trusted each other, so he was my gunner frequently.

**Sigler:** He was also your crew chief then?

**Tompkins:** Yeah. His name was Rick Canning and he was ultimately killed after I left country. He was on about his fourth or fifth extension when I was there. He had a brother who had been killed in Vietnam. I think he was a crew member on an aircraft – I think he was a crew chief on a Huey – and a south Vietnamese soldier, I guess, had a weapon that he didn't clear when he got on the aircraft and the weapon went off and killed his brother. So this guy hated all Orientals and wanted to – you know, anybody who was Oriental, he was happy to shoot at. So you had to be careful with him. But the best gunner we had. We went on an operation one time – the battalion was going to go onto this – it was a virtually an island – it had a river running around two sides of it. They had always thought that there was VC support units on that island and they wanted to do a combat assault. They wanted a blocking force along the one river and that was assigned to our scout section. I was a scout section leader, so I went in and got the briefing. They said, "Yeah, we want you guys to fly up and down the river. Anything that crosses it, shoot it." "Yes, sir." So we got out the next day and they do their combat assault on the one end of the island. We're flying up and down the river. This island is on the right side of the river. On the left side of the river is where Bong Son is, and there's people standing up on the bank, looking down on the river and watching everything that's going on. And here comes these people that are crossing the river to get away from this war going on in their back yard. They're all old people and women, herding these water buffalo.

**Sigler:** These were people who were living on the island?

**Tompkins:** People who lived on the island. And our assignment is to keep these people from leaving the island and to kill them if they come into the river. Well, we start flying back and forth and there's one bridge across – it's just a small metal bridge. People started walking across that. Well, we fired the mini-gun across the bridge to alert them, "you're not supposed to come this way," and they kept coming. And we dropped a grenade in the middle of the bridge and they still kept coming. So Canning starts firing, and actually hit one old guy. I said, "Cease fire! Cease fire!" So we stopped firing and fortunately didn't kill anybody, but it was just an ill-conceived blocking force because there's civilians coming across there. They kept coming.

**Sigler:** Whether they were enemy or not.

**Tompkins:** Right. So anyhow, that was an ill-conceived mission, and many of those happened. But that was one I felt really bad about because we did wound this one old guy and I've always felt bad about him.

Before I started flying the OH-6, I had to transition – to get qualified to fly it, I went down to Vung Tau for, I think that was two weeks. And that was really nice. It was almost like an in country R and R. We stayed in a hotel there. You know, got up everyday and went out and

flew missions, came back at night. So it was a good week or two weeks, whatever it was, for me. And that's when I learned to really appreciate that little OH-6. Then we flew first flight and last flight recons in the OH-6. We flew up into the An Loa valley probably almost every day. That was northwest of LZ English, which was generally a fairly hot area. And then one evening we were flying a last flight recon. We had been taking fire at LZ English from this hillside, mortar rounds, and we went up there to check out this hill. We started seeing these small little spider holes, and so we started trying to drop grenades in these spider holes. We got a grenade in one and it got a secondary explosion, blew up a pretty good hole out of the side of the mountain. So we assumed those were ammo storage holes.

**Sigler:** You were doing this all from the air in effect?

**Tompkins:** Yeah, from the OH-6. It was two aircraft flying together. I was lead and I had a chase cover ship behind me. And Rick Joles, Richard Joles, was my crew chief/gunner. He's the one that's dropping the grenades in the holes.

End side A

**Sigler:** Okay. Let's see if we can back up a little bit. You'd just blown a pretty good sized hole out of the side of the mountain.

**Tompkins:** Well, it was a big hill. But when we went around the back side, we found some more, so we were trying to drop more grenades in there. And Rick Joles is leaning out the aircraft, dropping grenades toward these holes. And as I came around for another pass, I had a tail rotor failure. In a OH-6, a tail rotor failure (and we were only about 40 knots at the time or less), so the aircraft went into a flat spin. Of course, the terrain underneath us was very un-level, you know, it was like mountainside slopes. And once we went into the flat spin, all I can see is green, blue, green, blue, green, blue. I'm looking half of it is the side of the mountain, the other half is looking out towards the coast. It was so fast, if I had let go of the controls, I'm not sure I could have gotten my arms back to the controls. So we were spinning real fast and I hear chase say, "Lead's in trouble." The normal procedure for a tail rotor failure is to chop the power, because the tail rotor is anti-torque, keeps you from yawing left to right. So if you don't have that control, you're virtually spinning underneath the rotor system in the opposite direction. And the procedure is to chop the throttle which takes the torque off the rotor system which will allow you to streamline the aircraft by rolling the nose over and getting forward airspeed enough that the airstream will keep the aircraft straight. Well, that's great if you are 2000 feet or if you are someplace where you can chop it and do a hovering auto-rotation, if you're on an airfield. But in the mountains, I didn't think I had that option, because if I had chopped the power and try to nose it over, I would have crashed into the side of the mountain doing about forty knots. So I just kind of held what I had and —. Well, first I tried to pull power in because I was thinking about trying to gain altitude to do the normal procedure. But every time I did that I started spinning so fast that it scared me. So I just kind of held what I had and let it settle in. We

crashed into the side of the mountain on the right side and I climbed out and looked in the back to get Rick out and he's not there. So I climbed out, I looked underneath, he's not there. We're in this like mangrove thing, these thick vines, and you can look underneath and see a little bit but you can't see too far. So I just didn't understand what had happened. I'm, I guess, half in shock anyway. So I climbed out and started to — the chase ship is over the top of me. Later I think they thought I was gonna shoot them or something, but I held my hand up in the air. I had a Browning handgun in my hand and I pointed the barrel uphill or downhill and I was trying to get them to tell me should I go uphill or downhill because I couldn't see. They didn't really do much. They kind of flew off, and later I think they thought I was aiming at them to say, "Come down and get me or I'll shoot you," or something, I don't know. But anyhow, another OH-6 was coming up from the south and it heard what had happened. That was Charlie West; he was flying that aircraft just on a logistics run, and he came over and actually landed. He didn't know whether I'd been shot down or what, so that was a very brave thing for him to do. He landed, frictioned down the controls, left the aircraft running, and came up to meet me as I was going down the hill. We came around the corner; he had his weapon drawn, I had mine — we almost shot each other. But he takes me back to his aircraft. We take off. He asks me about Joles. I said, "He's not there." And Charlie hovered over the aircraft after we got up and we looked back down and sure enough, he's not there. Anyhow, they took me back to LZ English and they activated a company of our unit, the 173rd, to go out and look for Rick. And he had actually been thrown from the aircraft apparently on the initial — when initially the tail rotor failure happened, it lurched as it went into this flat spin. He must have been untethered, since he was trying to lean out and drop these grenades in the hole, and when it lurched, it threw him out. We were probably 300-400 feet above the ground at the time, so he was killed. They found him about two in the morning, I think, that night. Of course, I was beside myself. I wanted to go back out to help and they wouldn't let me back out of LZ English. I sat there in the fetal position in operations listening to the radio of these guys calling, "No, we can't find him here. No, we don't see him there." And then when they finally found him. That was kind of traumatic.

**Sigler:** Did you ever figure out why the rotor failure? Just mechanical failure or enemy —?

**Tompkins:** Well, yeah. They do an accident investigation of everything, and what they came up with is on the OH-6 — now here I'm gonna badmouth it for a second, but I overall — I mean, when we crashed, it had this great frame that if you're inside that frame the chances of surviving are very good. But anyway, on the tail rotor hub there was a little rubber disk that had a little nipple that fit into a metal hole, and the tail rotor actually rotated around that rubber hub. It kept the tail rotor from flexing too far, because they have pitch change links that make the tail rotor go one way or the other. And those pitch change links are maybe, oh, six inches long. They're maybe three times as big around as a pencil. If they flex too far, they can snap. Apparently what happened was that little rubber nipple wore through and the rubber hub fell off because it didn't have anything to hold it in there anymore. And that allowed the rotor to flex too far and the pitch change links snapped, which is what controlled — that then meant that the blades just went

flat. You couldn't move them to increase or decrease pitch anymore, so they just went flat and had no anti-torque control at all. That was the theory; whether that's correct or not, I don't know. There's another theory that I think I would put my money on. When I went through the transition, I don't ever remember them talking about loss of tail rotor effectiveness, LTE. The OH-6 had a very large horizontal stabilizer fin on the back. It was pretty wide. Well, if you stuck your tail into the wind – so in other words, if the wind was blowing towards your tail, and you weren't going very fast. You were at a hover or less than 40 knots and that wind came up a little bit underneath the aircraft, it would push your nose down; it would push the tail up. Of course, to compensate for that, you're gonna push pedal in and that's — I mean it could have been a combination of the two. But anyway, we were climbing up the side of a mountain with our tail toward the coast, pulling power in and going slow. So it was a perfect storm situation for LTE, if that in fact could have caused it. Or maybe it was a little bit of the wind and then when I adjusted the pedal, it was so much pedal needed that it snapped the pitch change links. I don't know. But the theory was that little rubber thing fell out and allowed the pitch change links to snap. So after that, I was grounded for about a week. I went down to An Khe to get checked out. There was a flight surgeon down there that I had to see before I could get up on flight status again. I think he was getting ready to go home, so I sat in this office like half a day and the receptionist said, "No, he's out. He's out. No, he's —." I said, "Well, I have to wait because I have to see him before I can fly again." So I was there for a half a day and pretty soon the door opens and he comes out. There was only one way in, so he'd been there the whole time, he just didn't want to see me. He said, "Okay, come on in." He said, "What are you here for?" I said, "Well, I was in a crash and I have to get checked out before I can fly again." He said, "Are you having any problems?" I said, "Well, my back's bothering me." He said, "Bend over and touch your toes." So I bent down and got probably three inches from my toes. He said, "You're okay." He signed me off and sent me back to the unit. So that was a waste of time, but one of those procedures you had to go through. And actually years later I found out I had a fractured vertebrae, which I suspect was from that crash, but didn't know it at the time.

**Sigler:** That's why your back was hurting.

**Tompkins:** Yep. But then after that I started flying again for a while. I got an R and R somewhere in there, went to Hawaii for a week. They had a major operation down around — oh, I also went down to Bao Loc, and what they had, an operation called Task Force South. That was another three battalion operation with the 101st and the ARVN Rangers down around Bao Loc, which is – I think it's still in II Corps, but it might be in the northern part of III Corps. It's actually south of Phan Thet. So we were down there for a few weeks, I think, supporting that operation. And that was, I guess it was fairly successful. They rooted out some VC in the area but I don't think they found a whole lot. But it was a different part of Vietnam and interesting for me, working with the ARVN Rangers and the 101st.

**Sigler:** How did those joint task force work? Because you had what, one battalion of the 173rd? And then a battalion of the 101st? And the ARVN Rangers? And those are units that

haven't necessarily worked together before.

**Tompkins:** Right. And usually they would have an AO for the whole task force and then they would separate out – you know, one battalion would work in one area, one in another.

**Sigler:** An AO, Area of Operations?

**Tompkins:** Right. So that they didn't intermix that much. On the flanks, they would have closed flanks and communication, of course, between the units. And they would have someone generally overall in control with a brigade-size headquarters to control the three battalions. Sometimes it seemed to me more like it was three separate battalions operating, you know, just co-locating in case they ran into anything big they could support each other.

**Sigler:** Where did the quasi-brigade staff come from?

**Tompkins:** Well, I think they were just collected together. You'd take some of the battalion staff and plug into an overall brigade control or task force control. I called it a brigade headquarters but really it was a task force headquarters but it was about a — brigade size, right. So they'd just take people from each of the battalions and designate them as the task force staff. Don't know how they decided that.

They had lots of problems with those things in Vietnam. Like when we were up around Bong Son, the northern part of our AO was up at the top of the An Loa valley and it was the — What's the Black Horse division? That's what Patton's son was in. I forget what the designation of that division was, but anyhow, their AO started right at the top of our AO, the bottom of their AO did. Well, it didn't take the VC long to figure out, "Hey, we can operate back and forth across these two AO borders and never—." You know we always have a safe haven, just almost like being across the Cambodian border. If the 173rd moved north, they'd move north in the Black Horse division's AO. If the others came south, they'd come back into our AO. There was, as far as I know, never any coordination between the two units to try to do an anvil and hammer operation up there.

So let's see, what more can I tell you? Well, there was the big operation down around An Khe. That was in December, very early December, I think, '68. They sent me back down to An Khe to be again the assistant brigade aviation officer to coordinate the air assets in this operation. It was another three battalion-size assault into this area around Vinh Tan, which was an old French base. It was just northeast of the An Khe Pass in a valley there, and that had been area that the Americans really hadn't been in for awhile. Anyhow, I was on the radios back at An Khe. (I don't know if you've talked with Walt Henderson, but that was a pretty major operation of Walt's. Ned Costa was his crew chief). Anyhow, they were flying support of that operation and took a B-40 rocket in the rotor system. They crashed in some pretty tall trees and everybody was pretty shaken up. Walt was trapped in the pilot's seat. His legs were virtually crushed in the seat. He couldn't get out. They had a huge rescue operation with the rescue helicopters from the Air Force out of — what was the name of that air force base? Phukat. They

flew down there to help extract Walt, and we had some of our OH-6 crews virtually jumped from the skids into where Walt was. So they spent I don't know, quite a while, more than an hour cutting him out and lifting him out. Of course, that saved his life.

**Sigler:** And you were coordinating all this?

**Tompkins:** I was the guy back on the radios that was coordinating things from the start, but they pretty much took over the operation. There was a birddog FAC, a forward air controller for the Air Force, that pretty much took charge at the scene because he was flying over the scene, and he could see what was going on down there. So he did more of the coordinating, I think, than anybody once this thing started. I put the thing together, what aviation assets would be used and who would be reporting to who and what radio frequencies and all that stuff. But once it started happening, I didn't really have a whole lot of control from back where I was. And this FAC, he was awesome. He did just a fantastic job of coordinating everybody. I tried to tell him, "I'm back here; if you need anything, call me." And I tried to stay off the radio as much as I could. Walt actually knows the name of that FAC, and if you could ever talk with him, I think he could give you a very good overall picture of exactly what happened.

**Sigler:** It's Walt?

**Tompkins:** Walt Henderson, H-E-N-D-E-R-S-O-N. And he was the guy that was the pilot of the aircraft that was shot down and he was the most seriously injured. He knows the name of the FAC; I'm about 98 percent certain of that.

**Sigler:** And that was in December.

**Tompkins:** December of '68.

**Sigler:** And the area was?

**Tompkins:** Vinh Tan. It was II Corps and it was northeast of An Khe and actually not very far northeast of the An Khe Pass.

It was really a great unit to be a part of as a pilot because it was so unusual. Most aviation units you're a part of an aviation battalion or brigade and you have aviation support. Here you're actually assigned to the 173rd Airborne, infantry people. It gave you a different perspective. Like I mentioned about the 4th Division pilots, they're told to be on the ground at five-thirty. If our aviation people would have told us that, we'd have blown them off and supported the troops as long as we wanted because we were so attached to these guys on the ground. The 173rd had some of the toughest missions and were in some of the toughest situations, and we always felt like we gotta help these guys. So a lot of camaraderie between our pilots and our support units, and especially the company commanders who were the ones we

usually communicated with. They were on the ground and if they said, "We need you," we'd be there. So it was just a great unit. And the types of missions, as I mentioned before, we did a little bit of everything. Then I had I think it even better than most because they assigned me as the assistant brigade aviation officer several times, so I got some overall perspectives and felt like I really did something.

**Sigler:** Yeah. Well that would have been a fascinating job to get, as you say, the broader picture of what was actually going on. Okay. Well, thank you very much.

**Tompkins:** Thank you, Jack. I appreciate your interest and like I say, anything you need, give me a call.

End