

Interviewee: Nicholson, John W.
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good afternoon, General Nicholson.

Nicholson: Good afternoon, Jack.

Sigler: You understand that this interview is being recorded?

Nicholson: I so understand that it is being recorded, that's right.

Sigler: Okay. For the purpose of this interview, I am most interested in your time as commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion 503rd Airborne Infantry and the kind of support that the Casper Aviation Platoon gave you and your unit.

Nicholson: Well, I am happy to talk about that, Jack.

Sigler: Why don't we start with where you came from just before you took over the battalion and go on from there.

Nicholson: Well, I came to Vietnam in July of 1968, and I was waiting in place for a couple of weeks at the headquarters of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at L-Z English Bong Son, Vietnam. I was told I was going to take command of the 2nd Battalion 503rd Airborne Infantry. I was delighted, and I felt grateful for having a couple weeks to get acclimated because it was very hot and muggy and, you know, getting in shape and get used to what the rigors would necessitate. I took command in early August as a major, and my assumption of command ceremony was interrupted because one of our units was in contact, so we abruptly ended the assumption of command so that I could run to the helicopter and go to the area of contact. The helicopter was piloted by Casper pilots. That was my first acquaintance with them. And just like they did for the whole six months I was in command, they delivered, they took care of me, they took care of my troops. We literally put our life in their hands every day.

Sigler: Had you heard of this rather unique unit before?

Nicholson: No, I had not.

Sigler: Because it certainly never appeared in any other table of organization.

Nicholson: Right. It turned out that they were the unit of choice when it came to flying

command and control ships, flying special missions for us, and they literally pulled our fat out of the fire, saved lives, on several occasions. They were a young group, they were highly spirited, they were technically skilled, they controlled their fear and went anywhere we asked them to go during any weather conditions, day or night. They were remarkable. Especially since they were so young.

Sigler: You spoke of the command and control, and some of the pilots and crewmen I've talked to talk a lot about those missions. Can you tell me what they were like from your point of view?

Nicholson: Yeah. From my point of view, it was a flying headquarters for me which had an on-board communications system where I could communicate with several different parties at the same time and also with the pilots whom I would tell where I wanted to go. We'd brief them before we started and show them the general area of operations. Then once there we would get much more specific about going to specific tree lines or specific valleys or specific hilltops or specific stream beds or specific areas of enemy contact. And they would go there and they would bank to the left or bank to the right or hover in place or back up or make passes firing the door guns in support of our ground troops – whatever we asked them to do. Sometimes we would adjust artillery from the command and control ship. Sometimes we would help adjust air strikes. So it was a platform of command and control that literally ran the show from mid-air. The platform was piloted usually by Casper pilots – sometimes by other aviation units, but usually by Casper pilots. And we became known to each other, we depended on them, we had confidence in them, we asked for them by unit specifically and they never failed to deliver.

Sigler: What kind of team did you usually take? They were flying in Hueys, I assume.

Nicholson: Yes.

Sigler: Okay. What kind of a team did you take aboard when you were on these missions?

Nicholson: In my Huey, I usually took my S-3 —

Sigler: Your operations officer.

Nicholson: Operations officer was a major, Major Harry Skeins. Usually took my sergeant major who was a Master Sergeant Nichols. I took my fire direction officer sometimes, forward air controller sometimes, but usually it was the S-3 and the sergeant major and I.

Sigler: Any radio technicians?

Nicholson: No. The radios, they were pretty reliable. Sometimes we were transporting radios and batteries out to remote units to resupply them, and we used the command control ship for that quite a bit.

Sigler: And I assume this made a huge difference in your ability to handle the companies of the battalion.

Nicholson: That is correct. It made a huge difference because it was another very reliable means of communications. Secondly, you could go to the area where these ground units were either on the side of a mountain or the top of a mountain or in the valley or wherever, and you could literally see where they were even though usually you could not see them because of the dense foliage and the cover. Sometimes it was triple canopy so you couldn't see them. Sometimes they were in elephant grass that was eight feet high, so it was hard to see them there, too. But because of the mobility of the helicopters, you could go to where they were and you could sit on top of them, which wasn't always safe, because the enemy had a good shot at you if you were just hovering there. But it greatly enhanced the command and control capability. It enhanced the commanders vision of what was going on on the ground. It enhanced his *fingerspitzengefühl*, which is a German term which means a "fingertip feel for the battlefield," a feel for the battlefield, *fingerspitzengefühl*. I don't know how to spell it, but it's a term that known in some military circles and literally means a good feel for the battle. And for the troops on the ground to know that the commander would come to their AO [area of operations] and then deliver on what they asked for whether it would be fire support — it meant a lot to the troops on the ground to know that the commander – and in our case the battalion commander – would go to their AO day or night, frequently and night, too. Sometimes you couldn't go because the weather was just too bad. But usually you could go day or night, and go there and be prepared to provide the whole range of support: artillery support, air force tac. air support, insertion of additional troops, communications link ups with adjacent units with whom communications was faulty because of the intervening mountain ranges or hill ranges. And transmissions are impeded by the land mass. The helicopter got up there where it could sort of see over the military crest and beam down on the other side of that hill to the adjacent friendly units.

Sigler: Right, that would be important. This technique hasn't been duplicated very much in later periods, partially because of ground fire. Now, you did get some ground fire, quite a bit of ground fire, from what I understand talking to some of the pilots.

Nicholson: Yeah, we got shot at usually, and hit sometimes. The boys had holes in their ships and sometimes those holes would hit an oil line or fuel line, which meant you had just a matter of minutes to get the ship to a safe area in order to a make an emergency landing. What you did then, you called May Day! and "May Day" was a two word signal that you were in trouble. That causes other people to be silent on the net and listen to your May Day signal, where you are, what your trouble is, and it rallies support in the form of protection, and also the form of evacuation.

Sigler: Did the Vietnamese have ground to air missiles?

Nicholson: The enemy? The enemy did have ground to air guns, rifles and guns.

Sigler: Including the Russian 57mm anti-aircraft.

Nicholson: They didn't have those where we were very often because they were just too hard to carry in the mountains. But they had small arms and they had 51-caliber machine guns, and later they had surface to air missiles. So they could do a lot of damage. They killed JJ Clark, who was a classmate of mine who was commanding a battalion in the 173rd about two years after I commanded mine. He got killed – I think it was May of 1970. He hadn't been in command very long. He was one of my best friends and he got killed over there. Left a wife and six kids under the age of 14.

Sigler: In addition to the command and control, what other kinds of support did the Casper Battalion give your battalion?

Nicholson: They gave us reconnaissance, they gave us fire support, they gave us logistical re-supply, they gave us courier capability, they flew my bosses around frequently, and they flew visitors around our AO after we approved the flight plans..

Sigler: The brigade commanders.

Nicholson: And the deputy brigade commander, Colonel Ross Franklin, who was always out in the AO monitoring what went on.

Sigler: Was any one of those missions more important than the other or more common than the other?

Nicholson: Well, depends on whether you were being served or if somebody else was being served. [laughter] When we were being served, that was the most important mission. The vital missions were the emergency missions where you needed gunships to protect a downed bird or to protect an area where a med-evac helicopter was going in to dust off some wounded people. Those were the emergency missions. Now it was vital to have command and control because we covered a lot of ground. In a matter of minutes, you could cover more ground with a helicopter than it would take days to do as a ground unit.

Sigler: I know there's no way to generalize too much, but what kind of an area did your battalion normally deploy into?

Nicholson: It was widespread, and it was an area where we would insert a company or more up on a mountaintop and create a defensive position for them. You could register artillery support. You could use that location as a launchpad for ground patrols out into the area that the enemy had heretofore used with impunity. In other words, the enemy had total freedom of movement until we moved into the area, established a base, and then launched patrols out from that base to disrupt his communications, to destroy his caches of weapons, rice, sometimes money, and to generally take away from him his freedom to operate in that area.

Sigler: And when a company would set up a base like this, would they clear a helicopter

pad?

Nicholson: Yes. One of the first things you did was blow enough trees down so you could land helicopters, with chainsaws, sometimes we'd land a small dozer, and before nightfall we'd have berms protecting the perimeter, we'd have underground bunkers for protection against indirect fire, the mortar fire that they might send in on us, and line of site weapons – machine guns, recoilless rifles, rocket propelled grenades, small arms. We would have berms and, you know, dirt piled up, and we would have shelters with overhead cover usually before the sun went down.

Sigler: That's a lot of shoveling.

Nicholson: A lot of shoveling, it sure was.

Sigler: The landing zones – how would you mark them at night? How would you mark them for the incoming helicopters?

Nicholson: Well, you could use a strobe light if you weren't worried about divulging your position, or you could put some fuel oil in the bottom of a tin coffee can, some fuel oil on the top of some dirt or sand in there and light that, and that would burn so that from above you could see it, from a lateral distance you could not see it. But if you were above the horizon, you could see it if you got up to a certain angle – say you got up to a 45 degree angle, you could see it. Then you would use your radios to communicate, and the ground would then tell you where to fly, in what direction vis-a-vis the arrowhead created by your burning tin cans of oil. So you could place half a dozen cans of oil so they could form a sort of an arrowhead and then you could just say “in the direction of the arrow, go beyond that 500 yards and you will find a landing and we will have additional strobe lights at the landing.”

Sigler: You also mentioned that you provided fire support for the troops on the ground.

Nicholson: They did; they had little gunships, small helicopters, and they would mount guns on them and they would escort the command and control ships sometimes. And if you got in trouble, you could call for these little birds and they would come to your area – in minutes they'd be there. And they would go where the gunfire was coming from and they would suppress the enemy by firing into that area.

Sigler: When you were there, had they mounted the Gatling-type guns on the helicopters yet or was that later?

Nicholson: I'm not sure. I remember those on my next tour in Vietnam, but I don't know if we had them on those Casper ships or not.

Sigler: They did mount them at some point but I'm not sure of the date now.

Nicholson: I wouldn't want to say for sure.

Sigler: And then you mentioned also they also — protection when you were doing a med-evac.

Nicholson: Whenever a med-evac was needed, if a Casper ship was in the area, a Huey, we would use it for a med-evac. Of course, except in a dire emergency, you couldn't use the real small ships because it was a two passenger ship. You couldn't use those unless somebody was able to hang onto the skid. But the Hueys you could use. I remember when Bob Fox got killed on the 5th of December, 1968, and they brought his body back in a Casper bird. I met it at the pad, picked it up, carried it into the dispensary.

Sigler: Some of the saddest stories these guys have told me are going out and bringing the bodies back. How were the relations between the guys in the Casper Platoon and the other people in the brigade? Could you give me an idea of that?

Nicholson: Well, I think generally they were the same as between the Casper Platoon and my battalion. They were close and confident. They were tight and friendly, they were real good relationships.

Sigler: Certainly the morale in the Casper Platoon always seemed to be very, very high.

Nicholson: I think it was with everybody, not just the 2nd Battalion. We may have had somewhat of an advantage because we were relatively near – we were co-located at the same fire base, for our headquarters and the Casper Platoon.

Sigler: Both at L-Z English.

Nicholson: My companies usually were not at L-Z English, they were out in the jungle. But my headquarters was usually at L-Z English unless I moved it to a fire base. And I would command from a fire base frequently. But my tactical operations center, my bunkered-in command center, was at L-Z English.

Sigler: Where the majority of the headquarter staff kept control of things. In the six months you were there in command of the battalion, any major actions? I know there was constant action, but did any of the so-called major battles of the war take place?

Nicholson: No. That's my interpretation of the word "major." One of the major activities occurred on Christmas Eve, 1968, when we moved the whole battalion headquarters from L-Z English many miles away to a new fire base north of An Khe. We did it in one day; we did it on Christmas Eve. We started early in the morning and we moved three companies of troops plus the headquarters company. We moved our artillery battery, we moved our recon platoon, we moved key elements of the headquarters, plus a couple of metal containers we used as tactical operations center. We moved a dozer. We dug a hole deep enough in the ground so that everything was under cover by the time the sun went down. We used over a 150 Hook sorties. A Hook is a CH-47. It's a medium lift helicopter which the Caspers did not own. But the Caspers

protected them and provided the liaison, the command and control and the coordination capability to get those big birds to the right place with the right load at the right time.

Sigler: That's a terrific operation.

Nicholson: It was. And my S-3 was not there. We did it all with the 1st Lieutenant named Doug Hetler who now lives in Hampton, Virginia, who had been in the army all of about eighteen months.

Sigler: A brand new 1st Lieutenant

Nicholson: Yeah. And he coordinated all that and we got it done. We had tremendous support. We used trucks to get the troops the airfield at English, we used fixed wing aircraft to fly them up to An Khe. Then we used Hueys to make a combat assault at this fire base 20 kilometers north. Then we used Hooks to bring in the rest of the troops and the artillery and the steel conex containers that we used for a CP. And we had it all done by the time the sun went down on Christmas eve.

Sigler: That's incredible

Nicholson: Yeah, we felt pretty good about that

Sigler: When you had moved up north to An Khe, the Caspers continued to support the battalion?

Nicholson: Yes. That's where the support battalion for the 173rd was located, at An Khe.

Sigler: Well, of all the time you were there, does any one particular thing about the Casper platoon stand out in your mind?

Nicholson: Well, yes, and I told about it when I was talking about Stan Streicher Thursday.

Sigler: He was the platoon commander at the time you were there.

Nicholson: Yeah, and he's the one that volunteered to pilot a Huey up the side of a mountain with the necessary medicine, ammo, batteries to this platoon that was isolated up there on that mountaintop on abandoned fire base Armageddon, the platoon commanded by Jim Wilson from Storm Lake, Iowa.

[personal exchange not transcribed]

Sigler: Why don't you tell that story again for the benefit of the tape.

Nicholson: About Streicher? Well, I'll be glad to.

Sigler: Because it's a good story about the kind of support they provided.

Nicholson: Right. This was in the month of January, I believe, of 1969. And the 2nd Battalion had established a fire base about 25 miles west of the coast, and it was in the mountains and it wasn't near anything. It had very, very little artillery support except for 175 millimeter big guns out of An Khe which weren't very accurate. Anyway, we'd established a fire base out there in November and occupied it and sent patrols out from there to disrupt the enemy's lines of communication, to kill or capture the enemy and destroy his supplies. We were very successful and the enemy pretty much evacuated the area. So we made plans to evacuate the fire base. We thought we would play a trick on the enemy, that we would go through the normal evacuation routine of removing the artillery, removing the quad 50s, removing the troops, the antennas, the radars, and any vehicles we had there. We would backhaul the ammunition and then we would blow up the bunkers and blow up the defenses. Usually we did that when we evacuated a fire base. In the case of fire base Armageddon, we decided to leave a platoon behind hidden in the rubble for the purpose of apprehending, killing or capturing the enemy that almost always would come up and scavenge in the abandoned firebase. So we left the platoon from B Company up there on that mountain with instructions to stay low and don't reveal yourselves after we pull out. And indeed we did that. We had some communications with them, because we had placed teams on mountaintops between that firebase and our L-Z English base about 25 miles away. We needed a couple of relay teams because you couldn't communicate directly with them. Well, unfortunately, the weather socked in on us; the second day, the enemy did come up and try to scavenge at the firebase and our soldiers killed them. Well, that let the enemy know that there were still Americans up on this supposedly abandoned firebase. Of course, the enemy also knew that we couldn't fly in that weather because it was real thick and soupy. It also let the enemy know that if they dared to, they could go up and do battle with the troops that were left on that abandoned firebase, knowing that those troops on that abandoned firebase would have very little, if any, fire support. So we were concerned that the enemy would go up there and try to wipe out or capture this platoon, and we were hoping that the next day would bring good weather but it didn't – it was worse. So on the third day, we tried to drop re-supply of water, rations, batteries, and ammo, and we did it by sound. In other words, we loaded the bundles on a C-130 aircraft and they would push the bundles out and they would fall by parachute, hopefully onto the firebase or near enough to where the troops could see them and go get them. And we did that with a great deal of care and, hopefully, exquisite timing, doing all this kind by ear. We dropped four bundles and none of them hit in the firebase, nor did the fire base troops see any of them. And it was done at no small risk to the air force, because they were flying on instruments. And there were a lot of other mountains around, so they had to be careful what they were doing. Luckily, no air force aircraft got hit or crashed, but it didn't work. So the next day we sent two companies walking toward the firebase; it would be a two-day walk under ideal conditions, but unfortunately, the valley was flooded and the rivers had swollen way out of their banks. So the river, instead of being 20 yards wide was 200 yards wide and flowing rapidly. So we launched these two companies in a westward direction up the valleys and tried to navigate on the side of the mountain high enough so we weren't walking in water. It was really tough going, and there were enemy out there determined to impede us. Every time we'd send a different point man out, the enemy would shoot him. One guy's name was Tankersley, and he got hit in the shoulder. Another guy I think was Lloyd, he got hit in the stomach. So the enemy was set to pick us off. So we stopped. Then we're into the fourth day, and our troops are still out there. Their batteries are beginning to wear out, so they consolidated.

They were only using one radio in order to save batteries. We were wringing our hands figuring out how could protect or reinforce these guys. We were praying that the clouds would lift so that we could fly in there. Well, that's when Stan Streicher said "Hey Colonel, I've flown out there dozens of times. I know the area; I could practically fly it blindfolded." Which was baloney. He said "Let me take one of our Hueys and load it up with batteries and ammo and some water and medicine and I'll go out there by myself. In case I don't make it, we won't get a lot of guys banged up. I think I've got a technique for flying sideways up the side of that mountain. Because the prop wash will blow away the clouds sufficiently so that I can see the trees so I won't get my rotor blades busted in the trees." The rotor blades would always hit a few limbs, but they would be the thin outer limbs so they wouldn't hurt the rotor blades as much as tree trunks would. So I said "Okay." He did it, and he succeeded. He landed up there, and, of course, the troops were ecstatic. After he landed, the weather got even worse, so he stayed there. He didn't try to come down, because it is easier going up than it is coming down. He stayed there overnight – the next day the weather broke. So we flew out there with many helicopters and got our troops out. Streicher flew his airplane out. That was the saga of the closing down of fire support base Armageddon. That was the event the Casper Platoon, Streicher in particular, did that I'll always remember.

Sigler: They were a great bunch of guys.

Nicholson: Yes. And Buddy King, isn't he funny?

Sigler: Oh yeah, he really is.

Nicholson: He's a stand up comedian.

Sigler: Yeah, I got to run him down and get an interview out of him too.

End