

Interviewee: Rager, Robert E.
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: Good morning, Mr. Rager — [tape skips]

Rager: — was in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I hadn't quite finished high school and I wanted to go to the military, so I went and joined naval reserves. They said they would take me in the navy and it come about that I didn't go in the navy, I went in the marines. I spent a hitch in the marines; I got out, and then I went to work at Bethlehem Steel for a little while driving rivets, and I got out of there and then I went in the Air Force. That was too fast; people was moving too fast for me.

Sigler: When did you first join the marines?

Rager: In 1953, July. I got my navy reserve discharge aboard ship somewhere. I went back in the Air Force, and because of my marine training and that I was advanced in rank when I first got there. I went in the fire department and stayed in there for – oh, I don't know how long – until I got out.

Sigler: So you first got in the Air Force in the late '50s.

Rager: Yes. I got there – in February of '58, I went in the Air Force. And then I stayed there until I retired in 1975. But I was in the fire department. And then the Air Force started an air rescue program that involved fire fighters. When they brought the HH43-Bs to Keesler, I as there. I went over here to Alabama to get some flight training.

Sigler: Those were the big rescue helicopters.

Rager: Yeah. They were twin-tailed, twin-rotored – overhead rotors. I went over here to Selma and got some flight training and then I went back and stayed in air rescue. I was still a fire fighter, but I stayed in air rescue and whenever we had pilots or planes go down or something, that's what we did. We went and got out there to them because we could fly into the swamps and all that stuff without too much problems around there. So we did that, and I stayed at Keesler until 1968, when I got out to go to Vietnam. I went to Vietnam in February of '68 and

I stayed there until March of '69, I believe, something like that.

Sigler: What unit were you assigned to?

Rager: I was the 37th CES in Phu Cat.

Sigler: CES?

Rager: That's Civil Engineering Squadron. That's what the firefighters come under, so they was in civil engineers, and that's what we was in. But they had a Pedro [??] outfit down there that was 37th. I can't remember a lot of things like that, but the air rescue unit was on Phu Cat, was assigned there. I was an A-57170, which was a man on flying status for the fire department. Air rescue was the only place that we could be on flying status; it's the only thing they had. I got there at Phu Cat and was there until – well, I stayed there. In December, when the call come in that there was a plane down, and that we had a HH-43 that was damaged, well, it come into Phu Cat where it was from. That morning we lost a pilot; Captain Pollard [??] was aboard that aircraft.

Sigler: The HH-43 was what the Army calls the Hueys, is that correct?

Rager: Yeah. We had H-43Gs there because they were armor plated. The Bs were not armor plated. And that's what happened to one of them – the bullet went up through the console into the pilot. But he made it home, he brought the bird home.

Then we got a call – and I'm trying to remember – we got a call that there was an Army chopper down and there was people that was pinned inside, which that's not an uncommon call. You hear that just about every day. So when they left – I didn't go with them the first time went. They left and then we got a call that said they needed some more equipment. They needed something to get these people out because they didn't have it. It kind of irritated me, because rescue people know what a K-12 partner is in the Air Force. I know, because I trained them. Of course, we didn't have one.

Sigler: What exactly is a K-4?

Rager: It's a K-12 partner, and it's kind of like a chain saw but you put a round blade, any one you want, on it – masonry, metal, abrasive – and you crank it up like a chain saw. It's portable. But this one was built with covers around the mouth holes and things like that so that you could work in fuel.

Sigler: So you didn't set sparks off.

Rager: Right. It sparked, but they weren't hot when they hit out there enough to ignite diesel or JP4 [??] or whatever have you. So when they come and they said they didn't have it, I knew where there was one. Red Horse had it, and they was using it to cut bricks.

Sigler: Who was Red Horse?

Rager: Red Horse was an engineering outfit that was stationed there at Phu Cat. They done the construction work and all that stuff.

Sigler: They were Air Force or Army engineers?

Rager: They were Air Force.

Sigler: So you knew they had one of these.

Rager: Oh, yes. So we went to get it, but we couldn't get it, but the colonel from the base went and we got it. Then we went down to the chopper pad and I got aboard Pedro and we left. And we went out and circled the area and found a place to let ourselves down. We went down on the hoist, and there was some crew chiefs – I don't know who they were – but that's the first thing I asked for was a crew chief, because I was not familiar with Army choppers in that light. Basically frames and that stuff was about the same, but there was different areas where fuel lines come through and static lines come through and all this kind of stuff, so I had to have somebody there that knew. Then we went to cutting. We had an Army perimeter around us. I don't know how many Army – probably close to 100 men. They set up a perimeter around us and we stayed there until we got Walt out. He was jammed in —

Sigler: That was Walt Henderson.

Rager: Right. He was jammed in hard. When that chopper hit, it just jammed him slap into the nose. He had just metal everywhere around him and in his legs. We had to be very careful that we could cut and not hurt him, not injure him at all. We had a doctor in there, and that doctor's job was to keep Walt sedated and that so he didn't have too much pain. But also, he said that if we was there when the sun was going down, he was going to take Walt's legs off.

Sigler: To get him out.

Rager: Yeah.

Sigler: Frightening.

Rager: Well, yeah. I guess, you know, you talk to people when you do that. Walt, I was talking to him, but I don't think that he knew. He may have heard, but I don't think that he knew. It took us I don't know how long. Seemed like forever. But we finally got him to where me and the doctor could get his feet loose. After that, well, we used a belt, a gunner's belt, and several things to stabilize him to get him out. I cut the nose just about off of that bird. Finally we got him out and put him on a Stokes litter, took him up in a Pedro, and took him to Qui Nhon, I understand. That was the last time – the first and the last time – that I seen Walt in 35 years. It was amazing how they – you know, they was looking for people and looking for people. My nephew makes his living on a computer, and he's up in Washington, up in Maryland right by Washington DC. He found that name on there, and he went home and asked his mama – he said, “You reckon this is Uncle Bobby?” She said, “It's the only one I know.” So he called me, and sure enough, that's what it was. You talk about a man that didn't know – I didn't know what to say, because I had given Walt up for dead 35 years ago. When he left, I didn't expect to ever see him again. People say that's mean to think. No, it ain't mean when you see how he was in there and how he was blowed up and everything. You know, when you come in from 3,000 feet through a bunch of trees and that stuff – and teakwood, that's hard – and on a 60 degree slope you don't have no control over anything, but he got in there. But it was amazing how many of those men got out of that chopper. And some of them without a whole lot of injury, but every one of them was injured. Walt was the worst. I know they was all hurt, but not as bad as Walt.

Sigler: But the very fact that anybody got out of that —

Rager: Oh, yes. It's an amazing fact. He was shot down, and it could have went any which direction. Not only did the igniters hit him in the leg but they could have hit him other places on his body and they could have really been messed up in that chopper, had they had more firepower where they was shooting at, where the gooks was shooting. It come about when they got him out, then they had to lift the Army troops out of there. There was an LZ, I don't know, maybe a mile and a half, two miles away, and they started lifting them. And they lifted up to the last two Army men. One of them had an R-100 antenna on them and the other one was a lieutenant in charge of the platoon that was there. And they went up – when they got to the chopper, the hoist broke. There was a crew chief in there, Sergeant Franklin – big, big black boy. He reached and got hold of them and held them until they went to the LZ. He was so tight again there, or they tell me – I didn't see them, but they tell me that his shoulder had gone into the railing on the door, that it was actually penetrating his body. Held them. Then when they come back, well, they couldn't get us. There were three of us left; they couldn't get us because they didn't have no hoist. So they told us over the loudspeaker what they was doing and left – or over the ground radio – and left.

Sigler: By now it's sundown, also.

Rager: Yes sir, it's getting dark. So we waited, I don't know, seemed like forever. But it did get dark. And after dark, it wasn't too long after dark – I don't know how long, really, but there was activity in that area and it was the gooks coming up there to go look at that aircraft to get ammunition and that stuff. I'm sure that's what they was after. But they wasn't – oh, I don't know – at the time, I don't guess they was 20-25 yards from us. We was under a great big huge teakwood tree. I mean, it was huge. That thing was probably 8-10 feet in diameter, if they get that big. That's what it looked like to me. Sergeant Gunter [??] was that boy's name, I think, that was with us. He called the Army, told them where we was at and said that because there was activity on the ground, we'd need gunships. So they said, "Okay." Crown was in charge of that; I remember that, some colonel. They brought six ships and the circled the area and they called down and said that they had to wait for a flare ship, I guess it was. Anyway, they couldn't see us without that; they couldn't help us without them, where our position was. But they called and they said, "Okay, you've got a strobe; put it up where we can see it and we'll know where you're at." Well, you don't light a strobe when there's people running all over that woods that want to shoot you. He said if we wanted to come out of there, it had to be done. They had to identify us, where they was at. Because if those gunships needed to use their guns, they had to know where they was going to shoot. So they flew around there and protected us until a dust-off come. He lowered the hoist and he picked up the other two. I made sure they was on the penetrator and I sent them up. Then I got on there and I went up.

Sigler: You were the last man out of there.

Rager: Yes. That's the way it should have been, because I was the ranking man there. But they had that big – I call them strobes – underneath the chopper, and that thing lit up like daylight. And when you're going up between the earth and that chopper and there ain't nothing but a light – that's all you can see. You can say, "Well, them dudes are still out there; they can see me just as good as I can." But as it was, I give credit to the Lord; he was with us and He took care of us. And He also took care of Walt and all the boys that was there. We ended up with that and they made it in a magazine – I don't know what all. But it seemed like to me that everything that was done was just – it was amazing how it was done. Not what I did, because I was trained to do exactly that. But all the men that was there, all the people that helped, all the pilots and everybody — them Pedros was taking on fire earlier in the day; going in that area, they was taking on fire. I don't remember – Walt and them was flying this colonel somewhere. I don't know what their function was. They told me, but I don't remember. But it worked well. And the Army troops – the very next day I had Army troops —

[interruption]

I don't remember everything. And I set sometimes and I think about it and I wonder, you know

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Sigler: It's been 40 years since this happened.

Rager: Well, yeah, right. I thought about that. And I read the "Casper Down" and all that, and I talk to Cliff every now and then and a few other guys. But still, age takes away some things. I'm 73 years old, so I'm getting things taken away from me. But I like to go to reunions when I can, because then I can see those people and know that I was a part of it and that in my time, that was what I was supposed to do, I reckon.

Sigler: But you did a very, very good job of it.

Rager: Well, like I said, I was trained to do that. And without a brag, I could do my job very well. I was one of those people that was a natural in that think. He wasn't the first man I ever cut out of a bird. Most of it was planes – T-28s, T-6s, things like that when we had trainers and all that around. And we didn't have none when I was at Phu Cat because they always parachuted out and they always got out over what we call VC Island. Then you'd go pick them up over there. But it was within sight of the tower where we was at, where they'd parachute out, go down, and it wasn't no big deal there. In fact, I had more emergencies in the states than I had there. And it was amazing to me, because we had 100s and everything that was going out of there just loaded with ordinance. Going out, fly their mission, and coming back. And Charlie's sitting right there on the mountains waiting for them. When they come off the end of the runway, they'd shoot at them. So these guys loaded with ordinance, you couldn't just pull the nose up and go; you had to fly it up. There wasn't no such thing as making a combat landing or a combat takeoff that I know of. A landing, yes, but not no takeoff.

So we got that, and like I say, it was something amazing when my — see, I don't have a computer; I don't like them. Like I say, I don't have any use for it. But my son does, and right now he's in college; he's in Fruitland Bible School. And he took the messages from Walt and called back to Walt or whatever they do on those things – emailed him – and kept in touch with them. And they got to go with us this time.

[conversation about reunion experiences not transcribed]

Until all this happened, they had no knowledge of this; they had none. I've got a Silver Star. I kept it away. It was in the bottom drawer of my cabinet in there along with papers and that stuff. But I don't know – to me, I've done a job that I was getting paid to do, in a uniform that that's what it was for. To me, it's like those boys in Iraq and that now – they're there because they wanted to be there and they're doing a job because that's the way they want to do it. So it worked. I didn't have no hard time over there at Phu Cat. It was pretty good. In fact, to be in the zone we was in, you had to fly in and out of there; you couldn't drive nothing in and out because there wasn't no roads. Route 1 or whatever you call that, the supply line road – they blowed every bridge and that that was on that, hanging around there. I'm trying to think of the name of the town – I can't even remember – I got some citations from those people around there

by working with them on certain things. I'm proud of what I've done, yes. But to me, it's just like looking at everyone else that wears a uniform. Any one of those in a uniform would do the very same thing for anybody that's in their outfit. It doesn't matter. Since the Army is the only branch that I wasn't in or affiliated with – but now I am, because I was adopted into Casper.

Sigler: That's right. So you're now part of the 173rd Airborne Infantry Brigade.

Rager: Right. People say, "How did you do this?" "I didn't do it. They did it." I didn't even know it till they told me. Walt wrote and sent me the medallions. And then in Nashville I had an Army sergeant major give me one of those things from the Army for meritorious service. I had no earthly idea that this man was going to do that, because he was a fine figure of a man in his Army uniform with all them stripes and all the ribbons that he had on him. But he took the time to come and talk to me, and I really appreciated that. I've talked to many men, generals on down, but I really appreciated him, you know, to show his appreciation, show the Army's appreciation.

Sigler: They sent him over from Fort Campbell, didn't they?

Rager: Yeah, he come from somewhere. He come with the honor guard, maybe, or something, they come from over there. I'm not sure. But I know it was a fine — and of all places where he give it to me, it was on the dance floor. Then me and my wife could dance one or two dances; now if we could dance one or two, we'd be all right. But it's fine. I appreciated my life in the military. I was made for the military, I always believed that, that that was my calling.

Sigler: You went on for a full career.

Rager: Oh, yes. I spent 23 years in it. When I got out of there, I spent six weeks in the hospital for what'd they call it? Post traumatic distress syndrome. They told me that when I got back here, there was no airplanes, no guns, no nothing, and it got me down. But I was sure proud that they had that there, and that I went there.

[conversation about family military commitments not transcribed]

Sigler: Did you ever get another tour in Vietnam, or was this your single tour there?

Rager: I was just a single tour. When I got back, I was stationed at Barksdale, Louisiana, at Shreveport. I was up there when Hurricane Camille come through the coast, and my house was right there. The storm tore it up. So I was in SAC, and you don't get out of SAC when you get in there. I started off in SAC at Columbus. You don't get out of there. But when they called

and told me my house was tore up and all that stuff from Camille and that, and I needed to get back there, well, I went to the Red Cross – I guess it was the Red Cross – I went to somebody anyway, and they said, “Okay.” So they give me a paper and stamped that thing with a red stamp. And before I got to my house down here, my furniture was already there. I’m not joking. I got out of there so fast. And then they stationed me back at Keesler. So that’s where I finished my career. In fact, I went back to work as a Civil Service in one of the same jobs that I had.

Sigler: As a Department of Air Force civilian, then.

Rager: Right. Yes, Civil Service. But I had gone from the lowest position to the highest position that you could go there. I have no complaints. I worked 24 on and 24 off and I worked 8 hours, sometimes in the dispatch – I was in charge of the dispatch for I don’t know how long. But I don’t have no complaints about that. I complained more about Bethlehem Steel when I worked there than I did anywhere else. But I’ve got scars from driving rivets; I’ve got knots on my hands because driving those rivets was like shooting a .45 eight hours a day, sometimes 12 and 16 hours a day.

Sigler: Well, the guys in the Casper Platoon all think very, very highly of you.

Rager: Well, I think highly of them. All the ones that I have met, consider personal friends. I hope they do me.

[conversation about reunion attendance not transcribed]

End