

**Interviewee:** Head, Richard  
**Interviewer:** Jack Sigler  
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**Sigler:** Good morning, Mr. Head. You understand that this interview is being recorded?

**Head:** Yes.

**Sigler:** Let's start with just before you got into the service – how you got in and how you got into the Casper Platoon.

**Head:** Okay. I enlisted in the Army in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Sigler:** In what year?

**Head:** That would have been about 1962. I went to basic training and then was assigned to the artillery at Fort Sill. I was in a Pershing missile battalion and we got deployed to Europe, and I decided I'd take all those big scores I'd gotten on the Army battery – they all qualified me for OCS. I applied for OCS and was accepted, and went to artillery OCS at Fort Sill. I was commissioned there in – I guess it would have been – I would have been commissioned July 6, 1965. I was commissioned in the field artillery, and then went to – let's see, Fort Hood was my first assignment, but I only spent three months there and then I came back to Fort Sill again. I've been assigned to Fort Sill five times [laughs]. So I was there, and I had applied for flight school, and lo and behold, I was accepted. So I went to flight school at – well, it started at Fort Wolters in Texas. That must have been the early part of 1966. These days I don't remember exactly, but approximately then. And went through flight school, got my wings, and was sent off to— we all knew we were going to Vietnam, there wasn't any questions. Was shipped off to Vietnam. I can remember – I'm trying to think of the year – I think it was 1967, and I do remember the date exactly because we were sitting there in the Oakland Army Base waiting for our flight. I don't know how that set up – all I know is I reported to the Oakland Army Base and they said, "Okay, your flight's at so and so." And then it dawned on me it was Friday, the 13th of January, 1967, I think it was. I thought, "Oh, Lord. Let them hold the plane" and they did. So we left for Vietnam – phooey on datelines and everything else – I know we left there on the 14th on January.

**Sigler:** Your qualification was in helicopters?

**Head:** Yes. I was 22 years old, and on my way as a lieutenant to Vietnam to fly helicopters. And of course, we got to Vietnam, needless to say. That was in Bien Hoa or whatever it was then; that's where I came in. That's where the 173rd happened to be stationed at that time. I didn't have any assignment at all except Vietnam so I guess it's \_\_\_\_\_[??] or something like that – they broke you down. A guy that was in my flight school class and I were standing

next to each other, talking, and they said, “Okay, you two, you’re going to the 173rd Airborne Brigade.” “Oh, well, where’s that?” And they said, “They’ll send a bus for you, to pick you up.” So two officers and a bunch of enlisted men got on this bus and they took us over and they dropped us off at brigade headquarters. Bob MacGlaflin was the name of the other pilot and they sorted us both out and gave us transportation to the Casper Platoon. I said, “The Casper Platoon? As in ‘friendly ghost’”? He said, “That’s it exactly.” So the next thing I knew I was in the Casper Platoon. I can give you some names of people over there if you want.

**Sigler:** Sure.

**Head:** Okay. Well, the commanding officer was Jerry [??] Terry. His first name was really Tom but he always went with “Jerry” Terry. Then there was Bob MacGlaflin, and he was with me, and then there was me. Oh, some of the other names – George Heard, Chuck Reese, Pete Hooper – “Super” Hooper, Bill Reynolds, Grover Hutchins – we always used to call him “Gomer.” I ran into him at the Casper reunion and he said, “You know, the only people in the world I let call me Gomer are Caspers,” or General Dean. He was General Dean’s pilot.

**Sigler:** And Dean was brigade commander at that point.

**Head:** Yeah. And last time I saw Dean, he was four stars. So anyhow, I just got together my gear and you fly a mission. Of course, we had eight Hueys and six OH-13s; I think that was the breakdown of the aircraft. My first missions were – they were getting you “in country qualified.” They used to say that. And eventually become an aircraft commander, which I did. But I was also checked out in the H-13, which really we used to fly aero-scout missions in the H-13, plus just regular missions, usually taking battalion commanders up to see if they could find their battalion. I’m joking on that, of course; the battalion commanders were very good and they were always very good to us because we were kind of their eyes and ears. So that went on for – let’s see – I think, if I remember correctly, I think the first operation I actually flew on was Cedar Falls, and that was up in and a round the Iron Triangle. I learned what it is to be a support aircraft, because most of our time was spent – we had these big radio consoles in the back and then the battalion commanders would come up with us and we’d fly them around. And if any of their staff needed reconnaissance, we’d fly those, too. And occasionally if we got out there and we weren’t doing anything particular, we’d get into running air supply. Every once in a while we’d come under fire, and of course, we returned fire. But we weren’t by any means gunships. The hot stuff was the H-13. They were a little funny when they took the stretchers off of those things like you see in M\*A\*S\*H and they put two machine guns on it. Then we’d fly around out in front of the grunts and see if we could attract fire, which we usually did.

**Sigler:** Was your aircraft armored?

**Head:** The H-13, the only armor it had on it was a plate underneath the pilot and the gunner’s seat. It was kind of ceramic [??] armor. But now, we would get those H-13s so loaded down with ammunition and fuel and everything that you had to really pay attention when you were taking off. Landing wasn’t so bad because you used up a lot of the weight in the fuel, but it was

fine. So we did that. And then we finished Cedar Falls, and then came the “big one” as we refer to it. Junction City. And in Junction City, the 2nd of the 503rd Infantry Battalion – we had the 1st, 2nd, and 4th, and then later on in the progression of the brigades staying in Vietnam, they sent over the 3rd battalion. So we would be assigned to support a battalion on a given day. You always had to – there were always aircraft in maintenance or aircraft with some kind of trouble and needed to see the mechanics. And we had our own mechanics, but they kind of blended in with the aircraft support because the 335th Aviation Company, the Cowboys, was attached to the brigade. So we flew with them quite a bit. Matter of fact, I once flew formation with them. The standing joke was Chalk 10 formation on nine, one mile. I wasn’t used to flying formation, so I gave myself a pretty wide permit. The Cowboys used to pride themselves on how tight a formation they could —. But speaking of the Cowboys, of course they were at Bien Hoa and we were in the same compound; we just shared the same everything. But what happened with them was really kind of woke my eyes up with how dangerous it could be if you didn’t pay attention. They used to pride themselves on flying a very tight formation. And one day their commander – and I can’t for the life of me think of his name. I didn’t know him; I didn’t have much to do with him. But the commander and their executive officer were flying aircraft and leading a flight of ten, and they – what evidently happened was they meshed rotor blades with the second aircraft. His name I used to know. But of course, they crashed. They were both inverted when they crashed. Of course, the rest of the company followed them down – not crashing. One of the guys that was there – can’t remember his name – I can see him but I can’t remember — he said somebody had said that there were four dogs in there. They probably would have believed them because he was a little taller than I am. He said he walked by the wreckage of both of them. He said the skids were the highest portion. Of course, the things were inverted, so the skids were sticking up. And he said “... and they came up to my shoulder.” You know how tall a Huey is. I mean, it just smacked down in a paddy, that’s all it was. But they were – God, that must have been awful to ride it down, because they knew they weren’t going to come out of that one in any shape. So anyway, that was the lead-off for Junction City. It turned out there was Junction City 1 and Junction City 2, in progression. So the rest of the time was just routine missions, if any mission in a war is routine. We’d fly aviation support for the battalions, fly occasional aero-scouts. A typical day, you’d get up at seven – or get ready to go for a briefing at seven, and then off into the air you went. And that’s what you did. You stayed out there the whole day and came back in. If you had people taking fire or something – it was all just kind of missions kept popping up. There wasn’t any particular battle plans for the whole operation. The Caspers were just there for whatever the brigade. And of course, we had a brigade aviation officer up at brigade headquarters. And that was Chuck Reese. Then Bob MacGlaflin wound up being the assistant aviation officer. So I wound up with a lot more hours than Bob did. But the routine was, somebody would get the message down to us, and we knew what the missions were for the next day. They got posted on the board, and that was the way it went. I can probably think of some specific mission, but they all kind of blurred together. Your main job was to get there on time, get the people you’re supposed to have, take them where they wanted to go if it was acceptable, and if it was not putting the aircraft at risk. So we went right along and we didn’t have any trouble at all.

Every once in a while somebody’d come back with a bullet hole or two in their ship. Who was it? Dale Birney, I think it was, that backed his aircraft into a tree in a very tight LZ. And of

course, it was the worst aircraft we had, so we just — he said he knew he was in trouble when he saw the tail rotor come by the cockpit. But that thing was determined “not reusable.” So they brought in a sky crane and picked it up out of the LZ and took it off to wherever they take dead Hueys. But the nice part about it was, we got a new aircraft. Because 121 – or was it 621 – anyhow, it was 21 on the end of the thing – it had the old L-9 engine, which is really underpowered compared to the L-11. And the helicopter we got was one of the ones that was just coming in the country. It had the L-13 engine in it and it would pull the house up if you had to. And of course, nobody was injured; that was the best part.

So matter of fact, the entire time I was in the Caspers – let’s see, Steve Green, who regularly comes to and thoroughly supports the CAPO or whatever you want to call it – the organization. Steve was a warrant officer at that time. But we’re still good friends; we see each other at the year, and his son, Schuyler, is kind of the platoon’s official photographer. He’s a good photographer. So we get some pictures out of each reunion.

Steve Green, he got wounded. He was on the ground when it happened, and he took some rounds. The grunts went and got the shooter, but Steve was banged up in the hand and in the arm. So he got med-evaced, and I guess went to Japan. But he came back to us. They asked him in Japan, “Where do you want to go?” and he said, “Right where I was.” So they found us, wherever we were at that time. Oh, I know where we were – we were up north. And that was what really was big, coming after Junction City. There was Junction City 1 – that mountain over there – and it was right on the border with whatever is there.

**Sigler:** Cambodia, I believe.

**Head:** Yeah, yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. And so we played around there for a while, and then we came back in and got a little bit of a break. Then we went out on Junction City 2. And Junction City, the defining point in that was a big huge Michelin rubber plantation that had a couple of airfields there for when they were doing rubber and what have you. And I forget exactly what – I never got in on the so-called “big picture.” Nor did most of us. They did the planning. They said, “Okay, we’ll need this many helicopters at this place at this time, and carry on.” That’s what we did. By that time, of course, I was a 1st lieutenant. I got the 1st lieutenant at Rucker before we left flight school. You know, it happened because of the enlistment time I had; I was making more money than other 1st lieutenants because I could add on those years.

**Sigler:** \_\_\_\_\_[??]

**Head:** Yes. So anyhow, they did that. And then they split us off and a group of us — the platoon was actually operating in two locations, one still at Dak To and the other down on the coast at Tuy Hoa. We were sent down there, according to what I was told, that intelligence – right – suggested that NVA – not the Viet Cong but the NVA – was sending troops down there, and their mission was to disrupt the rice harvest. So we went down to Tuy Hoa and stayed there for I forget how long – it must have been a couple of months. Then they got the platoon back together. But the interesting thing about Tuy Hoa was for about a month of that – we were staying on the airfield – they had a real live airfield – and they had an aviation company that had been there and they had moved out. But all the barracks were there. So we had a roof

over our head. After Dak To – the monsoon just wears you down, it grinds at you.

**Sigler:** When you went down to Dak To – did they move one of the infantry battalions that you were in support of?

**Head:** Down to where? To Tuy Hoa?

**Sigler:** Yes, Tuy Hoa. I'm sorry.

**Head:** The Hoa shows up a lot of times over there, just like Bien Hoa. Anyhow. So we had half a platoon down at Tuy Hoa and the rest of the platoon up at Dak To. And then we all got together again, one big happy family. And where did we go from —? We went from Tuy Hoa back to Dak To, except that in the couple of months that we were at Tuy Hoa, they made all kinds of arrangements and the couple of ships that we had up there, they had been based out of – they were flying out of Kontum, which was slightly south of Tuy Hoa, because the 4th Infantry Division had moved in and taken over what used to be our base camp at Dak To. So we had — then they put — the brigade had its new headquarters up on a hill overlooking Dak To, and they had Chuck Reese and Bob MacGlaflin there. Then we got a new aviation officer, and that was Colonel Hornish. He was a major there and he made colonel. Then he got to command the 2nd Battalion. I know that. By that time we were all sort of hither and yon. And so we ran our operation – like, we'd come back at night or go out in the day from Kontum, and then we'd fly up to the Dak To area and support everything from the 4th Division to what was left of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, because the rest of them were getting in shape to come back up. So we had troops and — okay, maintenance was back at An Khe. And in the midst of all this moving around, it was difficult to keep track of people, because we had some at Kontum – that was us – and with our aircraft. We had both H-13s and Hueys. Our missions were very much the same. The reason they wanted us back in particular, though, was the fact that we knew the terrain. And I'll get to that in a little while. We knew the terrain around Dak To very well, because we had flown months in there. We had worked that area, as I think I mentioned, earlier when we first came to Dak To we were working out where the 4th Division had worked and we were staying – the aircraft were staying on their airfield. They pushed us up against a fence and said, "Here, this is where you guys will live. Good luck." And we thought, "Oh, boy, this is going to be fun." It wasn't, because the monsoons started then. I can remember sitting in a tent – we all were in tents – and listening to AFN reporting on the Israeli conflict with – who were they fighting? The Egyptians at that time?

**Sigler:** '67? Egyptians, yeah.

**Head:** And we were down there and that night the monsoons started. We were sleeping in a Hex tent. There was Jerry [??] Terry, George Heard, and me. And we'd left the roof flap open for some ventilation. Well, we got some ventilation; we found out how hard it could rain during the monsoon. The next morning, the place was just a sea of mud. And we lived in that mud, even when we went back to Dak To. I'm still like 23 years old, and I'm the second highest in command as far as flying aviators. So people deployed back to the never-never land. Then the

rest of us would sit there and we'd just — I don't want to make it sound routine, because no mission in Vietnam was completely routine. You always had to be on the alert for something. But we were pretty thorough in what we did, and we were a very tightly knit organization. There weren't any big noise-makers or troublemakers or people going off half-cocked or going off on their own or whatever. I suppose if you got to fight a war, it works to go that way.

Anyhow, so we went — let me see – Junction City 1, Junction City 2, then come down to — okay. So anyhow, when we got back up and completely assembled at Kontum, we had all the aircraft and we had the northwest quadrant of this airfield, and it was a good-size airfield because the Cowboys were there and they had their unit spread out. So I was the ranking officer there at the time, because Jerry [??] Terry was rotating back to the States and I was the next in line. So no big ceremonies or anything like that. So sort of by default I became the Casper commander.

**Sigler:** \_\_\_\_\_ [??]

**Head:** Yeah, and that's what my record so states. Now I'm saying to myself, "Now, what do I do?" And of course Bob MacGlaflin was up at the brigade at Dak To. I had him by three months or he would have had the honor. But I took it in stride, I guess. We didn't have any great big problems or what have you. A lot of people had been there for damn near as long as I had. Anyhow, so we went on to there, and then we were up at Dak To. I know the dates, because it was October and November of '67, and what that will kick in is the Hill 875. I flew what to my knowledge was the first recon flight of Hill 875, except that we had been working in that area quite a bit when we were up at Dak To the first time. So we kind of knew our way around the neighborhood, so to speak. My passenger, I don't remember his name but he was a fairly new major and he was the S-3 of the 2nd Battalion, and I don't remember who was the commander of the 2nd Battalion – I remember there was a Colonel Partain [??] – and I can remember him because I saw later he was a major general some place. But anyhow, I said – and there's been a lot of activity down there. Because I was looking down right through the trees in a H-13 – you had excellent visibility – and all I could see was a very much increased trench network. Had I known that probably half the North Vietnamese Army in that area was looking up their gun sights at me, I might have been a little more cautious. And then this major says to me, "Oh, no, intelligence doesn't report anything like that in this area." And I said, "Who?" And he said – I remember the conversation – he said, "Intelligence; they've been out looking, too." And I thought, "Hmmmm. Okay, I'm not going to jeopardize my career. I'm not going to tell him to go take a walk." Then of course came the battle for the hill itself.

**Sigler:** Would you sketch out generally what happened as background to that?

**Head:** As far as I know – see, we weren't privy to – what we would do is we'd go there and we'd pick up the battalion commander or whoever's going out on the recon, and the Cowboys would take care of the rest. They flew some Air Force in there, and they had those daisy cutter bombs and they were trying to carve out a LZ. But the thing that I remember the most after we got into it is that a friend of mine was the S-3 of the artillery battalion – Charlie Brown, that's what his name was. Charlie Brown. We'd make a call sign "Good Grief" or something like that. But anyhow, he said — and we were in the thick of it — and he said that they had ignored one — I

remember this to this day – I don't remember the date, but I remember sitting there with Charlie Brown wondering where the next mission was going to be. He said, "They violated one basic principle of war," and I said, "What was that?" And he said, "Even if you attack with 400-some odd men," and that's about what the battalion strength was, "if you attack one at a time in line, you're attacking —

**Sigler:** One man deep.

**Head:** One man deep. Yeah, that's exactly it. And that's what they did. There was a program on television on one of the channels and I just happened to hit it, and it was one of those Vietnam series, but then they had Hill 875. And I said to my wife, I said, "Come look at this." And she says, "Is that you?" I said, "It could be." You know, it's a helicopter and it's strapped onto to a pilot; that could be me. So Dak To – then they put in the 4th Battalion with Colonel Johnson. (That was my wife's maiden name, by the way – no relation). But anyhow, he did what they should have done in the first place. He flanked them and came in from the side, and they weren't prepared to defend from the side. The 4th Battalion demonstrated that quite adequately. So anyhow, we finally got the mess cleared off the hill. And it was so bad that the wounded or whatever was left was actually hiding under the dead. Boy, those kids had shell shock. I guess I did, too, but you know, I was busy. So we got all the wounded off. Somebody said – and I can't verify this or anything but I do remember this – that the highest ranking man on the ground still capable of fighting under his own power was a staff sergeant. It was a bludgeoning; we really got taken to the cleaners.

**Sigler:** And that's a whole battalion.

**Head:** Yeah. The 2nd Battalion. They were the ones that took the whack, and the 4th Battalion just came in and cleaned house. Of course, they were fresh and they were attacking from the right direction, not the wrong direction. We had all our air support, too, in place. The Cowboys had the Falcons, that was their gun team, and they were up and running. And we had our two M-60s and the H-13s. I was mainly concerned in helping out the lift to get the wounded and the dead off. But we managed to do that. And then things quieted down. There was a famous picture in *Life* magazine and it showed a formation, and it was a memory celebration for the dead. They had all these empty boots lined up in formation in front of the front row of people who are participating in this – I guess you'd call it memory formation or memory service or something like that. But I still have the original; somebody sent me the original from *Life* magazine and they said, "Is this you doing this?" And I sent a letter back and said, "Yup."

Then that took us into Thanksgiving. I've always said the best Thanksgiving dinner I ever had and the best reason to give thanks was we were not on that stinking hill any more. It was going to take a while for the battalion – and the brigade – I mean, when that happens to a battalion and a tight-knit unit like the brigade was, it takes a while to get your act together again. But we did, and we went right on just taking missions. I was coming up getting ready to —

**Sigler:** Your year was almost up.

**Head:** Yeah. Then there's the Thanksgiving holiday and Christmas holiday and nobody does a lot – we did some minor search and destroy missions, the best I can recall. Colonel Hornish, as I said, was aviation officer. I had been set to go on an R and R; I never got one. But I was set to go on R and R to go to Hong Kong and buy a suit or something like that. I didn't have any idea – I'm still like 23 years old. I see these pictures of these thing that they're sending back from Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan of these KIAs and it shows their name and their rank and their age, and they were all older than I was then. But I managed to survive to the 5th. I never took my R and R because it would have put me up there the minute we went into 875, and I said, "No way." And they were very appreciative of that.

When I came out of there and I came back and was assigned to Fort Wolters, which is a primary helicopter center.

**Sigler:** When you left, the brigade was still assigned to Dak To? I mean, that's where headquarters was?

**Head:** Yes. As far as I know. Of course, you have to understand we had people spread out – maintenance was at An Khe, and I guess like the AG office and everything else, that was at An Khe. But that's about it in a nutshell, I suppose. I never was one of these fans of keeping meticulous notes or "Dear Diary, got shot at again today." I'm glad if I had to do it, I did it with an outfit like the 173rd. Because I've had people tap me because I have a 173rd Airborne emblem on my ball cap. "Were you with the 173rd?" "Yes."

**Sigler:** You were not a paratrooper, though, were you?

**Head:** No. But I could fly. Not everybody in the platoon by any means – mostly enlisted. But I can remember sometimes – when we were down around the Bien Hoa region – and this lieutenant was sitting here chomping on a donut and he said – I remember this very clearly – he said, "You guys must be the only legs in this outfit." And I said, "Yeah, but how did you get that donut?" He said, "They brought them in —." I said, "Who brought them in?" "The Caspers." "Well, how 'bout that." You get your own donut next time, Jack, and see how far you get. I do remember that. But hell, why was I going to go around and jump out of an aircraft when I could fly it. But that's about it. And of course, over the years Caspers have tended to keep in touch with each other. You know, for a unit as small as we were, and jeepers, I can still name the names and call it off and what have you. But we've always prided ourselves in doing the job that we were sent to do. The brigade was the only separate brigade in the Army, and we were the only separate aviation platoon in the entire Army. And aviation was big time in those days. Matter of fact, you were glad if you were an aviation when you got out and decided to keep going in the army if you survived all the risks, because aviators got hit more in proportion to others because they didn't need that many more aviators. But I survived all that and then got out of Vietnam.

**Sigler:** When you got out, you went back and were reassigned in the United States?

**Head:** No, I came back – I was still in, as a matter of fact, when I came back and I had my assignment and it was at Fort Wolters, Texas. So I spent a couple years there working on my

degree and we had a neat set-up there where we would fly half a day — then I got picked — because of my performance, I got picked to go to flight evaluation, to be an instructor pilot and then subsequently a flight commander. Flight evaluation was the one that trained pilots to be instructor pilots and I gave check rides and provided formal training in like particularly power-off maneuvers. So that was fun and I enjoyed that. Then I went to the advanced course at Fort Sill. And while I was in the advanced course, I got a letter from the Department of the Army asking me if I would like to, at the completion of my next tour, if I would like to — and I knew that my next tour was going to be something short — if I would like to go on to a university of my choice and complete my degree. See, I had my two-year degree but they wanted people with four years. And I thought, “Hell, yes, I’ll do that.” And they said, “Well, pick a university and keep us posted.” I said, “You bet.” They said, “Well, how are you going to like Korea?” And I said, “What?” “How are you going to like Korea?” I said, “What about Korea?” They said, “That’s where you’re going, but wait till you get official notice.” And I said, “You bet.” And so as I said, we were in the advanced course — and there were some in there, including a friend of mine, that had been assigned to Fort Sill before they went — they just sort of walked across the street in the advanced course. And he said, “We’ve got a tactical assignment.” And we went up there to the post headquarters at Fort Sill to the AG’s office and he said, “Yup, here you are, you’re in APO — blah, blah.” I said, “Where in the hell is that?” “Oh, that’s Korea.” Beats the hell out of going back to Vietnam! No, I enjoyed my tour in Korea. It was easy duty and the quarters were decent and everything else. Anyhow, that’s my after-arms story. Then I stayed in until 20, and I had to retire at 20 because I was a reserve officer on active duty, and that was the limit. Actually I had a little bitty bit over 20, but it doesn’t make that much difference.

**Sigler:** Did you transfer to the aviation branch when that was formed?

**Head:** I was out before that was formed. I got out on the first of January, 1983. I had been on an ROTC assignment at Northern Illinois University, and that was my final assignment. So anyhow, that’s it.

**Sigler:** And quite an experience in Vietnam with Casper Platoon.

**Head:** Yes, indeedly. And people ask me, “Would you do it again?” I said, “Yes.” Because I don’t know what we’re doing over in those lovely places in the Mid-east, but we’re certainly not having —

[conversation on current military situation not transcribed]

End