

Interviewee: Krueger, William
Interviewer: Jack Sigler
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Sigler: You understand that this interview's being recorded?

Krueger: Yes, I do.

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

Krueger: I was in California and basically what got me started was when I was in high school, I received my draft notice. Since I was still in high school, they went ahead and let me finish up high school, and before I got another draft notice I went ahead and joined the service to get into aviation.

Sigler: Ah, you volunteered so you could get your pick of branches.

Krueger: Right.

Sigler: And you did, and what happened then?

Krueger: Then I took a month deal where I went in but they gave me a month before I had to report. When I finally reported, I ended up going to Fort Ord, California. And from Fort Ord, California, I went to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for my aviation training. And from my aviation training at Fort Rucker, I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, for jump school. Then I got my notice right after jump school that I was going to Vietnam.

Sigler: So what year then was that?

Krueger: That was in 1967.

Sigler: So you went to Vietnam. Then what?

Krueger: Well, actually 1967 is when I went in the service. It was in '68 that I got my orders to go to Vietnam.

Sigler: One year of basic flight and jump school.

Krueger: Right. It was '68 when I went to Vietnam.

Sigler: You enlisted what? Three years?

Krueger: Yes.

Sigler: So in '68, you went to Vietnam. Did you have orders to the 173rd?

Krueger: My orders were to the 173rd Airborne, but it was in the maintenance department. When I got there, since I went to helicopter crew chief school, I didn't want to do basic maintenance, so I put in for transfer to the Casper Platoon. I wanted to be a crew chief.

Sigler: Had you been trained as one?

Krueger: I was trained as a crew chief.

Sigler: And obviously your transfer was approved.

Krueger: Right.

Sigler: Then what happened?

Krueger: Then I arrived at Casper Platoon and the helicopter they had at that time that was open for me was 038, and that's the helicopter I flew on for about six months. Then I went into the office to record reports and stuff like that there. Then after a short period of time with that, I went back into the helicopters and flew what they call LOHs.

Sigler: What was the original copter you were on?

Krueger: It was a Huey – UH1H.

Sigler: So you flew on that as a crew chief for how long?

Krueger: About six months.

Sigler: About half the tour there. Tell me what happened while you were flying there.

Krueger: My job at that time on the flight was that we did a lot of flying for a colonel out to different outposts in that area of LZ English, and we did reconnaissance and we also did med-evac and we did support, where we took out ammunition and other troops and brought wounded back.

Sigler: You said you flew for a colonel. Were you in support of a particular battalion or

Krueger: No, with different colonels. We just didn't have one colonel. Whichever colonel needed a flight that day, they would call in and they would just give them different helicopters. As far as I remember, there was only one helicopter that was actually assigned to a special person. That helicopter was assigned to the general of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. All the other helicopters were assigned on a daily basis, unless you were on the 021, and 021 was assigned to a battalion in Tuy Hoa.

Sigler: So while you were flying crew chief, what were the major operations that took place? Do you remember?

Krueger: We had one operation that we – I can't remember the exact name of the operation, but it was an operation where we flew in and did reconnaissance flights around this one hill, and what we did on that there was that we'd usually take up a colonel with us and then he'd fly around and look at different positions that his men were in. It was really in support of the battalion that we were flying for at that time. It's hard to remember a lot of these things. Most of my missions on 038, though, was that – I flew a colonel once in a while, but a lot of times we did more support than anything else. Flying troops in, flying troops out, doing med-evacs and stuff like that there. We did a lot of LRP drops where took in LRP patrols and dropped them into the jungle and then go back at a scheduled time to pick them up and bring them back. We did re-supplies. One mission that I remember was started off on Thanksgiving Day where we got up early in the morning and started flying Thanksgiving dinner to different battalions. During that time it started off very slow and then all of a sudden there was an onslaught of Viet Cong trying to take over this one area, and then we went into re-supply it at that time. We took in other troops and brought out med-evac people.

Sigler: That was actually one of the big battles in the brigade, around Thanksgiving in what? '68.

Krueger: Right. That's the day that sticks in my mind the most, because of that day there. There was a lot of people that we actually – a lot of wounded we picked up and brought back. A lot of people who died during that time.

Sigler: Several people have told me about the missions in and out of that area. So, what were your basic functions as a crew chief?

Krueger: My job was to take care of the helicopter and also fly door gunner. In other words, I pulled all the maintenance on the helicopter except for every 25 hours I had to pull a maintenance check on the helicopter, make sure it was still flyable. Either at that time if there was any major problems, I'd have to do what they call a "Red X" where it goes in for a maintenance program. Once you do a Red X on a helicopter, it cannot be flown anywhere except to a maintenance area where it has the maintenance pulled on it. So I had that authority to down a helicopter if there was anything maintenance-ly wrong with it.

Sigler: Could your decision be overridden by somebody?

Krueger: It can be overridden by a pilot. Unless – it depends on what the decision was. If it has to do with anything with the rotor blades, no, because that was the main part of the helicopter. Once those rotor blades are deemed improper to fly, then they had a one-trip flight and that was it.

Sigler: Even the pilot couldn't override that one.

Krueger: No.

Sigler: Then as a door gunner – there was also another gunner aboard —

Krueger: There was another gunner on board, and usually that gunner was somebody that had been in the field for about three to four to sometimes five months. He put in for a door gunner job in his last few months in — instead of being out in the field as a ground pounder, he would fly door gunner. So he was usually an infantryman that was a door gunner. And was usually an infantryman that had background in small arms like small machine guns and stuff like that there.

Sigler: What kind of guns did you use —

Krueger: We used M-60 machine guns. And we also carried our M-16s on board with us and the pilots carried 45 calibers.

Sigler: So you were moderately well armed, at least.

Krueger: Right. Now we did not fly any gunships. We flew mostly passenger carrier type. That's what UH1H was for, usually take troops in or carrying passengers like colonels and stuff like that. The only thing we had as far as armor was the two door gunners with M-60 machine guns.

Sigler: You said you did all the missions including search and long-range recon patrols. Some of those missions got rather dangerous, didn't they?

Krueger: Yes, they did. Some of those missions included taking guys into an area that we knew was heavily fortified by Viet Cong and dropping them down into the jungle and coming out. In other words, we did take a lot of fire sometimes on those missions.

Sigler: And returned it, I assume.

Krueger: Right, and returned it. Our main job was to get those guys into a certain area so they could do their job and then come back and get them out as best as possible. Sometimes we

would take five guys in and you come back, you might only be picking up three guys. We did a lot of that on my helicopter, 038.

Sigler: Did you fly with a specific pilot or did the pilots vary?

Krueger: I flew with a specific pilot most of the time; he was the same pilot I flew with all the time.

Sigler: Who was that?

Krueger: I can't even think of his name now. I just met him at the reunion we just had, and to be honest with you, names I'm not too good with after all these years.

Sigler: I sympathize with that, because I'm much the same way.

Krueger: We did have one mission though that we did fly with one time that was a mission that we flew with a colonel where we had to take him out to a hill. I can't remember the name of the hill, but it was actually on top of a mountain, and that's where the brigade was located. As you're flying in from the bottom of the valley, you'd be taking enemy fire as you're going in. And when you was landing on the hill, you're okay. But when you got ready to take off, you're taking enemy fire again. So you're on top of a mountain where you're taking enemy fire from below. We went into that hill several times that day, picking up different soldiers and flying out and then coming back, dropped the colonel off and then had to come back and get the colonel. At the time we dropped the colonel off, we might pick up five soldiers and take them to the jungle, then come back and pick up five more, then go out to another area and have to drop them off. And no matter where we went, we were taking fire. And sometimes you cannot return fire because of where the troops are on the ground.

Sigler: When you could return fire, did the fire suppression work pretty well from the helicopter?

Krueger: As long as we knew where we were firing to. If we knew where they were shooting from and so forth like that, yes, it did. If it was down low enough that they weren't using tracers and you really couldn't tell which way the angles were coming in, you really didn't know where to shoot. And that got pretty heavy sometimes. Sometimes that took a good pilot to really know exactly what he was doing.

Sigler: The Hueys had two pilots aboard, usually, didn't they?

Krueger: Yes, they did. They had a co-pilot and a regular pilot. Now, usually what they did on co-pilots, if I remember right, is that usually the new pilots coming in flew the co-pilot's seat and then the regular pilot who's been there with experience, he'd fly the regular seat. If I remember right, I think it was left seat was the regular pilot and right seat was co-pilot.

There was some pretty good missions where we actually would fly in — we had one time where we actually got to fly Red Cross people into the field and stuff like that where they went in and helped out with the soldiers. Then we'd be there on the ground for a while and got to fly them out. Sometimes we got to fly different people for the 173rd Airborne that were, I guess you'd call movie stars and stuff like that there. So it really wasn't all bad things.

Sigler: People have told me that at least two Playboy bunnies visited the brigade.

Krueger: Yeah, and I got to fly them at the same time myself. It depends on who got to fly that day.

Sigler: And you got the lucky card on that one. And we flew some people — we went to An Khe, picked up a group of musicians and we'd fly them into LZ English and they'd give a performance there. Then we would fly them back the next day, which was some nice trips that we took.

Sigler: I just remembered — I want to get it on the tape — that Thanksgiving operation was Operation Hill 875.

Krueger: That's right. Hill 875. Yeah, Hill 875 was not an easy hill. We lost a lot of troops at that time. In fact, Hill 875 went on for a long time on and off.

Sigler: There you did everything — supplies, evacuation —

Krueger: We did evacuations, we did supplies, we did a lot of med-evac. During that Hill 875 they used very few med-evac ships because most of your med-evac ships were really not armed ships. They were actually ships — they were designed to go in and pick up wounded and just get them out. They actually had a Red Cross sign on them, whereas we were armed where we could go into an area that's been fought and protect ourselves and get troops in and out a lot easier than they could.

Sigler: Because the Red Cross wasn't very much respected in that particular war.

Krueger: No.

Sigler: And were the Red Cross helicopters flown by medical units?

Krueger: Yes. And you know, they actually would not fly into an area like that.

Sigler: They didn't want to get into combat situations.

Krueger: And that's where you need a helicopter a lot of times because you got to get some of those guys out as quick as possible, because their life depends on it. They can't sit around

waiting until somebody brings them blood or something like that. You got to get them right back to a medical unit. But that's a hard flight, because I can remember a lot of flights, going in, picking guys up, and when you first pick them up, they're alive, and before you get back, they die on the helicopter. Or you can actually end up going through a whole day where you're going in and taking troops in, then as you drop troops off you bring back med-evac people and some of these guys actually were missing legs and they would throw the leg onto the helicopter, hoping maybe the guy could get it back, or I guess – what they did it for. By the end of the day, your helicopter's full of blood and the heat and the smell and body parts that you're having to guard and clean out and everything like that. It finally got to you after a while.

Sigler: I'll bet it did. You switched then finally – or you said you went into the platoon headquarters.

Krueger: Yeah, I went in to platoon headquarters for about two months. I finally got to the point, I just couldn't take it anymore. So I asked for time out, which lasted about two months, and during that two months, got my head back together and everything like that. But I just basically did reports on the helicopters – which ones were in good maintenance, which ones were going to maintenance, kept records of the flight hours and so forth. I helped set up helicopters for the next following day for flights and stuff like that there. After about two months of that, it just didn't work out. I just had to get back to flying again.

Sigler: You were working with the brigade aviation officer at that point?

Krueger: Yeah.

Sigler: Actually on brigade staff, then. So after the two months of pushing paper, you went back to the observation helicopters.

Krueger: I went back to what they call Loach – they were more or less observation helicopters. They would fly out and scour the area for enemies; they were scouts, what I flew then. And we had two of them. They were LOH helicopters, or OH13s. One had a mini-gun mounted on one side and it had one door gunner. Then the other one had two door gunners because it didn't have a mini-gun mounted on it. I was on the one with the two door gunners. During that flight I was not the crew chief, I was just a door gunner at that time.

Sigler: Where would you put the second door gunner on that copter – back of the pilot?

Krueger: Both door gunners were behind the pilot; there was no co-pilot on those helicopters. We flew in the back cab, and most of the time we were half in and half out, because you didn't have room to really sit completely inside the helicopter.

Sigler: It was that crowded?

Krueger: Yeah. And on those, what we did then was we'd do scout missions. We'd go out late in the evening and we would fly around, looking for enemy movements and stuff like that there, and we would actually fly around until we found, say, somebody walking in the rice paddies or fields like that there, and then we would go down low and check them out. Lieutenant White at that time, he flew one, and I think he spoke a little Vietnamese, so he could talk to the people just to question them to see what was going on.

Sigler: Wasn't that just a little bit dangerous?

Krueger: That was probably more dangerous than the one I was flying before.

Sigler: Because you could get yourself in a trap very easily.

Krueger: Right. We also flew a little bit of search and destroy. That's where we would fly in and take fire and then when we'd take fire, we could notify the guys on the ground where the fire's coming from and let them know where the enemy was.

Sigler: So you did that, then, for a couple of months?

Krueger: I did that till – I think it was March 17th or 18th. And what happened was we were getting ready to go on a flight at nighttime. We got a call in and there was some trouble out there. So we flew up to the top of LZ English, we landed, and there was another Huey coming in to pick up a colonel. We were going to fly out with this colonel on this Huey, and we were going to fly scout for the Huey. And what happened, the other helicopter got too close to our helicopter, so without thinking about it, I threw my hands straight up in the air to warn off the helicopter because he was getting too close, and I forgot about Loaches, they're not like Hueys – they're lower to the ground. So my hands hit the rotor blades. When I got hurt, I had 23 days to go before I was going to leave Vietnam anyway. It was very close to my ETA. So I ended up in the hospital for a week in Vietnam, and then I ended up three days in Cambodia Bay, and from Cambodia Bay I ended up in San Francisco at Letterman General Hospital.

Sigler: Were they able to save your hand?

Krueger: After several operations, my hands were pretty well saved except for a couple fingers.

Sigler: That's a credit to the medical services. So after that, you left the service.

Krueger: Actually, I stayed in for about another year. I was stationed at Letterman General Hospital and they gave me a job to drive a colonel around. And also part of the time I drove – the general in charge of Letterman General Hospital was a surgeon, and I drove him around sometimes. So I had a pretty easy job for my last year.

Sigler: Yeah, it doesn't sound bad at all. Okay, go back to Vietnam for a few minutes. While you were there, did you get any leave?

Krueger: I went to a place called Kuala Lumpur. I really love it. I went there for a week. I really enjoyed it.

Sigler: Why did you chose that?

Krueger: Something different. A lot of the guys I knew were taking Hawaii or they were going to Australia, and I just felt, you know, like that's just going home again – I wanted something different. I felt like this was my chance to see a little bit of a part of the world I'll probably never get to see again.

Sigler: And Kuala Lumpur is a very, very interesting city.

Krueger: Yes, it is. It's got a major university there.

Sigler: Yeah, major university, it's the capital of Malaysia.

Krueger: And I took a couple of what they call 'in country' vacations, too. I took one to Camran Bay and I took another one to – I can't even think of the name of that beach – I think they call it Red Beach. That's where you go and they actually had American soldiers being lifeguards there. They really had the good job!

Sigler: You mean somebody was assigned to be a lifeguard?

Krueger: Someone was assigned to be a lifeguard. That's what they did all day long – they sat on the beach. I'll bet they could tell some war stories [laughter].

Sigler: Camran Bay was the big American R and R spot, right?

Krueger: Right.

Sigler: And that was run by the army?

Krueger: Right.

Sigler: Did you ever get into any leave just on the local economy? Saigon or —

Krueger: Well, when I was doing the desk job, one of the jobs I had to do at that time was they had to take reports to a place called Bien Hoa. So they put me on three different flights and I changed flights and everything like that, and I had to go to Bien Hoa. I went to An Khe and then I went to another city, I can't remember what it was, and then I went o Bien Hoa. And my job was to carry these to the main headquarters in Bien Hoa, these reports. And once I got there,

then there was the same thing trying to get back. Now, they got you the flights there, but the return, you're on your own. Whichever way I can get back – hitchhike, whatever. And it got pretty scary, because you ended up in some small towns that were pretty scary because they were not normal GI towns.

Sigler: And not necessarily under our control.

Krueger: No, they weren't. And the only thing I carried was I carried a .45 and a M-16 rifle. And I was by myself on the return trip.

Sigler: Anything ever happen?

Krueger: Well, I ended up in a place called Tuy Hoa for a short period of time.

Sigler: That was over near the coast, right?

Krueger: Yeah. There was a flight that was going to take me to Tuy Hoa and then another flight I could pick up out of Tuy Hoa would take me right straight to An Khe.

Sigler: Tuy Hoa – was the detached battalion still out there?

Krueger: Yes. The detached battalion – that's the reason I took the flight, because I knew I'd end up there. But I ended up there on the night that Tuy Hoa got overrun.

Sigler: So you turned into a ground soldier.

Krueger: Yes, very quick-like, along with a lot of other ground soldiers there. They were being overrun by the Viet Cong and they were using satchel charges and stuff like that there, and AK-47s coming in, and they were trying to blow up the area. So yes, that was pretty harrowing, because I'd never been into an area where you actually would get overrun and you actually saw Viet Cong coming through.

Sigler: It's, I suspect, very different on the ground than from the air.

Krueger: It is. On the ground, you actually see what's going on and what's happening. From the air, you're just shooting down and you really don't know what's going on. So it was a different feeling. It was pretty scary to me at the time, because I'd never been through anything like that.

Sigler: But you got through that one and got back to An Khe?

Krueger: An Khe. And that's when I give up my desk job and went back on the helicopter.

Sigler: Was brigade headquarters at An Khe at that point or up at LZ English?

Krueger: Okay, I got back to An Khe. From An Khe, I had to actually get back to LZ English, which I caught a flight with the 61st Aviation, which was also located at LZ. And they gave me a flight into LZ English, and then from the 61st Brigade I went over to the 173rd Airborne. That was brigade headquarters at that time, when I was there was LZ English.

Sigler: I guess An Khe was the helicopter —

Krueger: That's where our helicopter support base was. And that's where all the main flights with the C-119s and C-141s were flying out of An Khe, too. So there was a lot of flight come in and going out of An Khe.

Sigler: So if you could get to there, then you had pretty good travel elsewhere.

Krueger: Yeah, once you get there, you can go anywhere you want in Vietnam as far as the flights would go. They took you about everywhere.

Sigler: Okay, of all the time you were in there, what was the most interesting thing that happened to you, do you think?

Krueger: The most interesting thing that happened to me was when we were in town, Bong Son, outside of LZ English, I met a farmer. And the farmer could also speak a little English, and I knew a little bit of Vietnamese and stuff like that there, and just talking to this farmer made me realize what was really going on in Vietnam for myself. Because he told me one thing that really surprised me. He told me it didn't matter who ran the country, his life would not change. He said he would still go to his rice paddies, he would grow his rice, he would take it to the market, he would sell it, and nothing would affect it. He said at that time – this farmer, to me, was very smart – he says the only people that lives would change would be the politicians and the big businessmen. So that's what he said – his life would not change. He says we could fight all we wanted to, but we would not change his life. So that was probably the most interesting thing that happened to me, was just to hear that from a person himself, that he really – in all reality, he really didn't care which side won, his life would not change. And it put a different perspective on what we were doing over there. And he was in town at that time, selling his rice.

Sigler: Okay. That's a very interesting story. Anything else you can think of you'd like to add to this?

Krueger: Not really. I'll tell you one thing I would like to add to it. The camaraderie that we had between us guys in the Casper Platoon – I think it was completely different than most other platoons. I think we had a very, very – more of a family-type thing going on between us. We really did really think about each other very closely.

Sigler: Why do you think that was?

Krueger: I think because it was a small aviation platoon and there was not a lot of us, and we were completely separated from the infantry as far as, you know, the living deal. We had our own platoon, we had our own little area, we lived in that area, we lived real close to each other. I think that really had a lot to do with it. It was not like living in a big barracks area where you had a bunch of soldiers would just come and go. I think we just had it a little bit different than they did. Because you know, we did have our own little area. And it was passed on, what I consider, from generation to generation. When soldiers would come in, when they got ready to leave, they still had the same morale as they did when they arrived there. And they were still – you know, make you feel comfortable, you're brand new, you know you've got 300 and some odd days to go before you're going back home, and they're telling you, "Don't worry about it; you're going to make it; everything's going to be okay, everything's going to be just right." I mean, it was just a close tight knit thing that kept your morale up. And none of them never really got down.

Sigler: And it held up for close to ten years.

Krueger: Ten years. And I think that's the reason why we have these reunions. I think we got different people that were there for different years, and I think we all feel the same way about each other, even though we were not there at the same time they were there.

[discussion about future reunion attendance not transcribed]

End