Wayne D. Clarke
Veteran

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Interviewer

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MR: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth, please?
WC: My full name is Wayne Dennis Clark. I was born November 1, 1948 in Waterbury, Connecticut. But before I go on, I just want to say that this is kind of unusual for me to be on this side of the camera.

MR: What was your educational background before you went into the service?
WC: As I mentioned, I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut. When I was five years old, I started to attend kindergarten in Connecticut. Then my father, who worked for International Harvester Company, was transferred up to Poughkeepsie, New York. I lived in Poughkeepsie for a couple of years, and then we moved to Hyde Park, and then eventually to Castleton, New York, where I graduated from high school. Maple Hill High School, class of 1967.

I hadn't gone out to college at that point when I graduated. I started working, and a good friend of mine from high school got his draft notice. This was in January, I believe, of 1968. He enlisted in the Army. So I decided, well, I probably should enlist, too, because I figured I'd be getting my draft notice next. I entered the service on February 12, 1968. I entered the Army. I was interested, always been interested in aviation, and that was the field I pursued. I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for basic training. That was eight weeks.

MR: How did you feel when you went through basic training? Was this your first real time away from home?
WC: Yes, pretty much. I got a funny story to tell about basic training. I guess we were only in basic training for two or three weeks, and they decided to put the whole company on KP. So they got us up at two am in the morning, and of course, they were yelling and screaming for everybody to hurry up and get downstairs. I dressed as fast as I could, got downstairs in formation, and they marched us over

to the mess hall. Then they lined us up inside the mess hall, and we were inspected by the mess sergeant. He got to me, and I had forgotten to put my belt on, and he kind of flipped out about that. And he said, I'm going to give you the worst job there is here, which is being an outside-man. This is in the middle of February. The temperature was right around zero. And I had to go outside and empty these big, heavy garbage cans that were full of slop, and then I had to scrub them. Well, I got outside, and at the time, I think I weighed about a hundred-thirty pounds, and the cans were heavier than me. I didn't know where I should dump the slop. I didn't know at the time initially, but there was a dumpster, like, halfway down the block. So anyways, I saw this drain. I lifted the top on the drain and dumped the contents into the drain, covered the top, and I tried to wash the garbage cans out, but as fast as the water hit the garbage cans, it turned to ice, I was wet, and I was a mess. Anyways, the mess sergeant that was on duty went off duty. Somebody else came on. Everybody that had a job to do, they took masking tape and wrote your job on the masking tape. Mine just said OM for outside-man. It was done really sloppily, so you couldn't really tell that I was the outside-man. After the mess sergeant went off duty, I worked my way inside, and everything was fine. I was helping out with pots and pans and that, and then around lunch, all of a sudden, the drain started backing up inside the mess hall. They couldn't figure out what was going on. Well, I knew exactly what was going on, but I played really dumb. I remember they had to call a civilian rotor router to come in, and they were trying to work the drain inside the kitchen. I can remember I saw whole potatoes coming up out of the drain. I was scared to death, but luckily, they didn't figure out what exactly had caused the blockage. Eventually I went off duty about ten pm that night with everybody else, and that was my first exposure, of many, to the fine art of kitchen police.

MR: How long were you in basic training?
WC: Basic training lasted eight weeks. It was pretty nasty because of the weather. If it wasn't snowing, we got hit with sleet and freezing rain. Everybody was sick with what they called URI, upper respiratory infection. I remember the drill sergeant yelling because everybody was spitting green phlegm on the ground. He said it's starting to look like a chicken yard around here. But nobody wanted to go on sick call because nobody wanted to be recycled.

MR: What do you mean recycled?
WC: They had to do basic training all over again. So everybody was taking this terpin hydrate that they were passing around. So I was relieved when basic training was over. Then from there, I think I had a two week leave. Then in the

latter part of April of 1968, I went to Fort Eustis Virginia, for helicopter maintenance school. I think that was a three and a half month school where we learned about the Chinook helicopters and maintenance of them. It was a hard school. There was a lot of studying to do, a lot of practical exercises. We worked in the hangar on aircraft, working on engines, airframes, just general maintenance on the Chinook helicopter.

MR: What was the Chinook?
WC: It was a transport helicopter. From my Vietnam yearbook, here's a picture of what a Chinook looked like. [holds up yearbook] They were mainly used for transporting troops and moving by sling load underneath artillery pieces, supplies, et cetera. I completed that school in August of 1968. Then I had another two week leave, and at that point, I reported to Fort Lewis, Washington, and from there went back to Fort Eustis. The day I got to Fort Eustis, as soon as I signed into the company, I was put on KP. As soon as I got to Fort Lewis, Washington, I was put on KP. I left for Vietnam in early September of 1968. We landed about two am in the morning at Cameron Bay, and I heard my name over the loudspeaker, and I thought, what was this? They told me to report to the orderly room. Wouldn't you know it? They had me for KP again. [laughs] I think I was there in Cameron Bay…

MR: Could you tell when you landed what it was like?
WC: Even at two am in the morning, it was really hot and humid and muggy. Actually, before we got to Vietnam, we landed in Guam. That was very muggy as soon as you stepped off the plane. It was very similar to Vietnam. When we left Fort Louis, we landed in Alaska. We were only there for a couple hours. Then from Alaska, I think next we landed in Guam, then we landed in Japan. And then from Japan…

MR: Were these military aircraft or civilian?
WC: They were civilian [aircraft]. I got to Cameron Bay, of course, it was the middle of the night. The next day the heat was pretty unbearable. I was only in Cameron Bay, I think, a day or two. In formation they called people's names out, telling them what division they were going to. And they called my name out and said I was going to be assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. From there I caught a flight to Bien Hoa and got to Bien Hoa, and I think I was in Bien Hoa for about ten days or two weeks. They put us through this introductory course for Vietnam. What to expect.

MR: What was that like in retrospect? Would you think that helped you at all? Was it realistic?
WC: Well, it was more or less the type of training they gave us was like being out on patrol and jungle training, which I didn't really think I would need because I was assigned to an aviation unit, or so I expected to be. So anyways, I'd say the training was pretty adequate. They had us out on the range firing M16s. I was issued a brand new M16 right out of the carton. I still remember the serial number. 1106707 was the serial number of my rifle. We were out on the range and then they introduced us to firing the M60 machine gun. When I was in helicopter school, they taught us to use that, too, because if we were on aircraft as gunners, that's what we would use.

MR: Where were these guns?
WC: They were out on the range.

MR: No, when you had them on the helicopter, where were they?
WC: Oh.

MR: Where were they mounted?
WC: They were mounted on each..let's see, you had your cockpit, and right behind the cockpit was a door on the left or a window on the left. And then on the right side of the Chinook, there was a door with a window, and an M60 was mounted on each side.
When we were down in Chu Lai, I'll get to that later on, they were using tail guns. They dropped the ramp of the Chinook and you either sat on the end of the ramp with an M60 machine gun or an M79 grenade launcher. When we were at Bien Hoa, they taught us how to use the M79 grenade launcher, too, plus what they called the LAW rocket. It was basically like an infantry introduction. Anyways, I was there for, like I said, I think ten days, two weeks. Then again in formation, they said that our group was being shipped up north to the Phu Bai area, Camp Eagle. We got on a C130, flew up there, and again, we landed late at night at the Phu Bai airport. From there, they took us by a deuce-and-a-half, two and a half ton truck to Camp Eagle, which was several miles down the road. And we got to the unit in the middle of the night. That section of Camp Eagle wasn't really that well developed yet. The main unit was still living in tents. Everything was dark. We signed into the company, and then they said we were going to the new area, so they put us on the truck again. As I recall, I think they did use lights, but we were in the back of the truck. We had no idea where we were at. So they dropped us off to the new area in the middle of the night and they gave us an area to stay,

which was basically like a hooch with, I think, it had canvas over the top. Anyways, it was announced that we'd immediately be guarding the perimeter. Well, we had no idea where we were at.

We were carrying our M16s. They gave us ammunition and were supposed to just go out and patrol around the company area. Well, like I said, I had no idea where we were at.
I'm locked and loaded, not knowing what to expect. When my shift was over, I went back to the area where my gear was and I slept. We got up in the morning and we saw we were inside of a compound that was secure, but probably a few hundred yards out in front of us, there was the main perimeter, which was covered with barbed wire. So we were basically in a secure area. Why they put us out on guard duty, I don't know.

The next morning when I did get up, I was relieved to see a buddy of mine that I went through helicopter school with, a fellow from Washington named Glenn Schmidtke [?]. We were good friends in school and we were both assigned to the same unit. I was with that unit. It was the A company, 5th Transportation Battalion. It was mainly a helicopter repair unit. Other units would send their helicopters in, but they just worked on Huey helicopters. And there were several of us that had the Chinook training. Because we had the Chinook training, they decided that there were a lot of details to do, so they put us on basically permanent detail. We were filling sandbags for the most part, pulling guard duty. The main perimeter, there weren't bunkers out there yet. So they had us on detailed building bunkers. And, I mean, we were basically slave labor.

MR: What were bunkers?
WC: Bunkers were if the enemy was advancing through the wire, the bunkers were the first line of defense. We had a machine gun in each bunker. Plus there would be four people in the bunker, usually two people on guard duty, one on top, one in the inside, and two guys sleeping in these bunkers. They were made out of timbers, fifty-five gallon drums filled with sand and with wood beams all around it. Then they were covered with perforated steel plating, what they called PSP, and then covered with hundreds and hundreds of sandbags. These bunkers were a perfect breeding ground. There were snakes in them, there were rats. It wasn't unusual to be sleeping in the bunker on these…they had like a bunk bed. They weren't really beds, but just flats of plywood that two people would sleep on when they weren't on duty. You always felt a rat scamper across. No one ever got bit or anything. I know one night I was on top of the bunker, and it was just sun

up. I walked inside the bunker to check on the fellow that was on duty inside, and I thought I saw a piece of rope in the doorway of the bunker, but I wasn't sure. I put my foot on it, and it slithered inside the bunker. I yelled “snake” and everybody came flying out. [laughs]

MR: Were there any poisonous snakes?
WC: Oh, yeah. I guess the most poisonous was what they called the bamboo viper. I saw one of them slither across the sandbag on the front of the bunker one time. But I ended up in that unit. I was there for seven months. From there, all of us with Chinook training, Chinook MOS [Military Occupational Specialty], which was 67U20, were sent to the Chinook unit. That was on the other side of the hill from us in what they called Varsity Valley, which. Varsity was our unit call sign for the Chinook Unit, B Company, 159 Aviation Battalion, assault support helicopter battalion. I was there probably just a couple of weeks, and then I was assigned to be a door gunner on the Chinook. Eventually everybody that came over with me, if they wanted to be on flight status, they were all assigned as gunners. First you start off as a gunner, and from gunner, you worked your way up to crew chief, and then from crew chief to flight engineer, which is what I ended up doing. Eventually, I was a flight engineer. Basically any area we flew into, the Chinooks were considered very valuable, too valuable to lose. Although we did lose several over the time period I was there. We usually had Huey gunships or Cobra gunships flying with us. Not always, but any areas that were hot, usually we were pretty well protected.

MR: What do you mean by hot?
WC: Where there was heavy enemy activity. And I remember I was only in the unit for a few weeks. Well, a couple of weeks, maybe three weeks, four weeks, and I was assigned as a door gunner. Every morning when you got your assignment, you'd go to the arms room, you picked up your guns, two M60 machine guns, and then you walked out to the aircraft. But every place we flew in, as I mentioned, we resupplied firebases, moved artillery pieces, sling loads underneath the aircraft. Supplies, ammunition, sea rations, you name it, we hauled it. [When we] came into these bases, the Chinook put out extremely strong winds. You cleaned the guns every night whether they were used or not. Most of the time they weren't used, but they were just covered with all this red dust from these firebases. Actually one time, I remember we came into a firebase and blew over an outhouse with somebody in it. [laughs] Anyways, getting back to coming in at night, I was down in the arms room cleaning the machine guns from having them out on the aircraft from the day's flight. And all of a sudden I heard a rocket come in and

whenever a rocket hit, you could usually hear them come in. It sounded like somebody was dragging a board over gravel. Some rockets came in and it was dark. I didn't know where the bunker was, so I left the guns. I ran towards the company area. The flight line was a ways away from the company area. I saw everybody piling into this bunker and so I got in line. Everybody was pushing, trying to get in, and just as I got to the doorway, a rocket hit. We had this movie theater that was probably from the bunker, I'm going to say maybe twenty-five, thirty feet away. Well, that took a direct hit with the rocket. Like I said, I just got in the doorway when it hit and the fellow that was right behind me, in fact, I think he was leaving the next day or the day after [when] he got hit with a piece of shrapnel through the cheek. It wasn't a bad wound, but it was pretty close. If I had been a few seconds slower, who knows? But anyways, I flew as a door gunner.

Let's see, April, May, June, and then in July, the Americal Division down in Chu Lai were losing a lot of aircraft, so they sent several of us down there for a month. The company area was right on the beach. It was kind of nice down there. The only incident our unit had…we were coming into a South Vietnamese Firebase to resupply them with ammunition. I was sitting on the ramp because they were using tail gunners. I was sitting on the end of the ramp with the M60 machine gun with my legs dangling over the side, just waiting for them to drop the load off and then take off again. So I was sitting there, we were probably about ten or twelve feet off the ground and all of a sudden I saw this flash of light right in front of me, off to my left. I hit the ground, and then the concussion picked me up and threw me over backwards. And the whole aircraft shook. I looked up and saw all these little holes all around me, and I started yelling over the intercom, “Incoming, incoming!” I remember the pilots looked back. They were thinking that it was outgoing artillery. That they were firing as we were dropping the load off. I remember the flight engineer came running back to look, and so he confirmed that we were hit. So we flew back to base, and we had just small shrapnel holes through the back. And then underneath where I was sitting, I was sitting on a little piece of armor plating. I didn't get a scratch. We had small holes, as I recall, through five of the six blades. But that was really the closest call I had.

MR: Now, going back to when you were a gunner at the ramp or you were on the sides, did you have any attachment or anything to keep you from falling out?
WC: We had what they called a monkey harness. A lot of times we didn't wear them, but they had these armor plated vests. But we had what was known as a monkey harness. It was a harness with a strap, and through the inside of the

Chinook, there was a cable, and everybody hooked onto that. If you were moving about the inside of the aircraft, especially if you were the flight engineer, a crew chief, and you were sling loading, you had a trap door in the center of the aircraft, which you used to direct the pilots. That strap was just so if something happened, you didn't fall out of the aircraft. And of course, sitting on the end of the ramp, I had a monkey harness on at all times, too, so I wouldn't fall out. [laughs]

MR: Now, when you went to door gunner and crew chief and then flight engineer, what were the differences in what you did?
WC: The door gunner, your primary job was just to keep the guns clean. You brought the guns out to the aircraft in the morning and night. You took them back to the arms room and assisted the crew chief with any maintenance. The crew chief was responsible for maintenance of the aircraft. He worked along with the flight engineer. The flight engineer was responsible to make sure the maintenance was done. He usually stayed with the aircraft most of the time, whereas if you were assigned to an aircraft, usually not always, the flight engineer stayed with that aircraft, whereas the gunners would go from ship to ship. Crew chiefs too, as needed. And a lot of times if your ship was down for maintenance, heavy maintenance, as a flight engineer. You were assigned a different aircraft to fly. Because you always had people who went on leave, people who rotated home, people who went on R and R, sick call, et cetera. So we flew a lot. I think I had close to two-thousand hours flying time when I was in Vietnam. The pilots were restricted as to how much time they could fly a day. What would happen, a lot of times they changed pilots, but the air crews, the rest of us stayed with the ship.

MR: How many in an air crew?
WC: You had your pilot, your copilot, and then you had the flight engineer, crew chief and door gunner. So there was a crew of five.

MR: Did you ever have an experience with Agent Orange?
WC: I'm sure I did because a lot of the areas we flew into, you could tell they were definitely defoliated. You flew in and you saw all this dead vegetation, trees, et cetera. And plus, as I mentioned, you came into these areas and all the dust and dirt would be all over you, all over the aircraft, all over the guns, our flight suits and everything. Our flight suits were always wet with oil. The Chinooks leaked oil. And if you were crew chief or flight engineer, especially flight engineer, you were always in the back of the aircraft. When loads were being hooked up and transported, you were laying on the floor guiding the pilots in and out of the firebases. And also when the loads were hooked up, you guided the pilots in

because the pilots hovered over a load. Once the nose of the aircraft covered the load, they were basically blind. You had to direct them up and down, left or right, until the load was hooked up. Then as the aircraft rose you'd have to let them know how much space there was before the sling got tight and the load started to break ground.

MR: How did you keep in touch with those back home?
WC: Just through letters.

MR: What was the food like?
WC: The food. Now of course, we all complained and everything. We had powdered eggs for the most part. Sometimes we had fresh eggs. A lot of times the milk you got was sour. It was always instant potatoes, a lot of Spam. Spam sandwiches. When we were flying, most of the time we had eight C-rations. Then there was another ration that we got. Occasionally we got from some of the fire bases. We got these LRP rations, long range patrol rations, which you just added water to. They were pretty good. They had chili, they had beef stew. I think those were my two favorites.

MR: Did you ever have contact with the Vietnamese population?
WC: Not a lot of contact. Most of the towns were off limits. But on our way in and out of, like, Phu Bai and that if we had to go to visit another unit for one reason or another, we drove in and we had a little contact. Not a lot with the civilian population, but we did transport a lot of the South Vietnamese troops to different areas. I mean, as soon as they came on board, they definitely had a different smell to them. And once in a while, we did have to transport civilians. The thing we hated about doing that was they weren't used to flying on an aircraft and a lot of them would get sick. It wasn't a pretty sight. [laughs]

MR: How were race relations within your unit?
WC: In our unit, for the most part, they were pretty good. When we left Camp Eagle in the summer of 1970, I think it was around July of August or August of 1970, we moved from Camp Eagle to Phu Bai and there was a centralized mess hall. I remember there were a lot of black troops from other units. And racially, there wasn't really much trouble or anything. They had the handshake where they greeted each other as brothers, like hugging, and they'd have this handshake that would take maybe seconds. I don't know what they call it, hand jive or something like that. But I know the brothers were very strong on Camp Eagle. This one black guy from another unit had on his Boonie hat, which a lot of the infantry guys

wore in the field. They kind of frowned on wearing them in the Camp Eagle area. This one black guy had his Boonie hat, and on the top he had embroidered a black fist, and it said black power. And it said, every brother a leader, every sister a breeder. [laughs] But our unit, for the most part, we didn't really have any trouble.

MR: Were you aware of any drugs being used?
WC: Oh, yeah. Our unit, although a lot of people probably wouldn't want to admit it, I know when I first got to the unit, for about the first, well, for the whole time, I was with the Chinook unit. Every night when guys came in from flying, the enlisted anyway, I don't really know what went on in the officer area because those areas were segregated.
But I know the pipes would come out and the pot. You didn't have to be a smoker to breathe the stuff in. I can honestly say that the whole time I was in Vietnam, I never smoked pot. I mean, if I did, I'd admit to it, but there was a lot of heavy pot use. I never saw any hard drugs used, but I know some of the guys used to drink this stuff called OB. It was [unclear] 36.07 and it was a form of speed. It was some sort of South Vietnamese reducing formula for people that were overweight. And I had never seen an overweight South Vietnamese. But anyways, guys would drink that stuff and they'd be up for, like, twenty-four hours just wired on stuff.

MR: What did you think of the rotation system?
WC: I thought it was good. You got to Vietnam. You knew you were there for a year, and if you could make it through a year, you could go home or you could enlist. The money was a lot better in Vietnam. I did my year and I signed up for six months, an extra six months, because I didn't want to do stateside duty. Like I said, the money was good in Vietnam. For the most part, our unit kind of left the enlisted alone. They weren't big on polished boots and that. I mean, you had to keep yourself fairly squared away, but they weren't as strict with haircuts and that, like you would have been stateside. And then the last six months I was there, things started to heat up and we lost several aircraft, several crews, and I really felt bad. As I mentioned, I had been there for like a year and a half and nothing much was happening. We didn't lose anybody, I think, until the last six months I was there. Anyways, there was the one fellow that was in maintenance I got to be pretty good friends with. His last name was Evans and he was married. And I said, why don't you join the flight platoon? I said, you're out of the unit, the flying's nice, it's extra pay. He joined the flight platoon while I was away on leave. When I went back home for thirty days, he was on my aircraft. As I recall, they

were coming into a firebase and he was standing up in the back of the aircraft and he took a round through the chest. They brought him back to the unit and he stepped off the aircraft, went to a medevac helicopter, and that was it. He died.

For the last six months I was there, I came off my last leave and I thought, oh, boy, this is it. I remember one of the last missions. We went to Firebase Ripcord, which was under siege by the North Vietnamese. I think it was voluntary; they weren't going to make anybody fly. But I think mostly everybody volunteered to go. I was a flight engineer, and basically we had to fly in. It was an artillery base and [we] took the artillery pieces out, ammunition, equipment, et cetera. The aircraft I was on that day, it wasn't the aircraft I normally flew on, but it was like one of the weakest ships, it didn't have a full carrying capacity. What I was carrying was mostly equipment and some ammunition out of there.
When we were approaching the firebase, laying in the cargo hold, and because we knew that it was a hot mission, I went to a couple of the aircraft that were down for maintenance, and I took the armor plating off the control closet and I had it laying down on the floor where I was laying. Plus I had tool boxes around me. I remember going in and hearing fire and guys were running and hooking up the load and telling the pilots, okay, we're clear and taking off. So I didn't see a lot that was going on there because I was in the cargo hole concentrating on picking up the sling loads. We did lose one aircraft. It got shot down over the base, but everybody got out of it and they ended up pushing the aircraft. There was no way they could have gotten it out of there. So they pushed the aircraft off the side of the firebase and I guess they set fire to it or blew it up. But anyways, the whole crew got off, got out of there. They were picked up by a medevac helicopter. I think one guy got some dirt in his eyes, but nothing serious. But it turned out, I found out many years later, a fellow that was in my National Guard unit, that was a medevac pilot, that was his first mission. He picked up our crew and brought them back, the crew that was shot down. There was a well-known football player, [James Robert] Bob Kalsu, and he was killed on that firebase report. We used to fly in and out of there a lot prior to evacuating the base. We got everybody and everything, all the equipment off, all the artillery pieces and then all the personnel, and then they hammered it with B52s, went in there and bombed. I think it was a day or two later we went back with a chemical unit and we're flying. Gee, I think we were flying not only us, I think there were a couple of aircraft and we had barrels of CS gas on board from the chemical unit and they were pushing the barrels of gas out over the firebase. We took fire. We didn't get hit, but you saw the tracers coming up. But that was one of my last missions.

Before I left Vietnam, I was put in charge of a group of civilians that came in and we took them off to this area and they would fill sandbags and they would be paid in Vietnamese currency, so much a day. This one gal was pregnant and went into labor and they got her out and she delivered the baby, and the next day she was back filling sandbags again.

MR: When did you leave Vietnam?
WC: I left, I think it was around October 20, 1970.

MR: Were you aware of the draft resistors and the peace movement back home?
WC: Oh, I was, yeah, this is an awful thing to say, but I remember when Kent State happened. There wasn't a lot of sympathy for the students protesting the war. And here we were in Vietnam, and I remember I was over there during the My Lai Massacre. In fact, one time we had gone down to Saigon to pick up a new aircraft. I remember us flying around My Lai because we had heard about what had happened there. Pilots just wanted to check out the area. But this was long after the massacre.

MR: How were you greeted when you went back home? Did you go in uniform or did you change into civilian clothes?
WC: Went back home in civilian clothes. I never, like at the airport or even in uniform, never ran into any demonstrators. I never had any problems at the airports or anything. Coming back, I wasn't really ready to go to school or anything. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was kind of restless. Before we got out, they said that we could collect unemployment for a year, and if we wanted to work, we could go back to work. If you didn't want to go to work, you just collected unemployment. So I remember the first time I went down and signed up for unemployment. As soon as I got home, I thought, this is great. So I signed up. Then the next week I had to go back. I stood in line and I got up to the window. [They asked me] Did you work last week? [I answered] No. [They asked] Did you turn down any work? [I answered] No. [They asked] Did you look for work? That's what they asked me. I said, no. [They said] What do you mean, no? [I answered] I was told I didn't have to. [laughs] The guy read me the riot act. The next time I had to go back, I had to have a list of three or four places where I went to look for a job. I was on unemployment [pay] for only a couple of months, I think. And then I went to work for Montgomery Ward. I was there for a couple years and had a couple other jobs, and I was kind of restless. I wanted to go out to California. I was out in California just bumming around for several months, and I came back and I had this part time job working for this department store. I was

able to live at home with my parents. And basically I worked long enough where I'd be able to save some money, and I'd go out to California, and I did that for three or four years.

I came back here. I was working for a bank, and a friend of mine was a captain in the reserves. He knew I was in the army in Vietnam. He said they have this Try One program. I used to see the helicopters flying back and forth from the Albany Airport. After I was home, I kind of missed Vietnam and the guys I was with. There is some degree of guilt. You were going back home, and there are people that would never go home. But anyways, I kind of missed the flying. So I signed up for this Try One program.
I went to the aviation unit. At the time, it was the 42nd Aviation Battalion in Latham, and I was with the Aeroscouts. The OH-6, the small observation helicopters. I went through the on-the-job training program with them, and I became an Aeroscout Observer.
I got to fly in the front seat in a helicopter. I actually got to fly it with the pilot and just [had] some rudimentary training. The idea was, if anything happened to the pilot, you'd be able to fly the aircraft back and hopefully land it. I did that, and then eventually I switched over to the…because I wanted to get promoted, and you couldn't go any higher than a basic sergeant with the OH-6s. So I transferred over and became a Cobra mechanic. So I was able to get promoted to staff sergeant, and then they got rid of the Cobras and brought in the Blackhawks. I went through a school down in Pennsylvania for that, and I stayed with the Blackhawks until I retired. It was a few months before 911.
I had a little over 20 years in, and I got out. Then at age 60, I started collecting the pension from it.

MR: Do you belong to any veterans organizations at all?
WC: I did. I'm a little embarrassed to say this. How much time do we have left?

MR: Twelve. I'm watching.
WC: I'm a little embarrassed to say this, but the VFW came around and they wanted to get some of the Vietnam guys to join, so I agreed to join the VFW, which I did.
After that, every year since I joined, I think it was 1971, I've never attended a single meeting. But I've sent my dues in every year since then. About a year ago, I decided to become a life member, and I sent my dues in for that. I never attended meetings. I never joined the American Legion. A lot of it was because I didn't have time once I got in the guard. Besides drilling one weekend a month, you had

an obligation to fly, quite periodically. We flew maybe during the week, once a week or so. Besides the drill weekend, like an extra Saturday or two. I was quite involved with that. I was never really a joiner.

MR: Have you ever attended any reunions?
WC: Yeah, I joined the 101st Airborne Association quite a number of years ago. I let my membership expire. Then a number of years later, I joined. When the Internet came along, I noticed my unit had its own website. Through the Internet, I made contact with some of the guys I knew from Vietnam and the 101st Airborne. I think it was about seven or eight years ago, they were having a reunion in Reno, Nevada, and each unit would have a mini reunion there, too. My unit was having a reunion, so I went to that, and it was great to see a lot of the guys that I hadn't seen. At the time, it was like thirty-five years, and some of the guys, I never would have recognized them in a million years had it not been for their name tag. But some of the guys, a couple of the guys looked exactly like they did when they were in Vietnam. And, I mean, just recognizable.

MR: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone?
WC: Yeah, there was a fellow I was friends with in Vietnam. I actually went and visited him on my way back from one of my trips to California and spent a few days with him.

MR: There was that guy from the state of Washington.
WC: Oh, this other fellow? Yes. Yes. I did stay in contact with him for a few years, and I moved a couple times and kind of lost touch with him. But I was thinking recently I noticed something on the Internet where there was some kind of family reunion or something they had attended, so I thought I should get back in touch with them. And this other fellow I visited in Texas, I haven't been in touch with him in a couple of years. There's a fellow that lives in Massachusetts. I'm in regular contact with him. And there was also a friend from Vietnam that lives in Maine. On my way up to Canada, I stopped and spent some time with him a couple times. His name is Dick Bond, and he looks exactly the same way he did in Vietnam. It's uncanny. He was a heavy smoker, heavy drinker, and he must have done something right because he hasn't aged at all.

MR: How do you think your time in the service had an effect on your life?
WC: It wasn't an experience I would trade. But initially, like I said, I was restless. I came back home. I wasn't ready to settle down. I bounced from job to job, bummed around the country a bit. When I came back, I think it was the early

1980s. Well, before I joined the guard, through the GI Bill, I went to a trade school. Hudson Valley had a program. I became a certified welder. I worked in the welding field for a while. I kind of enjoyed it, but I know where I was working it wasn't the healthiest place to work because we were working inside the turbines, just inhaling all of this smoke from doing the stick welding inside of them. When I joined the guard, I started going to college part time, and I ended up getting my two year degree, liberal arts degree. And through that, through my affiliation with the National Guard, I went to work for the state. Eventually I came here to the military museum. I was working with the curators and when Governor Pataki started the Veterans Oral History Program, I was asked if I wanted to participate in that. I said I'd give it a try and I've been with it ever since. And of course, I worked with you for a number of years until you retired. But had I not gone and gotten my degree, I wouldn't have gotten this job because that was one of the minimum requirements to have at least a two year degree. So that was very beneficial.

MR: Thank you very much for your introduction.
WC: You're welcome. [shows yearbook] This is a copy of the yearbook from the unit. B Company 159th. As I mentioned earlier, our call sign was Varsity. I have some photographs. These are just around the unit. But here's what I looked like back when I was in Vietnam. [shows his yearbook photo] Can you zoom in on it? Do you have it? I got a funny story to tell you about that fellow next to me, the guy with the sunglasses. You see him? His name is Joe Doria. I probably shouldn't have mentioned his name, but anyways, I remember being on guard with him in the bunker one night. And there was myself and another guy, we were inside the bunker and this fella with the glasses, him and another guy, they were out outside. We decided to go in and get some sleep because we were going to take the next shift. This fellow and his buddy were out smoking and they were pretty well stoned. Periodically the officer or the guard would come along, usually with coffee and to check to make sure everybody was awake. When they pulled up with the jeep, the officer got out and you were supposed to say, halt, who goes there? They gave their name, then you said, advance and be recognized. And you'd say halt. There's a two part password. You gave them the first part of the word and then they gave you the next part and then they came forward. Anyways, the Jeep came out and this guy, that was wasted, instead of going through the procedure, he said, halt, you mother effer. I won't say, halt, you mother. effer. The guy stopped and yelled, what's the password? And next thing he said, get down in the front leaning rest position and he chambered a round. I heard what was going on. We all came out and we told the guy to back off. I thought for sure

this guy was going to get hauled away, but he got a stiff talking too, let's put it that way. But yeah, that was one of the funnier things.

I mean, there are funny stories, but a lot of sad things happened too. But anyways, this has been a lot of fun doing these interviews. We've done over two thousand of them. It's great working with you again, Mike. Actually, today is my last day. I'm retiring today, but I plan on continuing and coming in here as a volunteer doing interviews and also transferring the interviews, which we've done onto DVD and preserved for future generations.

MR: Okay. Well, thank you again.
WC: You're welcome.

Session ends and a new session starts.

WC: You had a question?
MR: Yes. What are your favorite details, a burning detail?
WC: Of course, we didn't have indoor plumbing in Vietnam, we had outhouses. The outhouses, they weren't like the traditional outhouse like you'd see out in the country.
These had, behind them there was a flat door and there'd be fifty-five gallon drums that were cut in half and those would be under each hole in the outhouse. Supposedly every day they were supposed to drag those out, add diesel fuel and a little gasoline to them, and burn what was in them. Well, that didn't happen sometimes. And after a day or two, they'd be crawling with maggots, and the outhouses weren't really the cleanest places in the world. A buddy of mine from Texas, decided to one night set fire to one of them and burned it to the ground. The next morning, there were just the empty drums left, and the first sergeant had a bird over it. We ended up getting new ones in. But in our unit, we had one fellow that was his job, just to take care of the latrines. I actually wrote a poem about it. Every unit had what was known as the company Shitburner. Most of the time, it was a job that somebody would volunteer for.

MR: Was it extra pay?
WC: They didn't get extra pay, but that was their only duty. They just had to take care of the latrines, which, if you didn't mind burning the stuff every day and keeping the inside clean and supplied with toilet paper, was the only duty you had to do. You could take care of business, it might take you an hour or 2 hours to do them, and then you had the rest of the day off. The first unit I went to, that unit I

was telling you about, with the 5th Transportation, at the time, it was a new area. They were building hooches, and one of the details was burning, being a shitburner. So I decided to volunteer just to do it once so I could say that I actually got to do it. I know it was a horrible job, but I just did it one time. I just volunteered to do it once. It was a God awful smell when they mixed the diesel fuel and gasoline and burned it every day. You could smell that any place you went to the camp. It put out a black sooty smoke with a horrible smell. If I sit and think about it, I can still smell it today. But anything else?

MR: Yeah, since we have this extra. Do you have a favorite movie of Vietnam? Have you ever watched any Vietnamese movies?
WC: I used to enjoy watching the Vietnam movies. Of course, a lot of them were really far-fetched, *Platoon*, I guess, from an infantryman's standpoint. Oh, going back to infantry, I was never in the infantry, per se, but this unit with the 5th Transportation, it was a new unit, and we were in the process of building bunkers. We actually had to go out beyond the perimeter and lay this…there were rice patties in front of us that weren't being used, so we had to lay wire, barbed wire through them. You had to pound stakes into the mud and then wrap this barbed wire back and forth. I remember doing that and having leeches clinging to us. Some of the leeches, you thought they were snakes, [gestures about 15 inches with his hands] but they were actually leeches about that long, swimming through the water. Our unit took a bunch of us and sent us out on patrol out in front of our perimeter section. And we had to walk through a small village. There was a house, like, a hut with the sides open, and there were these ammo crates stacked there with rice. I remember looking inside them. I ran a stick or a bayonet through them just to make sure it was just rice in there. We walked around. We didn't make any contact or anything, but it was interesting just to walk out through the village area, the civilian population and that. But that was the only real time we went out on patrol. Our new area with the 5th Transportation had a lot of old graves in the company area. They brought civilians in and exhumated these graves. One grave that was only, I'm going to say, probably just several years old. Breaking open the casket or what was just a wooden box and just these fleshy remains. They had a ceremony over them. Of course, you'd have to stand and keep guard as to what was going on. They put the remains into some kind of container and took them away. Still, kind of grotesque.

MR: So do you have a favorite movie?

WC: Oh, the movies. There was one with Burt Lancaster called *Go Tell the Spartans* about the early days in Vietnam. I thought that was pretty good. Of course, everybody enjoyed *Apocalypse Now*. I mean, that was really farfetched. But a lot of them I found to be entertaining, but really not realistic. Probably from what I hear, one of the most realistic ones was the movie, *We Were Soldiers*. I enjoyed that movie. I actually read the book, too.

MR: Have you ever revisited the wall?
WC: I did. Back in 1983. I had attended a 101st Airborne reunion down in Washington, and there wasn't anybody there that was with my unit. Most of the guys that were there were World War II veterans. At the time, back in 1983, they were, most of them about the same age that I am now. But I remember going to the wall and looking up quite a number of the guys I knew that were killed there from our unit. There were several of them that I looked up. That was very moving. The 101st, they laid a wreath there at the memorial. That was the first and only time I have been to the memorial. Okay, I guess we're done. Thanks.

Okay, we're back again. One other photo. [shows yearbook photo] That fellow I mentioned earlier, that first fellow killed David Evans. That's his picture right there.

MR: The one on the farthest? Right?
WC: Yeah, that's him right where my finger is. He was the first one from the unit that we lost. I wanted to show you some of the insignia from the unit. [shows unit insignia patches] Also, these here were from memorial services, from some of the guys, crews that were killed in the unit. [When] the ships went down, we lost the entire crew. Anyways, these are unit patches. When the unit first went over to Vietnam from the States, they were out of Fort Sill, Oklahoma. They were the 272nd Assault Support Helicopter Company. In Vietnam, they became Company B, 159th Aviation Support Helicopter Battalion. This is just a variation of that patch which says 101st Airborne there.

MR: Were these official patches?
WC: They were worn unofficially. These are variations of the patch. Also, they say Varsity 159. [shows additional insignia patches] And these were basically a cartoon of the Chinook helicopter. Every unit had their own patches that were kind of semi-official. Our sister company, A Company, their call sign was Pachyderms. Ours was Varsity. That is another variation. C Company, their call sign was Playtex. And their motto was “We support.” Our headquarters company

battalion, they were known as Lift Master. This is the unit crest with the motto "Press On." This I picked up somewhere along the way. It was just an oddball insignia. I've never seen another one like it. It was from a security platoon, says "Chuck's Only Regret." Chuck is referred to as the enemy. That's pretty much it. We were talking earlier about the job of burning human waste. That had inspired me to do a poem, which you were asking me about before, but I won't recite the poem. But I did that and a number of others. They are in a book titled *Soldier Ballads and Other Tales*, which is a book of poems I'd written over the years. I've got another batch ready for another book. When that'll be done. [shakes his head] Maybe in my retirement. Anyways, again, Mike, thanks. It's been a real pleasure.