

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL J. RETZ

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 16, 2007

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Matthew Lawrence: This begins an interview with Michael Retz on August 16, 2007, in San Diego, California, with Matt Lawrence and

Jessica Thomson Illingworth: ... Jessica Thomson Illingworth ...

ML: ... This interview was made possible in part by a grant from the Rutgers Alumni Association. Mr. Retz, I want to thank you for being here and allowing us to interview you for this program.

Michael Retz: You're welcome.

ML: All right, let's start with the beginning. Where and when were you born?

MR: I was born in Passaic, New Jersey. My parents were living in Clifton, but there's no hospital in Clifton, so I was born in Passaic, on December 8, 1935.

JJ: Now where did your parents meet, were they from the US or ...

MR: Yeah, they were both born in the United States. My, all my grandparents, you want a long story? My grandparents, all four of them, were from Hungary, although they consider themselves Germans, and if you go back in history, which I did, on the internet, and found out why my German grandparents were all from Hungary. It goes back a long way, and it has to do with the Holy Roman Empire and wanting to keep the Turks out of Hungary and all this stuff. So they allowed them, the Germans, poor Germans from the western part of Germany, to come down, settle in Hungary, which was undeveloped at the time, to keep the Turks out. And they gave them land, building materials, and livestock to settle there, and they were allowed to keep their German heritage, schools, churches, everything else. They never were required to learn Hungarian, but things got, I guess, a little dicey, and they came over here.

JJ: Do you know what year they came over?

MR: You know, without looking in the Bible back at home, I couldn't tell you. It was in the late 1800s because my mother was born in 1902, she was born here, and my father was born in 1906 and he was also born in Newark.

JJ: Where did they live when they were growing up, before they were married?

MR: My father grew up in Garfield, New Jersey and my mother grew up in Clifton and Passaic.

JJ: Do you know how they met?

MR: They met at church, which, like a lot of people in those days, they were German families and our parish, Holy Trinity Parish in Passaic, was a German parish. In Passaic, I don't know if you've ever been in Passaic, there are churches on every other corner, but one's a Hungarian,

one's an Irish, another one's a German, another one's a Polish, and, you know, they all went to their own nationality churches. That's how they met.

ML: What did your father do?

MR: My father, believe it or not, worked in the same paint and wallpaper store for his whole life, from the age of thirteen 'til he retired at sixty-two. It was called Stephan Gaal Paint and Wallpaper, Steven and Eleanor Gaal were the owners, and they hired my father at the age of thirteen to help paint houses, but then they also opened a store at the same time to sell paint to house painters. In those days, you didn't go to Home Depot; you went to a paint store that sold only paint. So, that's what my father did for his whole, entire working life.

Jl: Did he go to school at all or ...

MR: He went to Holy Trinity grammar school, it was a Catholic school, and so did my mother, and my father actually went, I'm trying to remember, I think he went, like, nine years of school. My mother went to eight years of school. When she graduated, she could type, take shorthand, do all that stuff, and immediately got a job in New York City on Lower Broadway for the Marston, I think it was Marston Steamship Company and worked there. You know, she took the train over to New York everyday from Passaic. That was the way things were in those days. You came out of grammar school, ready to go to work.

ML: Did you work in the paint store as well growing up?

MR: No, no, no, no. I didn't like anything to do with being inside, never had a job, well, I shouldn't say that, I worked a few jobs inside, but, no, I didn't work there.

ML: So did you grow up in Clifton or Passaic?

MR: I grew up in Clifton on Russell Street in Clifton.

ML: Where did you go to grammar school?

MR: I also went to Holy Trinity School and had Dominican nuns, and then, from there, I went to Pope Pious High School, which also had Dominican nuns, because our parish paid for us to go there if we had a certain average, you know.

ML: Can you maybe describe your schooling growing up, were the nuns harsh?

MR: Well, you want to talk about the fear of God? Yeah, not like today's schools, I mean, today, the teachers fear the kids. In those days, boy, you just didn't step out of line.

ML: Did you ever get in trouble?

MR: You know, the only time I can remember getting in trouble was one time. We took turns cleaning erasers in those days, blackboards had chalk erasers, you know, and I was supposed to clean erasers. Well, the wheel that you had to do it with was over by the trash cans; it was quite a ways from our classroom and it was a lot easier to take them outside the door and go bang, bang, against the brick wall, so that's what I was doing when I got caught. That was the only time I really remember getting, not only a whack with a, they had yardsticks with a metal edge and you didn't want to get hit with those, even if it was on your rear end. That's the only time I really remember getting in trouble with the nuns.

ML: Did you have brothers and sisters growing up?

MR: I had two sisters, one older, one younger, and my older sister, Mary, became, she went to Paterson State, which is now, what, William Paterson College? And that was a teacher's college in those days, and then she got a job teaching. I want to say Number Thirteen School in Clifton on VanHouten Avenue, but then, when she was expecting her first of three children, she said, "That's the end of that," and raised the children until they got into school, and then she went into a parochial school right near her house in Clifton and taught there 'til she retired in her sixties. And then, my younger sister, Regina, which was also my mother's name, she went to Pope Pius High School also, all three of us did, and, let's see, she took a secretarial course and got a job with ITT in Nutley, and she got, one of her bennies [benefits] was, she got over to Japan for quite a while, and worked over there for ITT, and don't confuse that with AT&T, it was ITT. Don't ask me what it stands for, but she's always been a secretary and she still is, now she's kind of retired in Sarasota, Florida, but she and her husband want to move back to Toms River, New Jersey to retire, but so be it.

ML: Growing up, what did you do in your free time?

MR: Free time, we were lucky enough to live with a county park in my backyard, so, getting there was real easy. It was a six-foot cyclone fence, but the tops were bent down, like kids would do, and we had a doghouse, a garbage-can shed, and then the fence, so I went boom, boom, boom, and I was into the park. There was a brook, Weasel Brook, that ran through the park that, of course, in the summer, my mother would say, "You got brand-new sneakers, stay out of the brook." Right. But we played in the brook, you know, all summer long, it was our way of staying cool, and then when we got a little older, we started playing softball every night, and there was a ritual there. We couldn't play baseball there, the field was too short. You would hit a baseball into somebody's window, so we had to play softball. But, in those days, there were no adult leaders, you know, the kids all got there, and you chose up sides. You had a leader for each team, and then he picked everybody and everybody knew who the best players were, so it pretty much evened out, and if there was a close play at first base, you argued about it for a while and then, obviously, the first side that got tired arguing was in the wrong, so you went back playing ball. Or everybody else said, "Aw, stop arguing, let's play ball," and, then you went back to playing. But we never had umpires, or adults, nothing. We just played ball.

ML: Did you play sports in high school?

MR: The only thing I did in high school was track. I was just a skinny, little kid; I couldn't play

football, I wasn't tall enough for basketball or anything, so I just ran track.

ML: What did you run?

MR: Four-forty [yards], quarter mile.

Jl: You mentioned earlier that you didn't work when you were younger, did you work when you were in high school?

MR: Oh, yeah. Well, actually, I started before I was in high school. I had an uncle who taught, I got to tell you about my uncle because he really had more influence on my life than my father did. My father had tuberculosis before I was born, actually a couple years before I was born, and I think he spent a couple of years in a sanitarium overlooking Paterson, Valley View Sanitarium, I think it was called, and he had one lung removed. Let me follow onto that. When I got to Rutgers, I was an Aggie and one of the things we were required, as freshmen, to take was a one credit course, and I'm trying to think of what it was called. I think General Agriculture but it was a one credit course, and we would have speakers on Monday afternoon on agricultural topics. There wasn't any testing or anything, but you had to be there. So one of the afternoons, we had this little, tiny guy, Dr. Waksman, who developed streptomycin at Rutgers, and I was thinking when I was sitting there, I had known about my father with tuberculosis and I had an aunt who had tuberculosis, and I was thinking, "God, it must be so great to know you personally have saved tens of millions of lives," and that's really what streptomycin did. So I was kind of awed by this guy and he was just a little, little guy, yeah. Anyway, my father was very quiet, if you asked him a question, he'd give you a yes or no answer and that was about it. My uncle, my mother's brother, was just the opposite; he was very outspoken. He and his wife, my aunt, never had any children, so I was kind of an adopted child. My uncle Joe was a lawyer. He went to Seton Hall, then got his law degree at Rutgers. I think he eventually became the lawyer for the city of Clifton, for the fire and police departments, for the parish, Holy Trinity Parish, and he had a good law practice. But, one of his good friends in Seton Hall became the head of Seton Hall University and called him up one day and said, "Joe, got a deal for you." He said, "I want you to come here and teach," and my uncle said, "What?" And his friend said, "Ah, think about it, then give me a call." He hung up the phone, and talked to my aunt and he said, "You know, I never thought of that." He said what he didn't like about the practice of law was sometimes you couldn't tell the truth, and, so, he immediately called his friend back and said, "I'll do it." So he became a philosophy professor down there at Seton Hall until the day he died. In fact, the day he died, in 1963 I think, he came home with some blue books. Remember the old blue books? Do you still use them? Oh, yeah? Blue books, he had a whole stack of them, came in, he was putting them on the dining room table, and in the middle of a sentence, my aunt said he stopped talking and she heard a clunk. He had a stroke and died. But he was a big influence in my life.

Jl: What was his name?

MR: Joseph Prefladisch and I can spell that, not too many people can.

Jl: What year did he graduate from Seton Hall?

MR: You know he was born in 1899, you could probably figure it out.

JJ: Maybe in the '20s?

MR: Yeah, I guess.

JJ: Did he go to Rutgers Law right after that?

MR: Yeah, he went to Rutgers in Newark, I guess it was.

ML: So he lived nearby when you were growing up?

MR: Yes, they also lived in Clifton, on Grove Street. We had to take a bus to get to his house, but it was no problem. But one of the things he did for me is, I used to go up, when I was in grammar school, and on Saturdays, I would earn a few dollars. They had Irish setter, who lived in the cellar. Their house was on a hill, so the back of the cellar was actually the first floor in the back. But I used to sweep that cellar, comb the dog, and do all those things and then wash the floors and wax the floors upstairs and take the dog for a walk and then in the summer I cut the lawns. I used to do all these little things and they gave me a few dollars. That was a lot of money in those days and with a couple of dollars I could go to the hobby shop and buy a HO gauge railroad car kit. I don't know if you know anything about HO gauge railroad, but in those days, they came in kits and you basically had to assemble them. Now, it's all plastic, you know, but I would be able to get one railroad car with each Saturday's wages, and then, to get an engine with an electric motor and stuff, that would take me maybe three or four Saturdays, but that's how I started working. Then, of course, when I turned sixteen, I immediately got a job in the movie theater as an usher where you meet a lot of girls. That was kind of like a nighttime thing. In the summer I worked at A&P stocking shelves. Then, my father got me a job with the department of Parks and Recreation for Clifton between my first two years at college doing playgrounds, putting in playgrounds and then you have to kind of drag the infields everyday during the summer when they play ball and put down the lines and all that. . It was a good job, it paid well. But my Uncle Joe also was a big influence on me. There was a TV station, it was Channel 13 in Newark back in those days, WAAT, I believe it was, but I'm not sure about that. But Channel 13 was the only New Jersey TV station and they had a program called "Junior Town Meeting", I think it was called. But every week for an hour they had three schools and that debated. Well, the night I was on the subject was taxes. On the first part of the debate you presented your side of a particular issue. Then the other two would give their side, and then it was opened up to the students in the audience who were from the three schools. This was live television. It was not taped, or anything, this was live. I can remember the girl next to me, I forget what high school she was from, and she says, "I'm going to die, I'm going to faint, I'm going to throw up," you know. She was so nervous that it kept me from being nervous, because I was trying to calm her, so it worked out pretty good. But before this whole thing started, we had a deal in Pope Pius that this one nun used to pick a student to represent the school. Well, this one guy, who was by far the sharpest, smartest kid in school, said, "Ain't no way you're going to get me up on that thing," so he actually refused, and then it came to another guy and he said,

"No," and then she came to me and she said, "How about you do it, Michael?" And I said, "Let me think about it." So I went home and I went to my Uncle Joe because he was really my mentor in those days, and I said, "What do you think?" He says, "Of course, you're going to do it." I said, "What do you mean, of course?" I said, "I know nothing about taxes." We already knew the subject was going to be about should we reduce taxes. This was 1952 or 53 and he said, "You come up here every night after school, and we will educate you on taxes." He was a strict Republican, you know. He was one of a few people I ever knew in my life that didn't like Roosevelt, FDR. But I did that, and I survived the hour on TV, and that really was something that I was able to take through life, you know, don't be afraid to jump into things like that. Anyway, that was my Uncle Joe.

ML: Now, you were fairly young when the Depression and World War II happened.

MR: I don't remember anything of the Depression, I know we moved around. In fact, we lived with my uncle and aunt, the one I just talked about, because he had a good job all through the Depression. But my father's, the store my father worked in, the paint and wallpaper store, you can imagine, people weren't painting their houses during the Depression, so there was no income there. But the Gaals told him, "If you'll keep the store open and continue working there, when things turn around, we'll pay you," and so I guess that's what they did.

Jl: So he worked for nothing?

MR: I guess he worked, basically, for nothing, but we had to move in with my aunt and uncle because we couldn't afford renting a house.

Jl: So before the Depression, your parents rented their house?

MR: Yes, they were married in 1929, I don't know if you know anything about the Depression, the crash was October 1929, I forget what date you can actually pin it down to, but, anyway, they got married on October 12, 1929, and went to Boston on their honeymoon, and so they were renting, initially, and then my sister was born in '32 and then I was born in '35 and we lived with my aunt and uncle until about '39. My father borrowed money from one of his brothers who had a good job with the Mountain Ice Company. He managed the Mountain Ice Company in Paterson, and he gave him cash, forty-five hundred dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. My father bought a two-family, Archie Bunker-style house, where every house looks the same on the street, and we bought the house and moved in and then he got twenty-five dollars a month from the other people downstairs. That was a pretty good place to grow up. So, we, my sisters and I, used to lie in bed at night and count the kids; we had about a hundred kids on our street, just one block. Every house had kids in the '40s, this was in the '40s.

ML: What about your remembrances of World War II? You mentioned that your uncle...

MR: World War II. I had another uncle, my father's youngest brother, Henry, who was in the Army. He was in artillery, he landed at Casablanca. I don't know if you're up on World War II

history, landed in Casablanca, went up to Tunis, across to Sicily, went ashore at Anzio, and then went up through Italy, to Germany, so he saw a lot of World War II. The funny thing is when he came back, I was ten years old. I was like a sponge. I'd say, "tell me about it." Never would he say a word, never. He would not say a word about the war.

JJ: Did your father hear from him while he was away?

MR: Yeah, and, in fact, I still have a letter I kept. It was called V-mail, I think it was where they actually photographed the letters and then somebody censored them. My uncle lived on a farm in Sussex and I wanted to get into one of the sheds, there was something in one of the sheds and he had put a combination lock on it and I asked him for the combination and he wrote out the combination. Of course, it was censored. I don't know why, but they had people censoring those things. I don't know who the guys were who used to spend all their time reading all the stuff. Can you imagine all the letters going back, to wives and stuff? Oh, my goodness. But, yeah, he was my youngest uncle and the only part of the war I could remember, basically, was sitting at the radio with my father, and a certain battle was taking place in Europe and my father would be listening very intently at the radio because he knew his brother was there. My father having one lung and three children and he was a little bit older, you know, he was born in 1906 so by 1946, already he was forty, so by the early '40s, he was, you know, probably past the draft age already, so he didn't have to go in.

ML: Do you remember things being rationed or anything like that?

MR: Oh, yeah, I can. It was a funny thing, you used to have these A stickers and B stickers on your window and that tells you how much gas you could get, and, of course, rubber tires were impossible to get and stuff like that. And then, I remember, this was in the days before supermarkets, before the Grand Union opened up by us, we used to have a butcher shop down the street from us and Rudy's Bakery, and then we had a guy who used to come around on our street and sell fruits and vegetables and he lived two doors down from us, and I can still remember his horse. He had a horse and wagon and every day, long before I got up, he would take that horse and wagon from Clifton and go to Crooks Avenue, which was like the border between Clifton and Paterson, and he would get his fruits and vegetables for the day on that wagon. He'd come back to our neighborhood and he would go up and down the streets and he'd call out. If it was August and the watermelons were ripe, he'd come down the street yelling out "Watermelons," and all the women would come out of the houses. Of course, most of the women were home raising kids. They, women, weren't working, so that's how the women got their fruits and vegetables every day, and I also remember his horse had a tendency to kinda walk away if he didn't pay attention. So he would put this big iron, round iron thing, down and hook the horse to this thing, so the horse couldn't walk away when he was trying to sell vegetables off the wagon in the back. But that's how we got our stuff. Every day, we would go down the street and get a loaf of bread from Rudy's Bakery. We would go late in the afternoon because, when the bread came out of the oven, they couldn't put it through the slicer; it was too hot. It had to cool for an hour or so, so we'd go back about five o'clock and, by then, they could slice it. I would eat the two heels on my way home. I always liked the two heels. The butcher shop, O'Lear's Butcher Shop, I remember going into it with my mother and counting out the little

stamps. You had little, tiny stamps. You had to rip off a certain number to get a pound of beef, or whatever she was getting, and then Mr. O'Leary would go in this big locker, or whatever that was, whether it was a refrigerator or freezer, I don't know what, and he had these big carcasses hanging up, and he'd take this thing, take a sharp knife and cut off what my mother wanted. You don't see that anymore. Everything is wrapped in plastic.

ML: So growing up in your neighborhood, was it mostly kids of German descent? Did they separate by where the church was or...

MR: No, no, no, our neighborhood was probably lower middle class, all mixes, you know, every kid on the street. If you remember, after World War I, we didn't have any immigration to speak of, so all of the kids were basically born in America. You didn't have any kids that were born anywhere else, but a lot of the parents and grandparents were born in Europe, so, you know, we had a lot of them. They were Russians, they were Polish, I can just go up and down the street, Hungarians, we were Germans, there were all kinds of mixes. There were very few cars on our street. We always played in the street because there were few cars. My father never owned a car in his life.

Jl: Really?

MR: Nope. Neither my father nor my mother drove, and they lived to, my father died at ninety-two, my mother died at near ninety. She thought it was great when I got a car. That day I turned seventeen, man, I was ...

Jl: You got a car when you were seventeen?

MR: Oh, yeah.

Jl: Wow.

MR: Actually, I got it before I was seventeen but I couldn't drive it.

Jl: Was that money that you'd earned?

MR: Yeah.

Jl: Must have been good with the ladies.

MR: Two hundred and ninety-five dollars, I paid for it, '41 Chevy.

Jl: So it was a newish car?

MR: Well, that was in '50, let's see, about '52,

JJ: About ten or eleven years old then. Better than my first car.

MR: Well, cars last a lot longer now. You know, if you got a hundred thousand on a car in those days, that was fantastic. Today, I've got an old Tercel out here; I've got two hundred thousand on it and nothing's ever broken on it. They last so much longer.

JJ: Are we ready for Rutgers now or is there anything else?

ML: Yes. The obvious question, how did you pick Rutgers?

MR: Well, of course, my uncle wanted me to go to a Catholic university. I said, "But, Uncle Joe." Well, let me tell you why I wanted to be an Aggie. Because I spent my summers on my grandparents' farm in Sussex. Do you know where the town of Sussex is? Okay, going towards Unionville, which is north, about three, four miles north, on that road to Unionville, off to the right hand side, was their chicken farm. They had an eleven acre poultry farm, chicken farm. They sold eggs, and I didn't like chickens too much, but across the street was a dairy farm and I just loved those cows, and I thought, "Man, this is it," and, in World War II, dairy farmers got rich, a lot of farmers got rich,. They put up this beautiful barn with all the modern stuff and everything, and I just thought cows were so much smarter than chickens. [laughter] So, anyway, I wanted to be a dairy farmer and my uncle thought he wanted me to be an engineer, and he said, "Well, if you want to be." I also wanted to just, after high school, go up there and live on the farm with my grandparents, my uncle and aunt, and he said, "No, no, no, no, no. If you want to be a farmer, that's fine, but you're going to go to college for four years first." I said, "Do I really have to?" And he says, "Yes, you have to." So, I said, "Okay." So, I found out that Rutgers was the only place, and it wasn't a State University yet then, but it was a lot cheaper because it was a land grant college and you could get tuition much cheaper, I think it was seven dollars a unit then, and I didn't pay for any of that because I got a scholarship. I forget what scholarship I got, but I applied for a scholarship and they wrote to my high school, and they sent my marks and stuff, so that I would get a scholarship. I never paid tuition.

JJ: So was it a full scholarship?

MR: The tuition was, yes. The only thing I had to pay was room and board and I didn't want to live in a dorm, I don't know why I didn't want to live in a dorm, maybe it was the cost, but I went down there looking for a place to get a room. They had, I found some bulletin boards, you know, or I went to the admissions office, or something and they gave me a list of places. We ended up at this one house, it was Mrs. Phyllis Day on 91 Easton Avenue, and I liked it right off the bat, maybe because she had a nice blonde daughter, I don't know, but Mrs. Day was nice, she was really nice, and I stayed there four years, believe it or not. It was six dollars a week for the room and my mother used to give me twenty dollars for the week. So I'd pay the six dollars and then I had fourteen left to eat and so we had a lot of ketchup sandwiches, stuff like that, but every once in a while we'd go and have a good meal. I was an Aggie, so I used to bum rides over to the Ag campus. Most of our classes as freshmen were on the main campus, but I think Tuesday and Thursday we had to go over to the Ag campus. There was a place that specialized in lunch, right, I'm trying to think of that street that came up, name some streets.

JJ: George Street?

MR: No, George was the main one in town. This is right on the Ag campus where the girl's dorm used to be.

JJ: Nichols?

ML: Neilson?

MR: Yeah, might have been, you know, I really can't remember. Anyway, this little place specialized in lunches for truckers, and stuff, and man, we would just pig out for a dollar. I mean we would get, you'd go, "[Wow.] How are you going to stay awake in class after this meal?" But that was one of the bargains in town. So, anyway, that's how I went through four years living at, we used to call it "Ma Day's." "Ma Day's Flop House," we used to call it. We had about, let's see, one, two, I had a roommate, Louie Weidemann and then Jim Bums was another student and then, in the room adjacent to ours, was a little old lady who never came out and Mrs. Day used to bring her meals up to her, and then upstairs was a bus driver and a guy who, I guess he was a post graduate student, a chemist, who actually worked down in Bound Brook, but he used to come up and take classes and he lived upstairs. So there was like one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, roomers there, in the house.

JJ: You just had one roommate?

MR: Actually, I had two over the four years. My first two years, I had a guy I went to high school with, but he dropped out after two years and then later came back and finished up at Rutgers and then got a job as a county agent in Pennsylvania. His name was Jim Cain. My roommate the second two years is a guy I worked with as an usher in the Clifton Theater. He went to Clifton High School and his name was Louie Weidemann, and Louie and I still email almost every night to this day. In fact, he just wrote me last night, he says, "Guess who I just got an email from?" I said, "Okay, who?" "Kathy Palma." She was a little candy girl that I had a crush on and I said, "Holy mackerel. Where'd you?" He said, "Well, I didn't know where she was, but her husband was a classmate of mine." Kathy was a year behind us. Small world.

ML: So ...

MR: So we're at Rutgers.

ML: We are at Rutgers.

MR: I was a dairy husbandry major.

JJ: What years did you go?

MR: Well, I started in '53 and then graduated in '57.

Jl: Did they have chapel in '53?

MR: Yes.

Jl: All four years?

MR: You know, I don't remember whether they had the last couple of years, but we did, it was Monday, right around one o'clock or so.

Jl: Do you remember anything about chapel?

MR: Yes, I remember some of the choirs and stuff were just incredible. I thought, "Wow, these guys can really sing." We never had any religious stuff like that, but I enjoyed chapel, some of the entertainers, they don't call it that. They don't do that anymore, I take it?

ML: No. Were you involved in sports? Did you go to the games?

MR: I wasn't and, even if I was, there was no time for it. I was in class half a day on Saturday. I mean, we had labs almost every afternoon. There was no way. I had a couple of friends who were business majors, or something like that, they were playing tennis every afternoon. I thought, "Holy mackerel," you know, "it isn't fair." We used to have labs that would last till four, sometimes five o'clock. If it wasn't chemistry or organic chemistry, it was geology, or it was something that, one of the Ag ones, took a long time, too. No, I never did sports at Rutgers.

Il: Now, were you at Rutgers College or were you at Cook?

MR: Well, it's Cook, but it wasn't Cook in those days. They were beginning to call it Cook campus but it was, you know, Rutgers.

ML: Did you get to socialize at all?

MR: Well, most of my social life was back in Clifton and Passaic. My girlfriends were back there. When I first got there it was New Jersey College for Women, and, you know, you could go over there and the rules were so strict that ... We had a couple of girls in our class on the Ag campus, but none on the main campus. There were no women on the main campus. They were strictly Douglass and they did all their courses there, but in the Ag part, there were a few women who were taking courses with us. That's the only place we had women in classes. But my social life was North. [laughter]

Jl: Do you go home every weekend?

MR: About every other weekend.

II: How did you get home, by bus or train?

MR: My roommate had a car. Well, I shouldn't say this, but my roommate was kind of a spoiled guy. [laughter] He was an only child, his father was a labor negotiator, arbitrator. In those days, that was a rare breed. I mean, there weren't too many around. I'm sure he made very good money and he gave my roommate things that I wouldn't even dream of getting, like brand new tape-recorders. In those days, I mean, a tape recorder was big, and he gave him a brand new '55 Chevy hardtop, powder blue and cream. Today, that's a classic car. I can remember him getting it. Then we also had, we had a group of us back in Clifton there, we were called Relic, Incorporated. We actually incorporated in the State of New Jersey because, as a non-profit, it didn't cost you anything first of all, and secondly, by us not individually owning the cars, the liability wasn't there, and if we sold it to each other, these old junky cars, we didn't have to get it inspected for six months. None of these would have passed inspection. We had a '30 Pontiac that you could just put into third gear, take your foot off the clutch, and, when you wanted to go, you had a throttle and choke on the dash, because the floor throttle, the accelerator, didn't work. We would pull out the gas on it. [laughter] And then, as you got a little higher speed, you had to pull the choke out, too, or it'd die. The only brakes, well, it had brakes, but mechanical brakes, but the real brake was the hand brake in the middle, so you pull this hand brake, you know. If my parents ever knew we were driving around, oh my God, but we had a lot of fun with it. And we had the regular "ugga ugga" horn, we had a "bap bap" horn, we had "ding-dong" bell on the floor, and a wolf whistle on the carburetor, and so, you can get a lot of attention on these cars. You don't want to hear all these times we had in that great car. It was a fantastic car; we had a lot of fun in it. But, anyway, that's where my social life was, back up there in North Jersey.

JJ: Did you date at all while you were at school?

MR: Did I date? Of course.

JJ: But you dated girls from home.

MR: Yeah, mainly from home, Clifton, Passaic. I married a girl from Passaic, who knew my sister, but I never knew her, and she never knew that my younger sister had a brother, until we met each other in the front of my house one evening. They were walking home and I said, "Who's that?" And my best friend had dated her and so he told me who she was. But most of the girls I dated were from Clifton, Passaic, one from Garfield, one from Belleville. Actually, my roommate Louie's wife, that I dated, was from Belleville. They're still married.

JJ: Do you remember any of your classes at Rutgers, or professors?

MR: Professors, boy, you know, I don't really remember too many. This one, I remember this one guy we had, great big guy at the Ag campus, (Boden?), or (Boyden?), or something like that, his name was, and I had him for several subjects. They used to teach several subjects, but none of them really stood out to me. The subject I liked the most was geology. I loved it, you know, you drive around New Jersey and you don't realize what you're looking at until you take geology, and then you go to someplace like the Delaware Water Gap, or, just north of Rutgers, is the

terminal moraine of the Wisconsin Glacier. That's as far as the glacier came, and then it started going back, so you've got this ridge, that runs across the whole state, of all these gobbled up rocks and stuff that it had picked up coming down, and then you go south, like you get to New Brunswick, you can't find a rock. But you go north of that, like at my grandparents' farm, they used to make their walls out of rocks because all their neighbors got together on Sunday, and they'd have these rock wall parties, or whatever you want to call it. They'd get these wagons and the horses together and they would pick up all the rocks and every time they plowed the fields, more rocks would come up, and, so to get rid of them, they'd build rock walls, and I bet you could still find them out there.

ML: You were in Catholic school all the way through high school, was it a difference for you at Rutgers?

MR: I don't know whether I ever thought of it as different. I mean, you had professors that you're looking at your watch, "Hey," if the guy didn't show up for another two minutes, "we're out of here," and you walked from one to the other, you know, whereas in high school, you walked from class to class, but you didn't walk from building to building or drive to class.

Jl: Did you find it academically more challenging?

MR: Rutgers? No, not when you have Dominican nuns. Hey, look, in grammar school, fifth grade, this is fifth grade, I used to write, this nun required us to write a five hundred word composition every single night including Friday night, every night, and she read them all, and then she would pick, everyday, she'd pick somebody to read theirs in front of the class. I mean, when I got to Rutgers as a freshman and there was a requirement for, twice a week you had to write a five-hundred word theme, everybody went, "Ah!" I said, "Piece of cake," it was easy, I mean, the English language to those nuns was important, I could remember catechism, we would take these sentences that were about ten lines, you know, and we'd diagram it. We'd have the whole blackboard to be diagramming one sentence -- gerunds, infinitives, and independent clauses, and dependent clauses, and everything. I learned English and, to this day, my grandkids, "Him and I are going," "Him and me are going," or "Me and him are going." I thought, "Oh," you know, I think how they're murdering the English language today. I heard somebody from Rutgers the other day on the radio, PBS, doing the same thing. I was driving down the road and I said, "This guy is from Rutgers?" and he said, "Him and me." How did he say it? It was something like that, "him and me did this," and I'm thinking, "Oh, my God. This guy is a college graduate." Anyway, I learned a lot from the nuns and it was, college was, to me pretty easy.

Jl: Did you even think about leaving?

MR: College?

Jl: Did you enjoy your four years at Rutgers?

MR: Oh, yeah.

ML: Do you remember Ag Field Day? Did you participate?

MR: Yes, cooking, cooking hamburgers, I remember, boy, it was hotter than hell cooking hamburgers. But I remember the log rolling contest and then the canoes with the things, with the boxing glove on the end of the pole, and stuff like that, and the cow milking contest, where they get people who never milked a cow before to try to milk a cow and it was fun. Then, we had a dance at night and so it was fun, the Ag Field Days were a lot of fun. They still have them?

Jl: Yes, they're one of the most looked forward to days of the year.

MR: They had a parade. I have eight-millimeter home movies of the parades taken from the admin building there. I was able to get to a second-story window, and took movies of the parade, like the queen, the bands, the ROTC drill teams and then the floats, different floats.

ML: You also served in the ROTC.

MR: I was in the Air Force ROTC for two years, but military didn't appeal to me, I don't know why. But I did get to fly in an airplane for the first time in Air Force ROTC. But then, you know, after two years, you had to make a decision whether to continue on and then get a commission, or not, and I said, "I don't want to."

Jl: You did it your first two years.

MR: First two years, we were required. You had Army, excuse me, Army or Air Force, you had a choice.

ML: You picked Air Force because?

MR: I don't know. Maybe I like blue better than brown or something. [laughter] I have no idea why I picked Air Force. Maybe, I don't know, I think back, the Air Force was relatively new then, you know, it was '47, or so, that the Air Force became an independent branch. It just appealed to me more than the Army. I never thought I'd much want to dig foxholes.

ML: You said it was your first time you flew a plane.

MR: Yeah, we got to fly a twin-engine Beechcraft one time, and we took turns. I think there were about five of us students in the plane and we would take turns, you know, getting up in the front with the pilot and actually turning, and stuff like that. I thought it was pretty cool.

ML: Where did you fly out of?

MR: Oh, boy, you know, I really couldn't tell you. It was a small field, wasn't too far from New Brunswick, but where the name didn't make any impression on me [Hadley Field?]. I was sitting in the back of a station wagon, or something, talking on the way, to wherever it was. I don't

know where it was.

ML: Were there a lot of GIs coming back from ...

MR: In fact, one of my good friends, who was an Aggie, Bob Nunamacher, was in the Korean War and he came back. He was already married and living at home and he was going on the GI Bill, and there were a lot of guys still going on the GI Bill. I don't know how many of them were still from World War II. A lot of these guys, I think, were Korea by then, '53 to '57.

JL: Do you remember the Korean War, well, obviously, you remember it, but do you remember its impact on campus at all?

MR: You know what had a bigger impact on me? I could remember during World War II, the big shortages were coffee and sugar and various things like that, that we've talked about before. But I was on my grandparents' farm when the Korean War started in June of '51, I think it was, and I used to go to the farm in the summer when school was out, and I was up there when the whole thing started, and my grandmother, as soon as that war started, she says, "We're going to town. We're getting coffee and sugar," and we went down, I can remember, we drove up to Middletown, New York. She figured there would be more coffee and sugar up there. I remember going into stores with her and she had all this sugar and coffee, [laughter] because she thought it was going to be rationed again. So, that's the big impression the Korean War made on me, but I didn't know anybody personally who was in it.

ML: Was there any kind of political activism on campus. Did you ever see speakers come?

MR: If they came, I didn't attend; I was somewhere else. No, not 'til Vietnam did I experience that, and, of course, I wasn't there. Was there activism on campus during the Korean War?

ML: I'm not sure.

JL: I know there was more during World War II and I think some of it did spill over into the Korean War, but it was, obviously, like you said, more World War II and Vietnam.

MR: I don't remember.

ML: Then you graduated in May of '57?

MR: Well, May or June, I don't remember when. It must have been June because I got engaged on the fifteenth and the next day, I had to be in Pensacola, and I remember, I think, we got out of school on the ninth of June, it was after graduation, or something like that. It could have been early, but I think it was very close, that I graduated, got engaged, and, then, I had to leave the engagement party to get a flight out of La Guardia to get to Pensacola the next day. Then I thought my world had ended. "What am I doing?" The world had changed when you get in the boot camp atmosphere-type thing. But Rutgers, I enjoyed my four years at Rutgers. I got to tell you about one incident that happened. I'm trying to think who the dean of men was at the time.

Who was dean of men back in '56-'57? I could call my roommate and find out, but it doesn't matter. But Louie had the '30 Pontiac down there. I don't know how the dormitories are set up now, but we used to go to what they called the Quad, and we drove the car in the middle of the Quad, and, of course, he, Louie is a nut, anyway, but he drove it in there, "ding dong, wolf whistle, bap bap, ugga ugga," you know, and who happened to be walking across the Quad, but the dean. Dean, geez, his name is on the tip of my tongue, but it doesn't matter. [Cornelius Boocock] So he walked over to the car, and Louie and I said, "Oh, shoot," you know. He said, "I want to see you two boys in my office at one o'clock." I'm thinking, "God, we're going to get kicked out of school." Here we are, seniors, and we're going to get kicked out of school. So we went to his office and he kind of greeted us with a smile. He says, "You know what?" He said, "I couldn't, with all those guys in the yard," he says, "I couldn't crack a smile and laugh at this, but," he says, "I thought that was the most hilarious thing I ever saw." [laughter] He says, "But I have to put on this show of, you know, being a disciplinarian," so he says, "But please don't do that again." [laughter] He says, "But you got a great car there," he says. So we went, "Oh, thank God, we didn't get kicked out of school."

Jl: So you met your wife while you were at Rutgers or did you know her growing up?

MR: No, I met her in Clifton of 1955. We used to do things as a group in those days, we went to a skating rink and she was a roller skater. She liked roller skating, and I had taken this other girl, Lois, to the skating rink, but then Lois wasn't too good a skater and Rachael was. I was kind of new at roller skating. I had ice skated all my life, so roller skating is a piece of cake after you've been ice skating, and I started double skating with Rachael and, you know, we just kind of blended together and I thought, "Hey, this is pretty good," so, before the evening was out, I asked her to go on the Rutgers boat ride up the Hudson. Do they still do that? We used to, first week of school, we always had a boat ride up the Hudson River and I asked her if she wanted to go on it. She said, "Yes." So that was our first official date; the Rutgers boat ride up to Bear Mountain, and then, we just kind of hit it off.

Jl: Was she living at home? Was she in high school or ...

MR: She was out of high school, working. She worked in a place called Tung-Sol, in Bloomfield. They made radio tubes, a thing from the past, actual vacuum tubes, you know, for television sets and stuff and she was on the assembly line of that, and her father was a cook at Clifton's Howard Johnson, and what else do you need to know about her? [laughter] So, yeah, we started dating between my, I guess that was the summer between sophomore and junior, or somewhere around there.

Jl: You got engaged two years later?

MR: Well, yeah, we got engaged just before I went in the Navy, June '57, and then we got married when I went home on Christmas leave from the Navy in '57.

Jl: When did you decide to go into the Navy?

MR: Well, here's how I decided. I was at the Commons for lunch one day and they had a table,

about this size, set in the corner, and it had a banner hanging up, "Fly Navy." So I'm eating my lunch and I'm thinking, you know, here it's 1957, I'm going to graduate in a couple of months, this is April. "I'm going to graduate in a couple of months, what in the world am I going to do?" There's no farms left in New Jersey to speak of. Do I really want to sell pharmaceuticals, which was the big thing? And, so I was thinking, "Well, I'm going to get drafted." Everybody was getting drafted if you didn't join some other program in the military in those days. So I walked over there and I said, "What are you selling?" He says, "Well, we want to get you to fly airplanes in the Navy." From that conversation, the thing that stuck in my mind was, he said, "We'll pay you seven hundred dollars a month to fly airplanes." I went, "Cha Ching. Seven hundred dollars a month; I can afford to get married at seven hundred dollars a month." That was a lot of money in those days, it really was, and I was thinking, "Hmm, eighty-nine dollars a month in the Army for digging foxholes or try this?" I said, "What have I got to lose?" So I signed the thing and, before you know it, I was over to Floyd Bennett Field getting a physical. No, first I went to Lower Broadway; the Navy had a thing there, and there were about thirty-five of us who took the eight hour written exam. Yeah, eight hour exam, and they test you on not only what you learn in school, but your dexterity and all these other things. So, anyway, finished that thing and a couple of us passed it and we ended up going to Floyd Bennett and then I took a physical. I got to tell you about the physical. In those days, I weighed a hundred thirty-five pounds and I was five foot ten. You had to weigh a hundred thirty-seven pounds to get into this flight program at 5' 10". So my roommate Louie was going to drive me over to take this physical, so we leave Rutgers and we drive over to Floyd Bennett Field. On the way, we go down Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn and he says, "We're going to stop and get a bunch of bananas," and he says, "You gotta make sure you eat these bananas before you get on the scale. Don't go to the bathroom, you know, or anything else until you're off that scale." So we got a bunch and he ended up eating more of those bananas than I did. So, anyway, I passed it and I got accepted into the flight program in the Navy.

JJ: What did your parents think of you enlisting?

MR: Well, they really didn't ...

ML: Did your uncle have an opinion?

MR: My uncle approved it, too. They all liked the Navy, for some reason, I don't know why. People seem to like the Navy more than the Army, I don't know why.

JJ: It sounds more glamorous, I think.

MR: Yeah, maybe so. Nobody had any objections to my joining; the only thing I can remember was leaving. The night I left, my mother and sister got kinda teary-eyed. "Oh, we'll never see you again," Gimme a break. But I went down to pre-flight and managed to get through pre-flight and got a commission in October, October 4th, and my then fiancée, Rachael, took a train down from New Jersey to Pensacola. She says the highlight of that trip was when they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. She didn't know anything about segregation and she said, "We crossed the Mason Dixon Line, all of a sudden, there were some black servicemen and everything, and they chased them out of the car, and, 'Get in your own car,' and all. Everything became colored and

white and the rest rooms and the drinking fountains ..."

JJ: Like they just flipped a sign?

MR: Yes. She says it was kind of a shock to her, you know. She didn't see that in New Jersey. But she came down for the commissioning and, then, she flew home. She didn't take the train. In December I went home and we got married. What's the nice thing about that is, I got home and, two days later, we had our wedding, but I didn't have to do anything. I just [showed up], she said, "You don't realize how much work it is to get ready for a wedding when your fiancée isn't here."

JJ: Did you have a big wedding?

MR: Not really. It was at a little Italian church; she's Italian and, like I said, every nationality had their church. St. Anthony's was the Italian church and I can still remember it was very cold, December 28th, and this little Franciscan priest had things on like this, [points to sandals] but no socks, barefoot, and it's cold. I can remember him coming outside the church and everything, and I thought, the one thing I remember about that, "He must have cold feet." Anyway, we got married and then went on our honeymoon up in the Poconos, Pocomont Lodge. My Uncle Joe and Aunt Nettie gave us the honeymoon, and then we came back, and flew down to Pensacola. I had rented a house down there. Actually, one of the chaplains, when I got down to pre-flight in June, you had to go to one of the three services: Catholic, Protestant or Jewish. So I went to the Catholic service there, and they said, "Anybody want to be an altar boy?" So I said, "I was an altar boy all through school; I'll volunteer." So I got to know this chaplain and he had just come back from Deep Freeze One, the first Antarctic expedition that the Navy had down there, and he was really a fantastic speaker. So we got to be his altar boys, this other guy, Emmett Ward and I, and so that was kind of our introduction. This chaplain had a boat, so we used to go out on weekends, when we weren't doing anything else, we were out on that boat water skiing and stuff like that and it was great.

JJ: Now is it called basic training?

MR: It's called pre-flight and then you get commissioned. You're a cadet, an AOC, Aviation Officer Candidate, AOC Cadet, and you get paid a whole thirty-nine dollars every two weeks until you get commissioned and then, boy... [whistles]

JJ: What do you remember about pre-flight, was it tough?

MR: Pre-flight was kind a tough. Of course, growing up in New Jersey, you know how to swim, because I could remember this one guy in our class grew up on the North Platte River in Nebraska, and we got down to the pool and, of course, they ask you, "Can you swim?" and a couple of these guys said, "No, I can't swim," and I asked, "How come you can't swim? You grew up, you said, you grew up on a river." He said, "Where I lived, the river was a mile wide and six inches deep." He says, "You don't swim in that." So, he had to learn to swim and by the time the sixteen weeks is over, you have to swim two miles with your clothes on, flight suit on. Then the Dilbert Dunker, have you ever seen or heard of the Dilbert Dunker? It's an airplane

cockpit on rails that goes down at about a forty-five degree angle, hits the water, flips upside down, and sinks, and you have to un-strap, and pull yourself down and out, because you're upside down, and then get out of it. It's very, I mean, it sounds easy, but it's very disorienting. They give guys a certain amount of time to get out and then, you know, scuba divers would pull them out. Some of those guys took it ten times before they could get out of that, and I would think, "Oh, my God."

JJ: Do you remember what the time was?

MR: Before they pulled them out? I don't remember, probably a minute or so, but not long. Luckily, I was able to get out the first time, so I didn't have to do it again. But that was one of the tougher things and, of course, the step test, somebody told me about the step test. It's like a bench about that high...

JJ: About the height of a chair.

MR: Yeah, and you stand there and they put on this record, tape, or whatever it was, anyway, "toot, toot, toot," and what you have to do is step up with the left foot, then the right foot, step down with the left foot, then down with the right foot, then repeat it for five minutes. These guys who we talked to, who had gone through it the previous weeks said, "You know, by the first minute, your body is going to tell you there ain't no way that you're going to do this for five minutes," and he says, "Don't believe your body, you can do it." So I remembered that and I started doing it and he was right. Boy, by the time the first minute was up, my legs were aching so bad, you know, and all that, but I stuck with it and most of the guys did. But there were a lot of requirements, you know. You had to do like thirty-seven sit-ups and ten chin-ups, and everything, which is not a lot. Today, it's probably a big deal because kids are in terrible shape. I have grandkids that couldn't do two chin-ups. You know, we were doing chin-ups, hanging in trees, and stuff while we were kids. Kids don't have that chance nowadays. But pre-flight, academics were easy. I took meteorology at Rutgers for six months and 4.0-ed the meteorology course, you know, in pre-flight. There was another guy from the University of Miami, played football down there, took a whole year of meteorology, flunked meteorology in pre-flight. I'm not going to speak for some of the universities today, but back in those days, some of these guys who were football players and stuff, I mean, they tried, but they, academically, could not hack it. They just didn't make it and they would, we would coach them and they would be taking No-Doz to stay awake and study all night, still didn't make it. One guy, Johnny Campbell was his name, had a master's degree in chemistry from the University of Mississippi and that poor guy just couldn't catch on to anything. He finally washed out, but I felt sorry for him because he tried so hard, but I was thinking, "What are these guys learning down there, you know?"

JJ: But was there a lot of camaraderie between you? There was no competition?

MR: Oh, no ... We were Class 24-57, the twenty-fourth class in 1957. So, you would hear this thing and we were in this barrack-type thing and you'd hear this thing over the loud speaker, "Class 24-57 muster on the quarter deck immediately," and everybody just races out of the room, you know, down to the quarter deck and then the guy would say, "With toothbrushes," and then, everybody would run back, get their toothbrushes, and come back, and then, of course, the last

guy down there would get chewed out. You know how the military is, but it was all a big game. But the game was to make sure you could go along with the program and that's all boot camp really is, you know, even today. You've seen these movies, I'm sure, where these drill sergeants are in these guys' faces and stuff. It's that way to see if you're going to crack and it's never going to change, I guess.

ML: Where did you live in pre-flight? Were you in barracks?

MR: Yeah, big barracks, and then, when we got commissioned, of course, we could get married. I lived in the BOQ, Bachelor Officer's Quarters 'til December 1957. Then, I rented that house I was telling you about, the chaplain actually found the house for us on the bayou, so he could tie his boat up in our backyard and we had a nice little house that we rented. We rented it from an old retired couple that lived close by. The old man flew the first night hop in a Navy aircraft in the Pensacola area back in 1917, tells you how old he was.

ML: Once you got into the military did you like it? You said when you took ROTC you didn't really like it, but once you got into the Naval air corps ...

MR: Did I like the military? Your grade and class standing and everything in pre-flight was based on military, academic, and physical, three things. The physical, to me, was, you know, a piece of cake. I was running track in high school and stuff like that. I never had any problem with that and the obstacle courses and stuff like that, climbing over these walls. I always 4.0-ed that and then the academic to me was easy. The military I thought was kinda, "Do we have to do this?" So I wasn't a fan of the military part. I wasn't all spit and polish, like some of the guys would really get into it, but I managed, as long as you can make a right turn and left turn when they tell you to do it.

ML: How long were you in pre-flight?

MR: Sixteen weeks.

JJ: You got your commission.

MR: Got commissioned and then we start flying, and that's when we went to a place called Saufley Field, one of many outlying fields that the Navy had in Pensacola, and we flew the T - 34, which is a basic trainer. It was made by Beechcraft, and you get assigned an instructor, and you have to learn the aircraft, and you learn all the steps and procedures and stuff for it. The first thing they teach you on all these things, and this is true with all flight training, is emergency procedures. If that engine quits, what are you going to do? And you have to learn stuff, you open the canopy, put the wheels down, do this, do that, all this other stuff, so, you know, you go through that and then you get about fourteen flights. Then your instructor takes you out to an outlying air field somewhere, and these were all grass fields that we used, and he says, "Okay, I'm going to get out. I want you to take off, fly around and make two touch-and-go landings and then land again and pick me up" and that's your first solo, and that's a big deal. Nobody in the back there that's going to save this thing for you if you screw up, and then, after that, if he says, "Okay," then you go on to doing a lot of solo stuff, and then you go into acrobatic stuff, and you

go into instrument phases, all the different phases, and formation flying, and gunnery and Carquals (carrier qualification), and all bits like that. Then when you get through with basic, basic training, then you have to decide. In those days, it was, do you go with jets, do you go to helicopters, or do you go to multi-engine? Those were the three choices, and I always was fascinated by helicopters. Helicopters were relatively new back then, and I was always fascinated, so I was high enough in the class standing that I was able to get what I wanted. So I went into helicopter training and that was fun. We used to have these old Bells they called them, Bell 47s. Going back to the tail was all a bunch of just open tubing, aluminum tubes and stuff, and the funny thing is, in a hot summer day down there, you had to have a light instructor with a heavy student, or vice versa, or the plane wouldn't get off the ground, that's how underpowered they were. Then they had these things called fire ants. We had these great big fields and, you know, you just fly out there and the instructor would tell you to do a turn, or do this, or do that, and then they would have whitewashed squares and you'd have to put the nose on the line and go like this, and then turn ninety degrees and go like that, you know, turn again, and stuff like that, and then do circles, all basic stuff that you do to learn in helicopters. Well, they had these fire ants down there in Pensacola and they would build mounds about that high ...

JJ: Very high mounds.

MR: Yeah, and so every once in a while, some wise guy would, just before he flew the plane back to the Ellison Field, which is where he started from, he'd go sideways with the skids, you know these things have skids on them, and level off one of these ant things. Well, by the time he got the plane back there, it's crawling all over with these fire ants, and so the next guy on that plane had some problems. [laughter] Anyway, from there you go through advanced helicopter training, which was what they call a HUP, H-U-P, which was a tandem rotor helicopter, didn't have a tail rotor, and I got through that thing. I can remember one of my last flights in the training command. We're in a cross country phase, where we're actually going to go navigate around, and we started out and, this is a check pilot, and he says, "Oh, hell you know what this is all about. I want to show you some places where all these stills are," and he took me around. This is in southern Alabama, and he says, "Do you see all that smoke coming out of there?" He says, "Let's check it out." Sure enough, there was a guy, there was a still, and some guy's running away from it, and stuff. It still goes on, I guess, down there, cheap whiskey.

JJ: Let's take a quick break.

[Tape Paused]

JJ: This continues the interview with Mr. Retz.

ML: So you're just about to the end of your training.

MR: Well, I got my wings in October, no, November, early November of '58. In fact, our daughter was born October 21st and then I got my wings, I think, November 11. My first assignment was in a helicopter squadron out of Norfolk, anti-submarine squadron, HS-3. We rented a house there and I immediately went to sea, left my wife and brand-new baby there, and that's how it is in the Navy, you know. So, she became very independent, very quickly, and she

remains that way to this day. But I spent four years in that squadron, out to sea, back and forth, back and forth and some people might have said, "Well, wasn't flying in Vietnam kinda scary?" I think some of the scariest flying I ever did was the North Atlantic in the wintertime. There the weather is horrible and we were flying at night, lots of times, especially after we got the H-3 helicopter. Every Commanding Officer wanted to fly it at night because it was an all-weather, instrument-capable helicopter and, "Oh, boy, new toy." So, we would fly at night and sometimes you'd be fifty miles from the carrier and you only had from a hundred-fifty feet to the surface assigned to you, because above a hundred-fifty feet were the fixed-wing aircraft that we worked with. Well, you know, a hundred-fifty feet, and you can't see anything, I mean, it's pitch-black, cloud cover, and no moon, no nothing. It's pitch black and you've got to trust your instruments and you doing that for four and a half hours is just really draining, and, you know, the planes were brand new and these automatic systems they had didn't always work.. In fact, we used to show each other our thumb because the release button was your thumb on your collective. You have a collective, which is the up and down control, and you have a cyclic, which is forward, left, right, back, and all that stuff here. Well, you'd push the button to go into automatic mode from a hundred-fifty feet and the plane would slowly go down to forty feet and, into a hover, automatically. Well, sometimes you'd push that automatic-to-transition button and the bottom would drop out. It would go into auto rotation, you know, it'd just cut the engines down to idle and the thing would just fall out of the sky. So you would hit that release button with your thumb, and you'd hit it so hard, you come back from the flight, you'd have the impression of that button in your thumb. So that was our trademark, you know, for a while. It was scary. In fact, I thought it was probably scarier than flying in Vietnam.

JJ: Were these helicopters flown by just one person?

MR: No, you had two pilots and two sonar operators in the back, and, basically, what you did is, you went into hover, lowered this sonar dome down a couple hundred feet into the water, and then listened for submarines and that was your job.

JJ: That's what you did for four years?

MR: Yeah.

ML: Did you ever encounter anything when you were out there listening? Did you ever hear submarines?

MR: Oh, yeah, you know, in those days, the Soviet Union and the United States were always playing games. I mean, you'd have these Russian trawlers that were around with you and, sometimes we thought we had our own submarines playing with us, and sometimes they weren't our own, and stuff like that. But, to be honest with you, I don't think our antisubmarine warfare ever caught up with our submarines, or the Russian submarines, because submarine technology advanced with the [advent of] nuclear submarines at an incredible rate. I'll tell you, not these newer helicopters but the older ones, the newer ones, H-3s, were jet, two jet engines, but the older ones were the big reciprocating engines, you know, and they only had one of them. We used to go out from the carrier, you know, maybe fifty miles and practice with a sub, one of our own nuclear subs. When they were brand new, we didn't know whether we could actually track

them and everything, they were so fast and so quiet. So this one day we were playing with them and then it was time to go back to the carrier. There was a certain time you got to be back for your recovery. We got back and the submarine was surfaced alongside the carrier, and I thought, "My God," you know, "and they expect us to play war games with these guys, it isn't fair." Of course, we were going into a headwind and he wasn't. But they're fast, they were really fast.

ML: What was life like out at sea on the carrier, day-to-day wise?

JJ: I can leave for this if you need me to.

MR: No, well, there's no women. There was a lot of practical jokes, I mean, you're there with guys. My first cruises, we had a room with twelve pilots and, you know, there's always some comedians in it and we called our room "The Funny Farm." We would do stupid things and I won't tell you all the stupid things.

ML: Can you give us a couple of examples?

MR: Well, like we went into liberty in New York one time and we had two light bulbs in the overhead. We don't call them ceilings in the Navy, they are overheads, bulkheads, and decks, and so forth. But, anyway, so one of the guys who got back early decided, "Well, let's play a practical joke," so what he does is, when you flip the light on over here, nothing happens because they've unscrewed the light bulbs a little bit. So, then they decide, "Well, we'll put a couple of chairs in front of the door and maybe a couple of waste baskets beyond that," so when a guy comes in, flips the light on, and says, "Oh ..." you know, a few obscenities, and then trips over a chair, or two, and falls into a waste basket, and all this other stuff and, oh, geez. Then we had this one guy who always brought his poop suit [to hang on his bunk]. We called the survival suits poop suits. This was to keep you alive for a little bit longer in the cold water, and because the water in the North Atlantic is, you know, so cold that without a poop suit, you might live ten minutes, but with a poop suit you might live forty minutes, or something like that. So he always brought his poop suit down from the ready room and hung it alongside his bunk, which were like double bunks, and we were saying, "Mac," his name was Harrison McDonald, "Mac, why are you dragging that thing down here?" "Well, if the ship sinks, I want to have a chance to survive." I said, "Mac, we're all down here, and if the ship sinks none of us are going to get out of here, you know." "Oh, no." Then, he had this ritual, he was single, he was a bachelor. He would get his stuff back from the laundry and just throw everything in these big drawers. We each were assigned about three big drawers and he threw everything in his drawer, undershirts, underpants, socks, everything. Then, every morning, he had this ritual, this is kind of gross, but he would take off his undershirt, blow his nose in it and throw it in his dirty laundry bag, and then he would pick up a sock and look at it and then, go in there and try to find a match, you know. He had all these different [socks], "No, that doesn't match." He would spend five minutes trying to find a match to his sock, and the rest of us would just shake our heads and say, "You know, only Mac would do something like that," and then we had other guys. One guy never would take a shower and we finally threw him in the shower and forced him to take a shower. There were all kinds of guys.

JJ: Now were you in the northern Atlantic the whole time?

MR.: No, not the whole time but most of the time, that's where we were assigned, the northern part of the Atlantic. We did go down to the Caribbean a couple times a year. Once, they had this balloon that the National Science Foundation, or somebody wanted to launch this balloon up to a hundred thousand feet and the only way they could do it, it took so long to inflate it that they had to have a no-wind condition. So they figured a way to do that was to do it on a flight deck of a carrier, so that they could navigate and keep the wind across the deck at zero. So they flew us all off to Roosevelt Roads [Naval Station] in Puerto Rico and just had the balloon on the carrier while they did that. We had like a week in Roosevelt Roads. Well, the problem with Roosevelt Roads is, I was the assistant flight schedules officer, which means I had to find eight pilots, because we had to launch four planes everyday to get our flight time in. At Roosevelt Roads, the rum was cheaper than the coke to make rum and coke. You take a gallon jug down and get a gallon of rum for a dollar and the coke was more expensive. [laughter] But the guys, I had to go around every morning trying to find eight sober guys, which was not easy, you know, to launch these four airplanes.

JJ: You said you had to do that because of your flying time?

MR: Well, yeah, every squadron did. Gas, I guess, was cheaper in those days and we were assigned so many dollars to buy so many gallons of gas and fly these planes and, to be honest with you, pilots used to try to get as much flight time as they could because they like flying. I did, so, we flew a lot of hours. It would take four hours to fly around the island of Puerto Rico. One time we were over on the [west end]. Roosevelt Roads is on the east end of the island, we were over on the west end, and the Coast Guard called us and asked if we could help rescue some people. Their motorboat, or sail boat, had gone up on some rocks and they had to get them off. So we went over and picked them up with a hoist and then we said, "Well, we don't have enough [fuel]." You use a lot of fuel hovering, a lot more than you do just flying, and we didn't have enough fuel to get back to Roosevelt Roads, so we said to the Coast Guard, "How about telling us where we can land?" Well, the Ramey Air Force Base was real close, so we contacted Ramey Air Force Base and they said, "You can land," and they told us where. We landed and we told them we needed fuel. Well, one of our crewmen got out of the plane. That was a mistake. They came with this pick-up truck with a machine gun and aimed at Adams and said, "Get back," over a PA system, "Get back in that plane." Then, we found out later, this was a top-secret SAC [Strategic Air Command] base and they had B-52s all over the place and no one was allowed out of their airplanes when you refuel there. In fact, they didn't even want anybody refueling there. That was curious. Anyway, that was my first squadron. Then I went to shore duty at NAS Oceana, which is in Virginia Beach, which was kind of nice.

JJ: What did you do there?

MR: The Navy, at the time, was getting into computers for maintenance. I won't say Navy Chief Petty Officers are set in their ways, but trying to get a Navy chief, in those days, to take to a new system of computers when, "What was wrong with the old way?" you know. It was a nightmare in that respect, but, on the other hand, I also had the collateral duty of search and rescue pilot and I got a lot of flying done there. One of my favorite places to go was the spotting towers. Oceana is like Miramar is, ... or was, it is a master Navy jet base and they would have

these A-6s and F-4s that go out and practice bombing at different targets. So we had to have spotters at these targets to tell the pilots where the bombs or missiles have hit or missed. One of them was an island in the middle of Chesapeake Bay called Tangier Island. I don't know if you ever heard of it. You have? Okay. Well, in those days, Tangier Island was really isolated and they had no roads or anything, no automobiles on the island, and everybody was an oyster man, no, a crabber. There was crab cages and stuff, that's the only occupation there. But they had two Navy spotting towers, one on each end of the island, and they had a sunken ship as a target in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. The two towers would get cross bearings and let the pilot know where his bomb hit in relation to the target. So when one of the radios crapped out, we would have to fly up with technicians to fix it. Well, while they were doing that, we used to walk on the island and it was great. Crab cakes, we used to get fresh crab cakes. This guy had a tiny little store with a two burner stove with a big, cast-iron frying pan, and he made the best crab cakes. That was one of the bennies [benefits] from that. Anyway, that was shore duty at Oceana. All this time we were having more kids and ...

Jl: Did your wife travel to Virginia with you?

MR: Oh, yeah.

Jl: You have three years, I guess.

MR: Yeah. We bought our first house in Virginia Beach. This was in 1962 and a two-story colonial, four bedrooms, three baths, twelve thousand dollars. Of course, we didn't make that much money, either. We wondered, "How are we going to pay these ninety-nine dollar a month house payments?" But we liked that house. We kept it for quite a while, and then, from there, I went back to another squadron, a helicopter squadron, which was my best tour, by far, in the Navy. It was H-46s, which is a big tandem rotor helicopter. Marines still fly them. The Navy had just gotten them for vertical replenishment. What that means is you take everything to the carrier, the destroyers, amphibious ships, by helicopter, except fuel oil. Fuel oil is the only thing that doesn't go by helicopter, and this was a new concept. They had tried it with smaller helicopters, but it never worked too well. But with the H-46, we could lift six thousand pounds, which was a lot in those days, and so they built a ship that would carry two of these helicopters. It was called [USS] *Sylvania* [(AFS-2)] and we had a hangar in the back of the ship and a nice flight deck and we'd have the two helicopters parked in the hangar. So it was great. The ship was home ported in Naples and we had two weeks of every month in Naples. I would go on basket leave up to Rome, stay in the YMCA, and tour Rome. Five dollars, it used to cost me, I think, five dollars a night in the YMCA and I would go over to the Vatican. Now, I hear people talk about the Vatican now, standing in line to get into St. Peter's and standing in line to get into the Sistine Chapel. I used to just walk into St. Peter's and the Pieta was on the first little altar on the right as you walk in there and I'd just wander around in St. Peter's. There were no crowds back in those days, in the '60s. So, anyway, it was a great tour. We had two H-46s, and how we did this, it's hard to explain without showing you. But we had the supply ship, which steamed along at ten knots, the carrier would be steaming alongside, seven hundred yards abeam of the supply ship and then everything was pre-loaded around one helicopter, all these pallets and big wraps. They had what they called a pennant, which was like a nylon rope and that would get hooked to the bottom of the helicopters. They had a hook on the bottom of the helicopter that the

pilot could release and drop the load. So, when we started, one helicopter would take off and then they'd roll the other helicopter out, he'd take off, and then, they came out with forklifts and filled up the whole deck with pallets and stuff. When the carrier was ready, we'd start the vertrep [vertical replenishment] and the first helicopter would come in to pick up a load. You'd come in sideways; with this plane you could fly it a hundred knots sideways, pick up the load and bring it over to the carrier and set it on the flight deck. Then, while he's doing that, the other plane would slide over, pick up a load, and when he's coming back, the first one is going over. We'd set up a figure eight pattern, so every thirty seconds we put about six thousand pounds on the flight deck of the carrier. So, in about two or three hours, we could go through a couple of hundred tons of groceries, spare parts, engines, jet engines, we would bring over everything. Everything, but fuel oil, would go over by helicopter. It was fun flying. I really, really loved it. That was my best tour. Besides that, we had liberty ports like Tangier. You ever hear of Tallulah Bankhead? She was a big entertainer; your folks would know her. She was one of these, I don't want to call them Mexican, Hispanic, type things, but she was not Hispanic. Her [uncle] was a senator from Alabama, Senator [John] Bankhead. In fact, US Highway 80 is called Bankhead Highway, named after him because he was the one that pushed the funding through Congress to get it paved. It goes from San Diego to Jacksonville, Florida. It was one of the first cross-country highways that was paved. Anyway, Tallulah Bankhead's sister Gina Bankhead was a big deal in Tangier and she was living with an English guy who was running arms to the rebels back in Algeria at the time. So, we came in there with our ship, and it was a big deal, and they had so many parties for us, we couldn't supply enough officers for the officer parties. We'd have like, we said, "Where are they getting all these English and American girls?" You know, they had like two for everyone of us officers. "Geez, this is not the way it's supposed to be." But we went into Tangier, we went into Corfu, Greece; that was another great port. We went into all the Mediterranean [ports], Cannes, and all that stuff. What were some of the other ones? We'd go into Malta, Valleta, Malta, Ajaccio, Corsica where Napoleon was born. I saw the bed he was born in. All these wonderful places. At the end of my first tour over there, we had four month tours, I was on my way back, I was in Rota, Spain, bumming rides back to the United States and this chaplain came out to the airplane that I was sitting in the back of, and he says, "I'm looking for Lieutenant Retz." I said, "I'm Lieutenant Retz." He says, "Can I speak to you?" So I got off the plane and talked to him. He told me my youngest son had died back in the States. I thought, "Oh, geez." The only thing I could think of was my poor wife there, and I'm over here in Europe. But, as it turned out, that's one of the times you really appreciate the Navy, because every one of those wives that were back there came over and took care of everything for her. So when I got home, I was kind of surprised that she was not a wreck or anything. He was our number five, so we had four other children, and they had the thing like, "Well, God wanted him, so he got him to be an angel," and my wife says, "How could I go to pieces when they were ... So, anyway, when I went back to the Med a second time, I was the officer in charge of the group over there, and that second time, just as I was finishing up, it was Christmas Day in 1967 and the CO of the ship called me up to his stateroom. He says, "Mike, I have a Christmas present for you. Merry Christmas." He handed me this piece of paper. It was my orders to Vietnam. I said, "Gosh, thanks a lot, Captain, I really appreciate that." So I came back to the States and then went through a whole bunch of survival training and all kinds of other stuff. And that ...

Jl: What year was that when you got your orders for Vietnam?

MR: That was Christmas of '67, so I came back and I had to go through a bunch of ordnance training, survival training. Then I went down to Fort Benning because the Navy didn't have any Huey Gunships. In fact, let me show you what they look like. So we had to go through training with the Army down at Fort Benning. I went through that, so by the time I got to Vietnam, it was June.

JJ: [Looking at pictures] Is that the Huey Gunship?

MR: Yeah, and that's how we did our maintenance, in the middle of nowhere, no hangar, no nothing, just out in the field.

ML: Now, I want to go back a little bit and ask you about, I guess, the political atmosphere, the opinion of the military during Kennedy's administration. Were you generally in support of Kennedy?

MR: Oh, yeah. God, when he got shot, it was like I couldn't have felt worse if my own father was shot, and I think everybody was in shock.

ML: Do you remember where you were?

MR: Where I was? This is crazy. We were up for my sister's wedding, up in New Jersey, and we were driving back to Virginia Beach, that was, what? November 22, 1963 and I had a Buick with no radio. We traveled all the way down the Delmarva Peninsula, got on a ferry, came across, this was before the bridge was built, came across and got home to Virginia Beach. My wife was in the shower and ... we had our radio right next to the bed, and I flipped the radio on and I was listening and I heard them saying, "President Johnson," and I thought, "Johnson, what's going on?" ... I said, "Rachael, you've got to get out of the shower and listen to this," and they were discussing [the assassination]. Now, this is like already nine o'clock at night, and he was shot, like, around noontime, or something like that, so I didn't learn about it 'til about nine o'clock that night, and then, the next few days I think the whole country just came to a standstill. I can still see little John John saluting, you remember that picture of him saluting? That was tough, tough to go through. Anyway, politically speaking, I was in full support of... Well, the Bay of Pigs was probably Kennedy's biggest fiasco.

JJ: Did you think that at the time?

MR: Yeah, we all knew it was a fiasco. We, I guess, being gung ho, we probably felt we should have carried through with it, but you don't know what's going on behind the scenes, and everything. A little side note to that: when I was at Oceana a few years later, I met this Cuban, Lieutenant (jg), in the United States Navy, but he was Cuban, Joe Perez was his name. And he was in maintenance, but he was a ground officer. But [when] I saw him, he was wearing wings and I said, "Joe, how come you're wearing wings and you're not flying?" He said, "Well," he said, "I went through Pensacola, and got my wings, and I was flying helicopters down in Cuba under Batista, and I was also flying TBMs," which is a World War II torpedo bomber, the Navy's TBMs, Grumman Avenger, I think they called it. He said, "I was doing those flights between

Havana and Santiago, which was on the opposite end of the island," and he said, "Well, we were carrying more and more Chinese." He says, "We didn't like what we were seeing," and, well, this was after Castro had already taken over, and so, he and a bunch of other guys, pilots, decided to bailout. So they snuck out of the country and got over to Miami. Well, it wasn't long before the CIA kind of got all their names, and everything, and this was really an interesting story. It might be a little too long for this tape, but I'll try to shorten it. Joe said, "Somebody contacted us and said, 'Would you like to get active against Castro and the liberation of Cuba?'" And he said, "Oh, sure," so the guy said, "Well, meet us on such and such a corner in Miami." They did, and this bus pulls up and they get on this bus. There's a bunch of other guys already on the bus, and they get this busload of guys. They stop and they get on this other bus with the windows are all blacked out on it, and they don't even know where they're going. They end up in the middle of the Everglades, somewhere, on this abandoned World War II strip and here is a plane, a DC-6, and here, again, they get on this DC-6 and Joe says, "I was in my khakis and a tee shirt. I wasn't planning on going anywhere." He gets on this DC-6 and, again, the windows are all blacked out, so they can't see out, and they fly. Now they're all pilots, so they know what a DC-6 can do, you know, about two hundred knots, and they fly for six hours, and so they're saying, "Hmm." So they all mentally got together and they said, "Well, six hours at two hundred knots is going to put us somewhere, it's either..." and they concluded that they were somewhere in Central America, and they were. They were in Guatemala, I think it was Guatemala. When they landed there, the CIA had chopped out this landing strip in the middle of the jungle, so nobody could even know they were there, and they had a bunch of B-26s from World War II, and, they started flying. Well, he said when they first got there, there was nothing. The only thing they had was dry cereal, like Wheaties, or cornflakes. They didn't even have milk. He said, "We were eating cereal with water." He said, "There was no food, nothing." But then, gradually, things got better. But they started flying from Guatemala, the west coast of Guatemala, all the way across the Caribbean to Havana and they would drop these leaflets and stuff, these propaganda leaflets over Havana and then fly back again. He said, "We had to lean out the engines, pull the RPM all the way back, and we had the whole back of the plane, where they used to have guns in World War II, was filled with auxiliary fuel tanks," just so they could make these nine hour trips back and forth, so it was quite interesting. But the day of Bay of Pigs, they were also flying. They were going to drop bombs that day; they had bombs in the plane. They would drop them over Havana, but never had the chance. He said, "Castro had his jets come up, and they knew that we couldn't shoot from behind because the guns were taken out, so the jets came from behind and shot everyone of us down," He bailed out, and was lucky enough to land in the water, right alongside an American destroyer. They picked him up and took him back to the United States and, eventually, he got to Oceana, there, as a ground pounder. So I said, "Well, that's crazy, Joe. You ought to be flying," and, to make a long story even shorter, I eventually took him up to Washington and talked to the aviation detailer up there, and I said, "Listen to this guy's story," and the guy did. He said, "[Wow]," and I said, "Yeah, and he's working for this black shoe over here, this non-aviator, you know, who was assigning him around." I said, "Well?" So, immediately, this guy said, "[Joe], I'm writing you a set of orders to Pensacola for a refresher in helicopters," and then he got into helicopters and he was in that H-46 squadron with me. So, yeah, that was a side note [on] Cuba, Cuba politics with Kennedy, that's how we got there; Kennedy's one failure.

ML: When Johnson became president, were you worried about going over to Vietnam? Was

there reaction to the Tet offensive?

MR: No. Well, I got over there right after Tet. You know, when you're young, you don't, well, you're young. You're going to live forever, right? You don't really think anything is ever going to happen to you and I know... When I got over there, things did start happening, but luckily not to me. But we had twenty-one planes in our squadron, that squadron there. [points to picture] We had twenty-one of those gunships and, in the first six months I was there, we lost twenty of them. The Army had so many, every time we lost one, we'd call the Army and say, "Hey, we need a [gun ship], we lost one." They'd say, "Oh, well, okay." They'd go down the list, "Okay, go to Cu Chi and pick up number ump-tee-ump. I'll call them and tell them you're coming." So we go up to Cu Chi and pick up another gun ship and bring it down. But they were a good airplane, I mean, they did a lot ... Without the helicopters, the Navy could never run the PBRs on the river, you know, because we were their cover, and we worked with the SEALs. We worked with the SEALs a lot, crazy people. Did you ever know any SEALs? I used to think, "How are we ever going to get these people back in the United States to live normal lives?" We had two teams at our place, and one team would go out one night, and the other team [would] go out the next night. We always briefed at four in the afternoon, and they'd tell us what they're going to do that night, and the SEALs, they were the only people in the Navy over there, I don't know about the Army but the Navy, that did not have to get permission to do anything, or report what they did. Their whole thing was to go out and harass the VC at night, the Vietcong, at night, and, "Don't tell us what you're doing, what your methods are, or anything." So they loved it, you know, and they'd go out in the middle of the night, and if they came back the next day without killing somebody, you couldn't even talk to them. They'd think they were just ...

JJ: They were upset?

MR: Oh, they were so pissed off if they didn't kill anybody.

JJ: So would they talk about it informally to you guys the next day?

MR: Oh, yeah. This is typically what would happen. We had scramble one, scramble two, scramble three, in those gunships. We had a little ready room and right outside was a berm with our helicopter parked in it. We had two gunship teams, I made a mistake one time of going to sleep at night. You don't go to sleep when you have duty. You have duty twenty-four hours, from five o'clock one night to five o'clock the next night. So, at night sometimes, around three o'clock or so, you know, you'd get a call and they would say, "Scramble one for the SEALs," and we had briefed, so we'd have a general idea where they were. Now, "scramble one" meant US forces are in deep doo-doo and, you know, life and death. "Scramble two" was friendly forces are having a tough time, and "scramble three" would be something, you know, get out there and help them, but it's not that big a deal. But scramble one, we would get our planes airborne in forty-five seconds after the phone rang. The pilot would get in there and you just didn't even bother putting on your hard hat, or strapping in, or anything. Get in, you hit the battery, the gas, and the starter, and as soon as that rotor was at a hundred percent, you'd bring it up, and then the other pilot would be putting his hard hat on, turning the radios on, and finding out where to go, and so, then, when you got going in that particular direction, then you give the plane to him, and then you have the chance to put your hard hat on, and get strapped in, and all that stuff. The

Rung Sat was a big swamp, you can probably see some of it, I don't know if they had pictures of it, but it's a big swampland, and that was our area -- the Rung Sat. It was between the ocean and Saigon. You'd get calls from the SEALs at night, you know, and they had what they call the shielded red flashlight. You know what a standard, government-issue flashlight looks like? It looks like a flashlight, but then you have a red lens on it instead of white, and then you have little shields so the light doesn't go off in directions, just goes straight out. So they'd be sitting in a ditch somewhere whispering into a little radio, in an FM radio, and they'd say, "Seawolf, I hear you," and then, we'd have coordinates, you know, they'd give us a six-digit coordinates, so we knew pretty much where they were, and we'd fly over, and they'd be whispering in their radio, "Do you see my flashlight?" You'd be flying and this is this pitch black, you know, there's not a light for forty miles and, all of a sudden, you get a flash of red as you go over, and he says, "Okay, I want a couple of rockets fifty yards to my west," or something like that, and I'd say, "Oh, my God, where was that light again?" You'd come around and you'd try to put it [there], but it was [tough], I was always afraid of hitting them. One night, as we were coming back to our little base, Nha Be, and TOC [tactical operations center] called us and said, "The SEALs are back if you want to come talk to them." So we went over to TOC and talked to them. This one guy says, "Hey, let me show you something," and he has this ammo clip on his belt, they're about that big around. He says, "Let me show you this one," and he took the clip off and he had a .50 [caliber] round. We had a .50 caliber in the right door of our helicopter, and it was our best weapon, and he says, "Let me tell you about this round. It hit the ground, came up, got me, flipped me, I did a somersault in the air, and landed." I said, "Geez." He said, "Oh, no, no. Don't apologize." He said, "We called for close fire and you gave it to us." I said, "That's a little bit too close." But, luckily, to my knowledge, we never killed any friendlies. But it was scary working with the SEALs. They are blood-thirsty people, at least they were then. Let's take a time out for a minute.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MR: Probably one of my most noteworthy ones [missions] was right around Christmas of '68. The VC had a general offensive, and the Army, basically, ran out of gunships to support different forts and stuff. The French had a lot of triangular forts over there. I don't know if you realize that. They built their forts in triangles, easier to defend that way, and, one night, during this offensive, I had just taken over the duty and just before five o'clock, I went over to TOC and got a briefing on what was going on, and they said, "Well, our area is pretty quiet." He said, "But the Army is taking a licking up here," and it was north of our area, and I said, "Well, don't they have some gunships to help them?" He says, "Well, you know, they just ran out of them." So I said, "Well, why can't we go up and help?" He says, "Well, if you want to do that, it's great, but, you know, it's not our area." I said, "Hey, they're US forces, why shouldn't we?" So, anyway, we went up, and I called in, and the guy told me what was going on, and, basically, they were being overrun from two sides by a large contingent. So, I made one run this way, and we have fourteen rockets, you know, seven on each side, and two planes, so we had twenty-eight rockets and a .50 caliber in our lead helicopter, and a lot of other machine guns so we were able to put down quite a bit of firepower. So we made one pass this way, and then came around and made another one this way. And, to make a long story short, we went back home two other times to rearm with rockets and ammunition. We had men waiting for us to land at Nha Be and guy had a rocket in his hand, like this, ready to slide it into our rocket tubes, because they knew time was

very critical. So we got a nice write-up. The Army came down a couple of days later and said, you know, "You guys saved us. We would all have been killed if you hadn't come up." So they gave us an award and I got a Distinguished Flying Cross for it, and all that stuff. Anyway, we in the Navy didn't write ourselves up for too many awards, so it's nice when a fellow service like the Army comes down, and they gave us some nice write-ups and stuff and told us that we had kept the thing from being overrun. You don't like to dwell on how many people were killed, and everything, you know. The military tends to do that; body count, body count, you know, I just, I know we killed people, and I didn't mind killing them, but there were times on the rivers that I did. One time, I was fairly new over there, so when you get there you become what they call a wing ship, or the second helicopter's co-pilot. Then you move up to the pilot, and then you move up to the lead plane, and then, eventually, become fire team leader. That means you make the decisions. Well, I was a fairly new fire team leader and, the night before, we had a couple of PBRs attacked in this one area, and a lot of guys were killed and stuff. So, the next day, they said, "Okay, you guys see anybody in that area, you shoot them." ... When I took off and I saw these same people that I had seen before, and there were fishermen, and wood cutters, and everything like that, and I'm thinking, "This is crazy," and I called into TOC, and I told them what I saw, and they said, "Shoot them." I was kind of intimidated being a new fire team leader. What these guys say, you better do because you got three other pilots and four other crewmen who are listening to all this, and they know what's going on, so I did. We went down, especially with the .50 caliber machine gun, and here are all these sampans, and I know there were women and kids in these things, and we shot them. I came back and I felt terrible, and I went over to TOC and I told the commander, I said, "You know what?" I said, "From now on, I'm going to make the decisions." I said, "These are the same people who had been there all along, and just because somebody got killed, one of our people got killed the night before, now we're going to go and kill them all?" I said, "That's crazy." I said, "I don't know who are the bad guys, who the good guys are, but to just start shooting people, you know, randomly, is crazy." So, from then on, when we got a situation like that, I kind of, you know, used my discretion on it. I'm not saying I didn't, but you have to weigh a lot of things and decide, "Hey," you know, "Were these people here before?" and, "Are they just cutting wood, or fishing, or whatever?"

JJ: Must be a tough decision.

MR: It is. When you're in, well, like you'd get in a firefight where you see people on the ground shooting at you, yeah, you didn't have any qualms about shooting back at them, you know. If I could hit that with a rocket, that's great, but to go shooting people in a boat when they're fishing, that haunts me to this day. I just feel horrible about that. When My Lai happened, you know, we had seen things like My Lai over there, and it happens in every war, and especially Vietnam, where you don't know who the good guys are and the bad guys are. After we'd come back from a flight we'd flip on our TV. We had Armed Forces Radio and Television. We had a good reception there, and we'd see this thing about My Lai and we'd say, "What's the big deal? This happens all the time. Why do they make a big deal out of this?" Calley, Lieutenant Calley, actually took the brunt of the whole thing. I don't know if you remember that, you're probably too young to remember. Have you ever heard of My Lai? Okay, and it was a massacre, and the only reason it ever really got anywhere was the fact that this helicopter pilot, this dust-off helicopter pilot, saw what was going on and, you know, made a report about it, and it got to the correspondents and they blew it up. But that sort of thing was going on all the time. We used to

go on what we'd call med caps, where we would take doctors, and dentists, and nurses, and stuff like that, and go to these little tiny villages all around the Rung Sat, in the swamps there and ... the doctors would try to treat all the people that needed stuff. So, we had a lot of these little villages that were very friendly to us. ... The Navy always had good food, the Army had terrible food, so the Army helicopters used to into our base at noontime to get a good meal. This one day, I had the duty and I always checked up with TOC, and they told us the Army gunships had just devastated this little village down here. So the guys came and landed at our place for lunch and I went over, and I saw them at lunch, and I said, "What in the world? Why did you do that this morning?" He said, "Well, hey, we took fire from that village." I said, "I know you didn't take fire from that village; I know that village," and he said, "Oh, what's the difference? They're just a bunch of gooks," and I said, [sighs]. I felt like punching him in the nose, but that was the attitude of a lot of these young kids. They were [young], the Army had these guys right out of high school; they were making helicopter pilots out of them, right out of high school, and they were making them warrant officers, and sending them over there, and all they do is want to shoot up things. So, we had a lot of that, which was too bad.

ML: When you went into the Navy, did you intend to stay in it, or did you intend to get out?

MR: No, I intended to get out after my, I think it was a four-year commitment, five years, five years. ... No, I was going to get out, but my wife liked it.

Jl: She did? She liked you not being home?

MR: Well, let me go back a few years. One time, after we were dating and I was working, see, I never told you this, in between my last two years, in the summer, I guess it was in between my junior and senior year, I worked on a farm down in Somerville, a dairy farm. The farmer's name was Warren Mathers. He has died, but his wife's still alive, Blanche Mathers. But I got a job there simply because I was an Aggie, and I figured I should know something about what my major was, which was dairy husbandry. So I got the job and it was milking forty-some-odd Holsteins twice a day and stuff like that, plus all the baling, and all the other work to do. Well, anyway, my wife came, my girlfriend at the time, came down one weekend and I was going to introduce her to Warren and Blanche Mathers, and the cows, and stuff like that. Well, she slipped in the manure, and fell in the gutter in the barn one day, and ruined her sneakers, and all that, so she wasn't too thrilled about dairy farming, or becoming a farmer's wife, as such. So she never said anything to me, at the time, but she has since told me, "I'm so glad you went into the Navy and you didn't become a farmer." But, no, she was the one that kept me in. I had a boss at Oceana, which was my first shore duty, who was just terrible. He knew I was there as a search and rescue pilot and that I had to spend every third day as search and rescue pilot at operations. Well, he didn't want me leaving maintenance. He said, "Your job is here at maintenance. Why are you always over there in operations?" He wouldn't take [my word for it], you know, the chief that I had working for me tried to explain that to him, "He's got the duty; he's got to be there." Well, he gave me a lousy fitness report and I figured, "Well, my career is probably down the drain," so I was going to get out, and that's when my wife says, "No, no, no," and luck came along and they rearranged, they reorganized shore bases and took the station aircraft away from maintenance and gave them to operations. So, I went with the aircraft and I got this new boss, this Commander Cobb. He was a World War II fighter pilot and he was in his [fifties], getting

ready to retire, and I went over there and, you know, I had known him, and everything, but I said, "I'm working for you now." He said, "Well, that's great." He says, "You got a great chief working for you. He'll take care of the planes; you do the flying." He says, "You got any problems with the skipper of the base, or anybody," he says, "just call me." He says, "You can usually find me at the club. I usually drink my lunches between about noon and two o'clock, or so." He was so laid back, and he was a wonderful guy to work for, and I did that. I had a chief, chief petty officer, who knew airplanes inside-out, and basically ran the maintenance department. I didn't even have to do anything except fly, so it was great. How did we get off on that tangent? Oh, you were talking about career. That was the only time I thought about getting out. After that, you know, I didn't think about getting out.

Jl: You were there for how many years?

MR: Twenty years in the Navy.

ML: When you went to Vietnam, what was your initial reaction when you got over there?

MR: First time I got there, in that squadron? Well, I pretty much knew what I was getting into, I mean, there weren't any surprises.

Il: Did you know because you'd seen it on TV, or heard ...

MR: No. I had talked to guys who were over there and, well, for example, one guy, one friend of mine told me, he said, "You know, when you get over there, you're going to have to carry around whatever you drag over there with you." He says, "It's hot, it's muggy." He says, "And there's nobody going help you." You know, officers are used to somebody helping them with their stuff. So he says, "The less you bring over there, the better." So I thought about that, and he says, "I'll tell you what. You think you need all your flight gear?" He says, "There's plenty of flight gear over there, don't bring any of it." So I took a couple of shirts like this [Hawaiian-print shirts], a couple of civilian pants like this [khaki pants], and a few, I brought like, you know what a parachute bag looks like? Like a big floppy suitcase, but it's got handles. Parachute riggers make them so they call them parachute bags. I took about a third-full parachute bag with me when I left for a year's trip, and everybody says, "How can you do that?" Well, I put a shaving kit in there, some underwear, some socks, a few shirts for when I go on R&R, and that's it. Everything else is going to be over there. I saw guys dragging trunks and everything all around Vietnam. So I was pre-warned; I knew what I was getting into.

ML: Where was your camp? Where were you based?

MR: Okay, Nha Be was a little base on the Long Tau River, which was the main river shipping channel from the ocean to Saigon. Now, you have to understand, ninety-six percent of everything that went to Vietnam went up that river by freighters, so the job was to keep that river clear of mines and stuff like that. That was a big job, and they had to sweep it twice a day with mine sweepers, and they had defoliated it with Agent Orange back about a mile on both sides of the river. Then the PBRs would patrol it and its tributaries all day long, and our job was to cover

them, plus whatever else we were called on to do. But I'm going to tell you about, you've heard of Agent Orange? Okay. We had defoliated back about a mile, close to a mile, from the Long Tau River on both sides and there wasn't a blade of grass, nothing. It was just flat, mud flats, okay. Then, all of a sudden, a ship would get hit by a rocket and you'd say, "[What?]" So, they would pull off to the side, or if it wasn't damaged too bad, it would continue on. But we'd put in a bunch of troops, like an hour after the rocket hit, right there, right on the bank. And nothing, until one of the troops tripped over a wire, and they traced the wire. It went to the bank of the river where the rocket was stuck into the mud bank, and the wire went back to the woods about a mile, and a rocket, like the ones we had in our planes there, that only takes about two and a half volts to set off. So what these guys do, when they captured these rockets and stuff, is they take that, run some wires back over here, put two sticks in like this, and then when that ship gets lined up at those two sticks, they just go [touch the wire] to a battery and the rocket goes off, and they're way back there in the woods. It took some guy tripping over a wire for us to discover that. But that's why whenever we had a helicopter go down, the first thing we did was take all the rockets out of the tubes; we didn't want those getting in the hands of the VC. I lost an engine one time over there and, luckily, I was at, we usually flew at a thousand feet and when the engine quit, I just turned around, looked over my shoulder, and there was a clearing in the jungle, and so, I auto rotated down there. Your crew is trained, as soon as the plane goes down, the co-pilot grabs this and goes there, the pilot goes there, the gunners go there. They set up a perimeter in defense of the helicopter. Well, you've got another helicopter flying with you, you know, your wingman, so it wasn't much problem with that. But these other guys all bailed out and they're setting up this perimeter defense, and I'm left there to get all these rockets out. I said, "Hey, you guys, come over here and help me with these rockets." "No, no, no. We're covering you, we're covering you." [laughter] So I took all these rockets out of the tubes and then we had another plane come in and pick us up. The FM radio and the rockets were the things that we were told to get out of the plane. The rest of it, you don't worry about it, the VC can't use it, but the rockets were the main thing. Anyway, after a year, oh, after seven months, I went on R&R to Hawaii, and that's great, when you haven't seen your wife for, ... either one of you married?

JJ: I'm married.

MR: You're married, okay. Well, you know seven months is a long time.

JJ: I can't imagine.

MR: Yeah, so I met her. She was coming from Norfolk, and I was coming from Vietnam. We met in Honolulu, and then we flew over to Kauai and some guys who had been there before said, "This place is the greatest," and it was called the Hanalei Plantation. This is where the film *South Pacific* was filmed, okay, up on the North Shore of Kauai, it was. We had a cottage; they had individual cottages all along this cliff edge, overlooking the Hanalei River and also looking up on the wettest spot on Earth, which is in the middle of the island there. The mountain gets four hundred-fifty inches of rain a year, or something like that, and it's always in a cloud, with waterfalls coming out of this cloud. The other view from our cottage was of the shoreline, the ocean. It was just gorgeous. So we had a week of R&R there, and then we had to leave. That's the tough part. So, anyway, I got back to Vietnam, went back to Det 2 at Nha Be. The last couple of months I was pulled out of that little detachment and became the Quality Assurance

Officer, testing all the helicopters after they came out of their 100 hour check. We didn't have too many planes that their engines lasted the duration because we always flew in an over-speed condition and overloaded the planes, and stuff like that, so we had a lot of problems with engine maintenance.

Jl: When you finally decided to retire, what year was that?

MR: Well, there's a few other things. The most, probably the most interesting Vietnam story was the evacuation of Saigon, in 1975 I was working for the Commander of Task Group 76, which is the amphibious task force that was always in the Far East, and was in charge of evacuations if that was going to occur. Adm. Whitmire was going to be the boss, the admiral was going to be the boss, and then, we would have the air officer on his staff, [who] was one of us Air Dales from San Diego. He would go over to be on his staff, you know, air officer because the admiral was a submariner, and he didn't know anything about aviation. I mean, he knew next to nothing. A message would come in, it was about air mattresses, and he'd send it to me because it had air in it. But he was a great guy to work for, I really, really liked him, and everything, but when it came to aviation, there was nobody else on the staff that knew anything. It was me, plus I had a couple of junior officers to run [the air operations], well, it's hard to explain. It's called a Tactical Air Control unit and, from the [USS] *Blue Ridge* [(LCC-19)], and from the other ships, you would actually control all amphibious air operations, all the helicopters, you know, going and coming from the shore, plus control the fighters and bombers that were in on the operation. So the original evacuation of Saigon and, you know, I don't want to get in all the history of what happened because it took a long time. We had originally evacuated Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We evacuated that, it went like clockwork.. I mean, in a couple of hours, we evacuated the whole city of all the Americans and American friendlies, piece of cake. But everybody knew what to do; there was a plan that was put out and everything. We did not have that cooperation in Saigon. The ambassador, who was Graham Martin, refused to put out an evacuation plan. And so, if you look in here [opens yearbook], there's an admiral and a general. This poor General was, well, I won't go there. General Carey was a Marine, he was in charge of the Marines in the amphibious assault group, okay, and he would go in with his staff about every other day in civilian clothes, because by 1975 Americans, military Americans, were not allowed in Vietnam. I mean that was, we got out in '72 and then, that was the end of the military, the American military, in Vietnam. So Air America, would come out from Saigon, land on our ship, which was out about thirty, forty miles out to sea, pick up the general and his staff in civilian clothes, and then go in, to the embassy, and try to brief the ambassador, and he wouldn't have anything to do with them. "Out of here, we're not evacuating. I don't want your evacuation plan. Don't talk about evacuation; we're not going to leave." So this went on and on. Now, I don't know, you're a history major, you may know a little bit about the history of how it fell, it fell from the North down, and we were getting all these horror stories about what's happening, you know, all along these seaports of South Vietnam. ... It was obvious to anybody that Saigon was going to fall, eventually, but the ambassador would not listen to this plan. We had a great plan. It was called Frequent Wind and we had a secure area at Tan Son Nut Airport, which is the big civilian airport near Saigon. The area was all fenced in, twelve-foot fence, you couldn't have gotten in. We could have landed twelve H-53 helicopters at a time. Now, you may not realize how big these are. We were putting seventy-seven people in an H-53, and then multiply that by twelve, and we could have brought in wave after wave of them because we had, we not only had

all the Marine H-53s, we had the Air Force H-53s on different carriers. In fact, we took a lot of the jet fighters off the carriers and left them at Cubi Point, in the Philippines. They were not a happy group. [laughter] So, here we are with Air Force H-53s on these great big CVAs of the Navy's. We could have done an evacuation of Saigon, you know, had people known where to go and what to do. They didn't. They never got the word; the word was never put out. I mean, some rumblings were put out, and the one thing that did get out was, "Listen to your radio. If you hear Bing Crosby sing White Christmas, that's an indication to get moving." In fact, that's what we used in Phnom Penh. [We] told everybody, "Listen, if you hear White Christmas, get to the evacuation point," and everybody knew where the evacuation point was, and we went in, "boom," and we were out, and it worked great. Well, Saigon was a different matter. We're sitting on a ship out there in the ocean, we can't talk to the President of the United States, and he's the only one that can tell the ambassador what to do, but we could talk to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at that time, I think, was Admiral Moorer, and we sent a message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff saying, "Hey, this guy won't even listen to an evacuation plan. How can we do this thing if people don't know what to do?" So Admiral Moorer went to Gerald Ford, who was president at the time, and said, "The ambassador is not listening to this plan" So Ford sent a message to the ambassador, infoed us, said, "You will listen to this evacuation plan." The next day, Air America comes out again; the General and staff fly in; they briefed the ambassador on the evacuation, and said, "Mr. Ambassador, that's the plan, do you have any questions?" "No. If that's the plan, get out of here. I was told to listen, I listened. That's it. I wasn't told to do anything about it. Just get out of here." So they came back to the ship and told us what he said. ... See, initially, we set up to do a surface evacuation of Saigon with ships down the river, and to take people out. Well, time for that came and went, and, pretty soon, the VC and the NVA had the city surrounded and there's no way to get a ship out anymore. So then, it was aircraft, C-5s, were flying people out. Well, it got to a point you knocked that off because they were coming out almost empty, and then, they started shelling the field, and hit the runways, and that finished the fixed wing operations. So, we were down to helicopters, and the only thing left was a helicopter evacuation. So I was busy. I don't know if you know anything about military message centers, and stuff like that, but we were busy. As the air officer on the staff for the Admiral, I would have to see everything for aviation. The last three days before the actual evacuation, on the thirtieth of April, I think we averaged eighteen hundred action messages a day, top secret stuff. One night, the last night before the evacuation, the admiral was so tired, and I was beat, too, and I had this one [message] that just came in from a three-star admiral. Now he's a two-star admiral, my boss. [The message] came in "op immediate," which means you drop everything and do it now, from a three-star, personally to Adm. Whitmire, and I said, "Well, you know, I'm going to have to answer this." He said, "Throw it on your desk. We'll answer it tomorrow." I said, "Admiral, this is from..." He said, "I don't care." He said, "We need to get some sleep." So I thought, "Holy Mackerel." I didn't sleep too well that night knowing I was going to let that go. [laughter] But we got to the point where the message traffic was just incredible. I felt sorry for the messengers from the ship's communications center because they'd knock, and I'd be trying to get a few hours sleep, and they'd knock on the door, "Commander Retz, we hate to do this." I said, "Come on, you've got to do your job. Let me see it," and I'd write an answer and send it off again. But, anyway, it got down to the last day and, finally the word got out, "We're going to evacuate." Well, when the word gets out in Saigon, where do the people go? The embassy, right? People didn't go to the Tan Son Nut airport where we were able to fly them out. No, they went to the embassy. You've probably never been there;

it was a pretty secure area and you've probably seen pictures. Did you ever see the play *Miss Saigon*? Okay, you remember that scene where the Vietnamese gal, who was the wife of the Marine, is left at the gate and that Huey is taking off, the last Huey? When I saw that, well, let me tell you the whole story, and I'll tell you why that's so personal for me. We started running these things in there, but there was no place to land an H-53 in the courtyard. The day before, we asked the ambassador for permission to cut that tall tree down; there was a great big tree in the middle of the courtyard, and he said, "No way," and he could see it from his office, the tree. When he went home, he lived in town, he didn't live in the compound, when he went home, we cut the tree about two-thirds of the way through; hooked a bulldozer to it with a chain, so he couldn't see it from his office, and as soon as the word went down, "Evacuate," a guy jumped on that bulldozer and pulled on that tree. The whole tree went over and they took it out, and we could land one H-53 at a time in the compound. They had to come in, now you, not being helicopter pilots, you don't realize how difficult this is, but they had to come in at a hundred feet, and then come straight down from a hundred feet. They couldn't make a regular approach, like you'd like to, and then, same thing leaving. They had to come up to a hundred feet and then depart, one at a time. The building, the main building, the roof had a little heliport on for Hueys and small helicopters. It was not stressed and not certified for an H-46, which, carries about twenty-five people, a bigger airplane. Well, I'll show you one in a sec. [looking at yearbook] Back here, let's see if we've got some H-46s. Well, here's some Hueys that we threw over the side. Well, where are the H-46s? I know they've got some H-46s here somewhere. These are Hueys. Let me see if they've got an H-46 on the deck here. Yeah, there's an H-46, right there. That could carry about twenty-five people, but ... the roof was not certified for that, and so, we were handicapped by only landing one big helicopter, the H-53s, which could handle up to seventy-seven people, in the courtyard. So, finally I said, "You know what? We have all these 46s, flying around." I told the helicopter controller to "land a H-46 on the roof." I said if it holds, we're in business. If it doesn't, tell him to pull the collective and get out of there," and he did and it held him, so we had now two places. One, the 46s, landing on the roof, and, the 53s landing in the courtyard, and that's how we staggered through this evacuation that lasted twenty-four hours, plus. In fact, it got started about eight o'clock in the morning and went on, and on, and on, and then, about two or three the next morning, now, you've got to understand, these pilots never got out of their pilot seat. They did not refueling. When they landed on the carrier deck, they just put a pressure hose to them with the rotors turning, and they can take on a whole load of fuel in about thirty seconds, and they threw box lunches at them, and water bottles, and away they went. Some of the guys never shut their engines down, never go out of the pilot's seat for seventeen hours, and, by two o'clock in the morning, the first one flew in the water. You know, they were so tired, and then, another one flew in the water. I was sitting in flag plot, which is the command center, on the *Blue Ridge*, which was the command ship.

Jl: You were on a ship.

MR: Yeah, I was on the *Blue Ridge*. This is where the admirals, in fact, when the evacuation started, we had five admirals sitting there, four of them were spectators, you know, and then Admiral Whitmire who I worked for, he was in charge of the whole thing. But, you know, they were not, well, two were aviators, but they didn't say anything. But Admiral Whitmire, being a submariner, he didn't say anything either, he just let us do our job, and so, after the second guy flew in the water, I said to the admiral, I said, you know, "Admiral, these guys are dead tired." I

said, "They've been going at this thing since eight o'clock and God knows when they woke up." I said, "And the ambassador continues to put Vietnamese on the helicopters. He knows we won't knock this off until we get all the Americans out." So the admiral says, "Well, what do you want me to do?" I said, "I want to go back to Admiral Moorer," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and, "tell him, 'No more Vietnamese, we've got to get the Americans out. We've got to wrap this thing up; we can't go on forever,'" and he said, "Well, okay." So I drafted up a message, and he sent it off, and, so then, Admiral Moorer sent a message out to the ambassador that said, "No more Vietnamese. Get the Americans out of there and you be on the last plane." So that's what happened. We got all the Americans out, and he was on the last plane. Then we still had six hundred Marines we had to get out, because we sent six hundred Marines into [the embassy], you know, for security. We had to get them all out. So I don't know, it must have been somewhere between eight or nine in the morning, I think it was about eight or nine in the morning, the next morning, the last of the marines were up on the roof. And they were screaming at me, "Where's that 46?" ... We had one last H-46 going to take, I think there were seven guys left on the roof, and he says, "They're shooting at us. They're trying to come up the stairs; we're throwing grenades down the stairs, smoke grenades and CS grenades, down the stairs. They're shooting at us from down below, and everything." He said, "Get us off this roof." I said, "Hey, the plane's inbound, it's inbound." So, finally, we got the last of the Marines off the roof, and I thought, "Oh, man." I was so tired, so exhausted, from the ordeal, and then, to top it all off, the ambassador, let me show you a picture of this. Here's [Ambassador] Graham Martin. There's the Admiral, Admiral Whitmire [shows picture]. The word came, from the guys who were on the radio, called me and he said, "The ambassador is on plane number umpteump, inbound." And I got the message, and I turned to the admiral and said, "Admiral, the ambassador is on this plane. He's going to land here in about ten minutes." I said, "Who's going back to greet him?" And he kind of looked around at all these other, more senior admirals than he, and he said, "You know what?" He says, "I better go because if any of these other guys go, they're going to throw the son of a bitch over the side." [laughter] So he [the ambassador] came aboard. The first thing he said was, "I'm hungry. What have you got to eat?" Luckily, Admiral Whitmire was a cool guy, he was, and I really liked him. There were days before the evacuation where we had all these ships, let me see if I have a picture. All these ships that were evacuating people from the North, Danang and stuff. There were thousands of these people crammed aboard these freighters, like this. [points to picture] These are ships which are MSTs, you know, supply ships, and they have a crew of maybe ten, twelve guys, and provisions for ten or twelve guys. They were putting these people in the holds of these ships. Now, you can imagine, you know, it's in the nineties, humidity, how hot it must get down there. We sent a Marine, usually a First Lieutenant, and a dozen enlisted guys for security on these ships, like this. I remember I was sitting in the flag plot, I had the duty that afternoon, and the admiral was sitting in his chair, and I said, "Admiral, you've got to see this message." It was from one of these lieutenants and this other supply ship, this other MSTs [Military Sea Transportation Service] ship, and it said, "You folks have got to do something. These people, we've got to put them ashore somewhere because," he said, "they're dying like flies." He said, "And when I walk down into the holds," he says, "I am literally up to my ankles in human feces." He says, "There is no water, there's," he says, "the little bit of water we have, just isn't enough to go around." Then, the admiral, when he read that, he said, "Mike, what am I going to do?" He says, "Washington won't help; they can't get cooperation. Saigon won't let them ashore because they're afraid they're going to cause a panic if all these people come ashore in Saigon. The Philippines won't take them; nobody will

take them." He says, "What can I do?" I said, "Admiral, I wish I could help you, but I haven't the foggiest idea. This is a diplomatic problem, not a Navy problem." So I really felt sorry for him. You know, in all of that, what was going on, and all this weight of the world on his shoulders, he turned to me one afternoon; he says, "By the way," he says, "you had one of your guys, second class petty officer, who we left back in Cubi Point at the hospital with a collapsed lung," he said, "Did you call his parents?" ... I did, but I'm thinking, "Here's a guy with the world collapsing around him, and he's worrying about one of my men who had a collapsed lung that we left in the Philippines." But that's the kind of guy he was, he was just an outstanding guy to work for. Anyway, that thing ended and we got to sail back. ... We had all these helicopters and people. We had... one of the guys that I was impressed with was Nguyen Cao Ky. Did you remember [him], the vice-president of Vietnam? He was Air Force, a General Ky. Anyway, he didn't abandon the ship like a lot of the Vietnamese. Like [Nguyen Van] Thieu, who was the president, who took his gold and went to Switzerland, or someplace. Ky stuck with it to the end and he was on the evacuation. He ended up on a ship with us and I got to talk to him. He spoke very good English, and he was a helicopter pilot, too, so we had a few things in common. But we went to the Philippines and off-loaded all these refugees, and all the correspondents. We had every correspondent representing all these different [news services]: AP, UPI, Reuters, you know, all these. I think I wrote that thing, here, in the back [of the yearbook]. But we had about a dozen different news things represented on the ship, and they all came to the *Blue Ridge* because we had the best communications to get their stories out, and stuff. So, then, we left Subic and sailed back towards San Diego. When you leave the Philippines and go to San Diego, you take the Great Circle Route because it's the shortest. Are you familiar with that? If you draw a straight line on a map from the Philippines to San Diego, it would probably take you close, pretty close to Hawaii. But the shortest route is the Great Circle Route, and that takes you way up to the north, almost to, just a little south of the Aleutian Islands. So, halfway back, there's a message that comes to the ship, and the skipper of the ship calls me up and says, "Mike," he says, "you have to make an important decision." I said, "What's that, Captain?" He says, "They want you in Honolulu for a congressional investigation, but," he says, "they're leaving it up to you to make the decision as to whether you want this ship to turn around and go back down to Honolulu, or not." I says, "You're kidding." [laughter] I said, "You know what?" I said, "Everybody on the ship has been away from their wife and family for seven months and can't wait to get home, and I'm one of them. And you're asking me, 'Do I want to go to Hawaii and talk to a bunch of congressmen, or do I want to go home?'" I said, "What do you think my answer is going to be?" He says, "Well, I had to ask you because they said it was your decision to make." So I said, "San Diego," and we never went there [to Hawaii]. I never got any flak about it. But they had a big congressional investigation in Hawaii. Getting back to *Miss Saigon*, when I saw that play, (if you didn't see the play you won't understand what we're talking about) they actually had a Huey on stage, turning up, and everything; the last helicopter leaving the embassy there in Saigon. But they locked the gates and no more Vietnamese were allowed to come, and this Marine sees his, or doesn't see his wife, actually, you know, but he had to get on the last plane to leave, and he has to leave his Vietnamese wife there. Well, I'm sitting in the audience thinking, "Dang, you know, maybe it was my decision, not to have anymore Vietnamese on that evacuation to..." Then I'm thinking, "You idiot, that was a play," you know, "it was not [a documentary]." But, who's to say it didn't happen? I don't know. Anyway, that was Saigon. What happened after Saigon? I went home and life returned to normal, and then, my last duty station was the Naval Safety Center at Norfolk, and I retired out of there after

twenty years.

Jl: Your family was still in Virginia, then?

MR: Actually, no. We, I didn't tell you all my tours in the Navy, but one of them, when I got back from Vietnam the first time, I went back to Pensacola as an instructor in helicopters. Then, after that two years, the Navy said, "Well, you've got to go aboard a ship in San Diego for your career purposes." I said, "What? My family's got a home; we have a nice home in Virginia Beach, blah, blah, blah," and they said, "Sorry, you're going to San Diego." So I said, "Okay." So we're scratching our fingernails all the way across the country, packed up six kids, a cat, and a dog, in this travel trailer, and headed out for San Diego. But as soon as we got here, we loved it. You know, when you have six little kids, my wife says, "No umbrellas, no raincoats, no galoshes, no overcoats, a backyard I can open up three hundred sixty-five days a year, they can play in the backyard. Ah," she says. So she loved it. So, anyway, that's how we got to San Diego, and then, my last two years, after I came back from that Saigon evacuation, they sent me back to Norfolk, and we decided to keep the house here, so we would have something to retire to, so that's how we got here. Retired, and came back out here [San Diego].

ML: Did they specifically send you back to Vietnam for the evacuation?

MR: No. I was stationed here in Coronado, right across the bridge. It's called Tactical Air Control squadron and we took turns, like we would go out on a ship from San Diego, go out there to West PAC for six, seven, eight months, and then come back. But you always had one commander, and I had about six officers, and about a dozen enlisted guys in the unit; we called that a unit. We would go to provide all the aviation expertise for an invasion, you know, an amphibious assault, because that's basically what this whole thing is in West PAC, is an amphibious assault group. After retirement, our kids, and the two youngest ones were only about, let's see, then, we're talking about '77, they were born in '70 and '71, so they, the two girls were six and seven years old and my wife wanted to go to work. She says, "I've been here all these years, raising kids, and stuff," and, so she wanted to go back to work. So I said, "Fine," and I went to school, I wanted to become a landscaper, and, so I went to a local college here, and got an associate's degree in landscaping. I met a friend of mine, who I was just visiting last week up in Portland, we're still good friends, and we went in business together in landscaping. But the GI Bill was paying me, like, in those days, it was a lot of money, four-fifty a month, or something, tax free. Plus, I was getting unemployment, plus I was getting my Navy retirement, that was pretty good money. So, I've got to tell you a funny story. You have to take, to get full benefits from the VA and the GI Bill, you have to take twelve units, okay. [I'm] taking them in Mesa College, we're wrapping up our whole curriculum there, and this Chuck and I were both in the same situation, and I had eleven; I needed twelve units. So going through this book, trying to find something that will fit in our schedule, the only thing I could find was bird watching, and it was a one credit course, and, so I wrote it down. I took it to the VA office, and I said, "Here's my [schedule]." He says, "You've got to be kidding me. You think we're going to pay you to do bird watching?" I said, "Well, I need a one unit course." I said, "Here, find one for me." So he looked, and looked, he says, "Damn," he says, "nothing fits." He said, "Okay, we'll approve it." So I told Chuck, and he came in with his, and he got approved. So, anyway, this was like the spring semester, and it started in the end of January, and the first class for bird watching was

down here where the river, San Diego River, runs into the bay and it's a big estuary. In January, the ducks from all up and down the west coast are here, and this guy Radford, who was teaching the course, had these telescopes on stands and you look through them, you know, and he'd find a particular duck and say, "Hey, everybody, look at this one. This is a such and such, a pin tail blah, blah, blah." So, "Okay," and we all had our own books and binoculars. In this class was a bunch of about four old gals, and they had boondockers and fatigues on, and everything, real crusty old gals, but they were real avid bird watchers. We were along a bike trail along the river or estuary, and it's paved, and we had all our telescopes set up, and everything, looking at these ducks. My friend Chuck, all of a sudden, sees these two girls come riding by on bicycles in bikinis, and he says, "Hey, look everybody, there's some Puffy-Chested Mattress Thrashers." [laughter] These old gals looked around, "A what? Where? What kind of thrasher was that?" You know, we're just dying laughing, but Chuck is so funny, with the "Puffy-Chested Mattress Thrashers," geez. But we had two good years at Mesa College and then I went to Grossmont College for another two years to use up my GI Bill; I took business administration. Then I got a job at the city schools because I was working too hard, working for myself. My wife came home one day, she was working for the schools at that time, she said, "Hey, look at this. They're looking for landscapers." So I said, "Oh, that job is great. At two-thirty, I go home, and there's no paperwork," and, "Wow," I said, "This is super." So I worked for them 'til I turned sixty-two and finally quit, again. Story of my life.

JJ: How many kids do you have?

MR: Six.

JJ: And they're all in the San Diego area except for ...

MR: No. There's one outside of Flint, Michigan, Swartz Creek. She married, she married a Marine, who was here at Camp Pendleton, and when he got out, that's where he went because that's where he got a good job. And then, I have my oldest daughter, who's the only one that's not married, and she lives in Seatac, which is the airport near Seattle.

JJ: Did any of your children go into the service?

MR: My son did. I have one son, five daughters. He would have stayed. In fact, he was in the Top Gun squadron here at Miramar and his division officer used to take [him] flying in a TA-4, which is a two seated A-4 aircraft, and he wanted to recommend him for officer training, and pilot training, and all that stuff, but my son's wife said, "[No]." Maybe I should have taken her to fall in the gutter in the cow barn, so she'd appreciate the Navy. But now, she says, "I should have let ... you stay in." It's too late now; you can't relive your life. So he spent six years in the Navy, and then got out.

ML: Did you approve of that or ...

MR: It's not up to me to approve of anything. No, I would have loved to have had him to have stayed in. I encouraged him to stay in and become a pilot. He wanted to, he really did. It didn't work out.

ML: So why did you retire after twenty years as opposed to twenty-five or something longer?

MR: Because I had missed so much of my older kids growing up; so many things that I wasn't here for, that I thought, "Now, I want to really enjoy these last couple of kids." ... In fact, what I did when I was out of school in the summer, and they were out of school, I had a Dodge van, a '73 Dodge van, full-sized van. I would rig the back, so we had a double mattress in the back, and the girls slept back there, and I had a pup tent, and we would take seven weeks every summer, going back to New Jersey to see the grandparents. We would stop at National Parks and National Forests, all the way across, and take a different route every summer, and stuff, and really, really have a good time. ... One of the girls, that's a teacher now, and she has got her own family and everything, she said, one time, she said, "You know, Dad, I never really appreciated those trips too much until I got to college." She went to Azusa Pacific University up here. ... She was an RA, and she says, "And I talked to these girls at night, they all came into my room, you know, for popcorn, and to watch movies, and some of them have never been out of the state," and there was something that came up about Topeka, Kansas. The girls would say, "What's Topeka, Kansas?" And she said, "I think to myself, 'Well, hell, not only do I know where Topeka, Kansas is, I was in that State Capital, moving around inside that big beautiful building.'" You know, we did that. We would travel and we stayed in National Forests, especially in the West, so there's no light, so at nine o'clock, when it got dark, I'd be asleep and I'd be awake at three in the morning. Three-thirty, I'd throw my pup tent in the van and start driving, and they'd sleep till eight o'clock and so, by noon, we were done driving for the day, and we would go horseback riding, or swimming, or, you know, sightseeing, or stuff like that. If you have your own kids someday, let me tell you one story about my youngest daughter. She was about seven or eight when we went to Mesa Verde National Park. Do you know, [or have] you ever been to Mesa Verde in Colorado, the cliff dwellers, the Anasazi, and the Indians and all that? Well, we went there, and we did the touring and went with the tour guides, and they take you in and out of these things, and then they talk to you. They tell you stories about the Anasazi, how they lived, and all this stuff. About two years later, she had to write a composition, or something. Well, at the time we were at Mesa Verde, I thought she was bored out of her mind, "She's not getting anything. I'm just wasting my time taking her through this thing," you know. Two years later, Trisha came to me, and she said, "Dad, would you kind of look this over for mistakes?" I read it, and it was about the Anasazi Indians, at Mesa Verde National Park, and I said, "Trish, where'd you get all this information?" She said, "Well, don't you remember? We were there." I said, "You remember all this from what they told you there?" She said, "Yeah," and I thought, "Oh, my God." From then on, I ought never underestimate what kids are going to absorb because they're like blotters, and they get things and you think they're not listening or paying attention, they are. Or even if they're not, it soaks in. One way or another, it soaks in. Anyway, so that's what I did for years, and then, of course, we started our business after I got done with college, roaming around for four years, and the kids are growing up. So, my wife and I just celebrated our fiftieth anniversary.

Jl: Congratulations.

MR: Yeah, now, I told you we got married in December, so we had a two-week window in July, early July, that was the only two weeks this year we could have celebrated with all the kids and

grandkids, so we did it a little early.

JJ: So it's not really fifty years.

MR: No, but we had the party, though, and it was great. So what else do you need?

ML: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

JJ: Anything we missed?

MR: I don't know what else I could add. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

MR: The original astronauts, the Mercury astronauts, had to be picked up by helicopter, you know, unless they were lucky enough to land right alongside of a ship. So they had to learn to get out of that Mercury capsule and into the sling of a helicopter, and all that stuff. So they came to Norfolk for about a week, and I have to admit, they were seven of the [most] happy-go-lucky, practical joking-type guys.

JJ: Really?

MR: Oh, yeah, they were always joking around, and things. But we went out on Chesapeake Bay, and they practiced getting out of the capsule, and then they had to put a collar around it, a flotation collar, so it wouldn't sink. They put that around it, and then they had to, we would come in with a helicopter, and practice picking them up, stuff like that. So we got a little exposure to them.

JJ: Did your kids, did they look at the space shuttle launches very closely?

MR: You know, I did. Our helicopter squadron was on the *USS Intrepid* and Scott Carpenter overshot the group of ships by a couple of hundred miles on his go-around, and so, our skipper, naturally, was going to get the prestige of picking him up. So he took off, and was racing a destroyer out there, and he got there before the destroyer. So he landed on the carrier, on the *USS Intrepid* (CVS-11) which is now in New York City as a museum. He landed on the *Intrepid*, after he was picked up with what they call a horse collar, the rescue thing you put underneath your arms, and then get hoisted up. So he, Scott Carpenter, came down to the officers' wardroom on the ship and people would ask him questions and he was talking about his trip, and all. So, I took the horse collar down with me and gave him a felt-tip pen and asked him to autograph it, and he did. We had that in our ready room for a long time. You know, I left the squadron after another year, or so, and I didn't know whatever happened to it. But I brought the kids to the squadron and they saw it. Other than that, I don't have any other stories.

JJ: That was great.

ML: Well, thank you very much. This concludes an interview with Michael Retz. I just want to thank you again.

MR: You're more than welcome.

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Reviewed by Matt Lawrence 11/9/07

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 2/20/08

Reviewed by Michael J. Retz 3/08 & 4/20/08