RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW J. SWAJKOWSKI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
APRIL 13, 2012

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Mr. Matthew Swajkowski on April 13, 2012, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Nick Molnar, Kara McCloskey and Cynthia Swajkowski. Thank you, Mr. Swajkowski, for coming in today. You have to excuse me; I get a little tripped up on the names. [laughter]

Matthew Swajkowski: It's okay, quite all right, quite all right.

NM: To begin, could you tell us when and where you were born?

MS: Yes, I was born in Newark, New Jersey, April 3, 1947. … I grew up in Newark, New Jersey. I went to Hawkins Street School as my primary school. I went to high school at Arts High in Newark, New Jersey, and, from there, I went to Lehigh University for a couple years. Then, after that, I transferred out, went to St. Peter's College, where I eventually graduated. I spent about five years in college, right. I was not the most auspicious student, so, you know, you lost some credits transferring out and going to another school. I finished up in '69. I spent four years in ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]. I received … a commission as a second lieutenant in Field Artillery in January of 1970. After graduation, I went into the United States Army. Fort Sill, Oklahoma, was my first reporting point, where I took field artillery officer basic for three months.

NM: Okay, I just want to backtrack a bit.

MS: Okay.

NM: I do want to ask you about your family history on both sides.

MS: Okay.

NM: Could you tell us a little bit about your family history on your father's side?

MS: Okay. My father was born in this country. His grandfather came over in 1901 from Poland. … The grandmother followed not too long after. Generally, what happened in those days was, the adult male would come first and establish himself, get a job and bring the rest of the family over. Well, the rest of the family was just a wife, and I'm not exactly sure how much after him she came over. My father was born, I believe, in 1911. He passed away in '81. He was about seventy years old when he passed away. He served in the Army for three years during the Depression, from about 1932 to 1935, as a young man, and then, was recalled to active duty. He was actually drafted back in 1942. In February or March of '42, he was drafted back in and he spent the next three years in Europe, Operation TORCH in North Africa, through North Africa, into Tunisia, Sicily, Italy. He actually got to see Rome and they pulled him off the line then and they were refitted to go into the invasion of Southern France [Operation Dragoon] in 1944. Then, he went through Southern France, Alsace-Lorraine and wound up on the Czechoslovakian border, finishing up there. He had a lot of points. They had a point system in those days in World War II. The more points you had, the sooner you came home, something like that there. I don't know the whole story about it, but they got stand-down orders to refit and send all their equipment to Antwerp, somewhere in June of 1945. … His unit was a heavy

artillery unit and they were scheduled to go to Japan. So, he didn't come home until about October of 1945, took a little time for him to get back. They were on orders from June, July through August. They were anticipating an invasion of the southernmost island of Japan, you know, in November of 1945 and that never came because of the bomb. [Editor's Note: Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic raid on August 6, 1945. Nagasaki was attacked on August 9, 1945. V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific.] So, he finally came home around October. Mother was on the home front. She worked for a jeweler at the time. She was in the jewelry business and she did, like, you know, all the engraving work and things like that there. During World War II, the Federal Government had the company making the very small gears and bevels and bearings for bombsights and periscopes five days a week and, two days a week, they were allowed to make jewelry. … She worked on the Norden bombsight, she worked on submarine periscopes, you know, all the little, tiny gears and precision parts there. They made them there. After the war, I guess, just, you know, a normal life for them, everything went back to normal and my father retired in the mid-'70s and, like I said, passed away in '81. My mother passed away in '97.

Kara McCloskey: Did your mother continue to work after World War II?

MS: Yes, we were a two-earner household. She worked through and I think she retired somewhere around 1970, in the early '70s.

NM: Did she work in the same factory?

MS: She always was in the jewelry business. She worked in about two or three different places, same kind of job, engraving work, the precision work with jewelry, you know, this here [Mr. Swajkowski shows a piece of jewelry], that kind of stuff. … She didn't make this for me, I bought this later on, but yes.

NM: Growing up, did your father ever talk about his military experience?

MS: To some degree, yes. … He was the old technical [sergeant], he was [called]. They call it spec now. They called it, like, spec-4, spec-5, I think, when I was in. It used to be called T-4, T-5, T-6, technical sergeant, you know. He was communications in the field artillery battalion that he was in. He would lay the wires, set up all the communications when they moved into an area. That was his primary responsibility. One of the things he tells me about is sitting on an OP [observation post] in the valley across from Monte Cassino and watching it, you know, get all blown to hell by the, you know, field artillery and aircraft when the order was given to take it. [Editor's Note: Operation AVENGER, the codename for the bombing of the Monte Cassino Abbey, occurred on February 15, 1944. Beginning in the morning and continuing into the afternoon, 250 bombers dropped six hundred tons of explosives in conjunction with heavy artillery.] He went into Italy, you know, right behind the main troops. He was in a very heavy unit. … They started off with 155-millimeter guns in Africa. They graduated up to eight-inch guns in Sicily and Italy and, eventually, when they went into Southern France there, they had 240-millimeter guns--not howitzers, guns. These things went about almost thirty thousand meters. … They fired a 360-pound shell and I remember him telling me, because, you know, we're fighting the current war with two hands tied behind our back and a ball and chain on our

feet, they would have a fire mission, I'll never forget him telling me, "We'd always save the last round for the rear echelon. We'd raise the gun up to, you know, maximum, forty-five degrees," roughly, you know, the maximum range, "put the maximum charge and just fire the gun," which is amazing, you know. Who the hell knows where the round went, you know, 360 pounds going down range about twenty miles? Think about it--you don't get away with stuff like that anymore. [laughter]

NM: Did he ever talk about his service prior to World War II?

MS: Earlier service, yes. Well, he went in the Army because he couldn't get a job. Yes, things were rough during the Depression. So, he goes in the Army and he spent most of his time with the provost marshal's office down in Fort Dix. That was it. … Actually, every Saturday, for inspections, he has to get the provost marshal's horse ready. That's the only thing I remember him telling me about, you know, and he almost got court-martialed because they dared him to ride the horse. … He rode the horse down the street and the horse fractured a hoof, and so, you know, worse comes to worst, you know, he lost some money or something like that there for doing that, kind of stupid. …

NM: Did your family talk about how the Depression affected them? Was that something that ever came up in your father's stories?

MS: Things were pretty tough. He got a job. After he came out of the service, he managed to get a job in the Kearny Shipyards, working on the boats. … Then, somebody talked him into coming in to work for Crucible Steel in Harrison, New Jersey, which was that plant right across--if you take New Jersey Transit into New York City, as soon as you come out of Penn Station Newark, you cross the Portal Bridge, it's now an open field, but, for the longest time, the first building on the right was Crucible Steel. … So, he got a job there for more money, being told that it was draft deferrable, and guess what? It wasn't draft deferrable. So, he was back in the Army again. His three brothers were all 4-F. One had lost a leg because he was working on the railroad. … The other two had, you know, congenital defects that precluded them from serving [in the] military. So, he was the only one of the four that was called, that was fit to be called back.

KM: On the survey, you indicated that they were Democrats. Were they active?

MS: Yes, they were. My father actually campaigned locally, got involved in the Adlai Stevenson campaign. I don't remember whether it was '52 or '56 when Stevenson ran, but he had this little button on his lapel. It was the sole of a shoe, with a hole in the sole, which was, like, Adlai Stevenson, his little trademark, you know, campaign trademark, because he was, you know, it was just a little wing and a prayer. He was on the QT with his campaign all the way through against Eisenhower. I'm not a Democrat anymore, incidentally. [Editor's Note: In the 1952 and 1956 Presidential campaigns, Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower defeated Adlai Stevenson, II, the Democratic Party's nominee.]

NM: I want to move on to your early memories of growing up in Newark. Could you tell us about your neighborhood? What do you recall, as a young child, that you did for fun? What kind of community was it?

MS: It was a mixed neighborhood. We had a project down the street, you know, that housed all sorts of families. Then, the local homes were mostly owned by Polish, German, Italian, Irish, just a mixture of everybody in the neighborhood. Most of the people worked for Ballantine. A lot of the people worked for Ballantine in the neighborhood. That's a beer, okay, or was a beer. I don't know whether they're still in existence or not, but … I'd say at least every third home had a Ballantine employee there and Ballantine was very unique, because, back in those days, they used to give their workers beer breaks, not coffee breaks, beer breaks, okay. So, a lot of the fathers were chronic beer drinkers--we won't say alcoholics, we'll just say chronic beer drinkers. [laughter]

NM: Which section of Newark?

MS: All right, you can go on Google Maps, you know, you can go drill down into Down Neck, the Ironbound Section, Hawkins Street. Just type in Hawkins Street, and it'll bring you down there, you know, Ironbound, because it was, you know, surrounded by tracks. Now, it's mostly Portuguese and stuff.

NM: Were there many children for you to play with? Among the children you played with, were their fathers also World War II veterans?

MS: Yes, there were, quite a few, quite a few, you know. No bullying laws, so, everybody was always getting beat up by somebody else. [laughter]

KM: What activities were you involved in? Were you involved in Boy Scouts or athletic teams?

MS: Actually, no. I never joined the Boy Scouts. We did play a lot of ball. I played some baseball in high school. I wasn't that great. I mean, you know, I'm not too coordinated. I did play some ball and we always played sandlot ball. … The Little League team in Newark at the time, we didn't have one--like, every little town has a Little League and there's a lot of parents to transport kids around now. That wasn't the case then. The Little League teams played in Independence Park, which required a bus trip, and then, walking several blocks. It was behind St. Casimir's Church up there. That's where the Little Leagues play. We didn't, you know. There was no Little League *per se* right in my neighborhood. I had one kid in the whole street [who] actually joined the Little League and that was it, but, mostly, for almost all through grammar school, we just played, you know, sandlot baseball, sandlot football, things like that there. It was, you know, think up stuff to do and find a place to do it, you know, good imagination.

Cynthia Swajkowski: How did you get into Arts High?

MS: I draw pretty little pictures. [laughter]

KM: On the survey, you also indicated that you were raised Roman Catholic. I was wondering if Catholicism played a big role in your life growing up.

MS: No, not really, not really. … I went to CCD classes, which were called Catechism classes. I made my Holy Communion, my Confirmation in 1959. … I didn't go to any Catholic schools until I went to St. Peter's, you know, but, after a while, you know, you went to church every weekend, but that was about it and I wasn't, you know, really religious. I wasn't super religious. As a matter-of-fact, in Vietnam, we blew a hydraulic line. We went down. We were supporting a ground unit. The engineer unit was opening up a road to Firebase Stinson and we were VR-ing [visual reconnaissance] for them, because they were taking fire from the hills. We blew the hydraulic line. We landed right in the middle of them. We had to close up the rotors, so that they could sling load the helicopter back, and I got a ride in off another helicopter. I landed on the pad and I see everybody running into church and I'm scratching my head, "Why is everybody running to church?" "Oh, it's Sunday, it's Easter Sunday," this little voice in the back of my head said, "I'd better go to church." Okay, I had better go. So, I went. I went to church. You know, I think I was in church three times in Vietnam and that was it. Every day was the same for us.

NM: I know you have a lot of questions about his childhood.

MS: Keep going. [laughter]

KM: Yes.

WS: Okay, all right.

KM: Since we were talking about Catholicism, what were your impressions of John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic President, and what were your parents' impressions of him?

MS: I was impressed with Kennedy. I really was, and you have to understand that the press did not dare talk about private lives, okay. I know now they say that Kennedy was a real philanderer, you know, and he had lots of girlfriends. Well, that never came out, but the fact that he had served in World War II, that he had distinguished himself in World War II, that he was willing to die for his people on the boat, you know, that was impressive. As a matter-of-fact, one of our projects in eighth grade, … we had a choice of writing reports or something like that or doing stuff on selected topics throughout the year, on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, or keeping, in the beginning of the year, … a scrapbook on the election, every day, you know, something to do with the election. I elected to do that, you know. So, I had this big--you know those composition notebooks, with the little white and black cover? I had the whole thing filled with stuff from the *Star-Ledger* and the *Newark Evening News* on Kennedy, the whole day, too. Yes, he was quite an impressive hero to look up to in those days.

KM: I was also wondering if you could describe the Civil Rights Movement, since you were growing up during that period, and if it had an impact on you.

MS: I followed it. To this day, I'll say they'll never be able to replace Martin Luther King. That guy was like one of the most impressive orators … that you could imagine and I saw him once in

person, in Newark, but, you know, I didn't even come close, you know. He was way back in the distance on a podium. You know, I know that my parents moved out of Newark in 1966, in the Winter of '66, and they moved to Union and that was just before, in 1967, during July of '67, they had the riots in Newark and I avoided Newark, you know, … during that time, as much as possible, you know. There was a lot of, you know, uneasiness there. … I didn't get too involved in the Civil Rights Movement. [Editor's Note: The Newark riots lasted from July 12 to July 17, 1967. They began after the police arrested an African-American cab driver and rumors spread that he had been killed in custody. The riots resulted in over two dozen deaths, over seven hundred injuries, fifteen hundred arrests and property damage exceeding ten million dollars.]

NM: What did you do for entertainment? You mentioned that you played baseball, but were there movie theaters downtown?

MS: … When we got older, when we were in high school, yes, and, you know, had a little more [freedom], I guess the parents gave you a little more responsibility and a little more leeway. Yes, we'd go up and see a movie from time to time. There were four movie theaters in Newark, the Branford, the RKO, the Paramount and Loew's, and they usually ran the first-run movies, and then, also, we would go to Yankee Stadium during the summer. Yankee Stadium, the bleachers were seventy-five cents, you know, back then, in those days, and the bus that we could catch on the corner was forty cents going to New York City. The subway was fifteen cents. So, if you had a couple dollars, you were hot to go to the ballgame, you know. That's all you really needed back in those days.

NM: Your wife mentioned before that you went to Arts High School. How did you get in there?

MS: I was able to draw. … As a small kid, I could visualize scenes and put them on paper way before I knew anything about depth and anything else, you know. What do they call it, depth perception on paper? I forget the term, but, you know, the teachers were pretty impressed and they pushed me, you know. Any time we had to, you know, like, make murals and stuff on the wall, I was, you know, always included, designs for the hallway, they'd pull me out. … I'd spend time doing that. So, Arts High required either a music test--you had to perform an instrument, you had to either sing--or you had to draw, sketch, whatever. … We spent the morning drawing pictures up there. So, they evaluated the pictures and I got accepted in. It was a public school. Arts High was a public school in Newark. However, you had to have some artistic talent, one way or another, to get in and, of course, if you didn't perform well academically, you got sent back to your district, your … district high school.

NM: What were some of the interests that you pursued at Arts High, your favorite subjects?

MS: Well, math and science always interested me and history interested me, also. I've got a pretty myopic view of literature right now. If I'm not reading a history book, and she'll tell you, I'm either reading a history book or I'm reading Tom Clancy, one or the other. You know, that's about it--hated English and you can see it. [laughter]

NM: In high school, what did you think you would do with yourself after high school?

MS: I really didn't know. I really wasn't sure of anything. It wasn't until after I got in the service and we were training people that I said, "I don't mind standing in front of a group and teaching them. You know, it's kind of enjoyable to pass on information." So, that's when I decided, you know, I'm going to go into teaching.

NM: As a teenager, did you have a job while going to school?

MS: No, not really. I bounced around, you know, went into the supermarket awhile, you know, worked there, but, you know, most of the time, you know, up until about senior year, we were just, you know, outside during the summer, playing, whatever. [laughter]

KM: Did your parents encourage you to go to college? Was it expected of you?

MS: My mother always used to say, "Do you want to be like us or do you want to be like, you know, So-and-So, down the street?" They encouraged me to go, right.

NM: Tell us how you selected the colleges that you applied to, I guess in your junior or senior year in high school.

MS: Yes. There was nobody in the family that went to school before me. Some of my cousins who were older than me were in school or had just gotten out and I really wasn't thinking of teaching. So, at the time, you know, they had a lot of people [who] were going to Montclair State, a lot of people were going to Newark College, which is, you know, now Kean. My wife went there. I just sent out a bunch of applications everywhere, you know. I just wound up going to one place that picked me. … I didn't have any alumni associations, my parents were never in school. You know, I was not, what do you call the …

CS: Helicopter?

MS: No, no, when you follow in your mother or father's footsteps.

NM: Legacy?

MS: Legacy, yes, that's it, you know, nothing like that. …

NM: I guess we are in 1965 now, when you went to Lehigh. Did you live there?

MS: Yes, I did. I was young and stupid, you know. We didn't study too much, yes. [laughter] …

NM: Was this one of the first times that you …

MS: That I was away? yes. You don't want to send a naïve person away, you know. I worked better from home. [laughter]

NM: Before you got into Lehigh, were you thinking of continuing in the arts or liberal arts?

MS: Yes.

NM: Then, you transferred.

MS: St. Peter's, because I wasn't doing that well out there. Yes, I got into St. Peter's and I did much better, and then, when you go to graduate school and you're paying for it on your own, you do a hell of a lot better, you know. [laughter] I think I had a 3.7, or something like that, you know. … I took a combination. … I got a teaching certification on a graduate level, plus, I got the master's degree and I think everything worked out to around a 3.7. So, when you're paying for it yourself, you realize that, you know, you've really got to study, you know.

KM: What motivated you to join the ROTC in your first year of college?

MS: The truth? I think I really wanted to serve my country. I wanted to see what it was all about, you know. That's basically it. … I felt that it was a responsibility that I had to perform. So, I spent four years in ROTC.

NM: How did you learn about the ROTC?

MS: It was there. [laughter] They gave us a little pep talk when we first came in and they asked us if we wanted to take it, you know. It was an optional subject, but it was only, like--the first couple years--it was only, like, two classes … a week, you know, two periods a week, and it was a drill period. … It wasn't, like, real stressful. … They wanted to keep you in the first couple years, and so, they pretty much made it entertaining--not entertaining, but … they were creative enough to keep you there, those people that were interested.

NM: When you transferred to St. Peter's, was it easy to jump into ROTC there or did you have to start over?

MS: No, I had two years and I went right back in. I went right back into ROTC at the next level up, but, when you're a junior--I don't know how they work it now, they must have an ROTC department here--I don't know whether you commit yourself right as a freshman or not, but you didn't commit yourself until your junior year at that time.

NM: While you were at Lehigh and St. Peter's, especially St. Peter's, the war in Vietnam was rapidly expanding in terms of troop involvement. How closely did you and your classmates follow the war?

MS: … I will say this--we were aware of everything going on, okay, and we would talk about some of the situations in class. Now, again, whether the instructors knew more because they were military, they didn't tell us, but, you know, it was at the level of what you glean from the news media at the time, but we would discuss it, yes.

NM: What about in your general classes, outside of ROTC? Would the subject come up on campus in any way?

MS: They had demonstrations. In the '60s, they had a lot of Jesuit priests at St. Peter's. As a matter-of-fact, I would say more than half of the faculty were Jesuits and, in those days, the Jesuits were not very liberal. Yes, they were hard, and some of them were really hardcore, you know, senior citizen type Jesuits who were very, very pro-country, pro-military, and so, they took a great affront to the demonstrations that were going on. We did have a chapter of SDS and stuff like that. [Editor's Note: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a popular student activist movement during the mid to late 1960s that expanded across college campuses across the United States. They protested against racial discrimination, the Vietnam War, inequality in the United States and for women's rights, but, eventually, fractured off into various splinter groups that advocated their own interests, sometimes through violent means.] As a matter-of-fact, the ROTC department and the SDS had a big debate in 1968 and we came in, we reviewed all our facts, we debated amongst ourselves, you know. I was, like, an alternate, but, you know, the ranking officers of the ROTC department took the lead on this debate. We got shouted down. We just flat out got shouted down, so, we left, yes.

NM: It was very interesting that you attended Martin Luther King's speech when he came to Newark. In the late 1960s, were there any Civil Rights-related activities on the St. Peter's campus that you were aware of, or was it mostly antiwar stuff?

MS: I do remember some demonstrations in '68 and '69. As a matter-of-fact, I do remember one time where we voluntarily decided to get together and protect the building that the ROTC was in, not only that, because there was, internally, into the building, we had, like, it wasn't a vault, but it was a caged-in area that housed about three hundred rifles, okay. So, we did have equipment there and those rifles were also used. They would take us out to the firing ranges. So, we would, from time to time, … refit those rifles with the firing pins. As they sat inside that protected area, they did not have the firing pins and I don't know where they locked the firing pins up, but there was stuff out there, that had that building been overrun, could have been taken out, you know. I don't remember any Civil Rights demonstrations, though.

NM: What was your major at St. Peter's?

MS: Bio.

NM: Bio, okay. It had changed from Lehigh to St. Peter's.

MS: Well, yes.

NM: What led you to pursue a major in biology?

MS: It was a challenge, it was interesting. I always liked history, but I knew that I'd probably never get a job as a history major. You know, I'd either be teaching it or, if, with a little bit of luck, maybe I could have gotten into a law school or something like that. I knew that this state was full of pharmaceutical companies and I knew that, you know, I could, somewhere along the way, hook up and get a job in a lab somewhere. So, that's why I pursued biology.

NM: Did you get that advice from someone?

MS: No, just, you know, it just seemed like, you know, there was more opportunity there than it was in a "liberal artsy" kind of field.

NM: Did you continue to draw and sketch while in college?

MS: No. She coerced me into making some pictures on vacation, from time to time, but that's about it, yes.

KM: Did your parents help you pay for college or did you have a job while you were in college?

MS: I had a job in college, but it wasn't enough to pay for school and my parents paid for my undergraduate education, the same thing with my son. Right now, we paid for part of it and we took out some loans and I am paying off the loan for his [education], you know. I made him a deal. I said, you know, "You pay your own way after that, but my parents paid for mine, I will pay for yours," you know, and I'm paying his off.

KM: Were you involved in campus life at St. Peter's?

MS: Campus life?

KM: Yes.

MS: No. I was a commuting student, you know. So, every day, at the end of the day, if we had to get together and prepare lab reports, because we worked in groups--in the higher level courses, we worked in groups--if we had to prepare reports, exchange information, go over stuff, sometimes, we'd have dinner in the cafeteria, and then, spend time in the library doing that, but, most of the time, I'd just pack it in and go home. I didn't belong to any organizations. …

CS: They don't have fraternities or sororities.

MS: They didn't have fraternities or sororities up there.

CS: Still don't now, though. It was a commuter college.

MS: … Yes, it was. Back then, if you wanted to stay around campus, if you came from far away, at St. Peter's, you had an apartment with a couple or three other people. They didn't really have dorms. They have dorms there now. …

NM: Since you were in ROTC and, obviously, the Vietnam War was going on, was it a foregone conclusion that you would probably end up as an officer in Vietnam?

MS: Yes.

NM: Did your …

MS: Easier than being a private in Vietnam, fewer people that would get you killed--I looked at it that way. [laughter]

NM: Other people have told us that they joined because they did not want to be drafted. Was that something that factored into your decision to go for ROTC?

MS: Absolutely. I figured I had a little more to offer than somebody that would be drafted in and, if I went in as an officer, at least I had a little more control over what was going to happen; at least that's the way I felt. … At that time, it was a six-year commitment. They called us OBV2, which is, "Obligated Volunteer, Two Years," okay. So, I had to put two years on active duty, two years READY Reserve, Active Reserve, and two years Standby Reserve. I think it's an eight-year commitment now and I don't know exactly how they break it down, but, … because it was a draft, the Army, the draft was in and they used a lot of people, … it was only six years then.

NM: Tell us about the experience of leaving New Jersey and going to basic training. Could you tell us how you prepared and what basic training was like?

MS: I'm home one day and the postman came to the door and he rang the doorbell and he had this official-looking letter and he had me sign for it. … It was, you know, those orders that were assigning me to Fort Sill, for officer basic course, and that came around November or so, November, December, and, right after, I think it was late in January, I drove out. There was another fellow on those orders, Rob (Thomason?). We kind of drove in tandem and I learned that I hate driving following somebody else, or that person following me or always trying to be around somebody else, so [that] we don't get lost. … We didn't have cell phones or anything in those days, and so, we drove in tandem all the way from New Jersey to Fort Sill, stayed somewhere out in West Virginia the first night, or just in Ohio, stayed another night just past St. Louis, and then, drove down to [Fort Sill], spent three days on the road following one another. I will never drive tandem again. [laughter] …

KM: How did the soldiers in basic training socialize and relax? What sort of Special Services were available to you?

MS: School was hard. … Unlike what Colonel [Jack] Jacobs said in his book, where he really pooh-poohed the infantry officer basic, they gave us a lot of work and the only time you really unwound was on the weekends and there was nothing out there. There was, really, Lawton, Oklahoma, is just outside the gate of Fort Sill, and it's a typical town that is always found outside of a military base. It's a trap; at least it was then. We would occasionally go. We knew there were a couple of decent restaurants. We stayed [away], avoided the bars. We went to about three or four different restaurants on a regular basis. One of them was a German restaurant that was run by an ex-NCO that had married a German woman on one of his tours over in … Germany and opened up a restaurant there. There were some Italian and Mexican restaurants. We'd go to a movie there. A lot of times, we'd go up the highway to Oklahoma, to see, like, a game or something at the University of Oklahoma, or go into Oklahoma City. … There was a sign outside of Fort Sill and it said, "Oklahoma City Limits, 87 Miles," on the Turner Turnpike,

and it was always our goal to get to Oklahoma City in an hour. We did it. It's just a straight line. [laughter]

NM: In ROTC, there are choices of branches, Armor, for example.

MS: Yes.

NM: What were some of the choices? Obviously, Artillery would have been one.

MS: At the time, we had to select two combat branches and one non-combat branch. … There was a long period of time when I thought that I was going to get into Chemical Corps, because that was my first choice, Chemical Corps, and I envisioned myself running around with a lab coat on for two years, you know--wouldn't that be cool? My second choice was Signal Corps, because I didn't want to go Infantry. The last thing I wanted was Infantry. I'm too big, too slow, too much of a target--I didn't want infantry. So, my third choice was Field Artillery and they gave me Field Artillery.

NM: At Fort Sill, what were some of the things that you found challenging about basic training?

MS: Gunnery. Gunnery was very, very unique to a lot of us. … Like I said early on, I wish they had given us about a couple more weeks of practical exercises, because that stuff takes a long time to gel, and then, … after the three months of the officer basic school, … I was a range safety, primarily, a range safety officer at Fort Sill. … That was my main job. About four or five days a week, I'd be out in the field. If I wasn't, I was helping out with, you know, the unit in the back, in their rear area somewhere, and given other responsibilities or officer of the day, staying up all night. It's always fun to stay up all night, and then, go range safety all the next day. You could sleep for about eighteen hours after that, even when you're young. That's one of the reasons that prompted me to, finally, you know, say, "I'm giving this up and going, you know. Let me get my Vietnam tour over and get out." … I really felt bad for some of these guys that went directly to Vietnam, because it's really difficult when you've just had a little bit of practice in something to actually implement it for real, especially when you're dealing with, you know, putting rounds next to a unit and you have to come within, like, maybe, a hundred or fifty meters, reading a map accurately and stuff like that there, supervising a team of kids, calculating, running up data in a fire direction center and stuff. It is, without a doubt, probably, you know, something that, you know, it's great when everything works out, but God help you if you screw up and put a round on somebody. … I mean, that's always there. I was always on edge when I was overseas, you know. I'll get into that after. …

KM: Do you feel that your training at Fort Sill adequately prepared you for your tour overseas?

MS: Just adequately. [laughter] … There's nothing like experience, okay. There's no other thing but experience. You need that experience and, you know, you only learn it by doing it for real, you know.

NM: Tell us about this process. You said that you volunteered to get your tour in Vietnam over with to get out of your position in the States, correct?

MS: Yes.

NM: Walk us through that process. Do you just sign up?

MS: [Mr. Swajkowski imitates picking up a phone.] "I want to go to 'Nam," that's it, it was a phone call. It was a phone call to the Pentagon, a direct phone call, to Field Artillery Ops in the Pentagon, "Please assign me to Vietnam." "When?" Okay, I gave them a range, you know, I said, you know, "October, November, send me over."

NM: When did you know which unit you would be assigned to?

MS: In Vietnam?

NM: In Vietnam.

MS: … When you fly in, we flew into Cam Ranh Bay. We landed there about seven-thirty at night. They took us off the airplane, we got our luggage, we went into a processing center, we filled out a bunch of forms. … They took the forms and they assigned us to a temporary quarters. We got a bunk. Next morning, we had to report in after breakfast. I think by noontime that day, I knew where I was going. They had assigned us.

KM: What was your first impression of Vietnam?

MS: … If you know anything about the country, Cam Ranh Bay is … somewhere around the Saigon area, I don't know exactly, but the monsoons, when they start, they sort of start in the Mekong Delta. They work from south to north, okay. So, in early November, they had finished with their monsoon season, but, when I went up to the Americal Division in I Corps, they were in the middle of their monsoon season. See, their monsoon season lasted from, like, October, started in October, really built up a head of steam in November and December and started tapering off in January, and then, we had a couple of months of pleasant weather in February and March. Then, it got very, very hot for about six months. Down south, it was just a little bit earlier. So, it just kind of swept from south to north. … My first impression was in the dark, but we were on the middle of this huge base, huge base. So, you really didn't get a feel for the country. They flew us up in a [Lockheed] C-130 [Hercules], in the cargo hold of a C-130, so, you can't really see out, because there's no windows. … Again, we landed in Chu Lai, in I Corps, where the headquarters of the Americal Division [was], and, again, it's a huge base. So, I really didn't get out to see the countryside until I actually got assigned to an infantry unit and we weren't really … doing villages over there. … Like, we weren't working in friendly, no-fire zones. We were working outside of village areas. So, I never really got in to see a village, except when we did run a few convoys later on and we'd go through villages. … Immediately, I had very little contact with the people. They had indigenous workers on the post, doing odd jobs, laundry, clean up, things like that there, working as help in mess halls and things, unloading, working in the PX areas and stuff. I'm sure they were robbing us blind, but, you know, what can you say? I won't get into that. [laughter]

NM: When you got to Vietnam, before you knew exactly where you would go, some Vietnam veterans have told us they had a "get to know Vietnam" program.

MS: … Yes, they had a three-day orientation at Fort Sill and, basically, the first day was an in-class kind of [thing]. They had a series of lecturers, officers and NCOs, telling you what to expect, what not to do, what to avoid, how to be, you know, nice to the Vietnamese, I suppose the term now is "being politically correct;" you know, what an egregious term. Anyway, after that first day, they would then take you out in the field and they'd run you through a field exercise, you know. They'd run you through a booby trap area, how to spot booby traps and stuff like that. I don't know what relevance that had with us as artillery people, because, you know, only the forward observers are out with infantry units and the rest of us were either on firebases or in rear areas. They also put us on the firing range and had us qualify with M-16s and it was basically--oh, yes, we did a combat assault out of a helicopter, to get us to feel what it was like--but that was about it. That was, like, about three days' orientation and, when you get to Vietnam, the first thing they do is give you an orientation there, and then, the infantry people spent about five days in orientation. They gave us, like, about two and they took us out, and we actually were oriented on shooting artillery. We had our own separate orientation as artillery officers. They took us out to a firebase and we actually fired some artillery for real. That was the rest of the orientation.

NM: In Vietnam, was there a lot of contact with your family or friends at home through letters?

MS: That's it, letters. There was something called a MARS station, M-A-R-S, I don't remember what the acronym was, what it represents, [Military Auxiliary Radio System], but you could probably find it, you know, if you Google it. The MARS station was basically a place that was manned twenty-four hours a day by a team of guys and you went in and you gave them your name, you gave them your address, you gave them your home phone number and they would try to get somebody that was on, like, a two-way radio in your area. … They would make contact with that individual, and then, that individual would link to a phone, somehow. They did have a phone setup there, where they'd call your family, and I know of one person that actually got through. I tried several times, because it was just out the back door. It was, like, maybe down the street from here by the light, okay, and it wasn't far away. I tried many times to call home there. I never got through, never got through.

CS: Tape cassettes. …

MS: Oh, yes, we sent cassettes home. I'd send a cassette home occasionally, you know, and talk, so [that] they could hear my voice, but, mostly, it was just, you know, a lot of letters.

KM: Did they send you cassettes?

MS: My parents, those old fogies? [laughter] No, I didn't get any cassettes.

NM: Your father had served in the artillery. Did he give you any pointers on what to expect?

MS: When they dropped me off at Kennedy Airport and I took the suitcase out of the trunk and the duffle bag out of the trunk, he walked over and he says--I know he was, like, upset, but he kept it in--and he shakes my hand, he says, "Now, you're going to find out what it's all about." That was it, that was it, and I know he was wound up, but, you know, there was nothing more he could say.

NM: Tell us about your experience after you got to your unit in Vietnam, meeting the other men, your initial assignments, things of that nature.

MS: The first unit I went to was the First Battalion, 14th Field Artillery, First of the 14th. They were the direct support artillery for the Americal, for the 198th Brigade, and I walked in, they told me [immediately]--the tactical operations officer, a major, called me in and told me--that I was going to be an FO [forward observer]. They gave me a quick bunk, you know, to lay down in and he said, you know, "You'll get your assignment in a day or so," and they sent me over to get supplies, to get my M-16 and get all my field equipment and stuff like that there, and I picked and chose everything I wanted. You know, they were suggesting what I should take out and all. So, I was kind of worried about weighing myself down, … but I, you know, [had] binoculars, things like that there, ponchos, rucksack, everything I needed, except for food, which I didn't get. They didn't issue me any food when I got out there. I had to mooch stuff off the guys out in the field. I went to a dinner. … The first night, one of the few nights that I was there the first couple days, I went to a dinner and met everybody and I got to see how the fire direction center in the rear area worked, because every battery had its own fire direction center, but, then, the battalion had a master fire direction center. So, when we processed, again, shooting the guns over there required the battery fire direction center and the battalion fire direction center to compute the data simultaneously and, if they came up with the same answer, you fired, okay. I mean, it's like it was an internal check, a double check, to make sure that you didn't screw up, okay. During that first night there, I met this kid [that] had come in a couple months earlier who was from West Point and they were fawning over this guy like he was the second coming of George Patton, okay. He was a forward observer, okay. I go out in the field. I was with another forward observer, who stayed out there for about four days, and all we did was shoot missions, just to get my feet wet, to make sure that I could handle it, and, you know, I'm real thankful that they did that process, you know. So, I got a feel for, you know, everything that's going on, reading a map, knowing the area that my company covered. After we came back in the first time, I found out the guy had called a round right on top of his own people, this West Pointer. That really shook me up, that really shook me up. Here's a guy that is probably going to make the Army a career and he just blew away some of his own troops. They were on a ridgeline. They spotted VC [Viet Cong] or NVA [North Vietnamese Army] enemy activity on the opposite ridgeline, but the areas were so close in appearance that what he called in, thinking it was the grid the enemy was on, was his own grid. Two rounds came in right in the middle of them. The 105 round is thirty-seven pounds--you had two of them about ten meters apart. It took out a lot of guys. They transferred him out. You know, things like that do happen. … I grew up real fast when that happened, because you're sitting there as an ROTC guy, with a Reserve commission, and you're saying to yourself, "How am I going to get through a year and not do something like that?" So, I wound up walking either behind point or one or two guys behind the point. I was up [with them]. We had two lieutenants that couldn't save their ass reading a map; they never knew where they were. I had to compensate for them, keep them on track. So, I'm up front and, you know,

the second month in, the point man stepped on a landmine and blew off both his legs and I was probably about fifteen feet [behind], you know. … The shrapnel hit me, the shrapnel hit the kid, big piece hit the kid next to me, took out part of his [knee], you know. He needed about fifty stitches and an operation on his knee and they immobilized [it]. They didn't send him home, but they gave him rear duty. They immobilized the knee for about a month, you know. … He had, like, a cast on. So, after that, I'm in the rear area and they lost two observers. One went home and another observer, air observer, had flown into a mountain with his pilot. Okay, so, they had two openings at division level for air observers and I volunteered for one of those slots. I was paranoid about working in the field with landmines. That really, and I'm sure they are today, too, they call them IEDs [improvised explosive devices] now, but, I mean, that takes a serious toll on people.

KM: Had you already had experience with flying or did you acquire that in the Army?

MS: … One thing that got me in was the fact that I took a flight physical when I was in the basic program. The point was in the flight--and I still have the actual physical. I pulled it out of my records. I figured, "I'll keep this as a souvenir, as a memorial, you know, [of] my time in." … I starved myself for about a week before the physical. I lived on salads and a little scrambled eggs in the morning, a piece of meat here and there. I weighed 205 pounds when I went in for the physical. To fly a helicopter, you have to be under two hundred pounds, because … they explained it to me once, you have the rotor head and, if you have too much weight in front of the rotor head, it causes a problem. It causes stress in the helicopter and all. So, you've got to be under two hundred pounds. So, the guy told me, "When you report to flight school, you've got to be under two hundred pounds." I decided not to go. I passed the flight physical and the tests with flying colors, but I just decided, you know, "I'm never going to be able to get it." I mean, I was, like, after that physical, I went out and had a pizza and a pitcher of beer. That's how, like, I had no energy left and I couldn't even get under two hundred pounds. So, I just cancelled out. I didn't go. I pulled it.

NM: Backtracking a little bit, was basic training physically challenging?

MS: No. It wasn't like a lot of PT or anything like that. In the basic course, it was a lot of classroom and a lot of outdoor training. I wish they had given us more, because some of that stuff just did not gel, you know. Cooper had a ninety-five, somewhere around ninety-five, and (Dwight?), right behind him, these two guys that were one and two, were up there around ninety-five, and then, Felker was just behind. Felker, I ran into Felker on the way home from Vietnam. As a matter-of-fact, there were about fifteen of us that came together going home on the same [day], you know, almost within one day of one another. Felker was about a ninety-four and I wound up with about an eighty-four. You needed an eighty or better to get through. Otherwise, they … would reassign you back to an earlier class.

NM: In Vietnam, serving with these lieutenants who you said could not read a map, how did you pick up on how to deal with that? You were walking with these people and you obviously could trip some kind of booby trap or be shot at. What was your relationship, as a forward observer, with this unit that you were calling in artillery support for?

MS: I was not in their chain of command, so, being new and not being in a chain of command, … it wasn't my job to tell these kids … how to behave, what to do. They pretty much had their act together. Light discipline at night was exceptional, moving around at night was, you know, really exceptional. They kept to their posts, they were awake. … You know, the guys out in the field had sort of an esprit de corps that the rear echelon troops didn't have. … You know, you could always tell them when they came back into the rear areas, because they had a little more bravado and all. They didn't do drugs out there, nothing like that. I had my own RTO. I had one person that I was in charge of, my radio telephone operator, and I could talk back and forth to the battery whenever I wanted to. I had my own net. … I could switch the channel and talk to the other officers and stuff. Now, the one guy that couldn't read a map, one of them shot himself in the ass with his forty-five. He was playing quick draw. I'll never forget that. His name was (Hunter?). He was from San Francisco and he likened himself to Teddy Roosevelt. He wore these little horned-rimmed glasses and he grew a little mustache like Teddy Roosevelt, but he shot himself in the ass. He got medevac-ed out and the other guy was from CCNY. We flushed out … a VC, not an NVA, but a VC. VC started running. Now, if you get a KIA, it just goes down that the unit got a KIA, but it's a big deal to catch a live one and send him back for interrogation. He dropped his stuff and he said, "I want to get him," all right. So, he ran after the guy. The guy whipped around, pulled a gun, had a revolver, shot him, hit him up in the upper torso. He didn't die. They medevac-ed him out. So, they were ultimately, later, replaced, but, by that time, I was replaced also.

NM: Were there any other experiences that stood out in your two months as a forward observer, any hairy situations you recall or ways that you prepared for these situations?

MS: … I made an effort to always stay on top of everything. I would shoot on a continuous basis to keep my skills up. We would prep areas before going into them. If they came back, if they came back on patrol, and they reported something out, we would shoot on that. We would shoot on defensive targets. … You know, I made an effort, I made every effort, you know, not to have something like happened to that West Pointer happen to me, but, beyond that, no. We had a couple of small engagements. We came up on a group of seventeen--and I didn't actually see it, because … it was one of the other platoons that was off from us--they ran upon a medical unit and this is where I learned that not everybody's a John Wayne, not everybody's a Carlos Hathcock, [a legendary US Marine Corps sniper]. They engaged these seventeen guys. We didn't find any--we found, like, one body, one or two bodies, I think--and the rest of them, we found some blood trails and the rest of them got away. … This was almost a setup, because they didn't know we were here and, you know, the average GI does not shoot too well. [laughter]

NM: Tell us about the transition to being an air observer. You said that these positions opened up and you applied.

MS: Well, you couldn't go back in the field with stitches. So, I'm in the rear area and I had about fifteen, I had maybe about thirty stitches, here, I had a chest wound here and I had about fifteen stitches up in my head, and so, I'm waiting to get the stitches removed. … At first, the operations officer, this major, called me in and he told me I was going to be a junior adviser to the regional forces in Tam Ky, which was the capital of Quang Tin Province, and I was going to be working for some captain. … Really, like, to me, that was the kiss of death, because I did

not--you know, you're not only training these people, but you have to eat their food. [laughter] … It just didn't suit me to go out there and do that, that it was just like they were brushing me off and sending me away completely, but, when this position opened up, within about a day or two of being told that, I immediately said, "Yes, you know, I've got this flight physical that's in my docket, you know, that's in my jacket. Check it out. My eyesight's exceptional. I'm ready to go, I'm ready," and the adjutant sent me up there and I got the job.

NM: Could you tell us about the technical differences between an air observer and a forward observer in the infantry?

MS: All right, as an air observer, we could not directly call in the Air Force. We had to go through a forward air controller. There's that one picture on the CD that I sent up where I'm standing in front of a gray airplane. When they used to find targets, … a lot of times on my maps, when I created my maps, I would plot the firebase and I'd, you know, have the name of the firebase, and then, I would take a large protractor and I would make a circle. Like, if … they had 105s, I'd made a circle at 11.7 kilometers, okay--that's the maximum extent. If they have 155s, it was 14.4 kilometers, eight-inchers, 16.8, and we had the seventy-five-millimeter guns that fired almost twenty miles. So, I had these all over. It took me days to put this map together, and then, we laminated it, you know, in an onionskin. We didn't have the plastic laminations, but we had something we could, you know, cover it [in], so [that] we could write in grease pencil on these things. … What's going on is, you were given a briefing in the morning, okay, because, again, every day, I had six hours of air time, every day, and it was controlled, what I could do, what I couldn't do. Most of the time, I'd either be supporting units on the ground, talking to them, doing VR work, shooting for them, or I'd be given areas to recon and they'd give me a set of map coordinates, like this here, "Upper left, lower right," and just make a box on the map and you would recon that area. … After all was said and done, then, … if I had some free time, I could go find targets of opportunity, but, again, the only thing I could shoot directly was artillery from the different firebases that we had. … A lot of times, you know, these range fans that I drew on these maps, if you went out to the furthest limits of the gun, on the outside of that range fan, you start finding targets, because the VC weren't stupid. They knew, "Hey, you know, this firebase has got 155-millimeter guns on it. They go out to about fourteen-and-a-half kilometers. Well, let's put up our little thingy over here at sixteen kilometers," you know. So, the Air Force, if we found something like that, that was really ripe and we couldn't get artillery on it, the next day, you know, the Air Force would take me up for a couple hours, I'd point the target out and they'd blow the target away with fighters.

NM: To clarify, when you were on these recon missions, plotting them out, you would radio back and they would fire artillery.

MS: Oh, yes.

NM: Okay. I was not sure.

MS: Yes, many times, many, because we worked--if you look, there's a very poor picture, in that set of ninety-seven pictures that I sent, of a map on a wall and you could see red lines drawn on it. Inside, interior to those red lines, we had no-fire zones. They were pacified areas, villages

and stuff. If you had a unit working in there or if you had somebody going up and down Highway 1 that suddenly got ambushed and was taking fire, I mean, in a situation like that, you could get a clearance to shoot into that area, but, under normal circumstances in a no-fire zone, it was almost impossible to shoot in and, most of the time, we were working outside those no-fire zones. So, it wasn't … hard to find. If we found a target, we'd just take it out, you know.

NM: In flying these recon missions, what kind of threats would you face? Would you have to take countermeasures against rifle fire, rockets?

MS: Okay, see, here's the sticky situation. We violated flight rules almost every day. … We used either a Loach, a Hughes Cayuse OH-6, which is the small helicopter, and, if I wasn't in that, if I was assigned the Bird Dog, which is a Cessna [O-1], there's a picture of that, too. … The Cayuse was a much better aircraft, because the plane could go lower. … It was maneuverable. … A lot of the pilots … were really intense about getting targets, also, and we would fly at treetop level a lot of times going after [targets], you know. We could not tell the rear area. If you're out, if you're VR-ing an area, you have to report in--you have to give a position and location every half-hour. … If you had just given a position location and you change your location, you had to give them another position report and tell them where you were going, you know, that kind of stuff, so [that] they knew where to look if something happened. In the eight months that I was flying, I went down three times. One time, we legitimately got shot down. We got shot up pretty bad and we had to ground the plane next to a firebase. We weren't able to make it in, but we had to ground it down, low off the hill. We still got some cover, you know, nothing happened to us. Another time, in the Cessna, the engine stopped. I was directing fire on a target and you know in your head, when you're talking to a battery, you're looking out the window, you're not paying attention to what the pilot's doing, but you know something's wrong, because the plane was always vibrating. The plane, you always heard this internal hum in your headset, because the engine's running the plane. … All of a sudden, it's like being in a glider. You don't hear anything. It's like dead silence and I looked at the pilot and, over [the eyesight] line of the pilot, the propeller was standing still. Now, that's enough to make you crap in your pants, you know, but I call the firebase and I said, … immediately, I didn't know what was going on, I said, "We're about a mile-and-a-half south of the target, about a thousand feet in the air, and we're going down." That was it, but, when we hit the ground, the pilot was on his own frequency talking to somebody else. We made a dead-stick landing in an open field and we were able to get the engine started again. It was a battery. It was a connection problem, an electrical problem, and the engine ran on magnetos, but, somehow, this old-fashioned circuit with a battery on it, everything was, you know, if you kill the contact somewhere, … the engine just stopped. So, we were able to get it up, but we were not on the ground more than three or four minutes and we had, like, five helicopters circling us. You know, we could have gotten out any time and, the third time, we blew a hydraulic line covering an engineer unit that was opening a road. Again, we landed right in the middle of them and we ultimately got out. Those were my three experiences. [laughter]

NM: In terms of the weapons …

MS: Organic, we didn't have. … All we had in the helicopter--we had no weapons, except side arms in the Cessna--in the helicopter, we had a sidearm, depending on what the [situation was],

because we had no doors in the helicopter. A lot of times, we would carry--the crew chief would come up for air time, also--and he would be our door gunner in the back. He would sit on a piece of armor plate on the floor and he had a bungee cord that he attached the M60 to and he had a box of M60 ammunition and some grenades, which we weren't allowed to have. We weren't allowed to toss anything out, but we would surreptitiously pick them up--again, a violation of flight rules, but, you know, it was nice to have around. So, we did engage occasionally. We would engage some targets from the air, and because, again, if you caught a VC on a trail, it didn't happen very often, you had to literally surprise somebody and we had developed a few techniques for doing that, but, if you surprised somebody and you knew, you obviously knew, they were enemy, we would take them out with our organic weapons, and then, call in artillery and give the kill to the artillery. You know, I mean, that's the only way we're able to do it, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let the bastard get away if I caught him, you know. I don't care what they said.

NM: What kind of threats would you face from the NVA or the VC? Would it be machine-gun fire or rifle fire?

MS: Absolutely. There is somewhere embedded in there, there's a picture of AA [antiaircraft]. I'm very high up. … When we used to go out and do VR work for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, occasionally, they would send us out there to look for stuff, because maybe they had sensors. [Editor's Note: The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a route used by the North Vietnamese to get supplies and men into South Vietnam that ran through Cambodia and Laos.] They would plant these sensors on the ground that would pick up vibrations. … During the middle of the night, if there was a lot of stuff going off somewhere, the next day, "Hey, you know, you've got a two-ship mission you're flying out there." So, one ship would fly low, you know, not real low, but, like, it would, like, dive down. If we had a probable area, it would dive down and look. Another plane would stay high, because, you know, you want to keep in contact with them. So, we were, like, the communications ship, sometime maybe, sometime, I was down low looking for stuff, but we always had two ships, and then, we could communicate very easily, because, … on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, I don't know whether anybody's ever said this before, there were a lot of places on that trail in Laos where you could run one truck north and one truck south. It was that wide and, during the dry season, they would actually creosote parts of that Trail. They would take creosote and put it down, so [that] it wouldn't kick up the dust. They would also, if you had the Trail, you had trees on both sides, they would tie off the trees on one side of the road with rope and the other side, and then, just pull them in and form a canopy over the top, you know. Sometimes, you could pick that out and, a lot of times, you couldn't, you know, but they would give you an area to look and we'd look, you know. We found piles of--we never found a truck, at least I don't ever remember spotting a truck or a tank--but we did spot people down there, we did spot supplies a few times. Again, we only went out there with two ships, because it was, like, you know, you'll see, if you dig around that picture there, you'll see a footbridge. That wasn't even the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That was a little spur coming off the Trail into our area. … It was such a waste of time, because they'd send the fighters out to blow the bridge up and they would put the bridge back up at night, because it was just a footbridge, but it was … always there in that area.

NM: You mentioned some operations that stand out from your eight months as an air observer. Are there any other operations or situations that stand out during that time?

MS: Oh, yes, [laughter] the time I got shot down. … I've got a flash drive, if you want to look at maps and I could show them, you know, but it would just be looking at a topographic map. I don't know whether that makes any sense or not.

NM: If it helps you in telling your story, we can load it up.

MS: You've been here awhile, do you want to take a break at all? okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MS: … So, our work was somewhat to interdict. Our work was basically to interdict these supplies, to a great degree, you know. … We were always looking for stuff, looking for targets and this is one thing, we were always checking these rivers. We were checking the river above and we looked for sampans and stuff. One day, I'm flying around, northwest of (Qui Ang?), up in this area here, in a free-fire zone, and there's a hut. Somebody had built [on the] surface one of these little straw [huts]. It had a thatched roof, it had, like, bamboo walls and stuff on it. Somebody had put it up, and so, I didn't do anything, … but I always, on a debrief, you know, it's like when you write your daily work report up on a job or something, … you have to describe all your time, you have to account for all your time. So, I described this hut. I said, "So, we're out here in the middle of nowhere," and I, you know, put a few sentences in about it. About a week later, okay, we're flying along--two huts, about maybe fifty meters apart, two huts, right. Now, there's a guy working the field with a water buffalo, okay. It looks normal, but it's not, all right. So, I'm watching this. … Over the span of about a week-and-a-half, two weeks, I must have wrote, I must have involved this thing on the debrief, about four or five times, okay. What happens is, … I was sending [in] these debriefs, because I was living with the unit that I was flying with, okay, the 21st RAC, Reconnaissance Aircraft Company. The RAC was, you know, we're on the airfield. I was sending this, by courier, back to the artillery unit, okay, the 196th Brigade. … That was my intelligence debriefing for them, but they were reading it in the main [unit]--the aircraft battalion that we were attached to, the intelligence people were reading it, okay. So, what did they do? One night, they assigned a hunter-killer unit, consisted of four Hueys and one Huey had night observation. They had a CRT [cathode ray tube]. They had a big screen and they had, you know, that generation's night vision equipment attached to a rotatable pod on the front of the helicopter. It was, for its day and age, … the best we had, but they flew out there. There are two gunships and there was a flare ship, okay, four helicopters that were flying along, about nine o'clock at night, and they engaged the target. There was, supposedly, according to what they said, … a platoon of NVA on the target, okay. Two ships got shot down, eight crew members, four lost their lives, four were sent home, okay. … They sent teams out to get those helicopters, to recover those men and, ultimately, to get those helicopters out. I got woken up the next morning. A guy comes up to me about quarter to six, "Hey, Ski, the Colonel wants to see you." Okay, quarter to six in the morning--in about three seconds, every single cell in your body is awake, because, if the Colonel wants to see you at a quarter to six in the morning, there ain't nothing good, there's absolutely nothing good, going to come out of this. So, I'm pulling my boots on, I'm getting dressed and I'm thinking over everything that happened the last couple of days, you know. "What the hell did I do wrong? What did I do wrong?" you know. A

guy comes up--[did] you ever see *Beverly Hills Cop*? You ever see the movie *Beverly Hills* [*Cop*, a 1984 police comedy]? Oh, you're too young.

NM: I have heard of it. [laughter]

MS: I always allude to the scene where Eddie Murphy's supervisor in Detroit chews him out, screams at him with every four-letter word you could humanly imagine and just chews the living hell out of him. That's what happened to me. … Finally, he ordered me to go out there and finish the target off. So, I'm in an airplane by seven o'clock in the morning, okay. By the time we got out there, about seven-thirty, the two structures had been repaired. You could see the bleached out [parts]--there was new green thatch in the roof next to the bleached out stuff. They had repaired it as if nothing had gone wrong. The old man was out in the field, okay. I started shooting on it; I started directing fire on it. Within about the first four rounds, both huts were gone and there were rectangular openings about maybe fifty, sixty feet apart. There were two entrances to a bunker down below. Now, this area had been swarmed over by troops for years and I'm sure that there's stuff over there that they probably used on an occasional basis that they hid, that they covered up, and this is one of those situations. So, I started directing fire right on the middle of the bunker, what I thought to be the bunker. We fired eight-inch artillery, eight-inch artillery, which fires a two-hundred-pound-round, and I was using concrete-piercing fuse, which has a delay mode, so that … the thing can bury itself a little bit. This ground was so hard, we were taking out chunks of ground about the size of a wastebasket. You know, that was doing nothing. You know, I kept telling them, "Keep shooting." … So, they'd fire another round, another round, another round. After about fifteen rounds and we got about twelve hits on top of the bunker, finally, one went in, okay. When the bunker blew up, it was like a giant rectangle just came out of the ground and went up in the air, just this rectangular opening just opened up, and we had multiple secondary explosions. I guess they never thought that I'd break through, but I did, multiple secondary explosions, you know, people being thrown out of it, and then, finally, out of the opening, we had people running down, you know, troops running down to another bunker further down the trail. So, we went on that, adjusted on that, until I finally, at the end of about two hours, I fired about almost a hundred rounds of eight-inch and I fired about another hundred rounds of 155 from another firebase, to suppress those people running around. I gave them about ten or twelve kills and we had a mechanized unit come in, sweep the area. They added about six more after that, but that, to me, because I still re-live that day, because I ask myself, "Why didn't they call me in and talk to me first?" They just laid on this mission for those guys in the middle of the night without any thought of talking to me and I just feel like I'm partly responsible for that happening, you know, to this day. … [Mr. Swajkowski begins referring to maps and other images on the computer.] There was a mountain over here. … Outside here, I don't know whether I can pick it up, we had--this might be it right here--we had this very high mountain ridge that extended to the west of this flat land that they called "Arizona Territory" and we had this one gorge that was right in the middle of it, okay. This was another infiltration route for the VC and the NVA. One of the things we used to like to do, flying early missions, flying early or late missions, would be to fly down this river, all the way down, come around, a lot of times, in the morning, when you had these low-hanging clouds. We'd get up into the clouds, okay, just enough so [that] we could still see the ground, but it was harder to see us, come around, come back from the west and the pilot would cut the engine. Okay, we'd just be a wind-milling prop, you know, on idle, and we'd just glide down the gorge and try and pick somebody

up walking the trail. That worked once. We got one or two like that. Again, we had to, like, stagger the times, because we didn't want them getting the advantage and shooting us out of the sky, … and then, another weird tale, this is, like, something that I still can't explain today. … We flew seat-of-the-pants over there. We didn't use a compass or beacons or anything--we all flew seat-of-the-pants. We called this area here, that has the river going like this, right, this was called the Horseshoe. This area in here was Iron Mountain. There's so much artillery, we called that Iron Mountain--so much artillery had been shot into it. Down here, this site here, take a wild guess; Fish Hook, right. You know, if you were talking to another plane, "I'll meet you at the Fish Hook in ten minutes," right, you know, that's the way we met one another. … If I needed Air Force help, you know, "Meet me at the Fish Hook, come down here." … There was Ha Thanh, okay. Ha Thanh was a Special Forces camp. I've got a couple pictures of that. This was a very hot area. This was an incredible area. This was, Quang Ngai was just to the east, again, lots of infiltration routes [for] NVA and VC here. When we had the helicopter, we'd fly into Ha Thanh Special Forces camp and I'd always talk, I'd always, you know, chit-chat with the Special Forces guys that were there and, usually, pardon me, but, you know, a lot of times, we had to get him out of his hut, because he was in bed with his girlfriend most of the time, when he wasn't out on patrol. So, you know, what can I say? but we'd fly in, we'd talk to this guy here and we found we had a lot of activity there. We had a situation. … In this area here, in this north of Ha Thanh, okay, and we were in range of the eight-inch guns at Tra Bong, we always kept our general support reinforcing batteries, we had three of them, Binh Son, Tra Bong and … Tien Phuoc, okay, they had eight-inch and 175s, okay. I mean, they were in the middle of the AO [area of operations] because, then, they could then range out real far to the west if we needed them. So, we're VR-ing in here and, again, there were some gentle hills. … You see the topographic lines here are very close together. These were extremely steep, okay, but these gentle hills, we got this block of grid, a grid line, a set of grids to (Batangan?) and we're in this valley and there's nothing out there. There's just elephant grass, but, again, you've got to make sure of what you're saying, because, if they send a unit out, which is what I suspect all the time, if they checked this area out, if they're going to insert a unit in there and something happens to that unit, your ass is mud, you know. So, I'm going up and down, we're going up and down this valley, we're looking … and I'm plotting it, with a grease pencil, you know, a couple active trails, but there was nothing there, because there was no cover, right. … We get to the side and we said, "Let's quit, you know. Let's go look for something else. Let's follow one of these trails, do something." We went up … sideways over this hill, going up over this hill, and we come around and there's a column of NVA coming right at us, okay. Now, to this day, I cannot figure out the acoustics, okay. You've got a helicopter that's just above the ground, blowing elephant grass all over, okay, and I come up over this ridge and I'm gaining. We're adding power. We're coming up over the ridgeline and they never heard us. … When I looked out, it was about my two o'clock, I'm looking at the lead guy of the NVA, these regular, you know, khakis, pith helmets, AK-47 packs and weapons, boots. These were not VC, these were hardcore NVA. They're coming up the trail. There's at least a dozen of them visible and the first guy, I could see the first guy, his jaw dropped, "Oh, shit, what did I do?" and, immediately, the door gunner, the pilot let the door gunner wail. Again, there aren't too many John Waynes in the world, okay, and, you know, if you start firing machine-gun, every fifth round is a tracer, okay. So, you've got the rounds, he's adjusting the rounds by putting the tracers on these guys, right. Nobody's falling down. They're all running back to the tree line. [laughter] You know, like, a couple or three of them got wobbly, nobody fell down, you know, [as] you would think--it's not the movies, okay. … They

get into this tree line and we're circling this big nest of trees and I'm calling in the artillery. So, we started laying in the artillery. Now, we did, I think we managed to contain them and take them all out. So, I gave the unit credit for all the kills, but, again, it was the most unique day, that I still remember it. I cannot figure out how they never heard us, why they were out in the middle of a field in broad daylight, just marching along as if they were having, you know, just a smoke-and-joke session, you know, everything is fun, as if they were back in North Vietnam--nailed them. Again, in this area over here, … this little finger of high ground, bounded by these two rivers, I spotted a cluster of hooches in the trees, not on the ground, but in the trees, and … I reported it. I didn't take it out. They said, "Go back, take it out," the next day. So, the next day, we're flying around, the artillery's coming in from almost due north, taking these hooches out. The pilot, I have a picture of Brennan, Brian Brennan was the guy that was flying me, we're flying along over here on this side, on the south side of this ridgeline, says, "There's something under those trees." He's saying, "There's something under those trees." So, I finished the mission and he says, "There's something under those trees." … He flew around. He flew around this thing, disappeared, and then, came back and the trees went halfway down the hill, and then, you had elephant grass. So, the trees stop here, you have elephant grass here. He brought the helicopter in--the skids were almost touching the ground. We looked up in the tree line--it was like a city. There was, like, a city under there. You could count at least a half a dozen different structures that they had. They had guys walking around. We were there about two seconds looking at that; they started shooting at us. So, he backed the thing out and he just went screaming down the hill to pick up some speed, and then, we climbed up after. So, we were out of range. We were out of range. They were just barely out of range. They wanted to shoot 175s. Well, 175 guns are just too wild. We wouldn't have hit anything. At that range, there would have been about a ninety-meter probable error. So, I just … called the Air Force and we started piling it on with the Air Force. I think they brought in about four sets of F-4s [McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II] that afternoon and it just blew. Guess what? We go in down there to give the BDA [bomb damage assessment], all right. Somebody was still alive down there. They stuck a gun out of one of the openings, one of the bunkers below … that mustn't have been damaged. They shot us up. We took seven entry rounds in the helicopter. … It started from the front right, it took out his pedals for the rear rotor. The engine was intact, but their connection to the rear rotor was gone. It took out a little portion of his boot. Two rounds came up through the console here, so, there was little bits of, like, fuses and little transistors and crap and little pieces of wire flying around all over the cockpit when they came through. Another round came up underneath the armor plate, went out between my legs, through the front Plexiglas, and then, another round came up here on the side of the armor plate. So, I always tell her, to this day, if this helicopter had been just a foot over in the other direction, I would have had two rounds coming up through this leg and one round would have come out, you know, hit back here, came out through the front of my leg here. I wouldn't have been the same person, but I was just lucky enough that the attitude of the helicopter was such that everything missed me, everything missed the door gunner. We just took seven rounds on a straight line, you know, across. It even missed the fuel cell. The fuel cell was directly behind us. So, again, that day, we're able to get the thing down the valley. We got the thing down the valley and we put it down. Where's Ha Thanh again? Ha Thanh, where are you? It's not that far away. There, Ha Thanh, we're able to get it down. They have an airstrip there. We're able to put it down outside the airstrip. Of course, it flew sideways kind of, you know. [laughter] It didn't want to track straight, because we had no rear rotor, but we got it back. …

NM: Did you usually fly with the same pilot? Were you always with the same crews?

MS: Yes, the helicopter pilots were pilots that were directly assigned to division artillery and they flew exclusively for the artillery people, … back and forth, different firebases. They would fly men and material back and forth, you know, lightweight stuff, because … they were just an observation helicopter unit. They would also fly our missions for us, but the two guys that I have there, Brennan, and there's a picture of Hagn, Festus Hagn--we called him Festus because that was the name of the guy that was Matt Dillon's sidekick in the old TV series called *Gunsmoke*, okay--those two guys were probably the best. They were just unreal. They would go to any length to find a target and we're always violating flight rules. You were supposed to stay fifteen hundred feet above the ground, you know, fifteen hundred AGL [above ground level]. You couldn't see anything from that height. You could not see. It was just green carpet from up that high; any questions?

NM: Is there anything about your tour as an air observer that we missed or you want to share?

MS: It was probably the best time, you know. I mean, you know, it wasn't like [other jobs]. I felt that I was really making a contribution, between finding targets like that, helping people on the ground, doing that recon work. … I really felt, you know, I had this deep sense of satisfaction at the end of each day that, you know, I was able to do something that worked in our favor.

NM: In terms of an average week, how many recon missions would you fly with these pilots?

MS: For several months, it was six hours a day, seven days a week. You know, usually, you wake up, when I was flying the helicopters where we were right in the area with the artillery unit and I was picked up on the pad right at the artillery unit, it was wake up, get a quick breakfast, go get briefed at seven o'clock. By eight o'clock, I was in the ship. The Hughes Cayuse had about two hours' air time. … If we were really moving it and using a lot of power and stuff, you know, where we were maneuvering and all and you're burning up fuel, we would be landing at least every hour and twenty minutes, hour and thirty minutes, fueling up, … and there were refuel points all over the area. … We would fly, have lunch, fly again. A lot of times, we would fly back into the main base and we'd switch pilots after three hours and I'd have a second pilot in the afternoon. … Pilots had a maximum air time of 110 hours every thirty days. Every thirty calendar days, if you reached 110 hours, you're supposed to stand down or else go have the doctor check you out and they'd give you clearance to fly that day. For us, I put in, like, about 180 hours or 190 hours in March alone. Okay, when the weather totally cleared up and we were able to go deep, fly anywhere without, you know, rain clouds and stuff like that, I put in a lot of hours in that month. … We had a situation one time where we had a call from Minh Long, which was one of the composite artillery bases. They had an airstrip and it was out in the middle of a valley. It was hard to get to. A kid came down with falciparum malaria, which is the worst kind, and the medic could not control it. The guy was just going to pieces out there. So, we flew in. … The medevac didn't want to come out for that. … Even though the guy was in bad shape, it wasn't a life-threatening situation. So, we volunteered our ship. We flew in on the surface of the river. We followed the valley in, just followed the river in, and you can imagine this thing,

thirty or forty feet to that side, and you've got the bank, another thirty or forty feet on this side, you've got the bank and you've got, like, a little tunnel--everything above you is white and you can't see anything else. You're just following this river. So, we kept asking them, "When you hear rotor blades, when you hear rotor blades, when you hear rotor [blades]." You know, I kind of pretty much knew, you know, looking at the map and looking the way the river bent, where we were. When they said they heard them pretty loud, I said, "Fire off flares." So, they kept firing off flares, hand flares, and we were able to see it, and so, we just kind of, like, very carefully, went up into the fog up there, landed and got the guy out.

NM: On these missions, you were definitely navigating--were you serving as the primary navigator for the pilot?

MS: Basically, the pilot took me where my orders said to go and, if we completed our tasks, if I didn't have anybody on the ground to support, then, we'd do our own little VR work and look for targets of opportunity. I can remember one; the other, getting back, we got that one guy out. Another time, we were supporting somebody else that got hit. … They got into a firefight. They had a guy that was hurt. We came down, they put him on the plane. We had a door gunner with us. I got off, because we couldn't carry [any more]. There was too much weight for four guys. I said, "I'll stay here with this unit," which was one of the dumbest things I ever did. [laughter] I'm down there with my helmet, with the (plum?) dangling, I've got five bullets in my gun, I don't have a map, I've got nothing. So, I'm just hugging the ground, you know. I'm wondering, "God, this was so stupid," you know, and they're shooting back and forth. … He came back and got me, though. [laughter] I did not like that. When you're flying around all day long and drinking beer at night, you don't want to go out in the field anymore. It's not good. [laughter]

NM: You brought up the soldier that you had to bring out because he had malaria. In your experience, did you see disease incapacitate a lot of men in Vietnam?

MS: We had a few. I was aware of a few people that got it. They used to give us, once a week, you got these, like, orange tablets, Chloroquine, Primaquine, and they made you [take them]. When you signed in to the mess hall, they had a medic on a certain day, you know. They made you take it, … once a week, and, if your name wasn't on the roster as getting one, they'd come back and order you in to take it, even though you were living in the rear area. So, yes, and they also had a daily pill that a lot of people tried to avoid, because it was experimental. It was a material, it was a chemical, called dapsone, D-A-P-S-O-N-E. I don't know … if it ever got a trade name, if, whatever, it was ever used. I had a tendency to avoid that, too. I didn't want to take it.

NM: You mentioned that you often had to refuel on these missions. What was the relationship like with some of the ground troops that you encountered? Did you develop friendly relationships with the ground crews that were taking care of the refueling?

MS: Well, with the helicopter. … I would refuel the plane. We would stop at a refuel point and, basically, what they had was these huge neoprene bladders that were built into, like, little revetments. They were sandbagged on the sides and all. So, you'd have, like, a bunch of them, a cluster of them, and they had fuel inside of them. If they took a direct hit, obviously, you'd have

a conflagration … that would take out the whole site. … Every so often, there was a fuel pump and it had a chain hanging off of it with a little, like, what looked to be a nail. You would ground the plane first before you stuck this thing down in the [fuel tank], took the cap off the pipe to fill it up, you grounded the plane, and then, you took this and we always had a little plastic bottle or glass bottle somewhere that the pilot had. … We'd just put a dose of the fuel in, just a small amount, look to see if it was clear, because if it had a lot of debris in it, we didn't take the fuel. … I don't think we ever found a bladder that had really serious problems. We always fueled up. … The [North American Rockwell] OV-10 [Bronco], not the O-1, the Bird Dog, had an air time of four hours. We had three-hour recon missions that we were allowed to extend, by our own volition, a half-hour, okay. They had a four-hour air time. So, you know, they only fueled that up … before the flight, and then, after the flight for the next flight. We didn't fly in anywhere and do it ourselves.

NM: You flew with different pilots. Were you flying in different planes as well, similar types, but different ones?

MS: Yes, … the 21st RAC had about eight airplanes and … whatever airplane you were assigned with the pilot is what you went up in and, again, DIVARTY, with their helicopters, they had at least as many helicopters, probably more, you know. Whatever plane was available that you were assigned to with the pilot is what you went up [in]. Pretty much, they were all identical, you know, two seats. … I don't ever remember going up with four people. … Always, it's just me and the pilot or me, the pilot and a door gunner in the back, that was about it. Again, organic ordnance, when we used it, really, we needed a clearance to use it, okay, but, if you took somebody out, if you absolutely knew and, you know, if you're in the middle of nowhere and the guy's running down the trail with a rifle, you know he's not one of yours, you took him out. Generally, I would call in some artillery and give them the kill, something like that there, but I never let one of these guys get away. It just was not a good policy to let them get away.

NM: Pilots often had nicknames for their aircraft. Do you remember naming a plane, for example? [Mr. Swajkowski starts to open images on a computer.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

MS: … I got wounded. I could give Herman Munster a run for his money there, couldn't I, you know? I was still wearing these crappy green fatigues and stuff like that there. … That's F-4 activity. We had an area down there that was full of VC. They shot up at us and all and, once, the F-4s totally missed it. What a bunch of jackasses, you know, but, the FAC, when we called, when we talked to the FAC, to get them in, we weren't allowed to call the fighters ourselves. So, the FAC would direct them in and they're moving. Even when they slow down or flare out, those F-4s were still moving at about 375, 400 knots. So, you don't see it. All they see is a white marking smoke and a FAC will tell them, "Hit the smoke," you know, and that's it. Okay, these two guys were okay. I have their names somewhere. … That's Lockwood, I think Arduini and Lockwood. They named their helicopters. This is *Grand Funk*. Every one of our helicopters had the crossed cannons, the Artillery [branch insignia] crossed cannons. That's Festus. I don't know, he looks a little strange, but we were all a little strange, you know. [laughter] He was good. He was an outstanding pilot. That's Brennan, that's Brian Brennan. He was one of the

best ones we had. I mean, like, he really was eager … to do the job right, you know. Buck Foley, okay, now, he was ex-Air Force. He wanted to fly in the Air Force, but he didn't have a college degree. So, he transferred into the Army and went into fixed-wing, okay, and he was married and he was always trying to pick up the nurses up in Da Nang, you know. So, one day, he goes to the men's room. He's got, like, three nurses around him. We were really pissed off. So, we walked up to the nurses and we said, "You know, he's got a wife and three kids at home." He was married, but, you know, he didn't have any kids, [laughter] "Got a wife and three kids at home," you know, and they just disappeared for him and he could not figure out what the hell was going on. [laughter] He didn't like us after he found out. … That was Minh Long. Minh Long was one of our [bases]. That's where I snuck in from the river out there to get that kid out with the falciparum malaria, but they had a fifteen-hundred-foot runway. … There it is again. … That's the airplane I took the picture of back there and that's what it looked like. We came in through the valley, followed the river in over here and, when they heard us, they started shooting up flares to get this kid out. That's an O-1, not bad. It had, like, four radios on it, it had a transponder, ADF [automatic direction finder], but, you know, we could go really deep into Laos on reconnaissance here and we could keep in contact pretty far. You know, we could talk, you know, a hundred miles away, was no problem talking back to base in this thing. The cockpit; that's a two-ship mission. See, he's hovering. They're perfect. These things here, they still use them. They use the more advanced versions now, but these [Boeing CH-47] Chinooks have never gone out of use, okay. … From what the pilots used to tell me, the way these things were balanced, it was the easiest thing to hover and maneuver and keep in place, an unbelievable aircraft, even though it was ugly and big. … There's a guy under him here somewhere, picking up a sling load, you know, to get it out. That was Chu Lai. That's some of the area around the [base?]. That's the church. Oh, I got commissioned. That's what a typical street looked like. Okay, this is your typical living facilities for most of the indigenous people around there. Some of them even had water buffaloes living with them. The Hai Van Pass over here, just north of Da Nang; this is Da Nang Bay. This is Da Nang main. … This was not our airport. Our airport was off to the side, along the ocean here. … This was strictly Air Force, okay, two ten-thousand-foot runways. Oh, the same day I got wounded in the field, this guy, the guy that's flying this airplane, tried to save the plane and he couldn't do it. So, he … landed in the bay and, somehow, the ejection seat and the control to open the canopy failed. He could not get out of the airplane and he drowned. They were trying to revive him in the emergency room the same time I went in there and … they weren't successful. They'd get a pulse, then, the pulse would disappear. … He had two or three doctors working on him. Every time they got a pulse, everybody would start to cheer and, soon as the pulse faded, you know, again, they'd go back. They couldn't revive him. That was our doctor, Dr. King. … This is Highway 1 right here. This is Highway 1. This is how they dried [rice]. They would empty this rice paddy of water by breaking the dike and they would lay the rice out like this here in the field to dry. If you saw this out in the middle of nowhere, obviously, you know, VC rations--somebody's gathering food, you know, and it was probably the VC. … Generally, you could fire a flare into it or drop a phosphorous grenade into it and just ignite the whole thing and burn it. That's what--notice, no PCs, no calculators, no nothing--that was a typical FDC, lots of phones for communication, but we did everything by hand, because, towards the end, when they took me off of flying, … they assigned me to a unit for about six weeks or so and we were just running convoys most of the time, back and forth, helping to close down some of these firebases. We aren't closing them down; we were turning them over to the South Vietnamese, okay. … This bunker is half in the ground and half out of

the ground, but, again, we had a lot of antennas on top, which made a nice target. The VC knew where to drop their mortars all the time. One of the guys, "Home is where you dig it," that's what it looked like from the outside. You went down this, took a couple of steps down, you were inside. Me, Franklin Anders, I think he lives in New Jersey somewhere. This is one of the firebases, what it looks like from the air, one of the big ones. This is Gia Vuc. This was the Special Forces camp--notice how there's several layers of rings of concertina wire and all kinds of impediments to get in? The airstrip was out on the side, over here, but this was deep inside the mountains, okay. So, you made every effort to, like, keep your fields of fire open, to have several rings of protection here. That was down our southern AO. Me, that was a poor picture, Ha Thanh, another picture of Ha Thanh. Kramer Compound in Quang Ngai, I have a few pictures of that. They had a little--the McDonald's equivalent--they made fried chicken, hamburgers and stuff like that. We used to go in there for lunch. This is Highway 1. This is a typical picture of Highway 1. This is our division headquarters. This is the console from a helicopter. He was next to me when I got wounded. It says, the name tag says Santos, but his name is Jeffrey Baird. He was from Boston. He got hit in the knee; more of Kramer Compound. One of our other observers, Anthony Hile; okay, he was the only platoon leader that could read a map. I've got a picture of him; he was normal, Lieutenant Lommen. This is payday for the indigenous workers. … This is *piasters*, okay, Vietnamese currency, and he's getting ready to pay the indigenous workers. Another one of our observers, Petersen; Colonel Ray, First of the 14th Commander, strange guy, you know. LZ Crest, they had a lot of coalmines there that were still active. This was that river up in Da Nang that we used to follow through. Our airbase, we had these revetments over here and we had our little headquarters shed over here. This unit here was a composite unit that used to fly VIPs around. … What you saw was over here on this side, this is a picture of Marble Mountain Field. MARS Station, that's the MARS Station, never got through to home, and this man here, I don't know whether you know him, Frederick Kroesen. [Editor's Note: General Frederick Kroesen, a retired US Army four-star general and Rutgers College Class of 1944 alumnus, commanded the Americal Division in 1971. General Kroesen's interview is also available on the Rutgers Oral History Archives website.]

NM: Yes, we interviewed him.

MS: How about that? Yes, this was a ceremony that [was held] after we closed down one of the firebases and they were turning it over to the Vietnamese. Yes, he came in. This is My Lai, one of the My Lais, My Lai 3 and 4, where the Calley incident occurred. [Editor's Note: Mr. Swajkowski is referring to the massacre of unarmed Vietnamese civilians by US soldiers under the command of Lieutenant William Calley in the hamlet of My Lai on March 16, 1968.] Oh, well, some pictures from Washington, DC. This is the picture--this is, I was high ship that day. … Somewhere in here, there's a little bridge, there's a little footbridge that the NVA would always put up. This is coming in from Laos. These trails are coming in from Laos and this is South Vietnam over here, okay. … I may be wrong, this may be South Vietnam, too, but this is way out by the border. Again, we didn't go too low because they really didn't like us. They would, you know, shoot up at us very quickly if we got too low and too close to them. Officers' club, … an OP, another OP; that's the OV-10 flying along with us. That's the plane. That's me. … Occasionally, I'd go up with them and point out targets that we found. If we were out beyond the range fan, it was always the case, if I went just past the range fan, I could start picking out targets. This area, this little rectangle here on my leg, in this hip pocket, was about one-inch

thick. It had the frequencies for every single unit in the division. Okay, you know, I could summon up anybody I needed at the time, a lot of responsibility for a lieutenant, me. That got me into some good chow halls. They always thought I was important, division tactical operations pass. … We had a little room on the side in the division tactical operations center, not because we were important, it was because they knew where to find us if they needed us, okay, yes, but, again, I could almost invariably stop at any base when we were flying along for lunch … and get into any chow hall with that thing. Just some more scenery, sampans; Sellers, Ron Sellers, this was the best pilot I ever flew with. This guy was outstanding and he could read a map better than me. Of all the people--I still think that I can read a map exceptionally well--this guy here, we'd be down on the deck somewhere, I'd be looking at the map, we'd find something … and he'd lean over and he says, "Right there." … We'd have to gain some altitude, so [that] I could visually overlay what I saw out the window with the contours on the map and work out a grid. It'd take me a minute or so--just like that for him. He knew exactly where we were all the time. I loved going up with him. That's … two of the guys, mortarmen from our unit; just more pictures. … That's just south of Marble Mountain. That was a Buddhist shrine. There you go, this whole picture here, you see these red lines and stuff, these are all no-fire zones, okay. You could not--you know, I wish this was more in more detail, but, I mean, if it was a little clearer--but, again, it was almost impossible to fire into those areas and we generally operated way out there. So, it really didn't matter that much. Weatherly, me; that's the band. We actually had a band there. That's the division headquarters area. That's the hospital, 93rd Evacuation or 92nd. That's a howitzer, and we're back. Did I waste a lot of your time, guys? [laughter]

NM: No.

KM: It was really great.

NM: You mentioned that you ended up turning over firebases to the South Vietnamese.

MS: Yes. This was already late in the fall. This was in the Fall of 1971 and we were handing stuff over. … Supposedly, you know, this was the period of Vietnamization, Nixon called it Vietnamization, where we were handing over stuff, just like we're doing now in Afghanistan. [Editor's Note: President Richard M. Nixon introduced his policy of Vietnamization, turning the prosecution of the war over to the South Vietnamese, in 1969.] I don't know whether it's ever going to work or not, but we were turning over stuff. … Somewhere around the end of August, they came in and said, you know, "You're going out to," I think it was First of the 82nd or Third of the 82nd. … If you keep my DD-214, it's on there, that last unit that I was with [Battery C, First Battalion, 82nd Artillery, 23rd Infantry Division], but I was assigned to help out, to help shut these down. Mostly, we were running convoys and stuff like that, up and down Highway 1. I didn't think it was any safer. I hated being on the ground over there. [laughter] You're driving down that road and you're in the middle of nowhere, you know, you just feel so alone. …

NM: Would you just be riding with the convoys or did you have a specific role in the convoy?

MS: The role was, if anything happened, you were responsible, because you were the officer on site, okay. That was always the case. If you can't blame it on anybody, blame it on the officer. That was the only thing I didn't like about the Army. That was the only reason I was there. I

mean, the sergeants and the truck drivers could've ran the convoy a lot better than me. I just sat there. You know, in my book, I was just there to take responsibility for anything that happened, okay. That's the clear way of putting it.

NM: Did the convoy ever face any threats from booby traps?

MS: Fortunately, no. We did have an incident where we blew a tire on one of the trucks and it wasn't--again, these are five-ton trucks--so, there's a dual axle in the back with four tires on each side. So, if you lose one of those tires, you just keep going, but, when you lose a drive wheel up front, you have to stop and change it, and it's a real bear to change one of these tires. So, you've got, like, five trucks and you've got a jeep and we're pulled over on the side of the road, waiting to change the tire, and you think you're in the middle of nowhere. … All of a sudden, a group of Vietnamese come out of nowhere and they're trying to sell you stuff, all right. … What it turned out was, you know, after they went through their junk and trinkets, the girl that was trying to sell me this stuff, because I was just sitting in the jeep; … they knew what they were doing changing the tire and I just called in and said, "We're stuck on the road until we change the tire." She ultimately reaches down into this box of crap and she pulls out drugs. She wanted to sell me some opium or heroin or something like that, you know, and it was all packaged up. Now, it always amazed me, like, where did these people, out in the middle of nowhere, get to have this, you know, professionally packaged up stuff? … I'm sure it was being fed down by the enemy. So, I told her to get out, you know. She wouldn't leave, she wouldn't leave, she was pressing the issue. So, I pull--and this kind of reminds me of the Representative from Florida, Allen West, the black guy that was a [lieutenant] colonel in Iraq … who knew that his troops were in danger, they had a captured Taliban [an Iraqi police officer] and he fired the gun between his legs to get him to talk and they wanted to court-martial him. … Finally, the overwhelming pressure that was put on by the public, you know, they allowed him to resign. Now, he's a Congressman from Florida. I fired the gun right past her head and told her to run. That's when she finally ran and we had to literally shoot in the air to get these guys away from us that were trying to sell us drugs. … You know, that was the only incident that I had on the ground then, but, otherwise, most of our convoys just ran pretty smoothly.

NM: While on convoy duty, was there regular interaction with civilians? Were they on the firebases you were turning over?

MS: I tried to keep it down to a minimum. If you're driving through a town square, you know, sometimes, there was a lot of pressure for some of the guys to get out and, like, buy something in the town square. I didn't see what for, because there was no prepared food. There was, you know, fresh vegetables and fish, like that. Our mess hall chef would go downtown with a couple of cartons of cigarettes and trade them for a couple bushels of lobsters and they'd make lobsters at night, on the firebase. That was pretty interesting, you know, but I didn't see any reason for stopping.

NM: Is there anything that we missed about your tour in Vietnam?

CS: Little boy with the water buffalo.

MS: … I tell her this story. The kids had, you know, unbelievable control of some of these animals over there. I remember this one time, we were coming along and there's a little kid, … maybe about this tall, probably forty pounds soaking wet, and there's this water buffalo walking along next to him and he's got this little stick and he's tapping the little water buffalo behind--the little, the big water buffalo--behind the ear and he's talking to it, you know. That thing's just moving along, having a good old time, and it spotted us in front and the thing is, it's like it snorted and it started scratching one foot on the ground, like somebody suddenly gave it a suppository the size of a beer can. … It was about ready to come at us and the kid just tapped it--walked in the opposite direction. I couldn't believe the control this kid had over it. It still amazes me to today; okay? [laughter]

NM: After your tour in Vietnam, did you still have time to serve on active duty?

MS: I had less than ninety days, so, they let me out. I came home. … The sad thing is, and I'm sure that they give more time to the people and are a little more considerate now, we flew in to McChord Air Force Base. They took us over to Fort Lewis. That was at night. They gave us a bunk to sleep in. The next day, they got us up, gave us a steak-and-egg breakfast, best breakfast I ever had in the service, took us over to medical, gave us our final medicals before we left. We then had a debriefing and the VA came in and talked to us about applying for medical benefits and stuff like that there and, by four o'clock, I was in payroll, getting my final records cleared up. By six o'clock, we were at Seattle-Tacoma Airport, getting ready to go home. That's as fast as we were [out]; you know, forty-eight hours from the time you left 'Nam to the time you leave as a civilian and you're out. They actually postdate your DD-214, so that, you know, if you did something on the way home, okay, they could still arrest you and prosecute you in the military. So, like, the date may say one [day], but you may have been home two days or a day or two earlier.

NM: Did you ever consider a career in the military or staying on as an officer in some capacity?

MS: No. … Sometimes, I regret that I didn't, but there was just such a--the National Guard is a lot more respected now than it was then. … When I came out and I had to go to the draft board to change my draft status, and that was the only thing I was obligated to do, … the lady in the draft board tells me that there are so many people that tried to get into the Reserves and the National Guard to avoid duty in Vietnam that all the slots are full and they're going to stay full for a long time. She said, "You don't have to worry. If they want you, they will call you up." They never did.

KM: Did you find it difficult to transition back to civilian life?

MS: Well, I tried getting some jobs. I went back to graduate school after, but I tried getting some jobs and there wasn't too much open for us. Like, a lot of people were told, "Don't even put Vietnam down on a resume. Say you were in the military, but don't say anything about Vietnam." … I do remember going in, one time, I went to the VFW. The VFW was open. I wanted to join the VFW. The VFW in Union, New Jersey, wanted nothing to do with us, you know. They didn't say, "Get out," but what they said was, "We have all the members [we need]. We're full to capacity, you know, and, when we open up again, you know, and we have a call in

the paper for, you know, people that want to come in, you know, come on in." That was a bogus line, but they just wanted nothing to do [with Vietnam veterans], and that's the case for a lot of VFWs around here. They just didn't want anything to do with Vietnam veterans. … Ultimately, I decided I'm going to go back to graduate school, because you go into a place--I went into one human resources center in one of the pharmaceutical companies. I would have been happy to take a job as a lab technician washing test tubes if I could get into a nice company and work my way up; never happened. … I could hear one person saying, as I was leaving, "It's one of those drug addicts from Vietnam," in the human resources. … You know, I got home and I looked at myself in the mirror and I said, "Give it up." So, I went back to graduate school for a couple of years, just laid low, and then, I started teaching after that.

NM: When you attended graduate school, was it specifically for teaching?

MS: No, I was working on a master's degree in biology, but … I was also taking educational courses for certification.

NM: After earning your master's in biology, were you still considering the pharmaceutical field?

MS: I got a job teaching almost immediately, you know. It's funny, because, when you first go in, when you first go in, they try to break you of a lot of bad habits. If you think back to that time, there was no GPS, there was … nothing electronic. If you're a forward observer out in the field and you find you have a target, you call in a grid, okay. The guy in the fire direction center reads back the grid to you, to make sure he got it correct. Then, they have to process data on that grid. They tell the battalion fire direction center, which is going to process the same data, to make sure everybody got it right, the grid. They have to talk to the guns to tell them … to apply what data they come up with on the gun to shoot in the proper direction at the proper range, okay. All this is done by voice. So, everything was read back very carefully. We always read back digits one at a time, unless it was, like, something like a thousand or something, you know, where you had a whole number, but, if you had individual digits, you read them back. Now, we used to play a game [at] our party at the end of the officer basic course with the money we accumulated from playing "bingo." … Bingo was, you know, if you read off … a number in class on a practical exercise and it wasn't one digit at a time, the instructor will [yell], "Bingo," and it's like somebody poking you with a needle and it gets you even worse, you know, … you get tongue-tied even more. Sometimes, you know, we had guys that were, you know, trying to enunciate these numbers one at a time, they weren't coming out correctly and they'd be hit up for seventy-five cents instead of one quarter, you know. So, we had a lot of money for a nice, big beer party at the end, but, think about it, after two years, to come out, you're so programmed in that habit that you're sitting in a classroom with a bunch of dorks that'd never been in the service and you want to enunciate it. You start saying some number or something, you know, in a class and it comes out as single digits and you've got some doofus, you know, laughing at you, you know. I mean, like, it was harder to break that habit than it was harder to get into that habit, you know. I still do that. [laughter]

NM: You were advised to lay low, especially after your experience on the job hunt.

MS: Keep Vietnam quiet.

NM: While you were attending school, was that ever an issue with the other students?

MS: No. … My virology professor, I had him for two courses, he was an ex-military also. He was in the Battle of the Bulge as a teenager. … You know, we had a good rapport going there, because, you know, we'd both seen some combat. So, yes, I used to go over and drink wine with the guy every now and then, you know, "Hey, … come on over, taste some wine and cheese and stuff," you know. So, you know, it was okay, but I didn't tell the whole world that I was in Vietnam.

NM: Where did you go to graduate school?

MS: Seton Hall.

NM: You earned a teaching certification at the same time and had a job offer upon graduation.

MS: Yes. Well, actually, after two years, … I still didn't complete the thesis, but I got offered that. At the end of the second year, I just got a call from out of the blue, from Carteret, and they offered me a position. It was teaching, ultimately, … it came down to teaching chemistry and earth science my first two years there. They had enough biology, [it] was, you know, a field they didn't need. They needed chemistry teachers and I was certified to teach chem. So, I wound up teaching that throughout my whole career, except for the physics and astronomy towards the end, which, again, I was, by law, … certified to teach it. … It was the hardest job I ever had, in my recent memory now, to re-teach myself physics. … This is at a high school level, you know, and I was teaching one honors class each year. That used to bust my chops. So, I had to be on top of everything.

NM: Could you briefly tell us about your career after the military?

MS: I left Carteret in 1986. … Again, they had a very, very steep declining enrollment. … When I'd started, they had fourteen hundred people in the high school, fourteen hundred students. In 1986, they were down to just slightly over six hundred and, you know, the principal, being what he was, was not a big fan of science. When they had the opportunity to reduce the science department, after twelve years, the people under me, that had less time, when they left, we just consolidated the classes. Because of the shrinking enrollment, we never rehired anybody, and so, the three people that were under me [left], you know. I wound up, after twelve years, being the low man on the totem pole. So, they offered me--I was the first one to be offered a position, but it was only part-time--the following year and I did not take it. So, I decided to [switch careers]. You know, I kept hearing stories about, you know, my sister-in-law was in industry, she said, "Come on over, you know, not hard to be a programmer. You could pick that up real fast," you know, and I went to Chubb Institute. I don't think Chubb Institute exists anymore, but it was an intense programming school. They took mostly college graduates, people that already had jobs that were in industry, that wanted to transition to a different career and, in five five-week segments, train you to be a COBOL mainframe programmer. Okay, I went through that course. I got picked up at AT&T and I spent my time working in corporate finance, writing financial programs and maintaining databases there, in the old mainframe

systems. I left AT&T at the end of, it was right at the beginning of 2002, … forced retirement, and I went back into teaching in Belleville, New Jersey. I just retired from there last June.

NM: You were teaching primarily physics and astronomy.

MS: Well, just the last couple, … the last four or five years, astronomy. … There was a series of really major illnesses and the department changed around. … I wound up being the only person certified to teach astronomy. I picked that up, and then, I picked up physics after that.

KM: Did you stay in contact with any of the people that you served with in Vietnam?

MS: I do send emails back and forth with other members of the … Americal Division Veterans Association, okay, and I do converse by email with some of the people, not people that I served with, but I do converse with people there and I've built a few relationships with some of the guys down at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, also.

NM: What were some of the challenges that you encountered in teaching science in high school?

MS: Chemistry is one of the more abstract things. It's easy to teach biology, because it's interesting. It's things that, you know, kids see stuff, … it's botany, it's physiology, it's about you, it's about the things around you. … Biology is a science that captivates the kids, but chemistry is a lot more abstract. You're dealing with stuff you can't see. You're dealing with reactions and you're dealing with principles that really have got to be accepted, you know. … Early on, when I first started, our lab manual had over seventy lab exercises. … We used to have a double period lab once a week, because we had the room to do it, and I used to have, every marking period, every quarter, … at least a half a dozen labs that I would do with the kids. Some of them were simple; some of them were more complex. As time grew on, especially the second time I went back in, OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and, you know, the government decided that so many different things were either carcinogenic or too dangerous to work with, the last lab manual that I saw had twenty-two labs in it. I used to be creative and design labs and stuff. So, it was harder to get hands-on activity, because it was limited stuff, a limited amount of stuff you could do. A lot of kids, you know, were forced to take [it]. They have a rule now, you've got to take three years of science. Back in the early '70s, it was only two years of science. So, the kids would stop after biology and it was only the kids that were really interested in chemistry that would take chemistry. Now, everybody was forced to take chemistry, or some other third-year science, you know, and most of the time, the guidance counselors were sticking them into chemistry. Okay, so, you … run the gamut of kids that are really interested and you have kids that don't give a rat's behind, they've just got to take the course and get out, right. So, you've kind of got to hit the middle of the road, except for the honors classes and the AP [Advanced Placement] classes. You've got to kind of tailor the course, you know, so that the kids that want to learn learn enough, but the kids that, you know, are just there for the ride, you know, at least you get them through. You get something into their heads, but you don't get to the point where they start to rebel against you. So, I don't think that's what [Governor Chris] Christie would want to hear, but that's the way you keep your sanity.

NM: Before we conclude, is there anything you would like to share for the record, about your family or anything else?

MS: … Since 9/11, there's only one politician that had the moxie to say, "We need a draft," and that was Representative Rangel from New York City. [Editor's Note: Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) proposed reinstating the draft several times during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, primarily as a means of highlighting issues surrounding how the manpower to fight those wars was developed and utilized.] As much as I dislike the guy for being a tax cheat and do you know that, like, a year ago, he lost his position as the head of one of the committees or something, … I think it had something to do with the IRS, but he was the only guy to have the nerve to say we need a draft to fight this, and it's like a dirty word, you know. I mean, it's like the kiss of death, if you're a politician, to call for a draft. You look at these guys now, I think it's tragic to have guys going back for four and five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Look what happened to the kid, … the thirty-eight-year-old, whatever he was, that shot up the civilians? I would guess that you take the soldiers that spent at least two tours, I bet a majority of them would have emotional problems. You know, four or five tours, you go out on a tour, you come home for a year and what do you do during that year? You can't enjoy your family, you're getting ready for the next deployment, and this is what a lot of these guys have been doing and they're ringing these people through the coals here. You know, you have a very small percentage of people that are actually giving everything to this country and the rest of this country is just standing by and watching. I don't think that's fair, I don't think that's fair at all. Americans have never been happy with a war of attrition, you know. Our concept is, "Get in there, get the job done and get the hell out." … If there was a draft, if they had to call people up, this campus would be a hot bed of, you know, student activity and stuff, antiwar movements, all that would start up again, but, since there is no draft, it's like nobody cares what happens.

NM: Okay.

MS: Did that make sense?

NM: No, it made sense, yes. I get it. This will conclude the interview for today. Thank you, Mr. Swajkowski. [laughter]

MS: I must have said it too much.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Kyle Downey 12/1/13
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 4/8/14
Reviewed by Matt Swajkowski 4/9/2014