

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT CURRY
Aerial Surveillance, Army, Vietnam War
2006

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Curry, Robert, (b. 1952). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 3 sound cassettes (ca. 127 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 3 sound cassettes (ca. 127 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Robert “Bob” Curry, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Vietnam War doing aerial surveillance for the Army with the 131st Aviation Company and the 225th Aviation Company. Curry grew up in a blue collar neighborhood in Milwaukee and attended Milwaukee Lutheran High School. In 1969, He transferred to Washington High in order to graduate in December and enlist in the Army Reserves. Curry remarks he was inspired by recruitment posters of Huey helicopters and “an aura...in my neighborhood of Mom, God, and apple pie” that convinced him it was his duty to join. Curry briefly covers his basic training at Fort Polk (Louisiana), observing he never knew the South got cold. Next, he outlines helicopter school at Fort Walters (Texas). Curry tells how he was transferred in the middle of the night and sent to Fort Huachuca (Arizona), a military intelligence base, to learn to fly the OV-1 Mohawk, a stealth airplane. Curry spends much time describing the Mohawk, which “looked like a caterpillar” and used Slide Looking Airborne Radar (SLAR) and infrared technology for intelligence work and visual surveillance. Curry comments it was unusual that he was assigned as a Mohawk co-pilot because he was an 18-year-old E-5 enlisted man. Curry vividly describes the shock of arriving at Bien Hoa (Vietnam) in 1970, noting veteran soldiers ignored the “f-ing new guys.” He was sent to the main base at Phu Bai to work with the 131st Aviation Company, I Corps. Curry describes frequent, unpredictable night attacks on the Army base, and he criticizes the Army’s weapons policies: soldiers were not allowed to carry M-16s with them on base. In the event of an attack, they had to wait in line to be issued a weapon. Curry suggests this policy was created because of racial tensions and drug use among the troops. He also reports that disputes over funding between the Air Force and Army resulted in all weaponry being removed from the Mohawk airplanes, so the Mohawks were always escorted by fighter planes. Curry touches briefly on racial tensions, stating his unit never had a problem but others did. He discusses drug use in depth, considering marijuana and alcohol use widespread by 1971, and stating that harder drugs were used more in some companies than others. Curry describes a typical mission. His role was to develop film canisters in the cockpit, creating topical maps to track movements on the ground. He details the various cameras on the Mohawk. When Curry was not performing surveillance, his missions involved transporting munitions to North Vietnam. Curry recalls frequent missions over the Gulf of Tonkin between Vinh and Hanoi. He also flew some missions for the 101st Aviation Company near Chu Lai and Da Nang, looking for specific logistical information. After four months in Phu Bai, Curry took R&R at China Beach (Vietnam) and was transferred to a base in Udorn (Thailand) for Mission Steel Tiger. Curry contrasts the poor living conditions in Phu Bai with the nicer facilities in Udorn, and he praises the Thai military. Curry mentions he flew missions over Laos with the 7th Air Force during the Lam Son

invasion in 1971. He explains his mission with the 7th Air Force was to look for Vietnamese trucks and traffic patterns, leading fighter planes to fire directly on the enemy. Curry would land at bases on the Plain of Jars and Long Chieng, the Hmong base in northern Laos. Curry spends much time relating the history of the Hmong, explaining how the CIA trained them to fight in Laos, and praising them for their support and protection of U.S. troops. He mentions meeting General Vang Pao, a Hmong resistance leader, and getting to know Hmong people at Long Chieng. Curry comments that Nixon officially denied the U.S. presence in Laos. Most of his missions were at night along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, doing intelligence and supporting Hmong guerrilla forces on the ground. Curry emphasizes that protecting the Hmong made him feel he had a purpose in a war that he had previously been conflicted about. Curry mentions working with Bill Lair, a CIA operative in the Secret War in Laos, and General Richard Secord, who handled Air Operations in Laos and later became part of the Iran-Contra scandal. Curry remarks Secord had “brilliant” but strange tactics, blowing up the toilet paper supply for the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and pouring detergent on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to make it slippery. Curry also praises General Harry C. Aderholt for understanding how to get what was needed from the government. Curry muses that he was an “eighteen-year old punk” briefing generals on intelligence information. In contrast to his work in Laos, Curry characterizes the attitude of soldiers in Vietnam as “protect your own ass,” adding that “your own military was damn near trying to kill you through stupidity.” Curry tells an emotional combat story in which, on a clandestine mission, his airplane was hit and the pilot was killed. Curry ejected them both from the plane, but he landed between a Hmong firebase and invading NVA. He thanks the Hmong soldiers, especially Colonel Xay Dang, for saving his life. For years, Curry felt guilty about this incident, both for not having done more for the Hmong and for the death of the pilot. He regrets that he could not talk with the pilot’s family because the operation was classified. Curry displays great affection for the Hmong and expresses frustration at racial tensions in Wisconsin. When Hmong refugees were relocated to the U.S., Curry was saddened that many veterans confused the Hmong with the Vietnamese. Curry also blames the U.S. government for leaving the Hmong to “a slaughter that was totally unnecessary and uncalled for” when they pulled out of Vietnam. In 1971, Curry finished his tour of duty in Vietnam. Curry speaks with bitterness about his homecoming. He had to fly one last mission over Saigon, and he was certain he would die on the mission. He describes arriving at Fort Lewis (Washington) at night: military police strip-searched everyone, looking for drugs. Curry comments it was like basic training all over again. He says he never wanted “a pat on the back,” but he did not expect such hostility. Curry describes being greeted at the Seattle Airport by angry protestors who chanted “Baby killers!” and threw eggs and chicken blood at the veterans. Curry ran into the airport and changed into civilian clothes in the bathroom, throwing his uniform in the trash. Soon after arriving home, Curry describes having a flashback while at the mall and being angry at civilians who were not interested in Vietnam and Laos. After the war, Curry married June, his fiancée, and studied journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He admits he hid his service from his classmates and stopped listing his veteran status on his resume after being turned down for several jobs. During the Persian Gulf War, Curry began having flashbacks and drinking heavily. He explains his family intervened with the help of veteran Joe Campbell, and he was treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at the VA Hospital in

Milwaukee. Curry mentions relapsing after September 11, 2001 but states positively that the nation's support for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans "gave [Vietnam Veterans] our respect back." Curry says he is no longer afraid to show his Vietnam badges in public and that strangers have approached him to thank him for his service. As a younger man, Curry states he was against veterans organizations; however, around 2001, Joe Campbell convinced him to join the Vietnam Veterans Association in Milwaukee, where Curry was reunited with Colonel Xay Dang. He discusses how renewing friendships with veterans and writing his book *Whispering Death: Our Journey with the Hmong in the Secret War for Laos* helped him release some of his anger and fight PTSD. Finally, Curry compares the politics of the Vietnam War with the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, and he opines on the military service of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and John Kerry. Curry mentions he has been active with Hmong groups in Wisconsin and is currently trying to build a library in Laos, which he considers a small way of "making it right."

Biographical Sketch:

Curry (b. 1952) was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is an alumnus of Milwaukee Lutheran High School, Washington High School, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 1969, he enlisted in the Army and became a co-pilot specialized in aerial surveillance with the 131st and 225th Aviation Companies. During the Vietnam War, Curry flew over 250 missions between 1970 and 1971 and participated in military intelligence operations with the CIA in Laos. Curry wrote a book about his experiences called *Whispering Death: Our Journey with the Hmong in the Secret War for Laos*. He now lives in Ottawa (Wisconsin) with his wife June and participates in the Vietnam Veterans Association and various Hmong groups.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2006
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Interview Transcript

Jim: July 10th, 2006: My name is Jim Kurtz and I'm interviewing Bob Curry in his home in Ottawa, Wisconsin. Bob, where and when were you born?

Curry: I was born in 1952. I was born in Milwaukee.

Jim: And what was the date in '52?

Curry: February 18th, 1952.

Jim: And where did you grow up?

Curry: Well, I grew up—what we would refer to as the inner city, Teutonia, 12th and North, Richard Street, and ah—

Jim: Ok.

Curry: And then eventually on 28th and Center.

Jim: Where did you go to high school then?

Curry: Milwaukee Lutheran for three years, and then I did my last half a year so I could graduate early to join the service and that was at Washington. I left Milwaukee Lutheran so I could go to Washington because they had an early graduation.

Jim: Ok, and so in what year was that that you graduated?

Curry: Uh—was it December of '70?

Jim: Ok. And what happened after you completed high school?

Curry: Well, I enlisted in the—they have an enlistment where you can sign up early, you're like in the reserves, so immediately after graduation I left for basic training for the Army.

Jim: Ok. And did you have any family who had a history—like in World War II or World War I or whatever? Korea?

Curry: Well, my dad had been in the Red Arrow Division in Milwaukee. So then he had a medical problem and he didn't go off to World War II, which he always regretted. But, you know, I grew up in a neighborhood—a blue collar poor neighborhood where, you know, a lot of World War II vets—a lot of movies on TV, a lot of the John Wayne movies, and there was an aura, at least in my neighborhood, of Mom, God, and apple pie. And if the government needed ya, you know, that's the least you could do is join. And the other thing was, I was—I

loved anything to do with airplanes. My dad would take me out the airport and we'd watch them take off and land. And so when I was in high school I saw a poster of a huge Huey helicopter over treetops, and it was "High School Graduate, You Too Could Fly." And I realized later it was because the college kids were smart enough to realize you could get killed doing something like that but, I went, "That's me." So I went and signed up for it.

Jim: So you signed up while you were in school—

Curry: Right.

Jim: Did you have an awareness that Vietnam was going on in—

Curry: Yeah, yeah I—oh, yeah I certainly did. I mean, you know the TV sets in the evening, the—I did uh—my wife now, her brother served two tours in Vietnam in Marines and had been over there before, and uh—yeah, I was aware. I was aware of the protests—that kind of made me mad. But I thought it was my duty to join.

Jim: Yeah. And did you have a view about the Vietnam War? Because you joined pretty deep into the war.

Curry: Yeah. I thought that we needed to, you know like the Kennedys, give freedom to those people in Southeast Asia who couldn't—you know, who couldn't do it on their own. Now my views have changed a number of times since getting to Vietnam and coming back, but in the beginning it was, no, we—whatever our country needed us to do for, they needed, you know, they had a good purpose and I needed to go.

Jim: Ok. You enlisted in—I just looked—

Curry: I enlisted in '70.

Jim: Ok, so, ok, so it would be '70. So it's not November of '69, it's November of '70 then.

Curry: Well hang on—no, no, it was I—I'm sorry, I enlisted in fall of '69—

Jim: Ok.

Curry: --into the early enlistment program, graduated in December and then left for—

Jim: Ok, so you graduated from *high* school in '69 then.

Curry: Yeah, I'm sorry.

Jim: That's why—I just want to make the dates add up, that's all. (Curry laughs). Ok. So where did you go for basic training?

Curry: To Fort Polk, Louisiana, and I never knew the South could be cold, but I found out what damp and cold was when you're sleeping outside. So I went down there for my basic training.

Jim: Ok. And then your advanced training you went to flight training or—

Curry: Yeah. I went to—after Basic I went over to Texas, Fort Walters, Texas, and that was primary helicopter school.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: And that's where learning to—we went through ground school. You know there was a lot of like ROTC indoctrination and weeding people out and things like that, and then we got into starting to fly the helicopters and just before I was finished there was a group of four of us who were snatched up one night and our next orders were to go to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, and we had no idea what we were going into.

Jim: Yeah And what was at Fort Huachuca?

Curry: Well, Fort Huachuca was the military—one of the military intelligence bases for the Army. More so nowadays but—we went there and that was to fly right seater co-pilot in a OV-1 Mohawk. And the OV-1 Mohawk was a twin-engine Army reconnaissance plane. There were several models depending upon what type of electronics they had on board. But the plane originally was developed by the Marines and the Army as a battlefield lintel plane. They were to be assigned to every unit along with the Hueys, and they could go out and find out where the enemy was with its different electronics. It was a twin-engine turbo prop; pilot, co-pilot had ejection seats, and could be flown during the day as a visual recon and also as a gunship, and then it could be flown also during the day with what's called SLAR, Side Looking Airborne Radar, and that could detect trucks, tanks, anything moving at a distance.

Jim: What—now the right seat was not the command seat, is that correct?

Curry: Command seat was the left seat, and that was usually a captain or major or somebody older. But the right seat was—could be filled by a captain or major but was typically, you know, the young eighteen, nineteen year old kids with some amount of flight training because most of the time that role was you were handling both the radio traffic, you were bringing in aircraft onto targets, and you were also operating the electronics equipment.

Jim: Ok. So you were functionally like a Forward Air Controller then.

Curry: Yeah, yeah, definitely like a FAC, and then, the other part of the mission we had was infrared, and we would—eventually when I went to Vietnam we would fly that at treetop level if somebody—if the Marines up in I Corps, whatever, suspected an enemy out near Khe Sanh or whatever, we would map out the coordinates when we would fly a treetop at night filming with infrared film.

Jim: Ok. So, do you know why you were selected to go to Fort—

Curry: I think it was I happened to be the next one on the list. As the Army goes a lot of times it's where you are in the line.

Jim: Yup.

Curry: And that's the only—that's the only thing I—

Jim: I assume you were a warrant officer—

Curry: Right.

Jim: So when did you get your warrant commission?

Curry: That was supposed to be in Vietnam and then it was supposed to be when we left Vietnam, and it was never handed out to anybody in the OV-1 units.

Jim: So what rank did you have?

Curry: We were E-5s.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: And then it was held as well if you re-signed for—because what we did was we were allowed to get out at the end of two years.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: If we would have kept going for another four years, yeah, then we could have –

Jim: Ok.

Curry: We could have gotten it, but at the end of two years I was ready to leave.

Jim: So that's an interesting anomaly that you were functioning as a pilot as an enlisted person not—

Curry: Right.

Jim: because most pilots were warrants or officers.

Curry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, there were only—in the history of the Mohawk I think there was only three hundred of these planes made. So a lot of times, even when you talk to, you know, Air Force people and you mention OV-1 Mohawk, right away they're, "Oh yeah, the Bronco." So most people don't know—in a lot of history books it's not—

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: .The OV-1 Mohawk is not in at all. So—and in most of the missions—well, I would probably say all but—most of the missions were classified. So, you know, our intel went down straight to headquarters. Part of the missions that I eventually ended up flying in Vietnam were directly for the CIA in Laos.

Jim: Ok. So what kind of training did you have at Fort Huachuca?

Curry: Well, it was a combination of going from learning to fly helicopters to handling a OV-1 twin-engine plane in case of an emergency, practice on what would happen if the pilot was killed or whatever. Then a lot of it was in the training of going out, and our job was to hunt and find the enemy. So our job was with—the windows were bubble windows on the side, kind of looked like a caterpillar from the back. So you could kind of stick your head in and actually see below ya. And with the engines they could never hear you come up on 'em. They could hear you definitely when you went past 'em, but you could sneak up on the enemy. They couldn't hear you coming. The Viet Cong gave the name "Whispering Death" to the plane.

Jim: How many hours did you fly before they—I assume they made you fly solo—

Curry: Right.

Jim: Before you went to Vietnam.

Curry: Yeah. Oh, it wasn't much at all. I think it was like four hours, and they were ready to—as soon as they got you as quickly as they could through the training, *boom*, they had your orders and you were on your way.

Jim: So in other words, it was really an emergency for you to have to land the plane then or something.

Curry: Yeah, yeah. Now once you got over to Vietnam and you were flying E-models and stuff, you could be flying—depending who you were flying with, if it was a lieutenant colonel, you know, he may want to fly the whole thing himself but, you know, then you could be flying, you know, half the mission or whatever else it was. When you started flying with the electronics, the SLAR and the infrared, it

was busy. I mean it was enough just to keep all that --, to keep everything coordinated.

Jim: It seems unusual that they would be—because obviously flying an airplane in combat's dangerous in those conditions, and trusting all that equipment to a guy that really didn't know how to fly the plane. Is it --

Curry: Well, I think they were hoping that somehow you had some of that helicopter training—

Jim: Oh, ok, ok! (laughs)

Curry: Then maybe you could auto-rotate it in.

Jim: Yeah, yeah.

Curry: And if—I always figure that if it's not logical, it's logical. That if it doesn't make sense then it makes sense in the Army. So, to try to figure it out I'll get it wrong anyway.

Jim: Ok. (Curry laughs). Arizona is quite a bit different from Vietnam so where did you train? I mean, there's not a hell of a lot of trees there—

Curry: Oh, there's none. Yeah, there's no trees whatso—yeah, that would be another spin on why. I think 'cause the equipment was there.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: And originally a lot of the Mohawks were in Europe. Again, which has no (laughs) relationship to Arizona, but they would fly the Berlin line—the Wall. And because the sensor equipment could go twenty or fifty miles across a border, they'd fly a lot of missions out of Germany seeing what was going on traffic-wise. And then there was some missions up in Alaska, and of course, you know, Vietnam took the bulk of it. I have no reason—I have no idea why it was in Arizona. Other than that was—at the time it was part of the Military Intelligence Base, and nowadays I'm pretty sure it's the headquarters for MI and—or at least one of them in the Army. So, I think because it was assigned to military intelligence—in fact my unit over in Vietnam at one time changed from aviation company to a military intelligence company.

Jim: OK. So, you knew you were going to Vietnam as soon as you got assigned to Fort Huachuca, you know.

Curry: Well, we were hoping on Germany, but yeah. (both laugh) We were young and naïve.

Jim: What was the reaction of your family when they—well, first of all, what was *your* reaction when you actually got your orders for Vietnam?

Curry: Well it—it was shock. You know, there was a lot of talk bravo before that and—but when you got ‘em it was, you know, it was kind of “holy shit”, you know. This is—this is about to happen. But, you know, you’re still able to cloud it, you know, until the day that door opens at the plane when you get off in Vietnam. There’s still a certain amount of, you know, denial in there.

Jim: Sure.

Curry: Because all you can do is guess.

Jim: Did you get leave before you went to visit –

Curry: Yeah, I got leave before I left.

Jim: And when you came back to Milwaukee was there any—how did your friends treat you one way or another, and family?

Curry: I really didn’t see my friends. Family obviously I was close to. You know, when I left high school everybody split and went different directions and a lot of them went on to college. And, you know, a lot of them turned into, into the protesters. And—I can respect anyone’s idea on the politics of the country. That’s what this is all about. You know, there’s a separate question of how they handled the veterans, which is upsetting to this generation –

Jim: Sure.

Curry: This day and, you know, till the day we die. But, you know, that’s a separate—

Jim: How did you get to Vietnam?

Curry: Flew. It went to Oakland, California, reported in, and one night took us out to the airport and—I talk about it in the book that I wrote—it was kind of, you know, I had the dream that we were gonna be in uniform and get on some C-130s and go over there and here we’re at a airport with stewardesses and, you know, a commercial plane and you’re getting on and it’s like you’re flying to the Bahamas for a vacation. Except when you got on board everybody was sitting in a green uniform, you know, and it was all guys so, it was weird. It was just definitely weird.

Jim: Did you know anybody on the flight over?

Curry: No. At that point, you know— with Vietnam you were plucked out of anyplace and you were just thrown in with another group of people that you got to know for

three days or two weeks and, you know, you made your friendships for that time knowing you'd probably never see these guys again.

Jim: Where did you land in Vietnam?

Curry: We landed down in—oh, boy, the big base north of—

Jim: At Bien Hoa?

Curry: Bien Hoa, yeah. Yeah.

Jim: Ok. What was your impression when the doors opened and you got out of the airplane?

Curry: Oh, wow, that's emblazed in my mind. That's like the, the air was sucked out of my—first it was sucked out of my lungs and then it was filled with the most putrid smell of rotting trees, vegetation, anything you could believe, and then you know the humidity, and it was so bright, you know it was like walking out to like a bunch of cameras going off or something. And then I walked down the gangplank and I was just—I was speechless. Probably the tongue was hanging out, you know, 'cause you don't know what you're expecting and people are kinda yelling at you to go here and go there and you're—I was in a trance, you know, just kinda trying to take everything in. And looking at the Vietnamese people who the first time I'd, you know, I'd seen other than on the TV sets before, and then this, "Oh my God, you know, I'm actually here." And then everything was like, there was no vegetation, you know, that was the thing about that base. You know, it was just dirt and dust and, you know, that red clay shit, is emblazed in my mind. And walking to like the little terminal building—

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: Looked kind of like an outpost out of the Old West. I mean, kind of that was familiar with Arizona because it was just so dusty and dirty and hot.

Jim: Bien Hoa was a major tactical air base. Did you have any impression with all the planes flying in and out of there?

Curry: I was just overwhelmed by everything. Yeah, there was the Hueys overhead—I mean your senses were just getting bombarded by everything and then you'd see the older guys, and you know they had—you know we had the shiny uniforms on, so they started yelling taunts at us and stuff, and you know being the, you know, the f-ing new guys, and—but, you know the—they had that red clay which had just taken the—which just dulled that uniform which was kind of imbedded in there. And, that's where I saw the, you know, the thousand-yard stare was just these guys just seemed to stare right through ya.

Jim: So, where were you assigned then?

Curry: Well, you know I stay on that base for, you know, whatever period of time—it might have been a week or something while they were stamping paperwork and trying to figure out where we go. So that was getting a little bit of familiarity with it.

Jim: Were there Mohawks at Bien Hoa?

Curry: Oh, no, no, not at all. No, I—finally, you know how rumors go around, the rumors came down that I'd be going to I Corps, and then it's like, ok where in the hell's I Corps, and nobody has any idea. One guy goes, "That's up north," and everybody else is going, "Well, that's great," you know, that answered the question. And then, I knew my next stop would be Da Nang, because I had to go to a brigade or something for some training and then, you know as I got closer then I knew I'd be going up to Phu Bai. And that eventually would be the 131st, flying out of Phu Bai.

Jim: So, what kind of orientation did you get about the country? Because you were a pilot so they weren't going to teach you how to go on ambush patrols and stuff like that.

Curry: No. I mean the ones in the country—there were two there, whatever they gave you in Bien Hoa, and I honestly can't remember much of anything down there, except standing in lines. Well, you know, real basic stuff like, you know, the enemy's never hit this base and, you know, we always joked about how everything was neatly laid out in lines so it made it easier for the grids, you know, for targeting by rockets and mortars, but when we went up to Da Nang—Marble Mountain—then it was like half days of training, 'cause in the afternoon they'd have us fill up the sandbags because Tet was coming up, and so, we'd go into this classroom and the sergeant would be preaching first about why we're here to save the Vietnamese. That went on for some length of time. The first thing I remember was, ok, you're on a base that was one of the earliest bases in Vietnam, and they built two-story barracks, which they never built anymore. So we were told that if we get an attack at the base, if it started, you might as well just roll over and pull the mattress on top of you, 'cause if you try to run outside for the bunker you're probably gonna get hit by shrapnel. And I remember it 'cause it was at night when we did get hit, and so that was my first fire, under fire. And we were pretty close to the airstrip for the Hueys and stuff, so they were trying—I don't know what they were trying to hit, the Hueys or anything they could or whatever, but it would—you know, all of a sudden in the middle of the night it was just like explosions like whole—I mean, you know, it was baptism under fire. And, so I'm laying in bed, and I go running for the door in the darkness, running into people, and then your mind's going a million miles an hour and then I—and then because you kind of hear the roof peppering, and then I remember a guy going, "Oh shit. If it's hitting you should go back and roll under the mattress." So here, I roll back

and I pull the mattress on top of me and I'm laying on the floor, and then all of a sudden I just got hit by—just a ton. I thought I was dead. What it was, was a guy on top of me went about three hundred and fifty pounds, (Jim laughs) and he jumped down on me, and he was beating me to death, and I'm going, "This guy is gonna kill me before the—" so I ran for the door again. By the time I got to the door it was all over. (both laugh)

Jim: I assume at that point you didn't have weapons or anything like— is that --

Curry: No, they didn't – no, they didn't give us weapons all through that stuff. You know, we would've probably shot up the building. (both laugh)

Jim: That's why they probably didn't give you weapons. So, when you got to Phu Bai what kind of orientation did you get?

Curry: Oh boy, that was—well that was the first time I'd seen a Mohawk, you know now and so—and we—you know, we—I took the chopper up to Hue, so you know, we went over Monkey Mountain and climbed over the paddies and everything, so that was the real time I was down low and could actually see the countryside. And, you know I could see we weren't that far from the ocean. We could see the mountains and the jungle going off to the west. And you come in and this little base had a single five thousand foot strip. A lot of Chinooks and Hueys were—because the 101st was right up there in Phu Bai. And I walked over and when I saw the Mohawks it was kind of like, there was something I was familiar with, so it was like coming home, in a strange sense. And then I—one guy met me as I'm walking over, all of a sudden a couple buddies from school, "Bob, how you doing?" So that was great, that was great. Because they had been there for a couple weeks before I had, so they could kind of give me—fill me in on what was really going on.

Jim: What did they tell you?

Curry: That I'd be flying, probably the SLAR missions up to North Vietnam to begin with, and then I could—you know as I was there longer—

Jim: What is SLAR—for the tape?

Curry: I'm sorry. It's Side Looking Airborne Radar.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: And there was a big pod on the side of the Mohawk that had radar, and then inside the cockpit in front of the co-pilot was a display. Now, we think of them nowadays as a computer display, video display. Well, in those days you didn't have video, at least not on a plane as small as the Mohawk. So, it was a screen and we actually developed film right in the cockpit. So it looked like a computer

display, and you could see a topical map of twenty-five, fifty miles on either side of the plane. So it'd be kind of like you're looking at one of those maps where you could see the rise of the mountains and the river bends, and then what we would look for is movers, and those were trucks or tanks. Anything with a metal surface moving over three miles an hour I think it would show up as a black dot. And you could actually plot it to a map and get coordinates off of it.

Jim: So how were you received in the unit other than by the people that you knew before?

Curry: Pretty much hands off. It was—you really didn't get to know anybody I think until ya, you know, survived a month or some period of time. I remember it was pretty much "Ok, you gotta go down here and get your weapon." So I went down there, did all the paperwork for it, he handed me my M-16 and then he said, "Ok, give it back to me." And I kinda went, "Whoa," you know, "we're in a war zone." And he says, "Well, no. If anything happens, here's your gun card. You come down here and you stand in line, you will turn in your gun card, I'll hand you the M-16. Then you will run to the building across from here and you will pick up your ammo." And I'm going, "Oh, Jesus Christ."

Jim: Oh my gosh.

Curry: I'm gonna get killed." You know, it doesn't take a brain scientist to figure out how to hit these camps. And because there was a lot of—there was—you know, by '70, '71 there was a lot of drug use going on in some areas. There was some racial tension going on. And then you throw in the insanity of the military sometimes and you come up with these kind of solutions. And then at the last minute he realized that I was flying, and he went, "Oh! Ok, you're flying." So he said, "Wait a minute." And then he—he threw me a .38, and he went in a bin and grabbed just a handful of shells, and put 'em there. And I said, "Well, what am I supposed to do with this?" And he says, "You'll fly with that." So I scooped 'em up and put 'em in my pocket like a pack of gum. And eventually later on I bought a holster from the PX so I could put it in there, but—"Here you go buddy. Here's your gun. Take care of yourself."

Jim: Had you been trained on a .38?

Curry: No, not at all. No.

Jim: Did they give you any kind of training about what happens if your plane went down?

Curry: It was very—nothing formal. At that time, some people were going to survival school in the Philippines. Jungle survival school. And I was signed up for it and then at the last minute they cancelled everything that was going on. So, no, there was no formal training whatsoever. You—we had a survival vest. I mean, the

kind of—you know, with fishing strings so you could fish—you had some tablets of some type of speed so you could stay awake and moving. You could put your—you know, then you had pockets for your shells, you have a strobe light, and you have a radio and things like that. But no, really there was no formal training whatsoever. It was talking to the other guys, and saying things like, “Well, what in the hell happens if we get shot down?” And that was the extent of it.

Jim: Were there many Mohawks shot down?

Curry: Depends. During different times there were. During Lam Son we had two or three go down, a lot of them shot up quite a bit. We lost some over northern Laos, although those are never in the records. Just before I had gotten there, there was a—there was a plane taken down in North Vietnam. We flew a lot of munitions up there and they actually—this was—it might have been during the monsoon season before—so we would fly coming in the Channel 69. And the Vietnamese had set up a fake Channel, 69, so they actually had the plane land in North Vietnam and then took it. So we were—depending on the mission, North Vietnam was -- you were either they were out to get ya and they were gonna do anything to blow you out of the sky, or they left you alone. So it was you never know when you were kind of expecting it there. Because there was—while there wasn’t bombing going on during my tour, there was retaliatory strikes. So if they were going after something they wanted to make sure it was a target worth it, because somebody was gonna catch hell for that one after it. And, about two months into my tour we had SAMs launched at us up—off of Vinh and luckily they were altitude targeted. I flew with a—every mission, stupidly, was flown at ten thousand feet, so when the imagery came out you could plot it out and you didn’t have to change your calipers. Well, I mean, that’s stupid. I just happened to fly one night with a guy saying we’re gonna fly at eight thousand feet, first time anybody had ever said that to me. Oh, ok. Fine. So we fly at eight thousand feet and that’s the night we had three SAMs blow up above us at ten thousand feet -- and we had a—we had plexiglas over our heads so we could look straight up and just about all sides of the plane. And, you know, he watched one come up over my side and explode in front of the plane, and I watched two explode up above us, and—

Jim: I’ve got to turn the tape over.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side B is blank for approx. 3 min.]

Jim: You were describing an event near Vinh.

Curry: Mm hmm.

Jim: What were you told if you were shot down about destroying equipment and stuff like that?

Curry: Well, you—we would put the plane into a dive position to crash into the ground and then we would eject. I mean, physically on the plane, we would be – I mean, you know, I was a hundred and sixty pounds soaking wet. So—and that might have been one of the reasons why they picked us or something ‘cause there was a weight constraint on the ejection seats, but we were in an area that was probably no wider than this table. Maybe a little bit, but you know you had, between you and the pilot not a lot of room, so you didn’t have any room for axes or anything like that. It was just, you know, if you got shot down that the plane is just going to crash and go to smithereens.

Jim: So that’s what the hope—they didn’t have any explosive devices or—

Curry: No, not that—no, no, uh uh. Because I’m sure they accidentally would have gone off. (both laugh) But no, no, there was none.

Jim: What kind of living conditions did you have at Phu Bai?

Curry: We were in hooches. So they were—I’ve got some pictures around here—they were just plywood shacks up on some bricks, you know, in a bunch of rows all grayed out by the weather, so they were pretty pathetic looking and you know, when I got there I think I was living with two other guys in a big part of it and then I eventually got to a place where it was me and another buddy kind of thing. That was until I ended up going to Laos, and then that was completely different.

Jim: Ok. So, I assume you lived with other enlisted people.

Curry: Right.

Jim: Didn’t live with officers.

Curry: Yeah. But they were right—I mean the officers were in the same type of—I think there was less per building. But they were like from here to that wall away.

Jim: OK.

Curry: They were pretty close.

Jim: What kind of food did you have?

Curry: Crappiest food in the world. You know, everybody said—we used to buy C-rations off the Marines when they came through. But anything—the one story that I remember is—you know that the dogs over there were—the ones that survived would come to the American bases to, you know, to be safe and eventually I ended up trading a guy—I flew a bunch of his missions so I could get

one of his pups from his litter. You know, 'cause a dog was a little bit of home. But you know, they would—these dogs would show up at the mess hall, standing when you walked out, begging. And I remember one day walking in there and they had that shiny—that beef, with the rainbow effect of the chemicals—and we were eating it, and you know you ate like three bites and we'd all “OK, ok this is ridiculous.” And so I walked out and I had some of that meat. And come on, Mandy (??) get down – get down, -- come here, get down -- and—(cat meowed)—I handed it to this new dog, and just ribs, and you knew—it was so bad that if that dog didn't eat something that day he was gonna die. And, I handed him that beef, and he smelled it and he walked away.

Jim: Oh my.

Curry: He was a starving dog and he wouldn't eat that stuff.

Jim: (laughing) So, tell me what an operational day was like when you flying a mission.

Curry: Our missions were scheduled, you know like so many days in advance so we could go down there, and you know at first I started flying the SLAR missions up off of North Vietnam. And that mission was to—it was flown twenty-four hours a day and there was a plane in reserve, so if one developed a problem up there and had to return another one went up immediately. 'Cause, you know Saigon wanted twenty-four hour a day coverage of what was going on. What we would do is we would fly just right off the coast. And we can map inland, and we can map all the major highways right along the coast that were coming down to the DMZ.

Jim: So you flew over the Gulf of Tonkin then?

Curry: Yeah. Yeah, we flew the Gulf of Tonkin up north of Vinh and south of, a little way south of Hai Phong and Hanoi. But we would be mapping all the traffic because they were—in their grand computer scheme they were trying to see how much truck – how much traffic was moving on those highways. And you know, our thinking was obviously if there was all of a sudden a lot of it then they were up to something. in the DMZ . Now then—so, a typical mission would be go down an hour or so before mission time, and prep the plane. We had a—I had to get fluid for the developing for the film. I had to get film in the canister. We had rollers that rolled the film, rolled the developing fluid on there. Those were like you protected those more than you protected anything else because they had to be perfect, because if they had a kink in them, you wouldn't get full development across and you had to scrub the mission and then it usually—you know usually you had to make that up. So that was not a fun thing to do. So, I'd go down there and prep the plane, and get everything running, and I'd run tests on the electronic systems as much as you can run on the ground, and then I'd usually be down there with the crew chief, and then I'd just do a walkover on the plane with him even though it was the pilot's responsibility to do the sign off on those. After a while,

the pilots and the co-pilots, you know even with rank and age became pretty good friends. There were some that was, you know, prima donnas and you only could talk to them you know as you talked to God. But a lot of 'em you became very close friends where you know you spent four hours on a mission with them up in the air. So they would come down—after a while you got to know the plane as well as they did from the standpoint of looking for maintenance problems with knowing, “Oh, that was Spud 13. I heard it had a problem on the last mission with so-and-so, so let's check it out and make sure that gear —“ ‘cause the one thing is we never wanted to get shot down, and two, we didn't want to have to abort a mission if we didn't have to.

Jim: So you said if you had an aborted mission that didn't count as a mission so you—

Curry: We had to make it up. And uh—and the ones off of—well, the ones off of Vietnam I mean, they were important in the grand scheme of things. The other missions—actually individual missions were probably more important because those were specific. We flew a lot for the 101st. We flew a lot for specific missions for the Marines out of—what's the base by Da Nang? Is that Chu Lai or—it was right south of—

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: Yeah, we actually used to fly down there and I'd fly into their camp, meet with their military intelligence people and they would say, “Look, out here west of Da Nang, up in the mountains, you know, we got this area here we want you to cover.” So we'd actually go out and fly the mission for 'em and fly it back to their base and drop off the film. So those missions were—to me they were life and death.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: Those were—we needed to get those done at any cost because somebody was walking into a whole bunch of shit. We needed to know where it was.

Jim: Let's just go back to the North Vietnam mission for a minute. Did you have any support by the Navy, you know, as far as boats down there or anything, or ships down there?

Curry: We checked in with—once we got out there we—I can't remember the call sign right now—but, yeah, it was a Navy ship off the coast that we reported in to. And they would have some limited radar on what was going on. So they would—if there was any—and they would call in movers in the sky, too. They would—I remember one night we were flying up off the coast and they said, “We got a mov—“ no, “We got a fast mov—“ anyway, “We have a suspected enemy following you.” And what we learned was that, you know, we could fly—we'd fly say two hundred fifty miles an hour. And they had some Sikorsky helicopters that could,

you know—‘cause Sikorsky after World War II, some went to Russia and some went to the U.S.—they had some pretty high speed helicopters up there. So that was the night we got the SAM shot at us. And the Navy was tracking them. And they would say, “Ok. They’re at your position, you know, ten nautical miles”—or twenty—I don’t remember what the distance was. And that evening as they’re following—so they’d keep an eye on us. Now, our idea was if they started coming out any closer, we’d head out to sea and then the Navy would launch some fighters for us.

Jim: You didn’t routinely have fighters in the air with you.

Curry: No. You know on the F-4s and whatever the Navy had—the Intruders—not the Intruders, but their fighters—they didn’t have a lot of on-time in the air, you know, those things suck gas like a Corvette going crazy. So, even in Laos we had it at first because we were at a farther distance but as the war started winding down resources started getting pulled back. So I don’t know what the deal was with the Navy. I know the Air Force eventually, they had ‘em on hot alert. So they would launch. And then there was a whole other game that happened after that. But in Vietnam the Navy would launch ‘em off the ships. We looked down in the bay because when we got up to Hai Phong you could see like the fishing junks up there. And you know, there’d be, you know, four or five of them out there every evening or something, kind of dispersed, and we hit that midpoint where we made the turn the first time, and we were kinda spooked because we were being trailed, or followed, and the Navy’s telling us all these adjustments, and the next time we came and made that turn in the harbor there, all of a sudden there was like forty. And then it’s like, “What in the hell is going on? This isn’t making sense.” And then we’d come back, and I swear there was a hundred ship—I mean it was like lit up with all these boats, these little junks and stuff. They were probably bigger when you got close to ‘em, but -- and then the next time we came down, then the Navy said, “The mover’s gone.” So it’s kind of like, phew, “Ok. I don’t know what that was about.” But when we got down to the harbor again, and there was just a huge number of ships, and that’s when they let loose with the SAMs. And what was put together later was that the helicopter was judging our position and mapping where we were going. The boats were down there apparently if we survived. And they assumed ‘cause we had flown every mission at ten thousand—they didn’t do a radar lock on, ‘cause some of our planes could determine radar lock on, and then we’d get the hell out of there. But this one was altitude and they put it up at—they never assumed we’d be at a different altitude. And it was only because of this guy, this pilot that I flew only with one time, and he decided to fly at eight thousand feet, otherwise we wouldn’t be talking today. But those are the freak things that happen, you know, and—

Jim: Sure. So, can you describe an in country mission then?

Curry: Yeah, we’d be—say the 101st might—well, before Lam Son, they were gonna—

Jim: Lam Son—what was that?

Curry: Lam Son was the invasion of Laos.

Jim: OK.

Curry: And this would have been in spring of—boy, '71?

Jim: Yes.

Curry: Yeah. And the Vietnamese were going to be the force on the ground, but we were gonna provide all the air cover and the Hueys and everything. So they were re-enacting, reactivating Khe Sanh, and that was going to be the staging area. So before that we flew a lot of missions around Khe Sanh, and we flew both photo/recon visual, so during the day, over the treetops or (laughs) between the treetops, it—we would be given targets, you know, “We want you to check out this area.” So we’d go out and grid the map. And we’d go in there and we had belly cameras and we had front mounted cameras and then we would do a visual by looking out and trying to see if we could visually find the enemy. And we fly a grid pattern, you know, we’d try to mix it up so they couldn’t exactly tell which part of the grid we were coming in on. ‘Cause we could sneak up on ‘em on the first pass, but then after that they knew something was up. And then as the South Vietnamese started moving north for their staging then our missions became Laos. And then the visual and the infrared moved over actually into Laos so around Tchepone and stuff like that were—I mean this was the NVA army in all its glory. I mean it had anti-aircraft guns, you know, that—they had hundred millimeter anti-aircraft guns, radar lock-on, by that time SAMs had arrived into Laos, and if I remember correctly—and this is reading history afterwards—there was like a hundred thousand troops that were deployed in Laos just to secure that Ho Chi Minh Trail. And Tchepone was like the central point where a lot of the routes came together and went back out. So it was a very important staging point for the North Vietnamese. So a lot of the missions would be going in and we were taking heavy fire at that time because now we were getting close and I’m sure the word was out on what was about to happen. So everything was tense. Everything was very tense.

Jim: Was the Mohawk the only aircraft that was capable of gathering this type of intelligence?

Curry: Well, you could do—you had FAC’s during the day, Forward Air Control, but their job mainly was to make it to target seeking and once they found it they’d coordinate air traffic in. But no, we were basically the only plane at that time that was capable of doing it. In fact, a lot of our missions, any of the Laos missions were flown under 7th Air Force. And when I was transferred to Thailand to fly the Laos missions, I was assigned to 7th Air Force, so we were kind of like the “Rat Patrol”. Then we had one mission, “Mission 20”, that went out every night over

Laos that after a mix of missions I went out and—you usually have one person assigned, and I took over that mission, I wanted to fly that mission because there was action on that mission, you were taking out trucks. And, but, there was also a lot of—so it was one these mixed bags of you're gonna take a lot of fire. I was eighteen, probably had seen too many John Wayne movies, but also wanted to *do* something, feel that I was *doing* something. So what we would do is we'd fly a route through—in—Steel Tiger is what the mission was called—and we'd fly a route and we would report in to the Air Force when we went across. And that would be like “Moonbeam”. It was this floating C-130 gunship, and would keep track of all the traffic coming in and out, and it was like a freeway on L.A. I mean, you had to fly with your lights on for a lot of the missions just 'cause, you know, you didn't want an F-4 sticking out of the side of your plane. And, so we'd fire out and we would map it, and then the Air Force would assign us gunships. Sometimes they might be a flight of F-4s. What we really hoped for was the C-130 or the AC-119 gunships—Spectres. And then they'd assign those. So we would actually go in and we could map the terrain and once we had one or two, three movers in a certain area, we usually knew there was a string of traffic going through that. And, because I flew every night I knew where most of the road—after awhile you build up and know where the traffic is—I knew where—I'd plot off of river beds, you know, I'd do the caliper plot and I would do the triangulation, look it on a map, and then I would call the coordinates in: I have eight movers at whatever the coordinates. And then the F-4s would go in, and you know the F-4s were kind of too fast for the targets usually, but the C-130s, they would go in—now they had some closer look—they had the early versions of the night vision goggle—night vision equipment, and so they could actually get in close. They would actually go into a circle, and put a pitch on it around the target, and then they could do the closer look, so they can actually bring up imagery right—real time—on a camera in the cockpit of the C-130. And then there was a command center in the C-130 that coordinated all the guns. You had the Gatling guns and eventually the artillery piece. And they would put it in a circle and would, with their computers at that point, they would target the guns. And you could sense it was going in under you, and then all of a sudden you'd see the rain of fire and then it was just an enormous—it was unbelievable watching that, and then you'd watch a secondary explosions off the ground and, you know the fires and the flames and stuff like that and it was just both an incredible rush and kind of a—“Wow, this is what it's all about.”

Jim: So how many times a week did you fly?

Curry: Oh, we flew every day.

Jim: Flew out every day.

Curry: Yeah, unless your mission perhaps got scrubbed. Then you were filled in. I wrote in the book I flew over two hundred and fifty missions. I actually flew over three hundred, I just—I always wanted to err a little bit on—'cause you flew every day

and sometimes twice a day. Now there might be—and every once in awhile they tried to get to the point where, ok, every fifth day you get the day off and stuff like that. So you factor those kinds of things in. Of course then when, you know, sometimes a dysentery would come through the unit and, you know, you might be sick for some days but then you'd be filling in flying double missions for, you know, the other guys that got sick behind you. But it was usually every day.

Jim: How many planes did your unit have?

Curry: Well, I'm gonna make a guess. I'm gonna make a guess—in Vietnam we probably had forty planes. And they were set up, I would say the bulk, twenty of them were set up for a Side Looking Airborne, another six or so for visual recon, and they—visual recon had rocket pods and .50 cal on 'em, up till when I was there about three or four months. Then they took all the weapons off the plane. It was a—

Jim: Why did they do that?

Curry: There was an argument between the Air Force and the Army over who should have the plane. The Air Force said it's close support, blah, blah, blah, it's the Air Force mission. The Army's saying, you know, it's like the helicopter we meet 'em with. So the powers to be, you know a million miles away in Washington, D.C. decided that the Army could keep the plane but they would remove all weapons from the plane whatsoever. So then every mission was flown on unarmed. And when guys flew the—and the enemy found out real quick. Because they knew that especially on visual recon you flew a team. So you had two guys in—you had a guy on your tail. So if you took fire they could come in and suppress the fire. After awhile they realized there's no suppressing fire so they would just—they'd stand out there all day with their guns and just try to blow the hell out of ya because they knew there was nothing you could do.

Jim: Did your plane get hit very often?

Curry: Yeah, I don't know what often—I couldn't even tell you what number of missions out of missions got—we got anti-aircraft—North Vietnamese mission was, again that was kinda you could go a long time and then MiGs would come down and run after you or—so that was an on-and-off, and most of the time it was off. There was always the fear of it. Once you got to Laos that was every night you were taking anti-aircraft fire.

Jim: Were these planes pretty tough?

Curry: Yeah, they were –

Jim: I mean did they sustain damage?

Curry: Yeah, they were. One -- they had a triple tail. I'll have to find a picture for you here. They had a triple tail on it, and one guy in Lam Son went out there, and he had two of the three actually chewed off from—it was hanging off the plane. And everybody was amazed how the guy ever flew the thing back, because all his control circuit systems were screwed up. But yeah, it was a tough little plane.

Jim: So how long were you in—I assume that you were at Phu Bai the entire time that you were in Vietnam, about before you went to Laos, is that right?

Curry: Yeah, yeah. Phu Bai and then—

Jim: How long were you at Phu Bai?

Curry: Four months—that would be a rough guess.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: I'd have to look at my book.

Jim: So, when you got time off did you get to go to the ocean or anything like that, or would you—

Curry: Yeah, well before I got transferred to Laos I took a three day R&R down at China Beach—

Jim: Ok.

Curry: Down at Da Nang. I never took an out of country R&R.

Jim: OK.

Curry: I—yeah, during the day, because a lot of times—I ended up flying at night most of the time—so a lot of times we'd take the jeep and we'd go into—sometimes down to Hue. We'd go over to the 101st base, they always had a PX over there, things like that. And so we'd sometimes take day jaunts, if that's what you want to call it, out to the 101st and things like that. We—in fact, we did some scouting at the 101st so we could see where we could steal air conditioners from when the 101st was out in the field so we could make a midnight requisition.

Jim: I assume you didn't *steal* 'em; you borrowed 'em.

Curry: We *borrowed* them. (both laugh)

Jim: Was there any danger driving off the Phu Bai base?

Curry: Yeah, we—yeah. Most of the time it was ok. That was—Vietnam where we were at was always the infrequency of—and you’d let down your guard, and one time a buddy of mine—I had a buddy in the chopper unit next to me and he was trying to adopt a young daughter from the orphanage down in Phu Bai/Hue. So he took me down there a couple times and we’d take food down there and I’d written back to the church to send me clothes and stuff like that. And most of the time we’d go and check out the M16s and stuff to go down, and—but then you get complacent and we had been to the PX a couple times—“Ah, let’s just go down to the boat.” ‘Cause Highway 1, it’s always so damn busy. And so we came back and just outside, just east of Phu Bai we got the whole road got ambushed, and a couple trucks up ahead of us got—I don’t know if they got hit with rockets or grenades or whatever—they went off the road. A couple, a truck behind us just blew into the side of a building and flattened it and then there was just gunfire all over the place. And I was just scared shitless. I just crawled underneath the jeep and he was under the jeep and it took a couple, I don’t know minutes, seconds, to go “Holy —“, you know, we knew we were in a bucket of shit. And in front of us had been a jeep full of ARVN, MPs, and of course they disappear and I don’t know where they went, but we could see a gun sticking up in the jeep. So, by the time our heart rate calmed down enough, and the shooting was now sporadic but we couldn’t hear, and there was some return fire from the road coming up, so we crawled up to the jeep and we got the M16 out of there, and just about the time between the panic and the “What in the hell are we gonna do?” and you know “Let’s aim it and start shooting,” then all of a sudden you heard some choppers come in it from overhead and some gunfire out, obviously as they were disappearing, and then it was all over. It was like it—anything I ran into other than anti-aircraft was a hell, whole hell of a lot of hell and fire ‘cause we used to take rockets and mortars at the base quite a bit. And then, nothing. And then it was just like, it’s all done. It’s like, gone.

Jim: When you talk about when the base gets rocketed and mortared, how did you know when it was done? How long—

Curry: Well, you know at first you’d wait for somebody to scream “Incoming,”—

Jim: Yup.

Curry: You know, the guys who had been there. After awhile I remember waking up in the bunker. And I’m in my underwear, and the mortars are hitting, and I don’t know how in the hell I got there, and I walked out and my bedclothes were like a trail, you know, my sheet and something else, so it got to the point where it’s like a cat, you sleep with one eye or one ear open, and your brain just became used to that, that’s, that’s incoming. And you just *went*. So, you *went* before you ever woke up.

Jim: Ok. Then how did you know when it was over?

Curry: Well, we'd (unintelligible/coughs/laughs)

Jim: OK.

Curry: You know, if we could—if there was Hueys or gunships coming in and there was some fire on the perimeter, and it would slow down for a bit, otherwise we would just sit in there for awhile and then, you know, you'd hear some people yelling that, you know, it's all clear or something. Then we would come out. (coughs)

Jim: Was the Phu Bai perimeter ever probed while you were there?

Curry: Yeah, it was probed. (coughs) Nobody got through the perimeter. There was probing that, after Lam Son, it started getting probed more and more. And I think as Americans were starting to pull back forces, there was a lot of—it was quiet from that standpoint when I got there, but I could see the activity picking up that there was more probing, that there were more attacks, and in the air by that—then I left. And the period that I left to go up to Laos they were getting a lot of hits on the base.

Jim: Have we covered everything about Vietnam that we should go to Laos now?

Curry: Yeah, I think so.

Jim: Ok. So, how did you find out about you were going to Laos and what were you told about it?

Curry: We knew we had a secret mission over in Laos flying with the Air Force and the CIA. (coughs) And, you also—you know the nice thing about it was you got to visit the Air Force bases which were also a lot nicer than Army bases, and the Air Force bases were in Thailand so, and that was a good safe place to be.

Jim: So that's where your planes were based?

Curry: Based out of Thailand and we flew the missions out of an Air Force base in Udorn, Thailand.

Jim: OK.

Curry: And then—

Jim: So did you just move your—some of your planes from Phu Bai to Thailand?

Curry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. (phone rang) Want me to get that or something?

Jim: Yeah, yeah. Ok. So, you were telling us a little bit—you flew with the Air Force and CIA and you said you were transferred to OPCON with the Air Force then or CIA or—

Curry: Yeah, we were up on—ok, we flew up with 7th Air Force. And they were out of Udorn. So any—eventually the Mission 20 truck traffic was kind of like the training mission to fly Laos.

Jim: OK.

Curry: That usually if you flew that mission, you know, you were gonna be picked to fly the Laos missions ‘cause there was that coordination of bringing in direct fire onto the enemy. So I flew that one for, I don’t know, every night for two or three months, and then myself and the 2nd Lieutenant—I used to call him Crazy Koontz, I think his name was Larry Koontz, we became pretty close friends, we flew most of our missions together—him and I took our plane and we flew it over to Udorn. And so we had—in that unit we had maybe four airplanes, and three would, two to three would fly every night and then one was kind of like the spare. And then we had some crew chiefs, some MI people, so there was a group of about twenty of us, maybe four pilots, four co-pilots, and then another ten of the ground crew.

Jim: What happened when a plane went down for maintenance or anything like that?

Curry: We had to rely upon getting all our parts and everything from Vietnam. The guy over there was pretty good on being able to trade off stuff, you know, and you know, “I’ll get you some silk, whatever, (laughs) from whatever if you get me the right parts over there.” The problem was that the—at one point Phu Bai started sending us planes that were the bottom of the heap. And when we flew into northern Laos we flew into the Plain of Jars. So to get into the Plain of Jars you have to, you have to fly above these mountains that are up at ten, twelve thousand feet. And then the planes actually bowl (??) inside. Ok, once you get over those mountains and you get in there, now this is all enemy territory.

Jim: I’ve gotta change—

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

Jim: You operated out of Udorn, is that—

Curry: Yeah, and then sometimes we would fly into Long Chieng, which was the Hmong base up in northern Laos. That’s where the Ravens flew out of.

Jim: Ok. What are the Ravens?

Curry: The Ravens are the clandestine FAC group for the, for the Air Force, and the—there was a movie *Air America* and the book *Air America*—

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: And they were very dissimilar, and—but those were really based upon, not only Air America, which was owned by the CIA, but also the FACs and what happened was, after Cambodia and that, Congress came out, you know, you can't have any U.S. forces on the ground in Laos, and probably Cambodia too. And so what would happen was they needed these Forward Air Controllers north, to—they couldn't fly O-1s out of Udorn and get up there in any amount of time. So they had to be on the ground up there. They also needed to put the radar base right on the border with North Vietnam, to direct the bombers into, ah, into Hanoi. So what they did was they'd take these Air Force people, they'd get 'em over to Thailand, and they would release them from the Air Force. And so they'd be civilians and then what they were given IDs and they would work for USAID. And the FACs were given IDs as Forest Rangers. (Jim laughs) So they were Forest Rangers operating within Laos.

Jim: Looking for fires or—

Curry: Well, yeah, in a way.

Jim: Or creating –

Curry: Creating fires, but they were based out of Long Chieng, which was the CIA base, and then that's where the CIA had their operatives up there. And that's where the Hmong and Vang Pao and his group of Hmong, that's where all those famous stories come out of up there. And that was like—that was like Shangri La, whatever you think that place is, it was just—you're in the middle of the mountain, you're *high* in a mountain, but you're just south of Plain of Jars so there's mountains jutting out and this stone just comes straight up out of the ground and there's a word for that type but, it's like you're living on the edge of the earth. And these guys would live up there all the time. We would come in and grab missions or, you know we had a problem with a plane or whatever else, so that's where we got to know the Hmong people up there. And, and then just, again, north of there, they took some Air Force—most of these were enlisted guys—and they put 'em up on top of this mountain—I know there's a mountain that's a sacred mountain for the Hmong and I just can't remember the name of it—but it was sheer. It went straight up and then it had a plateau on the top, and there was kind of one way up the mountain you could get and it was right on the border with North Vietnam so they actually air lifted some of our top secret radar. So when the B-52s went up there, that's the radar system they would use to direct them into Hanoi. And it was -- this place is untouchable. And so they had the Hmong up there protecting it from it, but these were all Air Force—that intel unit was overrun—I'm gonna get this wrong—in '70. The North Vietnamese, again they knew the war was running down so they became a lot more aggressive. And first they went in there. They attacked it with three fabric covered aircraft, like out of World War I. And they were actually all shot down but they came up there with machine guns and tried to attack it. And one was shot down by a guy in a Air America helicopter, just with an M-16 out of the side. And they talked about

being -- it was the strangest air war that ever occurred during that time where a Huey actually shot down an attack aircraft. But then actually they did bring bulldozers in and built a road and actually went in and one night invaded it. They had the mountain climbers come up the other side and see, to the CIA people and the Air Force people was not a surprise, they were saying that this thing's going to get overrun. The military brass didn't quite believe it, they thought it was unpenetrable. And a lot of Americans lost their lives. A lot of them were never recovered and they actually had to go in and bomb off the mountain top to hopefully destroy all that equipment, but ever since that point the U.S. never had full radar up into North Vietnam.

Jim: So what were your—can you describe the typical missions if there was such a thing in your—

Curry: Yeah, what we fly is—we would usually fly all the time at night because, you know, you had the Air Force guys, they needed any day visual you know, was—the FACs were up in the F-4s and were doing photo recon. So our job was at night, and it was basically to—you know, southern Laos, you were hunting trucks on Ho Chi Minh heading to Vietnam, South Vietnam. Northern Laos, the CIA had employed the Hmong to be our force on the ground. And the Hmong were to make guerilla attacks against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were to protect the northern—it's like a panhandle up there, and that's where the capital was, was Vientiane, so if anything you wanted to protect the capital of Vientiane, because if the Communists took over and you don't have a government that you can say legitimately wants you into that country. So the Hmong had always—the Hmong, about a hundred years before the war had moved down from northern China. They weren't residents of Laos. So, they were like—they were mistreated by the Laotian people. They were seen as less than them, and anybody else within Asia. Kinda like the mountain people of Kentucky were looked down on a long time by other, you know, more sophisticated people in the cities. So they lived up there and then they fought with the French. And the French had known them to be the fiercest and most loyal fighters there were up there. And the Hmong valued very much the education of the French, and they also liked the protection because the French would bring the Vietnamese in, you know, before, you know, they had their war and conflict there. And the Vietnamese were always looking to take over something or to, to take over anything that the Hmong had, and at the same time you had drugs going on up there. That was where a lot of the poppy fields were, was in that triangle with Burma, Laos, and depending upon what stories you hear, a lot of the trading before these wars broke out, that's one of the reasons France was there. China traders would come in and try to get that poppy crop. The Hmong sometimes would cultivate it. They used it as a medicine, you know, but then it was used for, you know, trafficking for all kinds of people. You know, rumors include the CIA in doing that. That was their cash crop up there. So, the Hmong, when the United States felt that they needed to go into Laos, and this is where General Aderholt was brought over, who wrote the forward in my book, started making staging bases in Laos and putting together his clandestine air force

in Thailand. He was one of these “I’m tired of the Air Force buying just supersonic jets. We need planes that can be pulse air support.” And the Air Force didn’t have anything. So what he did was he brought all these planes out of mothballs. He brought T-28s out of mothballs, he brought the B-26 bomber out of World War II, actually went and got some of the early starscopes and put ‘em into to the bay of the thing so they could go in, and he got the Skyraiders over there, so he put together—you know, some of these bases that you fly into look like a museum of World War II, because that’s how we fought that ground war in Laos, with all those slow moving aircraft. But anyway, getting back to my mission, my mission was to—at night, the North Vietnamese would, were always trying to push in and take territory and slaughter the Hmong. They wanted to, obviously, put a Communist regime in charge in Laos, but they also wanted revenge on the Hmong because the Hmong supported the French during, you know, France’s war with North Vietnam. Dien Bien Phu actually was the French going to protect the Hmong, because Dien Bien Phu is kind of the gateway to the valleys and they were going to go in and slaughter the Hmong. So that the French went up to Dien Bien Phu to kind of forestall that effort. And then when that fell apart some of the Hmong were given—some of the Hmong I *met* were given jobs at that time of going up there and trying to get as many French out of there as they could and bring them back and sneak them back through because the ones that were caught, they were, they were—talk like we’re talking now in conversations of the French being—ropes put in through their ears or through their nose and walked through the villages to show the Hmong that these are the powerful French and now they’re just animals. They would hide in the caves and everything until they could try to get them out of there. So, it was kind of a dual purpose now they knew that the Vietnamese were going to be out for revenge. At the same time America needed a ground force. So Bill Lair, who I got to know well after the war, he was a CIA operative there that ran that. He went up and met with Vang Pao, and he was the one that put together the agreement with the United States and Vang Pao that we would use -- that we would finance ‘em, we would give ‘em weapons, we would give ‘em training. So they were the ground forces. And so our job was to protect the Hmong. And the Hmong would—I mean these people were—I can’t say enough. They’re like family to me even today. They would do anything to save you, to save an American. That’s all they cared about was getting—so a lot of pilots owe their lives to these Hmong guys.

Jim: How did you get to meet ‘em? I mean because you—

Curry: Well, I met ‘em a number of times when I’d flown into Long Chieng.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: I’d flown—then in Udorn I got to meet some of the Air America guys, so sometimes on day offs or during the day we would fly up, because the—you know our building was here, and there’re steel sheds and fenced off complexes right next to us. So we’d go over there and, you know, they’d have the old cargo

planes or stuff like that going up, so every once in awhile me and a buddy just as a day trip would hop on the plane and fly up to the base, you know, while they're off-loading stuff, get to meet some of these Ravens and that, get to meet some of the Hmong and stuff like that, and actually meet some of the military guys so they got to know—because there were certain points where the Air Force had the C-130 flying command post up there. Alleycat is usually who we flew with. And there were a number of times where Alleycat couldn't get up because of mechanical problems whatsoever. We were the only slow motor operating during the night up there to coordinate. So the Alleycat normally would handle all the ground traffic up to the air and then coordinate, "You know we got a firebase here. We got lookouts out here watching this road." So they would be talking to the Hmong on the ground as to what's going on on the ground. So a lot of times the Hmong if they were under attack on a base would call Alleycat, Alleycat would get some F-4s to come in and lay some fire. When Alleycat wasn't there my job basically became to funnel all of that traffic off the ground and send it back over the mountaintops to get it south so they could coordinate you know, any kind of air cover for 'em. So, some of these guys, in fact some I've met in the last year, with their call signs I remember talking to them on the ground, and here I meet 'em at a Hmong gathering, and it's just like—it's like a brother you knew you never had.

Jim: What kind of language gap was there?

Curry: It was, it was huge. It was -- they speak Hmong, not Laotian, ok, so I—I know very little Hmong now. In fact I want to go to a course at UW-M to relearn it. I knew enough to get me through, and then you usually had—they had trained people in the military. I mean, their military was, even though there were only three hundred thousand Hmong I think it was completely, they—the Americans brought 'em back and trained 'em. So you had quite a few that knew enough language, English, that you could—when I talked radio traffic it was mostly English, broken English, and then I knew—finally I knew some of the Hmong words for different things.

Jim: How did you pick up the Hmong words that you did know?

Curry: It was just either over the radio traffic, then you'd come back and you'd talk to other guys, "What in the hell does this mean?" "Oh, well, you know, that means tank." Or the CIA guys would tell you. See every day we'd brief with the CIA. For a while I was briefing with—he was a, I think it was a captain or major there, I can't remember—but he was unassigned from the Air Force. See, he was a civilian. He was handling Air Operations for the CIA, which was right down the road from us. So he would come over every afternoon, we'd come over, and he'd bring photos. And we'd go over our missions the night before, and then usually that day the F-4s had gone in and did a photo recon or whatever we got involved in and so they would take out the pictures and we could, we would go back over the mission of what we thought, what we found, what we called in, what

explosions we saw, and then we would see the photos on the ground and stuff like that. And the guy's name was Secord. Well, Secord later became a Brigadier General. He was the guy that was involved in the Iran Scandal. But he was always—it was amazing that—and he was involved in the whole Reagan thing where they tried to take him down, and I had some correspondence with him at that time because I just felt so sorry for this guy. And then he came out with a book and sent me a copy of his book. And he became that part of the Air Force that was CIA clandestine all along. He was the advisor to the Shah of Iran and—well, I'm getting off track there, but these kind of guys lived in that other world. And he would come down, I remember one day we'd come in and he had, it was a bunch of scrub, jungle foliage and stuff like that. He's going "What's this?" And we're looking there and you know, I don't know, boxes or something, right, they're stacking up boxes. And this was a run on some Vietnamese, north—NVA stuff. And then, for some reason, he was—he would just become a tyrant. He was going, "No! What are these?" (pounds fist) And so now it'd be, now I'm not nonchalant, now I'm going ok, what are they? And we're trying to figure out ok, what area is this in? What could they be bringing in? And all of a sudden he went off, he says—and excuse my language—"That's the entire fucking toilet paper supply for the NVA Army for the entire wet season." And so they had wet/dry seasons. The dry season the North Vietnamese can move in, and then the wet season they were bogged down with—it was like the reverse of Vietnam because they had the equipment, they had the tanks. We had the Hmong who were fighting a guerilla war, so it was the exact opposite. They were in uniforms. Ok, the Hmong weren't. So here was, he'd found a stash of their toilet paper supply, which (laughs) you kind of laugh about that but, and he said, "I'm putting in an arc light tonight," and he said, "I'm blowing away their toilet paper, and they're going to be wiping their ass with palm leaves for the next six months." (interviewer laughs) I remember that! And that night we flew up there and we got held back off station, and the arc lights went in, and we, you know—when they went in when we were up there we can not only see 'em but we could feel 'em. I mean, our plane would move. And it went—he took the toilet paper supply out with a B-52 strike. And I thought, that was probably the most awesome use of firepower, because—it was *brilliant*. Another time he dropped Calgonite on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to make it slippery, so in those tight corners the trucks would slip right off the trail. I mean, he just did oddball stuff. Yeah.

Jim: When we got up here, you were talking about the—well, go ahead— you --

Curry: Well, we would meet with our CIA handlers, like a Secord, and in the afternoon, and because everything at that point of the war, with the secret war, was being decided by, you know, Secord was the Air Marshal, I mean he made all decisions on that. You know, he went straight back to Washington when he needed other things, so—

Jim: Who was the Air Marshall?

Curry: The Air Marshal was the CIA person in charge of any air operations within Laos, and he would more or less direct the 7th Air Force. Now there's always a bit of conflict there on where he needed the manpower or planes. The CIA and the Station Chief in Vientiane actually ran the war. Ok, he would tell the Air Force what assets he needed. Ok, you know, versus Vietnam, you know, the military ran that operation. In Laos it was different. The CIA had direct responsibility to run that entire war. They determined that they would hire the Hmong on the ground. You know, they would bankroll them, they would payroll them, they would train them, etcetera. They would go to the Air Force and say, "I need these kind of assets." Now you run into the conflicts of a General not wanting to take—but you would get—you would finally get somebody like an Aderholt who understood what secret operations were.

Jim: So Aderholt was able to bring in all these airplanes that the Air Force didn't like because the CIA liked the results that they were getting.

Curry: Right, right. And—yeah, and it was tremendous, I mean, and finally, certainly before my time but when the Air Force went out on an extraction for a pilot or a crew, one part of that besides the Jolly Greens and you know, the F-4s up above was in the middle was the A-1 Skyraider. You know, the A-1 Skyraider became part of the team that was quote "support" for the Jolly Greens going in. 'Cause they could lay down suppression fire like it was unbelievable. So yeah, I mean the—you know you get some point where you have a general from Vietnam coming over to figure out what's going on over *here*, and being insulted with, well, you know, I'm not quite in charge, 'course then they would probably pretty much soon leave after that, but the Air Force people that were there like an Aderholt, they were close—they knew what secret operations were, they knew what kind of planes they needed. And continually he would go up against the Pentagon. And in fact—and this is kind of off of this story—but at one point when he finally did his tours over there, he actually went back into retirement. He said, "I just have too much conflict with the Air Force." At the end of the war the Air Force actually came back to them and said, "We're gonna make you Brigadier General"—I think I got this right—"and we need you to handle the air operations over there." And it was pretty much "okay, if I do it it's a hands off kind of thing." So he's one of these true—I mean he's an enlisted man's general. This guy's got the heart of a fucking saint, and he wants to protect his people and he'll do anything to—

Jim: And he wrote a book called *Air Commando*, I believe.

Curry: Yeah, yeah he did. Just—I mean he's a hell of a guy. I think he's gonna be up next weekend for the Hmong thing. But just this big teddy bear of a guy who you know that guy's gonna cover your ass. And he'll put his rank on the table to do it. And you'll fight for somebody like that 'cause you know he's got you covered. And most of the people over there were that way. I mean there was a camaraderie of—unlike Vietnam. And there was always a camaraderie in Vietnam to protect

your brother, protect the people you're with, but in Vietnam it was "What in the hell is going on here?" by the time '70-'71 came. You know, we're taking weapons off of our plane, we're doing asinine things, what are we—you know, then units are packing up and going back, and resources aren't being given, and you—and I felt like I was just *fodder* out there to be—that there was this chess game going on and if I got killed or didn't kill, you know, or if I went out and killed five more it wasn't going to make any difference in the grand scheme of things. So a lot of guys took the attitude of look, "We just want to protect our asses, and get the hell out of here in one piece." Now, when I got in—that's when I came into conflict with my earlier beliefs of what in hell is this war all about. You know and then you start reading a little bit of history of Ho Chi Minh coming, you know, fighting with the U.S. during World War II and that just is, it's going what in the hell is going on here. One minute, you know, this war is stupid and we ought to get the hell out of here, and the next time it's, you know, we need to *get* 'em, so it was just very confusing. And then the South Vietnamese forces, you know the word was most of the time you couldn't count on them to protect you when, -- you know I'd fly over bases or mountain tops or the artillery, the firebases, and they'd take a U.S. unit back and they'd put the ARNs in there and then they'd have a U.S. perimeter right behind the ARNs, and I'm going, you know so the ARNs wouldn't turn on them I'm going—it was just, it was just utter confusion. And it was just people, you know, people were trying to kill you, then your own military was damn near trying to kill you through stupidity, so it was kind of like "What in the hell is going on?" Then you start hearing the—what's going on in the country and the guys that went to R and R and they're getting screamed and yelled at and it's going—it's like, you know—

Jim: Did you take any heat because you were from Wisconsin, which is kind of a hot bed of protest?

Curry: Actually not. I didn't in my units at all.

Jim: Were there racial difficulties or drug and alcohol difficulties --

Curry: I think—well, I think by—because I talked to some of my vet friends who were there in '68-'69 and a lot of them say "Look I never used the shit, you know, I never—it wasn't around me." By '71 it was pretty—I'm gonna say pretty much everywhere that *I* was. And pot was—anybody young, Christ, 99% of people would have smoked that. The other drugs, that depended and my understanding was that was pretty unit by unit. So, was there a lot of racial tension in our unit? No. But we obviously heard about it because you know, they were taking guns back and that was one of the things noted, that you know, we're more fearful of a riot between our own troops and so many overcoming the base. So, no, but I think—my understanding was that was pretty much depending where you were, that was either a factor or not. Drugs was a factor on our base but, you know there were the people that heavily indulged in it and went over, and then there were the people who experimented with it, and then you have people who drank

themselves to death and people who smoked pot. So it was kind of a—it was a buffet of any kind of lifestyle you wanted.

Jim: So was your food and living conditions better in Lao—in Thailand?

Curry: Yeah, they were. Yeah, 'cause it was on an Air Force base there. Now for awhile we lived in the town. So we lived in the—we lived right in the Thai villages. And the Thai people were—I was just amazed. Here's a people who love their country, who had a picture, every restaurant had a picture of the King and Queen in it, and the Thai military was one you didn't want to screw with. You know they were kinda like the Koreans, they—you know, they had their stuff together. And—

Jim: How did they feel about Americans?

Curry: I think—we got along tremendously. You know, there's that point where everybody you interface with, we were providing a lot of jobs as Americans so I'm—there was a lot of people that loved us. I think back in the villages there were a lot of people who, you know, their sons and daughters were going in, and their daughters were being dated by Americans and it's that whole ugly American scheme. Did they come and try to shoot you and—I mean, it would have been maybe like somebody in Chicago coming and shooting you 'cause you fooled with his daughter. There wasn't any—no, it was completely different than Vietnam. It was *completely* different than Vietnam. Now, you know, the North Vietnamese would sometimes bring in raids to try to knock out the planes and stuff like that. But now the Air Force would—I mean their air force, airplanes and stuff, you know—they had all the equipment we didn't have in Vietnam. I mean it was amazing. I don't know how the air force did it but, it was amazing on what they had.

Jim: So, actually sometimes American bases in Thailand got attacked?

Curry: Yeah. Yeah. And the – it depended (??) —those that were close to the border. And there was one—oh God, the base that was right at the northeast corner, I can't remember the name of it—that used to get hit quite a bit, 'cause that was right across the Mekong, and that's where a lot of the secret air operations came out of. Udorn had Air America in there. We were fairly close to the river, and all the close (??) air support, you know the F-4s and everything came out of there. So if they could – and the B-66s that went up with the B-52s, I mean it was all high value target stuff. These are fairly sophisticated attacks. These weren't your Viet Cong farmers during the day. These would be trained NVA or Laotian troops that would come down for a specific reason. You know, they weren't there to take over the base. They were there to destroy and get out of there quickly. And were they infrequent? Oh, yeah, compared to Vietnam, yeah. 'Cause Vietnam you could expect something every day or every hour of every day; and here it was long periods in between. I mean you were safe on the ground. Now, it was kind of like, now when you flew to your—on your missions, you know if

you flew one mission it's four hours, eight hours, if anything happened while you were up there it was pretty much over at that point. Because, one, we didn't have—we had the Hmong on the ground, thank God, but a lot of times we were flying, we were flying right to the border with—to—Hanoi is about at that same level. Once a month we had to make trips into southern China because China was building a highway out of China down into, into Laos, and the fear was, you know, the old they're going to take over Thailand and everything, right? But the North Vietnamese used to take some of their troops and take 'em up through China and transport 'em across southern China where they were immune to American air strikes, and then bring 'em down this highway into Laos. So this highway was—they were always trying to figure out how far are they, how far are they? So we had to go out and find out.

Jim: So you flew into China?

Curry: Yeah.

Jim: What—we weren't supposed to do that, were we?

Curry: No, no. Well, I don't know if we were supposed to fly, you know. You know, I remember reading about Nixon giving a speech saying that we have no forces fighting in Laos. And that was revealed finally at the end of the war. That was covered, but—no, I mean there was—I remember there were C-130s going into China. I couldn't tell you what the mission was. But I remember coming back, and we would pass by radio call. And so I don't know if they were Air America C-130s or if they were some of ours. I don't know what the mission was. But we weren't the only plane flying into China.

Jim: They weren't gunships though, were they?

Curry: No.

Jim: They were just—

Curry: Some -- I don't—you know, they could have been dropping off stuff, they could have been—I couldn't tell you. That part I didn't know. But I knew we went up because we could—on this film we could track all the traffic that was moving on the highway. And—now by '71 we were pulling back, so the Air Force was bringing back a lot of its assets, its air assets out of the area. So where they used to have F-4s flying up there all the time to provide cover—I mean not only for us, but you know, for during the day all the transports going in and supplying the Hmong, the FACs and stuff like that, putting the air strikes in there, stuff like that, you know, finally they didn't have enough F-4s to be on station. So what they did was they had a hot pad and it was a group right there—you know on where you had the four and the four -4s sitting there with the pins in 'em, but they were in the shack and they sat there in their G-suits and everything else. So, if a MiG did come, ok, they could be launched within, you know, minutes. Now, it would

take—and this is bad memory—F-4 would take ten minutes to get up there? With afterburners? I could be wildly off on that one. I just remember when we were out there it was like ungodly long. Because then they—in '71 we would get calls, and I remember these calls 'cause we started getting quite frequent and it would be—our call sign was Spud—so it was “Spud two-two, we have bandits out of a Bulls-eye.” and Bulls-eye was Hanoi. Bandits were MiGs, and then they would give us what longi—what angle they're at, “They're at your 0-90” or whatever, I can't remember. “Angles unknown or altitude unknown,” and then, “Seven minutes to your position.” So, we'd turn around and start heading south, obviously, at two hundred fifty miles an hour while this MiG is doing whatever it's doing. And then you'd wait for the calls, and finally till you would get the call that the F-4s were and --

[End of Tape 2, Side A]

Jim: When MiGs saw F-4s they took, off, is that—

Curry: Yeah, yeah, they—

Jim: Do you know if they ever engaged each other?

Curry: Yeah, they did. I mean, I'm just saying—we were hopeful that once our—once the F-4s were like within a couple minutes of us that—the mission normally was for them to come down and either harass, perhaps test, you know, what our response was going to be, and if they could take out a slow mover, you know, I'm certainly that would go over well, you know, at the officers club that night when they got back. But there were some times where there weren't resources, and if it was a moonlit night a lot of times we would duck down and fly the valleys to get below the radar. So at least we could buy a little bit of time that they could send the MiG toward us, but the MiG at a certain point their nose radar would take over, and if we were down below some mountains hopefully we could buy some time. 'Cause that's all we could do was buy time. There is one case of—in Laos, where a Mohawk did take down a—I think it was a MiG—and they had rockets on. It was determined they had visual recon, and it was one of these things that never happens in a million years. But they would come—they would penetrate that far south, and a Mohawk happened to actually take one out. But that was kind of—but that was heard all over because it was such an odd—but now we were flying without weapons, and that's—

Jim: You were flying without weapons in Laos also?

Curry: Oh yeah, yeah, all the time, except our .38 at the side.

Jim: Oh, ok, that's right because of the Air Force problem.

Curry: Yeah, because of the Air Force. So, we had to rely on them fully. So, and there was a period in—a lot of this I struggle with, so I usually don't talk about it or if I do it's kind of pulled out—but the reason I know the Hmong so well is in September I was up there on one of these CIA missions up there, and we did have a MiG come down and it took us out. And I don't know if it was a missile, I don't know if it was—

Jim: You got shot down.

Curry: We got shot down.

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: And the guy that I was flying with—and I'd only flown with him this one time—got killed. Kept it airborne for—it could've been ten minutes, it could've two minutes, because you know you lose track of time at that point. And the plane was kind of falling apart and I wanted to try to get as far south as I could because we were just south of the China border and was trying to at least get south of the Plain of Jars where the Hmong were. And so I injected my—you know, I took a rope, and took the injection handle and took him out and took myself out, injected out, and we landed north of the Plain of Jars, where some small hill tops were coming. And he crashed—I could hear him crash down through the forest close to me. I wasn't sure where he was. I was scared shitless, you know, I didn't know what in the hell was gonna go on. It's probably not going to be good. And then there was gunfire, and I just figured, oh boy, I'm here with a .38 and this is not going to go down good. So I tried to hide basically is what I did. And then there was gunfire behind me, so now I didn't know what in the hell was going on. What had happened was I landed near one of these Hmong firebases. I also landed near where some NVA were positioning themselves—I don't know, to attack the Hmong firebase or whatever it was. They knew a plane went down. They knew a couple people had come down, so that was—that was big stakes for them to get an American. And the Hmong fought a pitched battle over the top of my head. And they called in the CIA helicopters, the silver Hueys, and got out, and I flew back to Long Chieng. I was there like a day, and then I met the guy who was in charge of the unit—flew back to the base and met him and thanked him a million times for saving my life and everything else. And—and then I flew back to our base and—then there was a lot of other stuff in there but that's—I mean—I found out later that—'cause I'd met this guy, by happenchance three or four years ago in Milwaukee. Colonel Xay Dang. I met him at a basement of a Vietnam Vets meeting. I just went to thank Joe Campbell for literally saving my life, on some things that happened in my life, and he was sitting in the basement. And here's a guy who saved my life and we both cried, in each other's arms. And to meet him in Milwaukee, thirty some years later—and then I find out that—I'm gonna have this wrong—but four or five of the Hmong died, and seven or eight of them were wounded, but that was their job. They would take the whole unit down to get the American out, whatever it took.

Jim: Ok. I don't want to press you on the details you don't want to talk about, but you said you were extracted by a Air America helicopter—

Curry: Right.

Jim: Did you get back to the Hmong firebase or did they have a patrol that came and got you?

Curry: Well, their little firebase out there, they sent out a patrol to, to protect me, right?

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: To get enough space for the Huey to come in. The Huey came in snatched me.

Jim: So you were snatched from where you landed and where you ejected.

Curry: Yeah, yeah. And then I went back to their Long Chieng, which was their—

Jim: Main base.

Curry: Main base. Which would probably look like a remote base to us, but—and sat there and got debriefed and-- kinda much, and got totally toasted drunk with 'em I think, and—and then—I think it was day after that—I'm kinda losin' pieces here, 'cause for a long time I just didn't want to remember anything about this—

Jim: Sure.

Curry: And, I—I don't know—I really don't know who this other—I remember this one guy by his name, but it might have been his call sign so I don't even know—there's a lot of guilt there on—for whatever reasons on—I can't even go to this guy's family and say I knew this guy for two hours. So—

Jim: The pilot, you're talking about.

Curry: Yeah, yeah. 'Cause the CIA did have some of our equipment and sometimes they would—they would grab Army people to fill in on some of their flights and stuff, so that's how I met this guy. Just by happenchance on doing it. But, there was—I think I saved all my—well, I didn't save 'em, I was writing my fiancée, who is now my wife, and you know, I'd write her every day or every three days or something. She kept all those letters. So when I started writing my—when the first—and I'm kinda jumping ahead, but just a—when the first Gulf War broke out, it's like something snapped up in my head. I just—oh, my God—I was glued to CNN, I was—you know, I was hibernating in my office, I was—I started drinking like a banshee, and I hadn't had that problem before. And then I started writing these memories of all this—I'd write about this piece, and then I'd write

about getting shot down, then I'd write about this. And then, you know, for about a year I went through this kind of thing. And wrote pretty much the book and almost got published and then something happened with Vietnam books were dead again, and then, you know, I just went—and then I was pissed off and fuck this thing, and forget it and everything else so—and, and I—three or four years ago my life totally crumpled, mentally and everything. And Joe got me into the VA. 'Cause I didn't—you know, I'd heard of PTSD but, I never went to the VA. I got all my arms and limbs, you know. I have no reason to go back there, and they took me in there—I was kind of like, pretty much a basket case.

Jim: How did you meet Joe Campbell?

Curry: My daughters got a hold of him. They wrote to the Vietnam Vets chapter and say, you know, "My dad is—I need help, I don't know who to go to." And Joe happened to be the one to pick up the letter. And he had had a family, and he kinda, you know—I don't want to get into Joe's business, but he'd kinda destructed on—with drinking and that—probably five years before I did and—

Jim: Well, Joe has been interviewed so—

Curry: Ok.

Jim: So for the record, people can find out about Joe's story so—

Curry: Yeah. Yeah and so he—I mean he literally was able to point me, get me to the VA, get me to the right doctors and—I mean literally saved my life. And, and then when the doctors found out—I guess I'm—this is a big circle coming back around—the doctors found out that I'd been writing this book. I remember the one doctor going, "Do you know why you were writing the book?" And I went, "I don't know. I thought I was going to be an author or something." And he said, "No, you were writing the book because that's how you're gonna let this thing out. It's how you're gonna let all this shit out." And I said, you know, I went probably like every vet, you know, "Why thirty years later?" You know, why not—and he says, "'cause you've been stuffing it and your body's getting older and it can't stuff it as far as it did before." So anyway, he helped me—they helped me finish the book, and there's still pieces I haven't written about, to get it out, more of a cleansing kind of thing. And what was incredible was, because of meeting this Hmong I got to meet the entire community in Milwaukee.

Jim: This is at that—

Curry: This is like four years ago.

Jim: Yeah, ok, that's the meeting that you –

Curry: Yeah.

Jim: Saw Joe at.

Curry: Yeah, and then I—and when I came back from the country I always had this guilt, especially when the Hmong started coming back here. And then you'd read stories in the paper of how they're struggling, and you know, to a lot of vets, you know, they're a bunch of Vietnamese again 'cause they're Asian and you know, all they saw were the Vietnamese fighting in the war, so they consider, you know, here's the same shit again. And, so I could see these people struggling. On the other hand, I could—you know, I'd drive through the neighborhood near around Marquette, and I could never approach any of them because I felt like they should want to kill me because we let those people out to dry.

Jim: Mm hmm.

Curry: I mean—there was a slaughter there that was totally unnecessary and uncalled for, that this government was totally responsible for. And we just let 'em out to hang. One day we decided the war was done and that was frickin' it. And, then when I met Colonel Xay Dang and the other people, and my God, these people are the most forgiving—not even forgiving because they don't hold us—at least I haven't met one that was pissed off at us, they're just happy to be here and—the world they went through coming home—I mean, they swam rivers, they got shot in their back, they had their wives taken out and all kinds of things done in front of them, I mean the most horrendous atrocities you can ever think. And that's what happened at the end of these wars to just about *all* these people. And then they went into camps in Thailand which were essentially concentration camps. I mean, the Americans didn't—you know, we wanted to walk away from that war as fast as we could and just let that whole thing—so we didn't want to bring the Hmong into it, you know, that we have some responsibility. And then the United Nations got involved in these camps and they actually started forcing some of these people back into Laos, at gunpoint, and, you know, how can these people ever forgive? We were their allies. They saved I don't know how many of our pilots, because not one P.O.W. who was shot down in Laos was ever returned. North Vietnam they were, but never Laos. And I knew of guys on the ground who landed alive. They were alive when they were on the ground. And they never came home. But there was that whole side of the war where those people were all traded off. And you can get into a whole lot of detail of—you know, I did a lot of writings and working in the book of when the agreement was written in Vietnam we essentially forced it down the throats of the Hmong and the Laotians to sign the same agreement. And many times we withheld—our government withheld guns and payroll until agreements would be signed. So—and the Hmong knew what was going to happen, afterward, and that's exactly what happened. But, anyway, I'm getting off on a tangent but there was so much guilt in me of how could I even show my face to these people, not that they would even know, you know, who I was, I was a eighteen year old kid there, but that was another reason I wanted to hide from this whole thing, of how can—here I was so much a part—you know,

in my own small way. And then these people are just—and now they're getting spit on in the U.S. you know, they're going "Oh, oh, it's the damn Hmong." You know I'd run into people, "Well they're getting everything free. They're not paying taxes," and I'd have to walk out. I'd say, "You really don't want to have this discussion right now." And sometimes I could handle it, and I'm not a violent person. I don't get into fistfights or anything like that.

Jim: What was your reaction when that Hmong killed those people hunting in northern Wisconsin?

Curry: Well, I mean it was so sad because I was—every—he was a *Hmong*. Now, if I went out and—I wouldn't be a *German-Swedish American*, you know, I would be whoever it was, but right away that label's on him, that somehow they need to know that it's a Hmong, right, and so, and to the community that was devastating. That was just devastating 'cause they've been fighting this image thing that went on. The individual obviously had a problem. You know, you can be bad and good in any—

Jim: Mm hmm.

Curry: Any type of people, and it's an unfortunate situation but I think there's a lot more education now because for awhile when I last—three or four years when I was up in the Oshkosh area—there's a lot of things written in the Hmong newspaper almost every week, and I was really kind of shocked by that. But, you know, I realize that there's a lot of Hmong in different areas in the state so I think, yeah there's always gonna be some of the good old boys who hates black, Asians and everybody else and this gives 'em one damn excuse to do whatever, ok. And you know, we're never going stop that, but I know the Hmong community was devastated. And I was hurt for them, but I was surprised that there wasn't as much as a backlash. Now, I'm not Hmong, so I didn't—you know I'm not getting the shit so, but I thought it would be a lot more severe. Now, up in that area I don't think I'd want to be walking around but—

Jim: Well, this was not a bad circle to go, but I just want to, kinda wrap up Laos and then—

Curry: Yeah.

Jim: Is there anything after you got shot down that happened in Laos that is notable? Did you go back to flying again?

Curry: Yeah, I went back to flying again.

Jim: Was that difficult?

Curry: Well, one, I don't think there was a choice.

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: And—no, I knew I was—I had survived that by the grace of God and I think there's probably that fatalistic thing that, you know, I got time to serve and I gotta get back in there and do it. So it - I just did it. I don't -- Was I scared? I'm sure I was. Did I somehow fight it? No. I don't remember fighting it in my mind –

Jim: OK.

Curry: Just—no— it was maybe part of it was to get back and get those sons-of-bitches. Yeah, I don't what all would have been going on but the war was, you know, by the time we're getting at the end of '71 the NVA were really making moves in. The U.S. had put some Thai units up there now in there as artillery units, and it was at the point I *knew* that landscape. I knew—I had detected—now, what in the hell's that lake called, oh shit—Roadrunner Lake up there. And I don't know if it's 'cause it looks like a roadrunner or something when you look at it from above but—you kind of knew the highways. You know, even though it's jungle you have some major highways, even though it's a path, but I kept picking up movers right along this like shear drop off ridge right by the lake there. And so I you know, I'm going, "They're sneaking something in here." So that night—and I had gotten up there, and I'd been up there enough that Alleycat knew who I was and stuff like that. And I said, "There's something going on over here. We have to put in some air strikes." And they had actually built a road underneath the jungle there and were putting it along the shear. 'Cause they put air strikes on that all night. That thing burned into the next day. So I mean that was a proud thing for me to go— boy, you know, I caught 'em at their game and then because I was doing something I was now—and I was doing something for the Hmong so it wasn't I was fighting the war for a place where we should or shouldn't be anymore, I felt I had a purpose. That I was doing something to—you know I couldn't decide the politics of the guy on the other side of that rifle. You know he was trying to kill me not 'cause he hated me but that was his job. So that was my job, to do that. And that's what I did till, you know, till my—you know the days that, you know I had a—I was still officially assigned to Vietnam because we weren't supposed to be there. So when I flew back I actually had to fly—I was reassigned to the 225th down at Tuy Hua. So I flew back to Tuy Hua to do my— get my bags and papers together. And I had four or five days there. That was like—I was like a new guy there.

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: Nobody would even talk to me; spend the time of day with me.

Jim: And after you'd been there for a year just about.

Curry: Yeah. It was like—I was just an outcast in that group. And I wanted—I was trying to get a flight back, down to Cam Ranh—

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: And I couldn't. I couldn't. I'm going, "I'm gonna miss my date." And I don't know what—somehow, I think you had the fear –

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: that they could automatically keep you, right? A DEROS date or whatever it was? And I finally went to the CO, or one of the people, and I said, "Look, I've got to get down to Cam Ranh." He said, "Ok, I'll—come back here tonight," you know, "I'll get it arranged for you." So I came back down. And he said, "You're flying" He said, "The only way I can get you down there is if you fly a mission out of Saigon." And I looked at him like, "You're fucking kidding." And then I knew I was going to die. I just knew this was it. And he was serious. The only—I had to fly an infrared mission outside Saigon, and—well, I'm alive today and I made it, but that was just like, ok, this is where you get killed on the last day.

Jim: So how did—did you take a Mohawk down to fly—

Curry: I flew right seat. It was infrared, north—out of northern Saigon. I plotted out the mission. We went down there, and we were ready to go in and in that patch of rice paddy there was this low level fog. By some stroke of luck that fog just was right there, and it never moved, and we stayed up there, thinking it would drift off, right, because when you're flying treetops you can't do that kind of shit. And that fog stayed there, and finally he said, "Ok, we're gonna have to abort the mission and I'll drop you off in Cam Ranh." And I just looked up to the sky and I say, "You *are* still there." (both laugh) And then Cam Ranh and then back to—Fort, where was it, Washington—

Jim: Fort Lewis?

Curry: Fort Lewis, yeah.

Jim: Is that where you were separated from the military?

Curry: Yeah, that was just—that was hell. That was—

Jim: Explain that, please.

Curry: Well, you know—I mean, there's the excitement of the plane lifting off out of Cam Ranh Bay, and there's the talk and you know, we make a pit stop in Japan and we get a milkshake and then we're talking about what we're gonna get—and there was always this talk that you get this steak dinner when you get back there to Fort Lewis. Kind of the Army and the country's thank you kind of thing, right?

And so we come back, and we land in the middle of the night and I'm going, you know I'm thinking there's something to this middle of the night shit. And we go out to the base and the base is, you know, it's like midnight or whatever and it's kind of quiet and we get thrown in this building, kind of on the backside of Fort Lewis. To me there didn't seem to be a lot going on. Big cavernous building is all I'm in, and then it was like—it was like basic training. It was, "Get your asses in this line. Put all your"—you know we had to throw all of our clothes in a pile and then it was march into the showers. And just abuse, just a—and I'm thinking look, I don't want you guys to pat me on the back, just don't—excuse my language again—don't fuck with me, you know. And now your mind is racing eight hundred miles an hour, what in the hell is going on? And—I mean just from one place – "Now, fill this out, just being talked to like—and this is by your own brothers in the military, like scum of the earth.

Jim: Were these people mainly Vietnam vets or—

Curry: I don't know. I have no idea.

Jim: Ok.

Curry: They were at Fort Lewis. Whether they had been there before or not I have no clue. And just—I mean it was just like—we had to go out and police the cigarettes and do like that. And one guy raises his hands and says—(laughs) this is stupid but—he says, "What about the steak dinner?" And then we just got reamed. "Well, if you want to spend another three days here, and get your god damned dinner, or if you want to get home." So one guy in the back—I wrote in the book, I can't remember the words he used, just he said it for all of us at that point—and that was just—well, first when we got to the airport, you know the MPs are taking –

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: All the stuff through and digging through your bag and throwing stuff in the trash they don't like, and digging for drugs and paraphernalia and whatever and then, you know, all of a sudden a bunch of us go into the room where we have to strip down, they do the rubber glove, and it's just like, this is just like—I don't even know how to describe that. It was like, wow, "Welcome home, "right? And then you get thrown in to the Seattle thing where they're just abusing hell out of the units – just

Jim: Were you in uniform in Seattle?

Curry: We came back in our jungle fatigues.

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: And then they gave us new—what do they? —Class –

Jim: A, I think.

Curry: Class A, brand new ones and then, you know, finally get to the point and you get your ticket, we're gonna take you tonight at like eleven o'clock, and that's when I'm going, why is it always—

Jim: At night.

Curry: In the middle of the night, you know are they hiding us or—you know, I'm kinda thinking there might be something to that, but we all get on the big school bus and we're all kind of kidding each other, you know, screw this shit and we're out of here. We're going home; we're all excited about this stuff. And as we're pulling up to the airport in Seattle, the bus driver says, "Friendly fires." I remember the door is like squeakin' open. And we're going, "What in the hell is he talking about?" We're all getting up in line and you know, I'm in the line and guys are getting out and you could hear like yelling and stuff up in front. And as I get off the bus, this is kinda like—this is like *déjà vu*, like everything goes into slow motion. There's a group of people kind of up off the sidewalk, and they're like middle aged white—kind of like some of the protesters of the anti-abortion kind of—

Jim: Mm hmm

Curry: Just like would drive a mini-van nowadays, and they're up there, and they're chanting, and we can't make it out at first what it is. 'Cause we're walking up and now it's kind of like ok, now we just got to get to those doors. And then we started getting pelted with stuff, and I got hit with an egg, guy in front of me got hit with blood and stuff and we realized later it was like chicken guts and stuff. And then they were screaming, "Baby killers." "Crazies." All that stuff. And there started to be a scuffle in the front. And—I'm remembering it vividly, but it's like in slow motion. And it's just kind of a, what in the hell—but whatever it was somehow we made it, we got it into the airport, and we kinda just ran, and just kinda ran in this open area in the airport, and there was kind of people walking around. And all of a sudden here's a bunch of people in uniform coming in and some got like chicken guts on 'em and—I remember one guy like grabbing his kids and like shuffling 'em off to get 'em away from us. And I walked into the men's room. And I took my uniform— I was pissed -- took my uniform – I was pissed and I stuffed it in the garbage can in the men's room. And I pulled some civilian clothes out of my bag, and I put those on, and that's almost the last time I talked about it. I came home—I was just pissed at that point. Well, that's not exactly true. I get off at the airport. My fiancée and her mother meet me. My fiancée is upset I don't have my uniform on, but you know I'm thankful I don't. And then it was just kinda—I'm in my civilian clothes, I just want to get away from whatever, and went to the house. And some days later I went out to the mall, and—one of these big, grand malls they'd just built—and I started having

flashbacks then. I would and you know I was pissed, I was going these—I just wanted to scream out at these people, “Do you realize people are living in cardboard boxes just twenty hours from here? That kids are getting killed?” That—and they’re walking around and la, la, la, and it’s like the war never was going on, and I had to get out of there. I just— I just – and then I know sometime in between there I calmed down or stuffed it further. I went to UWM. I was going to save the world. I was gonna be a journalist and I was gonna unleash all this shit that was on the world, and—of course on the campus I kept my—up until my last year—my Vietnam veteran identity a closely guarded secret because the protests were still going on then. And in fact, a couple years ago—this is an aside, but I’m walking across the mall at UWM, because I’ve gone back to take some masters courses, and I’m going to a VVA meeting at night, right? So I had a shirt on with a VVA patch on it. Now, it’s like there’s nobody on the campus. I’m walking across the mall. I’ve got my jacket, and I find myself sliding my jacket over that patch. And as I did it I realized “Holy shit, what am I doing?” But it was that I didn’t want anybody to know, and I was doing it not thinking about it. And then I’d gone out and applied for a couple jobs, and I remember like my dad saying, “If you’re a veteran you get all these different points on interviews.” And I put down, you know, Combat Veteran Vietnam, and I know I actually lost some jobs because of that. So that never went on the resume again. And you know, my immediate family knew. Up until four years ago they never really knew a lot of what happened because, you know, like all of us, one who would understand, why go through it in your own mind again, verbalize it. And I think more importantly was I just didn’t want to be hurt by somebody judging me again, by somebody saying, “Oh, you were one of those baby killers,” or, “Ah, you know I have stress.” Getting judged the second time hurts more than the first.

Jim: Let me ask a question and don’t answer it if you don’t want to. The last presidential election hopefully was the last one the Vietnam war will be an issue, and the veteran movement seemed to go with the guy who didn’t serve in Vietnam as opposed to the guy who did. Do you have any comment about that?

Curry: Yeah. Well, we didn’t have a whole lot of choice. So to me it was this is the two you got to pick from. I voted for Kerry, and I disagreed with some of his politics when he came back. More so from the standpoint that I’d seen a number—I don’t want to say too many, one is too many—too many rich people who avoided military service. And if somebody—you know, I got to the point I voted for Clinton. Hey, if Clinton at that time decided that “I don’t want to serve in the war”, that’s his choice. And if he wants to live with the outcome of that, that’s his choice—“I’m doing it.” So, that’s more of a ballsy being a man move than somebody who gets into the National Guard because of his dad, into a unit that’s never going to get called, and then can’t show up for half the meetings, and then of course later on is the guy that says, “Bring it on.” Or somebody like Dick Cheney who totally—here’s a guy who was too busy for the Vietnam War. That is just—oh, my God. I would vote for almost *anybody* after that point. So, do I

have problems with a lot of what Kerry said and did when he came back? Yeah. I wasn't so sure I knew what *my* (laughs) politics were when I came back. And was he the best choice? No, I—there was that other general that I was kind of hoping he would get up there that was running in the Democratic Party and—

Jim: Clark—Wesley Clark.

Curry: Yeah, yeah I—somehow I had some respect for him, and uh—but no, I just—

[End of Tape 2, Side B]

Jim: You were talking about General Aderholt, and the advice he gave you—or a discussion you had about all of this.

Curry: Well, you know, he talked about a lot of the things that we had learned in Vietnam and Laos were totally not used in the current war, so—he's probably a Republican, (laughs) I mean I—you know we never got to that level but a lot of the things that happened in Vietnam when—now he's doing some PTSD at the, at the—'cause after 9/11 you know, I just went off the wall again, mentally. I was up to 300 pounds; I was eating myself to death when I wasn't trying to drink myself to death. And—anyway I was in there for—and the TVs would come on and you know, 9/11 happened and boy, just that adrenaline. It was just like going a hundred miles an hour again and it's like getting ready to go out to battle and you're not going but somehow, you know, I'd watch TV and I'm looking for stuff to come on out of some—and you know, it's a weird shit. And they're talking about this happened and the secret weapons and stuff like that, and you know, you've got to be careful in some of these vet groups 'cause some of them are very staunch Republicans that—those are arguments that are just better not—

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: It's better not even having 'em because it's not going to go anywhere good. So I kinda—and I said “Look, I'm not a Saddam lover, but I remember Tonkin Gulf and some of these other things,” and excuse my language again but I said “Somehow there's a big fuck coming here, and I just don't know where it's coming from.” And—and everybody's gonna have their own beliefs after that. You know, Afghanistan, yeah I think we had every right in the world and the world was behind us. Iraq, I think that speaks for itself. I mean, the one good thing that does come out of it is up until this day the veterans have been respected by the community. And if that's one thing that you know, us Vietnam vets gave—and somebody—, Joe I think, was the one that told me I had—we had a close friend who was a Gulf War vet who, you know, who believed that he never did enough. You know, always put himself down and Joe said to him, he said, “You know what you guys did, you gave us our respect back. Because we didn't have to hide anymore.” And that was true you know, when I think about that. It did it. And now when I mention that I'm a vet and I, you know I—you know I've had some stuff like that I—like John wears 'em all the time. I'm still kinda I'm

not at that point yet, you know. But when I do wear 'em, like if I go to a meeting and I keep it on by accident and I walk—and I do have people stop me now and say, “I just want to thank you for your service.” And that kind of freaks me out, 'cause I'm waiting for the other shoe to fall. And—(phone ringing)—but—

Jim: Do you want to answer it?

Curry: Oh, I --it was—a little while—I'm sitting there Easter, with my wife, and she's getting up and doing stuff in the kitchen and the news just happens to come on and these veterans—this is a couple years ago—so some of these vets are coming back on leave from Iraq. And they're wearing their uniforms, sitting, and this is the Milwaukee airport. And they're filming 'em, and when they're walking through, everybody in the airport's doing this (clapping his hands), and I'm just stunned. I'm watching the TV and I just kind of—ok. And I'd let it roll and June was kinda watching it from the background. She said, “What'd you think of that?” And I said, “You know, I got a bunch of emotions flying right now.” I said, “Right now I just want to cry.” I said, “Gee, they deserve all of that.” And I said, “There's a certain – there's part of me that goes—I guess I didn't even want that. I just didn't want to be abused.” And that's what continues to hurt. And—but you know I also found that the younger generation, the generation of my daughters, look at it completely different. You know, without going into a lot of detail, and it's—you know, which I can do at some point—my life literally hit the wall three or four years ago. And where, you know, I damned near died and probably wasn't going to have a life again. And my daughters and June came and surrounded me and then they got a hold of people like Joe, and I got to the VA and those people literally saved my life. I can't say enough good things about 'em. And the veterans' community. I went to the Vietnam Vets meeting to thank Joe, not to join, 'cause I didn't want anything to do with any kind of vets organization. I wanted to be as far away from that as I could. And then I met Colonel Xay Dang, and I went, and I met these guys and they never judged me. And just like they didn't judge you over there. And I went, “Wow, I found my brothers, you know, that I lost a long time ago.” And—because when I came back I never had friends. I had acquaintances. But I never let anybody get real close to me. I was close to my daughters; I was probably a little standoffish with my wife. Although, you know, we still loved each other. She had seen both sides of me before Vietnam and after. And after I met these guys again I was kinda like, “Wow. These are what friends are.” They'll go through thick and thin with you, they'll cover your ass, they'll do whatever. They can joke about, -- and I'm going, “Wow. This is like—this is like it was thirty years ago.” And it was like a revelation to me. So now I do belong to the Vietnam Vets chapter. Like I said, I don't walk around with the hats on or the vests or do all that stuff. There's still a part of me that—that's not quite comfortable with that. I do a lot with the Hmong groups now. We're trying to build a library in Laos with Chuck, and do that. And somehow that's—doing that is making it right. And I don't even know what right means because I can't redo the past, but that's how I'm dealing with it now rather than not dealing with it.

Jim: How would you—I mean you’ve been very candid about what Vietnam did to you as far as some of the bad things. Would you assess whether it was on the whole a negative or a positive in your life?

Curry: Wow. I don’t think there’s an answer to that. I mean, I was in places at eighteen that, if you look back, they write books about.

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: You know, part of the thing I didn’t mention, when after I’d been in Laos for awhile, I was debriefing groups of generals on what was happening in the— here I was, an eighteen-year-old punk, and these generals are getting the skinny from me on what I think is going on. I walk out of the meeting and I’m going—I mean these are places that you just—are overwhelming, you know in a memory. And the camaraderie, the—we had each other, and once you’ve been—now that I know it again, I’ll never give it up. I will never give it up. But when I came back, you know I came back by myself like everybody else did. So you had nobody to hang with. You kinda—you went in your own closet and you never raised your head above the sandbag again, ‘cause you didn’t want to take a shot. So if there was another Vietnam vet you kind of found out about it by accident, and then at that point you just never talked about it. He never talked about it, you never talked about it. And so now that I found that again, that’s what’s gonna keep me sane or—as sane as I can be the rest of my life. I mean my—June sees it in me. She goes, “My God, these are—I’ve never, you know, these are your true friends.” And she sees ‘em, you know, ‘cause they’ve helped her a lot too. So has it—I guess it was, I didn’t have—you know did I have a choice? I enlisted. We don’t have a choice a lot of things in life. So what do we take from it? Unfortunately I tried to hide it and not deal with it, and I didn’t know any better. And that became destructive, but now that I—now that I know what I’m dealing with in my mind—you know, for instance I know I can’t drink any more. ‘Cause that’ll lead to no good, plus it’ll, you know, bring flashbacks back probably even worse. But I know where to go. I know certain days if I feel this way, that I *can* feel this way. And it’s shitty, but I’m not going to try to work myself to death or overindulge in this or that to just go over here with it because it’s gonna end up self-destructing me. And would I wish I would have known it sooner? Oh, yeah. I mean, I think a lot of people do. And that’s why I have a nephew who’s a Navy SEAL, and I talked with him a couple years ago. He’s been to—oh, God knows all the places. I know he was in Afghanistan during Anaconda. And so we talk and I said to him, I said, “Look.” I said, “Kinda look what’s happening with my life, Kyle.” And I said, “You’re still in the Navy. You’re still a SEAL. You’re still bravo. You’re still strong. You’re not gonna take anything, but you know the shit that happens.” And I said, “If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here.” I said, “Because don’t do what I do. Don’t do what I did.” And he took my book and read it, and I said, “There’s a million of us out there, ok?” And I said, “Just don’t let it happen to you what happened to us. And if you can’t talk about it with

me, then go find somebody else to talk about it, but don't—and especially somebody like you, you're gonna be taught to stuff that as far as you can, but you can't do it 'cause it's gonna destroy you and eat you up." So, you know there—you know hopefully, you know there's a lot of vets who are doing things what Joe's doing, things with the returning Iraqi vets and their families and stuff, and maybe that's what we can do with what we've been through.

Jim: The one last thing I'd to talk to you about is what is the name of the book you wrote?

Curry: Ok, it's called—the title is *Whispering Death*.

Jim: OK.

Curry: And then the subtitle is *Our Journey with the Hmong in the Secret War in Laos*.

Jim: OK. And why did you write this—why did you—you told us why the VA told you were writing the book? Why did you start writing it yourself?

Curry: I have no idea. The Gulf War broke out, and for some reason there was a lot of emotions going on. A lot of—I think there was probably a ton of anger at what had happened to *us*. What had happened to *me*. That kind of the war was over, you'd come back and everybody expects, ok, get over it, pick it up, get moving, it couldn't have been that tough, you shouldn't have been there in the first place, move on. So that anger has always been there. Now I always—I always look like the kind-hearted fool, but underneath—you know, one day somebody at the VA said, "Bob, one of these days you're gonna realize what you're so pissed about. Or why were you so pissed in that meeting." I looked at her, and I looked at her and I'm saying, "What do you mean? I'm not an angry guy." Inside I'm going, "Who in the hell are you to tell me I'm pissed off?" (Jim laughing) And somehow a day later that clicked, you know, and holy shit—she's right! I think it was all that anger, and I had to get it out. And I had to write about these, these incidences like when, you know—and it was all random. I mean there wasn't any grand scheme to this thing. It was the time, you know, we got shot at with the MiGs, and then, you know, the time all the instruments were bad and we almost went into the side of a mountain 'cause of a stupid radar operator, and, you know, the mortar attack here, and I would just randomly write 'em over the room. It became like an obsession. I would be holed up in that, and then I'd be watching CNN. And years later, this is four years later, my wife is going through video tapes—you know how we record 'em so we're gonna reuse 'em?

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: So she's figuring well, you know, I can reuse these tapes. She says, "Why were you recording CNN?" And I said, "Well, no I wasn't recording CNN 'cause I was watching it all the time." "So now I have twenty tapes here. You were not

only watching it, then you were watching the tapes.” And see that part of me I don’t remember. She remembers one night thunder was, lightning and thunder and I was in a suit or something and the next—she couldn’t find me. And I was in the ditch in the front of the house, crawling through it, you know, with the rainwater coming through. And then she said, “What are you doing?” And I kinda went, you know—then I knew I was doing something stupid, but I don’t know what the (unintelligible) answer was but, yeah, there, yeah--

Jim: Well, we’ve covered an awful lot of ground, Bob. Is there any ground that we haven’t covered that we should?

Curry: Not that I’m aware of. I’ll get you a copy of the book. And there might be other things if you “Evelyn Wood” it that stick out. I’m always willing to—“Bob, what about this, or what about that?”

Jim: Yeah.

Curry: If—if I can’t talk, if I don’t want to talk about it or maybe it’s just not that day, you know I’ll mention it to you.

Jim: Sure

Curry: But, you know I’m fairly open to, you know—you know even what happened in my life four years ago just so other vets don’t go in that direction, but, I kinda see that as a separate aside –

Jim: Yes.

Curry: From this right now.

Jim: Well, thank you ever so—

[End of Interview]