

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ROGER HALLINGSTAD

Engine Mechanic, Air Force, Korean War;
Engine Mechanic, Air Force, First Indochina War.

2006

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Hallingstad, Roger D., (1932-). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Roger D. Hallingstad, a Sparta, Wisconsin native, discusses his Air Force service in Japan during the Korean War and in French Indochina at the end of the First Indochina War. Hallingstad touches on being in the 32nd Reconnaissance Division of the Wisconsin National Guard, helping his brother build experimental aircraft, and enlisting in the Air Force in 1950. While at basic training at Lackland Air Force Base (Texas), he talks about living in cold conditions in tents, receiving no uniforms, and having some tent-mates die of pneumonia. Hallingstad speaks of additional training at MacDill Air Force Base (Florida), aircraft and engine school at Sheppard Air Force Base (Texas), temporary duty working on engines at Chanute Field (Illinois), and volunteering for overseas duty in Japan. He discusses his three-week voyage aboard a troop ship. Hallingstad details his duties related to engine storage at a Far East Air Forces Materiel Command Air Force Base northwest of Tokyo. He mentions that he had been trained to work on R-3350 engines but was not allowed to transfer to do so. Hallingstad remembers seeing a plane crash that killed everyone aboard. In February of 1954, he talks about being told to pack up and report for a "special assignment," being put on an airplane without knowing his destination, arriving at Clark Air Force Base (Philippines), and being put on another plane, still without knowing his destination. Sent to Do Son Air Base near Haiphong (Indochina, now Vietnam), Hallingstad speaks of living conditions: adobe huts, mosquito netting, and open showers. He emphasizes that they were not told anything about combat conditions or the war. Hallingstad explains there was a strict curfew every night and anyone outside would be shot, which happened to a civilian woman one night. He recalls drinking with Foreign Legion paratroopers, journeying into Haiphong, and the tightening of security measures after some Americans were abducted. He portrays his limited exposure to Vietnamese civilians. Hallingstad details the conflict between French and American mechanics, explaining the French had lower quality standards, were disinterested, and would sometimes not show up for work. He speaks of working with C-47s, his limited awareness of the war, and catching a glimpse of "Earthquake McGoon" McGovern, a pilot who was later killed in action. Hallingstad tells of seeing a freezer full of meat flown in but being told that, due to a power failure, they couldn't eat it. He speaks being afraid after being issued a weapon during an alert, despite having to weapons training. After Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7th, he tells of his unit's getting pulled out, giving liquor to their replacements, and having some airplane problems on the flight to the Philippines. Hallingstad lists the promises about promotion, extra pay, and medals that the Army made while he was in Indochina, and which he never received. After returning to Japan, he talks about climbing Mount Fujiyama. Hallingstad reflects on the unpopularity of the conflicts in Vietnam and the unawareness he has encountered about the United States' early presence in Indochina. He relates getting assistance from Tammy

Baldwin's office to apply for a "Medal of Indochina" from the French government, which he has yet to receive.

Biographical Sketch:

Hallingstad (b.1932) served with the Air Force during the Korean War and Cold War. He was involved early on in the American involvement in Vietnam assisting the French Air Force. After his discharge, he attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and settled in Middleton.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2006

Transcribed by Gail Villwock, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

- Jim: July 21st, 2006. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm interviewing Roger Hallingstad at the Middleton V.F.W. Post 8216. Roger, when and where were you born?
- Roger: I was born on September 8, 1932 at St. Mary's Hospital in Sparta, Wisconsin.
- Jim: And is that where you grew up?
- Roger: That's where I grew up.
- Jim: And when did you graduate from high school?
- Roger: June 5th, 1950.
- Jim: 1950?
- Roger: 1950.
- Jim: Okay. And what did you do after high school, Roger?
- Roger: Well, I kind of did some odd jobs around Sparta, worked on the golf course, and for a time I was an apprentice fireman on a steam locomotive for the Chicago-Milwaukee-St. Paul Railroad. And then in the winter months my friend decided that he wanted to go in the service. And I had been a member of the Wisconsin National Guard, 32nd Reconnaissance Division, training at Camp McCoy. And many of my friends enlisted in the Navy, and I was the only one that went in the Air Force.
- Jim: Is there any reason why you went in the Air Force, Roger?
- Roger: Well, I had always liked airplanes, and my older brother was physically incapacitated to become a pilot in World War II, so he got—he got involved with experimental aircraft building homebuilts, and so I helped him on those projects and we had an airport out there. So I always liked the flying, but I never wanted to learn how to fly; I just liked the airport.
- Jim: Okay. And the fact that the Korean War was going on at that time, did that have any influence in the fact that you decided to enlist?
- Roger: Oh, yeah, I was patriotic. All of my high school buddies were, as I say, were enlisting in various branches of service, primarily the Navy.
- Jim: Did you have any family members that were veterans?

- Roger: No.
- Jim: So there was no—
- Roger: No military background.
- Jim: Not at all. And at that time was it considered really the thing to do for kids to go in the military?
- Roger: I think there was a lot of patriotism. Especially, you know, we were in Sparta, and that's the home of Camp McCoy. And they—during World War II my father worked for the Milwaukee Road involved with shipping all of the lumber in when they were building the new camp. They had their own Camp McCoy, which was a cavalry post. And then during the war as a way to earn money we'd go out there and sell newspapers, so we sold—they had three different units training for the Normandy Invasion. And after the war when they came back to be separated I was out there selling papers, so I got to know Camp McCoy like the back of my hand.
- Jim: When you entered the Air Force, where did you go?
- Roger: I enlisted in La Crosse and was inducted in Minneapolis.
- Jim: Okay. Okay. And where did you go for training?
- Roger: Well, they sent us down to Lackland Air Force Base, and they had so many volunteers they didn't have any barracks for us to live in, so they pitched all these tents out on this desolate, desolate field. They had no uniforms for us so we had to wear our own uniforms, or our own civilian clothes for, I don't know, two weeks. And several of my tent-mates got pneumonia, and we had a couple of them that died. I still have pictures of my flight leader and my flight—but the only warm place was the latrine, so we'd go up there at night and sleep on the floor, and whoever got in there first got a nice warm place, otherwise we slept in tents. And then they said they were going to transfer us to some other place, and I kept watching the bulletin board, and one morning I went up and I saw MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. So we got on these aircraft, I think they were C-47s, and they flew us into MacDill. And I'll never forget flying over the Gulf and seeing it's warm. And MacDill was a Strategic Air Command Base with B-47 bombers, jets. And they took us to the mess hall and they fed us, and I think that was the first decent meal I had in weeks, and they said you can have all the ice cream you want. So we stayed there and actually took some basic training, and then they had to get rid of us. So I had a friend who worked in the orderly room, he said, "I just want to let you know you're signed up for Cooks and Bakers School at Fort Benning, Georgia". "God," I said, "I don't want to go down to Fort Benning." "Well," he said, "the only other thing we got is Aircraft and Engine School in

Wichita Falls, Texas, at Sheppard Air Force Base.” I said, “I’ll go there.” So myself and three of my buddies, we went there.

Jim: So did they give you any kind of an aptitude test, or they just needed people to either be cooks and bakers or mechanics?

Roger: Apparently, apparently.

Jim: So what did you do when you got to Sheppard Air Force Base?

Roger: Well, first of all we went to Aircraft and Engine School. And they had three different shifts. I think we went six days a week, we went from 6:00 in the morning to 12:00 noon for I think three months, then from 12:00 to 6:00, and then the last of them was 6:00 to midnight, and we kept switching off, you know. And I think we got there, I don’t have any record, in February, and after that we went to another specialized school that we finished in December. And I remember riding a troop train from Wichita Falls to Chicago to go home for Christmas. And then I had to go back to MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

Jim: What was the reaction of your family when you came home from leave in December of '51? Any thought about their concern about the war and you being involved in it or anything like that?

Roger: I don't think, I don't remember.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: That's one of those things where at Christmas time, 1951, a lot of my friends were home at Christmas leave and we hadn't seen each other since high school, so we'd go out and party and get together and share experiences in our various, you know, military—

Jim: Did you have any discussions about the war or anything like that with your friends?

Roger: No, I don't think so. We just young kids.

Jim: Yeah. Okay, then when you—during this engine training did you have an aptitude for fixing engines, or—

Roger: I think I—I think they gave us some tests for mechanical ability. And looking at my records I see that they rated me, so apparently they did. They must have done that down at Wichita Falls.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: It was a God-forsaken place. They had signs there: "All airmen and dogs keep off the lawn."

Jim: [Laughter]

Roger: And I can remember one of my experiences, we were always hungry, I don't know why.

Jim: Because maybe you were young and needed a lot of food. Did you enjoy fixing engines?

Roger: Well, to tell you the truth I never did get a chance to work on them.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Roger: Outside of the school. But when I got back to MacDill they said we've got some classes at Chanute Field, Illinois on R-3350s. These were all piston engines, reciprocating, and we'd like to send you up there to school. And I think that was like sixty days temporary duty.

So we went up to Chanute, I think there were, I don't know, four or five of us, and what they would do, they'd have all these different engines in these different, what'd they call them, cells, and they'd take stuff off and then we had to go in and diagnose what is wrong with them, and that was exciting. I love to solve problems, and I thought, boy, this could be fun to get by in a unit someplace, and here is the aircraft and you're going to work on the engines. So I graduated from that, and went back to MacDill, and MacDill is all jets. So one day my friends that we went to this engine school were in our barracks, and a guy came in and said, "Anybody want to take a trip?" And we said, "Where?" "Well, Japan." And I said, "Geez, I'd like to go." And the other guys said, "Yeah, we'll go." So they said, "Okay." So I just came off of leave, and they said, "Well, you got so many days to get to California." And so we went all the way to Key West. This guy had bought a car from a credit company, he had a beautiful '47 Ford convertible, yellow. And he was making payments on it, and he wasn't supposed to take it out of the state, but he said, "I'm going overseas." So we went all the way to Key West—he lived in Connecticut, and we went all the way to the East Coast, and I took a bus to Wisconsin and then a train, the California Zephyr, to California. And did not know where we were going. And we went across the Pacific and ended up in Yokohama.

Jim: Okay, let's talk about the trip across the Pacific. You went by boat, and was it an ocean liner?

Roger: No, it was a big troop ship. And it was either, and I can't remember, I can—

- Jim: That's fine. Just what were they, you said you were in two ships together going across?
- Roger: Well, they kept going across. There was a fleet of them, the military air transport. And it seems to me, and I got pictures on it, I think we went across on the—on the *General Nelson W. Walker*, I remember that.
- Jim: Okay.
- Roger: And it was three weeks, and we had to go around the hurricanes and all that, and—
- Jim: What did you do when you were on this voyage?
- Roger: We were in a compartment. And I, you know, I don't know what deck it was. I think there were three hundred of us in there. Some guys never took a bath, never washed their feet, just, they were seasick. And basically during the day you could go up on deck. And they had movies, and USO shows, and different things like that. And, then, of course, you'd go down and eat your meals, but—
- Jim: How was the food?
- Roger: Well, I think, as I remember it wasn't—it wasn't outstanding. You had to stand up and eat, I mean it was mess tables. I remember the first night when we left California, we left San Francisco, we had these land swells, and people were sick all over, they had big garbage cans and people were heaving in them. And when we went down to eat they grabbed us and told us we were going to be on K.P. Well, I got really seasick and vomiting and all of that, and I snuck out. But basically it was uneventful, I mean some of the days were very pleasant, and—
- Jim: Okay. So you landed in Yokohama?
- Roger: Yokohama.
- Jim: Okay. And then where were you assigned to Japan?
- Roger: And then they took us to a depot, it was a Far East Air Materiel Command, FEMCOM Air Force Base.
- Jim: What is that, FEMCOM, what is that?
- Roger: It is a Far East Air—

Jim: Okay. Far East?

Roger: Materiel Command, FEMCOM. And that was about an hour or so northwest of Tokyo. And we were on one side of the airstrip, we were a depot; we stored materials, rebuilt aircraft going to Korea, we painted them, did all new hydraulics, new engine. And my specific job, I had a crew of Japanese civilians and our job was to put the engines in storage; we had to fill them with certain fluids and park them.

Jim: So these would be engines you took off?

Roger: No, they were still on the aircraft.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Roger: They fly in the aircraft, like a used aircraft rebuilding place.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: And we had P-51s, we had B-26s, B-25s. And we parked them, and I got pictures, parked them on this big storage area, and then they would take and run them through the whole process: hydraulics, instruments and everything, repaint them, and then take them up to Korea.

Jim: So your job was to work on the engines on these aircraft?

Roger: Well, I never got—I'm not a mechanic, I'm just in charge of the—we were putting the engines in storage, so I never had hands-on. In the four years, except for when I was in Indochina, I never worked on an engine. Now, FEMCOM is on one side of the air base. On the other side is Tachikawa, and that was a very, very busy aircraft base.

Jim: Do you know how to spell that?

Roger: T-A-C-H-I-K-A-W-A.

Jim: T-A-C-H-I?

Roger: K-A-W-A.

Jim: K-A-W-A.

Roger: Tachikawa Air Force Base. Now this—basically the Tachikawa and FEMCOM were are on the same—underneath our base was an old Japanese Zero Aircraft Factory during World War II, and they ran the tunnels through the smoke, out to the mountains, so they bombed out there. So when you

went down the streets it was hollow. But it was a regular job, 8:00 to 5:00, we had an hour off for lunch. And at that time there was an air base where they were, had B-29s and they were bombing in Korea. So I took it upon myself to go over there one day and talk to the commanding officer. And I said, "I'm trained on R-3350 engines but I'm not working on them." "Well," he says, "you gotta go through the chain of command, you gotta go through your officer." And my commander says, "There is no way we're going to transfer you." So I still have the letter that this commanding officer said, "No, we can't use you." So it is one of those things you're trained, I was trained for a whole year to do something and never got a chance to utilize it.

Jim: Because the Air Force knew that they needed you better for what you were doing.

Roger: [Laughter].

Jim: Okay. So how long were you in Japan?

Roger: Well, I got there in October, '52. We were sent to Indochina in February, 1954.

Jim: So October, '52 through February, '54 you were in Japan.

Roger: And then from—I got back to Japan around the 12th of May, 1954.

Jim: Okay. Well, let's just stop there. I just wanted to put this out. So your duties from October to February 5—October of '52 through February of '54 was basically at FEMCOM facilitating the rebuilding of aircraft?

Roger: Exactly.

Jim: Did you have any, at this time, any knowledge of the Indochina War?

Roger: None. None whatsoever.

Jim: What were your thoughts about the Korean War?

Roger: Well, my memory is basically connected with one incident that took place in August, 1953. A C-124 Globemaster had a hundred fifty-six Army soldiers going back to Korea from R & R. And I watched the aircraft take off, and it never gained altitude and the engines quit, and it crashed in a rice paddy just north of the aircraft, and all of them were killed. I'll never forget that. When they went out there to the wreck, I have pictures of it, not of the bodies, but it didn't burn. And the men in the plane were just, I guess were killed by broken necks or whatever, and whatever, I don't know, and they were like they were sitting in their seats sleeping, because a friend of mine had gone out there.

But that's the only, aside from being involved with Korea, we just, they would bring the aircraft, they would fly them in from Korea, and then we would put this preservative in the engines temporarily, and then they would repaint them, and then send them back up.

Jim: When they repainted them—

Roger: They put the Korean insignia.

Jim: So these were planes that were going to the Korean Air Force then?

Roger: I think, I think, I think that's true. It may not be true; maybe it was American. I would have to go back through my photos.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: But we were just like a warehouse, I mean, you know, we just—

Jim: Okay. So how did it happen that you got assigned to Indochina?

Roger: Well, it was just a typical day. We had gone to work, you know, we were in our—I think I was out on the runway or something, and they said, "We want you all to come to the base gym immediately." And I can't remember how many, but there must have been over a hundred. And so it seems to me it was like 4:00, 4:30 on an afternoon, February, it must have been February 5th, and we sat in the bleachers and this officer said, "We have a special," I think he said "special assignment." And he said, "If you are married, you want to make arrangements to send your wife back to the States. We want you to go back to your barracks, turn in all of your bedding. We don't want you to take any money. We want you to take khakis." Now the pictures I have shows us in fatigues, so we must have taken fatigues. "No insignia, no rank. If you're a mechanic you bring all of your tools. If you're hydraulics, or, you know, bring whatever you need to work. And we, you have to be over at Tachikawa Air Force Base," I think he said 6:30, it was something like that, 7 o'clock at night.

Jim: So the same day?

Roger: Same day.

Jim: So about 4:00 in the afternoon for the people that are married to get their wife—

Roger: Right.

Jim: —moving and everything like that?

Roger: Yeah. And if you got anything at the cleaners, the laundry, go get it out. But don't take any money; no identification.

Jim: So I was going to ask, so you didn't take your dog tags?

Roger: I think we wore those.

Jim: So it would be no I.D. but wear dog tags?

Roger: Like a wallet. I can't be exactly sure on that, but I think we had our dog tags.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: Oh, no, no cold weather clothing, no jackets.

Jim: Okay. So did you—did they tell you where you were going?

Roger: No. So we got over to Tachikawa Air Force Base, and they gave us a briefing. What happened, they told us we were going to be flying on C-119 Flying Boxcars. And we took all of our tool boxes, I remember that, and put them in the center of the aircraft, and we sat facing each other. And then they gave us a briefing what happens if we're gonna crash in the ocean.

Jim: What did that consist of?

Roger: Well, how to get out of the aircraft, and where the life rafts were and our life jackets. And some of the guys got really panicky, because they wanted to know what was going on, and no one was telling us. And when we looked at the pilots, I mean it was just young kids, I thought. I mean, I think I was—'54, '52, I was twenty. And one of my friends was a mechanic sat in the cockpit of our plane all the way to Clark Field watching the instruments. [Laughter]. They didn't want him up there but they let him.

And then we took off and we were flying, flying, nobody knows where we're going, nobody says a word. And, you know, we're just droning on and droning on. Around midnight we see these lights, and we land at this—and the guy says, “We're in Okinawa, we're going to refuel, and don't get, you can't get off the aircraft.” I don't think we could get off the aircraft to smoke or anything, I don't remember that. But I do remember we had an antenna, radio antenna that had to be fixed, so they fixed that. I don't think we got off the aircraft. We could have. But anyway we took off again, and we flew and flew and flew and flew. Next thing you know we're in Clark Field in the Philippines, Clark Air Force Base. And I think it's in the morning, as I recall.

Jim: In some of the historic recounting of this it says that you folks were volunteers. Is that true?

Roger: No, that's not true.

Jim: So this, the—

Roger: We were in—the United States volunteered us.

Jim: Yeah. So in other words, when you went to the gym you were volunteered? I mean, when they told you to go to the gym, it was just that you were—

Roger: Well, that is your assignment. You obey an order, that's an order.

Jim: Yup, it was an order.

Roger: We didn't have a choice.

Jim: Okay. That's all I wanted to clarify.

Roger: But in a way the government—you know, it's hard to say, I mean, it isn't like they say, I would like to go, we'll take you. I think that some of the civilian pilots volunteered with the CIA or whatever. But, no, we just—it was an assignment. I mean, I got a copy of the orders. The orders say "you're going here."

Jim: But your orders didn't say you were going to Indochina, did they?

Roger: Yeah. Well, you're going to be assigned to this—

Jim: —unit.

Roger: —A.P.O. This is after the fact. I never saw this. When we hit the Philippines we had no knowledge what is going on. Nobody told us anything. So they took us to the barracks. Oh, boy, I don't know, seems to me we went to the mess hall, and then we went to this barracks. And I think we slept, I can't be sure. Well, anyway they get us outside and line us up, and they say, "Okay, we're going to split you into two groups. What kind of aircraft do you want to work on? Here's the choice: We got C-119s, we got C-47s, we got B-26s." Well, I had never worked on a B-26. I had worked on a C-119 one time. So I said "C-47." Well, you go over here with this group, you go over with this group. They must have given us inoculations or shots, I don't remember that, but they took us down on the airstrip and they give us helmets, I remember that, and here's this huge C-124 Globemaster with the cargo doors open. Oh, man, some of us just panicked, because we remembered the one that crashed. So they took us on the upper deck, I think there was a hundred and fifty of us,

and all of the Jeeps and everything went in the pod and we took off, and flew and flew and flew and flew and flew. Next thing we know we see this seawall. We land. We saw anti-aircraft guns, and guys in helmets, and Jeeps, and machine guns, and—

Jim: Where did you land?

Roger: In Haiphong in North China, which I guess they called CAD B, I don't know, Airport, but it was Haiphong. It was where they based the C-119s, and—

Jim: When you walked off that aircraft, what was your first impression of Indochina?

Roger: It was terrible. I didn't understand what we were getting into. I didn't know where we were at. Because one of the guys said we were going to go to Indochina. Well, I didn't know what, I had never heard of Indochina. I had heard of it, but I didn't know where it was. I really didn't know, you know, that the French were fighting, that there was combat

Jim: So did you have any impression about the climate, or—

Roger: Oh, it's hot. Oh, it was hot, yeah, terribly warm.

Jim: So what happened then when you got off the aircraft?

Roger: They took us and loaded us on these trucks, 6 by 6's or whatever. And we went down this road through these villages, it was all dirt to this airstrip at Do Son[?]. It was just one perforated steel planking runway. And I remember I saw the gasoline pumps [dumps?]. And then they said that they put water in our gas tanks in Vietnam, I don't remember that. Well, anyway, they put us in these regular adobe huts, real low. But, God, there was all kinds of, I don't know if it was cockroaches, or lizards and stuff crawling in there, and—

Jim: Did they have bedding? Or did you have sleeping bags, or—

Roger: I think we had sheets.

Jim: Sheets.

Roger: We also all had mosquito netting on every bed.

Jim: Was this—were these huts by the runway?

Roger: No, they were away, away from the runway.

Jim: And was—

- Roger: I think there were—I think there were four barracks, and then there was a room that we used for a mail room, and then there was, I think the cafeteria we also used as a chapel. And then you had to go across this big field, and there was the showers, no doors, just—and the French and everybody used the same thing. And one day I was in there taking a shower, we had, our French, the officer who was in charge of the unit, and our American counterpart, and this, you know, French interpreter, very attractive lady, and she was doing, must have been one of the generals came in on tour, and I'm in there taking a shower and she just comes right in the shower. I mean, there are no doors, or no partitions, you're just—
- Jim: Okay.
- Roger: So then down beside that were the pillboxes for the water.
- Jim: Okay. Was there a perimeter around this base with barbed wire?
- Roger: Must have been. I don't remember.
- Jim: You don't remember any of that. And did you have weapons?
- Roger: Well, the article said that they pressed for weapons, they brought them from the Philippines. But I remember we had carbines, but the ammunition—they never told us that we might be in trouble, never.
- Jim: Let's pursue that a little bit. So, in other words, when you landed you were just told that you were going to be working on aircraft. You were not told anything about combat?
- Roger: War, combat, Viet Minh, blowin' up aircraft, nothing. Suicides, nothing. And we had these women come in, peasant women from the village, to sweep and clean, and I guess maybe to work in the kitchen. And then what they would do, they'd take a piece of paper and a pencil and they'd mark so many marks, that's how many guys were in each barracks. Well, then at night they would go back home to their—and now here comes the mortars at night. And this was something I'll never forget. There were no screens on the windows, they were just open. And it seems to me to the best of my recollection that once it got dusk, and I want to say, 8:00, 8:30, we were not allowed to leave the barracks, because they had armored personnel carriers and half tracks all night long with search lights going in and out of the barracks, all of the flight lines, looking for infiltrators. So if you had to go to the bathroom you either did it in a coffee can or out the window, but you did not go outside. If you went outside they'd shoot. And down at the beach, what they called a beach, on the water, they put in the water, they put these big wooden things, and no one would come inside of those or they would shoot them. And one day this

woman came with this little boat with a child and made the mistake and they just shot her.

Jim: What did you do at night when you were sitting in the barracks?

Roger: Well, one thing we did when we first got over there, we set up a volleyball court; we played a lot of volleyball. And they had this, I don't know what you could call it, tavern. But we'd go there.—[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Jim: We were talking about your nighttime activities. So was this an NCO club, or was it, this club where you drank at, is this all American?

Roger: It was just a big room, like a big bar.

Jim: Yeah.

Roger: And these are some of the memories I have, I'll never forget. These Foreign Legion paratroopers would come in there. Now this is—it's dark. They had their weapons, they had their parachutes on, and they would be standing there drinking. And, of course, there was never mentioned the last name, it was Joe, or Charlie, or Franz, or—I mean they were all different countries. And we're sitting there just like a family, we're talking, and a siren would go off, and they'd gulp down their drink and take off and get on the aircraft, because all of them had night drops.

Jim: So they were just getting, kind of relaxing before they were going to go drop somewhere?

Roger: Right. They were going to take them out.

Jim: Did you get a chance to talk to any of these people?

Roger: Oh, yeah, but I don't remember the conversations. A lot of them were European and Caucasians.

Jim: Were there any Americans in the Foreign Legion that you remember?

Roger: There were a couple, but I—but they did not want to talk about, they were professional killers, that's what they're there for, and they didn't do any of their background. I mean a lot of them were young, you know, like we were, in their twenties.

But they brought in—I remember that from an article, they brought in these Senegalese, these troops from Africa for, I guess, security. I remember those guys.

Jim: Did they charge—what kind of liquor did they have there?

Roger: They had a lot of cognac and wine, French wine.

Jim: What about beer?

Roger: They had beer.

Jim: Do you—was it American beer, do you remember?

Roger: I think it was Japanese or stuff from the Philippines

Jim: So it might have been San Miguel, because reputedly General McArthur had an interest in that, I think.

Roger: But I don't remember, I don't remember being paid. I don't remember currency. We weren't allowed to take any greenbacks, so it seemed to me, I think they paid us in piasters, I think.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: I don't remember paying at the bar. But I remember we had a mail clerk, he was a World War II career guy. He'd get so drunk that he strung out a rope from the—because it wasn't very far to where he, where the mail room was. I think he'd have to hold on to that at night to go to bed. But we—the actual area that we were in was for us. I mean, where the younger paratroopers and those guys lived I don't remember.

Jim: So these French Foreign Legion guys were just there because they were just close to the flight line, and you know, to take off? They stayed somewhere else?

Roger: Right, right.

Jim: Were you ever required to pull perimeter duty around this place?

Roger: Never.

Jim: Did you get a chance to go off this base and mix with the locals?

Roger: It seems to me that one day a week, I can't, I can't be certain, that we would go in to the air base. Well, I remember when we first got there they would take us into Haiphong and kind of drop us off, and we could come and go individually, or whatever. I remember that. And I remember one afternoon my friend and I rented these, I think Vespa Motor Scooters, and we went all over Haiphong on these scooters, and we got into a funeral procession by

mistake. And we were really, really lucky that we did not become abducted, or—there was a part of Haiphong that you, they warned us, do not, ever, ever, go there, and that's where these two men were abducted and never heard from. One was a captain. But I remember then they started getting more controlling and we had to go in groups. And then we had a great big water tank truck, water tanker for water. And then we would, one of us would ride shotgun and get up in the cab with the driver with a carbine.

Jim: Did you have ammunition in the carbine then?

Roger: Must of.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: Go through these villages you would hardly see anybody; very, very poor. I mean, just thatched huts. And these women had these straw hats, you know, they chewed this betel nut, their teeth were all black and they had these black silk—I never saw any men. But according to this article, the Vietcong were living in these places, you know. But I, we never, nobody ever stopped us, nobody ever tried to attack us. And then we would go down that—they were, I think it was one day a week we could go in there as a group, and we took turns who was going to go. No insignia or anything like that, we were just—.

Jim: How did the people treat you? Did they think you were French, or—

Roger: They hated us. Well, I shouldn't say hate; they didn't want us there. My recollection is, they—we, we, I mean—now maybe we were in an area that was all Vietcong and we were fighting these guys off in Viet Minh and they were going to overrun the fortress, and, you know, and—

Jim: What did you know about Dien Bien Phu?

Roger: Nothing. I just heard the name, you know, funny sounding name, and I knew they were dropping supplies and we were working on the aircraft that were helping. We were told originally—and I remember this, the French were—we were to teach, we were teachers. We were not going to actually do a lot of hands-on work as I recall. Now I could be wrong. But it turned out that the French mechanics were not—in this article on this Major Knox, he wanted to do the maintenance according to our standards. And they just wanted—I mean, I've seen aircraft come in, they got oil leaks down the fuselage, and they'd just take a can of gas, and, you know, wash the oil off. They didn't care where the oil was coming from. Refuel them and they'd take off. But he wanted it done right. And he got in a hassle, and they said they fired him. So I don't know, I remember there was a lot of conflict between us and the French.

- Jim: Did you get specific orders to do things the way you were told to do, you know what?
- Roger: Yeah, maintenance.
- Jim: Yeah. I mean, so then—
- Roger: They would take—when you're putting spark plugs in there is a certain pressure—not a pressure, I can't think of what the term is, there is a tool; they would tighten it where you couldn't even get them out of the—if you were changing the plugs, a lot of them broke off in the cylinder, then we would have to change the cylinder. I don't think we had a lot of extra parts; that's kind of unclear. But most of the people I was with, this is the way you do it. I don't know who did it, but they'd go and use that toilet in that aircraft and never, never, ever clean it. And you'd go in there and you'd vomit. They were just slobs. Well, then it got so hot you couldn't work on aircraft, so we would go down to this place, it was a real nice little resort, and we would go down there and the guys would swim, and I suppose some of them drank. Nobody ever got drunk or couldn't show up. The French would go down there and drink wine and they'd never come back to work.
- Jim: So what was a typical work day like there?
- Roger: Well, they'd get an aircraft, this is what's wrong.
- Jim: What time of the morning would you start?
- Roger: Oh, real early, like 7:30.
- Jim: Okay. And then you would work all day?
- Roger: No, until noon.
- Jim: And then what?
- Roger: It got so hot. And then we'd come back at 6:00. Well the French, they're not showing up, so actually—see, we were supposed to be teaching. You'd have a French mechanic, you're supposed to show him how to do this. And, well, they wouldn't come back in the afternoon, so we'd end up doing the work.
- Jim: So you end up doing the work and they just didn't hang around to be taught or anything?
- Roger: They were disinterested.

Jim: Were these people from metropolitan France that you were teaching, or you don't know where?

Roger: We had very little conversations.

Jim: Okay.

Roger: It seems to me, and of course, there was a lot of resentment that we're there. I don't know.

Jim: Okay. Did you work in hangars, or erectments, or how did you work in there?

Roger: Out on the runway. We had no hangars that I remember.

Jim: Did you ever get harassed by the Viet Minh when you were working on aircraft?

Roger: No, not during the day. Never, not during the day.

Jim: Did they keep aircraft on the field at night there?

Roger: Oh, yeah, they were parked. [unintelligible] They had a storage area where they parked them and they'd bring them into where we were.

Jim: Okay. Were any aircraft blown up by sappers while you were there?

Roger: They said that they blew them up the night before we got there. They knew we were coming, but I don't recall them doing any demolition—

Jim: Okay.

Roger: —while we were there.

Jim: Did you see any aircraft when you were there that was, you know, old Japanese, or old German aircraft?

Roger: No. Don't remember.

Jim: What kind of American aircraft did you see? Did you see any fighters, or anything like that?

Roger: The only aircraft that our—at Do Son Air Base or whatever were the C-47, or they call them Dakotas, DC-3s.

Jim: Yeah.

Roger: Haiphong is where they had a lot of, I think they were Bearcats, or Hellcats, C-119s.

Jim: Did you ever get over to the Haiphong Airport for work?

Roger: No, never. Just to pick up water.

Jim: Okay. Now where did you pick up the water there?

Roger: At the air base, I think.

Jim: They have a well there, or—

Roger: I remember, I remember the control tower, so—

Jim: Okay.

Roger: And I remember, I remember seeing these aircraft. The thing that impressed me, they had maybe five or six of these Bearcats that we gave them, I guess, that were droppin' bombs around, and they'd come in one after the other, just land right after each other, you know, and then they taxied over, wash 'em off, and, you know, refuel them, and put new ammo in 'em or whatever, and go off again.

Jim: Were there any American pilots in North Vietnam at this time?

Roger: Just the ones I think that were from the CIA.

Jim: Or Air America?

Roger: Air America. That's just from the [unintelligible] colonel or—

Jim: Do any of those guys stand out in your mind?

Roger: Just Earthquake McGoan, that was, or McGovern.

Jim: Yeah. Could you tell us a little bit about what you remember.

Roger: Well, I just remember we were over there, and we must have gone for water. And these men would fly these Flying Boxcars out to Dien Bien Phu. They would make two round trips a day dropping, because the aircraft, the airport out there was destroyed, so they were dropping supplies, and that's the only way these men at Dien Bien Phu could get by day-by-day. And apparently the shelling was just intense. The Vietnamese didn't have any planes, but they had rockets and they must have had anti-aircraft. But, anyway, these men were in great danger dropping these supplies, because they had to come in real

low. And Dien Bien Phu was scattered [unintelligible] some of the chutes landed outside of the perimeter, so the colonists actually ended up with our supplies. But they would make two round trips a day. And they would take the cargo doors off and put these, I don't know what you call them, rollers in there for the chutes, and then they would strap two Vietnamese in the back to kick the chutes out. And so they would go out in the morning and come back, and then I think go to the bar and drink, and then they would refuel, and re-supply, and then they'd make another trip out in the afternoon. And we were there that one day and I saw him, a huge, huge man getting out of this aircraft and walking across the, and then they told me that this was—well, there's a bar in San Francisco I guess called Earthquake McGoon. So I have a—I got a magazine with a picture of him and the other—

Jim: Okay.

Roger: —co-pilot that took a trip out fully loaded with ammunition, and they got hit and crashed in the hillside.

Jim: Did you ever observe any battle damage on these C-119s?

Roger: No.

Jim: Or C-47s that you worked on?

Roger: No, not that I recall.

Jim: So it was just basically the routine wear and tear of operating aircraft that you were dealing with?

Roger: Right. I remember spark plugs.

Jim: Yeah.

Roger: And, of course, the—if there was a problem with hydraulics or instruments, of course we had all the specialists there; they'd go in. The Air Force policy at that time was you did not fix anything, you did a repair, you replaced or removed and replaced. So if you followed the tech manual, this is how many turns you put on this. But the French, they didn't care anything about that. The thing started, it ran, you know, good enough for them.

Jim: Good enough for them.

Roger: But our commanding officer apparently got in big trouble because we were doing it right.

Jim: Do you remember him leaving and a new guy coming?

Roger: I don't remember that.

Jim: Okay. So, when Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7th, was there any change in the way you operated?

Roger: No. We were just put on the word that we were leaving, and they were going to bring in replacements, I think it was the 12th of May. So they took us up to Haiphong and, of course, a lot of guys bought a lot of alcohol, we had a lot of champagne and cognac and all that, we were going to take it on the airplane, you know. I know it was hot, oh, man it was just terribly hot. So our replacements, and we didn't know where these guys came from, we didn't recognize them. I suppose they were—they did the same thing, they were told to report and ended up—and they were getting off the plane. And this one guy said, "Well, you guys, what are you doing? You can't take any alcohol on this plane." So we had to give it to the guys that came in; it was like Christmas. And I never forget this, we got on, it was a C-54, and—which is a good aircraft, where they had just landed, and we didn't refuel, we just landed, opened the door, the guys got out, we got on, we fired up the engine, went down to the end of the runway, and we took off. And they had a window there, it must have been an escape hatch. And [unintelligible] I think it was a bar, the bar goes in, and you put it and latch it. Well, they forgot to put that in. And we're gaining altitude, somebody went to put that in and almost got sucked out of the aircraft because the guy had to hold him, I remember that. So then we flew, this is late in the afternoon, I thought we got to Clark Field, I think it was a Saturday, pouring down rain, electrical storm, we couldn't get the landing lights to come on. And we looked down, and we had been gone, you know, guys wanted to get out and have some action, I guess, I don't know, we saw the landing, the runway—we couldn't land. We just kept circling because we couldn't get the—finally, they got the lights to come on and we landed.

Jim: What was your reaction leaving Indochina?

Roger: [pause] Well, I mean, I was a young kid, it was a—I never related what we were doing to danger until I read this article, that we were in real danger of being killed. It was just like another assignment, being sent to another base, you know, to do this work. Sure, there were hardships, I mean, as far as food and not being able to—of course I was single, I didn't have anybody in my life back in the States, anybody, you know, a sweetheart or so, you know.

Jim: What was the food like?

Roger: I can't remember.

Jim: Okay.

- Roger: I remember bottled water. And I remember them flying in this great big walk-in freezer, I'll never forget that; plugging it in and unloading all of this meat. They had steaks, and chops, and roasts. And we're all going, "Boy, is that ever going to taste good, you know." Sometime during the night the compressor quit because the power was real erratic. And the doctor said, "You can't eat that." But I remember seeing these civilians, we'd go to the mess hall and dump our food leftovers, and then they'd fight—oh, rats, huge rats fighting.
- Jim: Did the rats bother you in your quarters at night at all?
- Roger: No, I don't think so.
- Jim: Did you have bunkers to go in when you got mortared?
- Roger: No.
- Jim: Did you get mortared frequently when you were—
- Roger: The only incident I remember is that one night where—I remember the sirens going off, I remember that, it was midnight, because we can't leave our barracks. And they have people there to take us down by the beach, it's called the beach, and—
- Jim: Was that the beach on the China Sea on the Gulf of Tonkin?
- Roger: Yeah, they called it some other bay. But I remember going out of the barracks, they gave us instructions, I think the carbines were locked up, and they gave us a carbine but no ammo.
- Jim: Well, that's good.
- Roger: Well, our guys had never fired them.
- Jim: Probably shoot each other.
- Roger: And if you're a mechanic working with tools, and somebody gives you a weapon, you're not trained to use a weapon. And that's when I really got scared. And I just found an old photograph with search lights and pillboxes. But I remember these half tracks with machine guns, 50 calibers.
- Jim: But you said you could go to this bar at night, but you couldn't—you had to go to the bathroom and use facilities in a can, or something?
- Roger: Right, right. And I don't remember how late it got when we were there.

Jim: Okay. Were you allowed to write letters home?

Roger: Yeah, we had mail service.

Jim: I mean, so you could tell people where you were and what you were doing?

Roger: Yeah. I was thinking about that the other day. And it seems to me that once I realized how dangerous it was we didn't have any weapons, I think I wrote home and asked if they could send me a pistol. I think I remember that.

Jim: Did you get a pistol?

Roger: No.

Jim: Okay. You said earlier that you were promised some stuff in Japan?

Roger: No, in Indochina when we were there. We had like a briefing; and, you know, they would tell us different things.

Jim: What were you promised?

Roger: That we were going to get an increase in rank, we were going to get a promotion. I was an Airman Second, that would have been an Airman First. We were going to get cash from the government, extra duty pay for the time we were there. And we were also going to get medals from our government and also the French.

Jim: Did you get all of that?

Roger: Didn't get anything.

Jim: Did they—somebody ask where this stuff was when you got back to Clark Field?

Roger: I don't recall. I think we just expected it would show up one day.

Jim: Yeah.

Roger: And, then, of course, I got back in May, and then I left in I think in August.

Jim: So you just—you stayed at Clark Field until you got out of the Air Force?

Roger: No, no, I went back to Japan.

Jim: Oh, you went back to Japan?

- Roger: I went back to Japan then.
- Jim: And did you continue doing the same job back in Japan?
- Roger: Yeah, just like I had been gone and back.
- Jim: Well, that's what they call, T.D.Y., temporary duty.
- Roger: [Laughter] I think so. I found my records, I found the actual orders, and it's a ninety day temporary duty, the A.P.O. 324, which I didn't know until I got these records from Tammy Baldwin's office. Now one of the highlights in my Japan tour was I climbed Mt. Fujiyama.
- Jim: Could you describe that, please?
- Roger: Well, we had heard that it was not hard to climb, but you could only climb it July and August.
- Jim: Why was that?
- Roger: Because of the snow.
- Jim: Okay.
- Roger: And the wind. I think it is 12,550 feet. But little kids can climb it, grammar. And the time to do it is you start at night about 5:30, I still have my hiking stick, and there's paths up the mountain, and they have different huts at different levels. And then you, they have a branding iron, they brand this hiking stick. So we, you know, we didn't sleep, we just—and they had beer and sandwiches; the higher you go the more expensive. The goal is to start at night and get up to the top at sunrise to see Tokyo. And we got up there it was all overcast. And then I—we went down in the crater and I got a piece of the volcanic ash. It takes all night to climb, but then coming down you actually kind of slide down, you wear out a pair of shoes. You just kind of lay back and you just lay on this lava. But it was very, very nice. I'm glad I did it.
- Jim: Is there anything that stands out about the Indochina experience that we haven't discussed, Roger?
- Roger: I think about this so often. When our aircraft would take off from Haiphong, sometimes they were just on the Chinese border, or over China in their pattern. We got into this conflict, people hated us, didn't want us there. We would come back years later, we left all of our equipment, all of our stuff, and now we're way south. And it just, I don't know.

- Jim: Well.
- Roger: It was such a—and I shouldn't say it because men died, but it was so unpopular.
- Jim: Now you're talking about the second Indochina War, not the one that you were involved in?
- Roger: Well, yeah, the Vietnam War.
- Jim: Yeah, right. When you came back to the United States and back to the Sparta area did people—
- Roger: Well, I came back to Sparta, I got discharged in California, and I enrolled in University of Wisconsin. So I came here to Madison in September, 1954.
- Jim: Did anybody—did you have any feelings about this experience? Or anybody care, or anything—
- Roger: No.
- Jim: —that you had been to Indochina and been involved in Dien Bien Phu?
- Roger: No.
- Jim: Did you have any thoughts about this, you know, being part of the need to contain communism or anything like that?
- Roger: No thoughts about it. They gave us the opportunity to re-enlist, but I had no interest in the military. I tell you, I just wanted to get out.
- Jim: Did you join any veterans groups?
- Roger: No. Only recently.
- Jim: And what would you—
- Roger: VFW and [unintelligible].
- Jim: Okay. How are you treated within these veterans groups of being a veteran of an earlier part of the Vietnam War?
- Roger: Well, I haven't been real active. I don't drink alcohol, not that that's a hindrance. I've never been in a group where we talked about—a lot of people don't even know we were in Indochina. And I'd say I'm one of the oldest veterans. “When were you there?” And, “Geez, really?” So I don't think

there is a lot of awareness on the general public today that we were even there. I mean, they know about the battle of Dien Bien Phu because it is such a funny name, and that was the end of the French Empire. After that, you know, the French just—

Jim: So in a recent article in the Wisconsin State Journal there was a feature about you getting a French medal. Could you tell us about that?

Roger: Well, I am a full-time volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. I got involved here and Madison, Dane County, years ago back in '97. So I decided after successful cancer surgery that I was going to devote the rest of my life to humanitarian things. And I decided to travel the country and build a house for Habitat for Humanity, which I've been doing for the last, it would be five years. I'm down in Georgia back in, I don't know, February of this year, and I'm sitting in my trailer and I'm just thinking, I wonder what actually ever happened to those promises from the French government to give out any awards? And a friend of mine before he died had some problems with Social Security; and he said, "If you ever want to have anything to do with veterans' issues, get a hold of Tammy Baldwin." So I wrote her office a letter, and I got this response: "We'll be happy." So they got my records, they ascertained where I was, when I was there. She wrote a letter to the French Ambassador and he replied in April, yes, the government has been negligent awarding these for sacrifices. And just now because of the archives they started giving out awards to the pilots who flew the aircraft dropping supplies who were in the most dangerous. And thanks for the inquiry. And it seems to me that basically that Mr. Hallingstad is entitled to a medal called the Medal of Indochina.

Jim: Yeah.

Roger: And so I'm in Madison, I'm just here kind of between projects. And so I knew George Hesselberg at the State Journal, he's from up by Sparta. And so I said, "Would you be interested in a human interest story?" And he asked me some questions. So he did it, and he took my picture and wrote this very nice article, and he is a very talented writer. And he got on the Internet and he can't find the medal listed anyplace.

Jim: Have you gotten the medal?

Roger: No, I haven't. And so I've been in touch with Tammy Baldwin's office; a young woman there by the name of Kathy has been very, very helpful, and she said, "Well, it takes time, usually thirty days." Well, the letter I got was dated April 21st from the French Ambassador; this is July 21st. I haven't been to the post office today, but—and George Hesselberg said, "Well, what are you going to do when you get the medal?" "I don't know." He said, "You let me know." But they did make sure that I got all of the medals I was entitled to

when I was there, and I can't say enough about their efforts on behalf of veterans.

Jim: How would you assess this experience affecting your life?

Roger: Well, of course now I'm seventy-three, and it's fifty some years later. And reading about the battle, it was very tragic: the men who were captured there, the men who died there, how the Communists treated our forces on this march. And I've always been a competitor, and I—I just hate to lose. And when you put that much effort into something, and it is poor planning, bad decisions. Eisenhower was wise, very cautious, he did send B-29s in there and they didn't send nuclear bombers, they sent men, and he was really cautious; I was reading about this report, about sending Americans into this dangerous part of the world. I don't think at the time the people realized how detrimental that was going to be to world history.

[End of Interview]