Transcription: Thomas Heikkala

Today is Thursday, November 18th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Thomas Heikkala. Mr. Heikkala is at his residence in Austin, Texas, and I'm at the General Land Office, in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking time to talk to us today and share with us some of your memories of your time in the service. I guess the first question, sir, that we usually start with is just tell us a little bit about your background and your childhood before you entered the military.

Thomas Heikkala: I was born in San Francisco in 1945, a month after World War II ended. My dad was in the Army. He's one of 10 children, my mom was one of 14. Many of their brothers were in the military during the war, World War II. My folks named me after my dad's twin brother who was killed in January of 1945 in, I think in Belgium.

In World War II?

Thomas Heikkala: During World War II. It was his fraternal twin whom it was very devastating to him to lose. So he named me after him. So I grew up mostly around San Francisco. There was a couple of times when we moved back to where they lived prior, which was in Matagorda, Michigan, my mom and ___ Racine, Wisconsin. Both my parents are first generation Americans. My parents came over as immigrants, single young people during around 1900 area, and found each other and had their families. So my mom's brother was in the military and had some kind of a breakdown, a mental breakdown I think, as World War II was just starting in December, January of '42, and my parents sent my mom out to see what was wrong with Uncle Russell and she met my dad who was his friend. My dad was stationed at The Presidio in San Francisco as part of the intelligence and communications central for the Pacific Theater. So they met and they eventually married. So I grew up around there and went to school there. I was drafted into the military in January of '67.

So you actually lived in the City of San Francisco?

Thomas Heikkala: Sometimes. When I was very young through about the 4th grade.

And then you lived in one of the suburbs there?

Thomas Heikkala: Then we moved to Wisconsin and Michigan for about a year and then we moved back, and we lived in Daly City which is the first town adjacent to San Francisco.

That's right. Is the airport in Daly City?

Thomas Heikkala: No, it's south farther. Yeah, Daly City is right on the city line, and the airport is another 15 miles or 20 miles south on the bay.

So when you were growing up as a child there, had you ever thought of serving in the military?

Thomas Heikkala: Oh, I was totally fascinated by the military as a kid. My dad was somewhat, too, because he never went to the war theaters. He was always in that communications central place in The Presidio. I remember when I was real little, maybe 4 or 5,

he took me to the movie theater, some war movie, and all these airplanes were shooting each other down and it was scary. Then I got into, I remember getting into the war comic books, Star Spangled war stories, Sergeant Rocket, Easy Company, and all the different variations that were created mainly about World War II. Horror comic books were scary, but war ones I could deal with. My mom was real into the library, she loved the library, and so she took me from when I was very little, and as I got older I discovered there was a section of the library that had all the war stuff. I called it the 940 section which was the number designation, and from then on that was where I went when I went to the library. I always went to that section to check out stories, books on mostly World War II and World War I, the Korean War, and just books, picture books. When I was 16, what I wanted most for my birthday was a big old coffee table book called The Pictorial History of World War II, which I got, and I was particularly fascinated with fighter pilots, and was into reading about them and reading books about different fighter pilots and their dealings with the war wins and the war and how it was, and their missions. One trip, my relative, we stopped at a memorial for a guy named Richard Bong who had shot down more airplanes than any American, and we stopped and went through his home town. It was a memorial in this town, a little plaza, it was a little town.

What town is that?

Thomas Heikkala: I don't remember. I haven't a clue, I'd have to look it up.

I have read about him though. He was a great fighter ace and probably not many people are aware of him today.

Thomas Heikkala: He shot down 40 airplanes or something like that. And then I met an ace at my aunt's house one time, a guy who had shot down five or six.

Wow, tell us about that a little bit.

Thomas Heikkala: Well, I took a trip by myself when I was 15 to visit my relatives in Wisconsin and Michigan on a train, and my relatives had a little grownup party one night and I had been reading this stuff and had a list of American aces, and his name was in there. I don't remember what his name is even anymore, but he was at the party and I met him briefly. We didn't really talk, but -

I'm sure that was a thrill to a 15-year-old kid to meet someone who was an actual fighter ace.

Thomas Heikkala: Yup, it was, but you know it always has this dark thing around it, too. Like it was always the movies, and I was in the movies, too. I think I've seen every war movie that's ever been made except for the ones in the last 20 years. And sometimes you'd see one that would give you a different story about the situation, like the war was like the 1930s movie, All Quiet on the Western Front, which was based on a book. It gives you a whole different side of the situation, what's going on in the lives of people on the ground.

So in 1967, you're living in San Francisco when you get the draft notice?

Thomas Heikkala: Yup.

And you're the first veteran I think I've interviewed that was actually a resident of San Francisco at that time, because I know everyone talks about the Haight-Ashbury district and going to San

Francisco with a flower in your hair and that sort of thing, and you were right there. So how did that impact you being drafted and living in San Francisco? I'm sure that was unique compared to most draftees.

Thomas Heikkala: Well a lot of my high school friends, not a lot, but several of the high school classmates joined the military rather than get drafted. So I saw that happening, and I decided I was going to go to school. I was really ___ back then. I didn't have much of a clue what I was going to do with my life. I managed to graduate from high school decently and then I went to College of San Mateo and some of the anti-war stuff was in the peripheral, but I hadn't been to any large demonstrations or anything, but I saw it in the news. I knew it was happening when Berkeley, where there was a lot of action going on, and so that kind of was stuck in my head a little bit, and it may have helped me feel like I didn't want to go in until I had to or something, you know. So I went to college for almost two and a half years until I got kind of sick of it, and I studied aviation and architecture – or architecture first and then aviation courses. About the time of my last semester which was the fifth, I started taking flying lessons. I had been in a car wreck when I was 17 and got a little bit of money from the wreck and was able to afford flight training. So I went to a flight school and while I was going I quit college because it was, I wasn't really liking it. My parents said well why don't you see about going to a flight school full time? Maybe you can, oh by the way back then you could only get two years' worth of deferments before you were drafted. You could get four semesters or so worth of deferments to keep you from being drafted when you were 18.

I think a lot of people don't realize, I think a lot of folks think in their history of the Vietnam War that if you were a college student, you couldn't be drafted at all. And you're saying that after basically your sophomore year you could be.

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah, unless you had some kind of special college thing going. There was a few extra things that made it so you could go longer like if you were going to medical school I think or maybe a few others, I'm not sure anymore. But I know there were some others. But not me. I wasn't one of those special kids, pretty average. But I was enjoying flying lessons. So we found a flight school in Nevada in Reno, or south of Reno, and my mom and I went up there and they said they could get me another deferment through Nevada. So I signed up for the school and got another deferment and went to the flight school and got my commercial pilot's license and a flight instructor certificate and instrument reading, and finished that, and went back to where I was originally going to flight school and got a job as a flight instructor. But I knew the draft was on my tail and so after working for only a few months, I got my draft notice. I didn't have much conscience to really fight it, and then I was fairly confused and torn about whether it was something I should do or not do, and the consequences were kind of heavy, you know, so I decided well, I don't know what's right and wrong, I better just go and see and maybe it'll help me find out whether this military and war business is good for me and the country or whether it's a lot of malarkey. So I went in and was sent to basic at Fort Ord.

So you were drafted into the Army.

Thomas Heikkala: Into the Army.

Was there ever a chance, and I guess once you're drafted you're stuck, but there wasn't ever a chance that you could try to get into the Air Force with your interest in flying?

Thomas Heikkala: Well I did just prior to being drafted. I went to the Air Force and to the Navy and to the Army to see if I could be a pilot in the military, because I had all these flight ___. But they all rejected me because I wore glasses. And I had just started wearing them because of that car wreck. They discovered I had a little bit of need for them, and they didn't want to take any young person without 20/20 uncorrected, so it was like sorry, even though you're highly qualified, we don't want you. So I thought damn, I'll just do it the quickest and easiest way out, through it.

So when you get the draft notice, I guess at that point was it a lottery system?

Thomas Heikkala: No.

You had a number? You didn't have that at that point?

Thomas Heikkala: No.

So that came I guess later than.

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah.

OK, so you get the draft notice. How much time do you have before you have to report?

Thomas Heikkala: Not much, maybe a month. They just give you a little bit of time to get your affairs together.

So then you go to basic training at Fort Ord?

Thomas Heikkala: Yep.

Tell us a little bit about that experience.

Thomas Heikkala: Well that was fairly shocking. Fort Ord is on the coast by the Monterey Bay. It's cool, and chilly and foggy. The drill sergeants are not very friendly and family-like. They're always like get up, get up, get up, at 5:30 in the morning, and then they just hustle you around and hustle you around and yell and scream at you all day long, and they try and mold you into something else that you haven't been ever before. Run us around, taking us out to the beach to shoot at targets. One time with a big pack on your back and an M-14 which is a heavy rifle, one time I couldn't keep up, because they would walk you out to the beach a mile or two out to the beach and part of it was through sand, and if you've ever marched through sand it's hard to walk through.

That's right.

Thomas Heikkala: And I fell back and they screamed and yelled at me all the way back to the barracks. And then another time when we were out at the beach we were in these little holes that they dig for you to shoot from. It was a whole series of firing ranges so they could have a lot of different platoons there at the same time, separated by platoons, by ranges. There was a shot that rang out on this range next to the next one, and then they got us all out of our foxholes and packed us up and moved us back to the bay. We found out later that a young guy had killed himself.

Geez, on the firing range.

Thomas Heikkala: Right in his foxhole.

Wow.

Thomas Heikkala: So that was, you know, but they didn't make much of it. Everything went on as usual.

Sure.

Thomas Heikkala: Then after that was over, a short leave and sent to Fort Polk, Louisiana, to what they called Tiger Land.

Yeah, I've been there. That's kind of an inhospitable place.

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah, right. So they decided I was going to be an 11D, 10, 20, whatever it was, an infantryman. You take that test with the draft board, that's the thing that they figure out what you like and what you don't like, like do you like camping? Oh yeah, I like camping. So that was, Fort Ord was kind of modern. The buildings were newer, the beds have 5- to 6-inch thick mattresses. It was pretty clean. But Fort Polk was like little 3-inch mattresses, old timey frames, wood framed buildings. It was much more older.

A lot of those buildings are still there. I was there about six years ago for some training and we stayed in some of those old World War II style barracks and it's amazing that they're still there. So when you were going through this training, sir, did you know how many of the guys who were with you were also draftees? Did that ever come up or could you ever really tell how many were drafted and how many were they because they had just volunteered?

Thomas Heikkala: It wasn't easy to know for sure. There was a mix, maybe half and half, maybe less, maybe more, I really don't know. At Fort Ord, some of them were National Guard, but I couldn't really tell.

So you're at Fort Polk, how long do you spend there?

Thomas Heikkala: I think it was eight or ten weeks. Usually what happened is they, you go from basic to AIT to Vietnam, because it was the fact, that way they trained you for Vietnam and then they shipped you off as a replacement. Towards the end of my thing there, I started feeling like I didn't want to go over as an infantryman and I started looking into officer candidate school. There was some kind of an option. So I applied for it and they accepted my application and kept me at Fort Polk for another month or two where they processed how it might work. So then I became part of the cadre that was training the troops, acting like the enemy out when they did field training. This became part of the regular thing. So then that ended and they told me I could go to the infantry artillery or tank school, so I decided to go to the tank school in Fort Knox, and after a short leave I was in Fort Knox, and when I got there they said how did you get these orders? I said I don't know, they just gave them to me. This place has been closed for a month. We're not taking anymore officer candidates. And so there was a group of us, maybe 20 or so of us that were sent there, and they said you can go to infantry school or you can go to artillery school. Or you don't have to go at all. So I thought about it one night and I thought,

well I've already been in for six months and I got 18 months to go, I think I'm going to blow it off. So they kept me there for a little while and then they sent me to Fort Lewis Washington to train with a whole battalion that was going to be sent to Vietnam. I went there and was there for three or four months, and did more training and more training, and then I had got, the guy, I decided to join a recon platoon, and the guy who was training us, Sergeant Johnston, had already been to Vietnam with the 1st Cav, and had seen a lot of combat. He was very much a professional soldier kind of guy, an African American guy, and he was strong, determined and tough, and didn't take any shit from any of us. Yet he had a certain kindness about him, too, that sort of made up for it. So we trained there and just before we were sent over, my sergeant, Sergeant Johnston, put in for a change. I think he had been awarded the Silver Star for what he did. And he would tell us things like an outfit doesn't get any good until its been baptized in blood, you know. We were walking around the woods and if anybody slipped up, he would be on us like stink on shit. If we lost track of each other or anything -

Sure.

Thomas Heikkala: So he threw me to the ground one time in front of the captain just because I had slipped or did something stupid, and so he kind of changed and didn't have to go with us. He didn't want to go with a green outfit. I eventually learned that he did go back with I think the Americal Division that was killed. But I was glad to have met him. He was, when we'd go to the NCO club, he was always very kind to us in that situation.

So when do you finally get to Vietnam, do you remember?

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah, I had been in about, almost about 14 months by then, and so my last 9-1/2 months were in Vietnam in '68, and I was sent to the 199th Flight Infantry Brigade as the 5th Battalion, 12th Infantry, which had I think there was four or five battalions, and then the 199th, which was near Bien Hoa, it was stationed in Bien Hoa, and we did our operations around the greater area of Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it's known now.

When you went over, did you fly on a commercial aircraft?

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah.

Tell us about the day you actually arrived and what your memories are of actually getting off the plane in Vietnam.

Thomas Heikkala: I just remember as the plane was taxiing in and seeing people in black pajama bottoms and conical hats, looked like they may have been doing farming or cleaning up or something around the runway. I don't know, they just hustled us through the situation and took us in trucks or something out to Bien Hoa, and it was hot and humid. We all lived in tents with wooden floors. They did a little bit of getting us used to the land. There was landscape. Because we were there as a unit, we didn't have any veterans around so to speak, except for the ones that were with us that had been in the war. So they just did a little bit of showing us this and showing us that and having different people talk to us, and then walk us around through a village one day, and then they started sending us out into making it into the field and making fire bases out in different places.

It sounds like your situation was a little unique from a lot of the other Vietnam veterans I've talked to where they were sent over as replacements, so they were the new guy joining the unit

that had already been there a while and in your case, your whole unit was new. I'm sure that provided an extra set of challenges. Tell us a little about some of your first missions or some of your first memories of going out.

Thomas Heikkala: Well, when I was, before I was in the military, we had a subscription to National Geographic at home, and there was a story in one of the issues from the mid-60s about Vietnam, and there was a picture of a railroad track near a town called Trangbom, and one of the first things we did as a reconnaissance patrol, we would walk down those railroad tracks near the town of Trangbom. We set up in a little spot somewhere and walked around in the woods, in the jungle nearby that area, and it was, we didn't really find anybody or anything in that area, although we would just set up at night some place and you hear things happening. Premier was not far away, but it was very close, and we would set up to do an ambush and some trip grenades out in front of us somewhere, and every time one of the grenades went off, and I remember hearing a rifle shot which sounded like it was coming out from in front of us and a friend of mine shot his rifle, and that's all that happened. We just stayed there laying there in the bush for the night.

What were your feelings during all this?

Thomas Heikkala: It was scary.

Yeah, just a sense of overall fear.

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah I mean you walked into this world where to survive was the thing that was happening was constantly, always scary. You didn't know who was who or what was what because the enemy could be anybody. People put up with us but they didn't really, they weren't really friendly. They weren't, just like we were another thing around their world. I think one of the first things we actually did is they took a bunch of us to guard a shipment of something that just came in on a boat, so we were by this boat and some Vietnamese woman who spoke English was talking to us a little bit about their government and their leadership and about Madam Nu and what a great woman she was, and that was kind of unusual. That was the only time I ever heard anything like that. So we walked around that area for a while and I got dysentery, because we didn't have a very good sanitation situation, and they just flew me back to the base and gave me a bunch of Kaopectate to take. I stayed around the fire base for several days while my bottom end healed, and one of our other companies in the battalion had just come back from confronting the NVA, and they were all really shook up, especially some of the ones that I knew closely. I think the lost a couple of guys and another guy went crazy, and everybody looked pretty disturbed over the laying in the mud in the rain with a 50-caliber machine gun shooting at 'em and stuff in the night. So then the captain making them charge the enemy, and they all felt ripped off. So then they sent me back to the woods and I was always hyper alert with my thumb on the safety and my eyeballs. I was the RTO for my lieutenant.

OK, so you were definitely a big target.

Thomas Heikkala: I was carrying 25 on my back and standing, walking behind our lieutenant, who was a pretty nice guy. We told him oftentimes that we were being kind of abused, too, by they would tell us to walk to do a patrol at night. So we would patrol for a while and we'd just stop and hole up for the night, a couple of times, and just f- them, I'm just gonna, we can't do this, this is ridiculous. So we would just stop some place and hole up for the night and I

remember one time everybody went to sleep, and except for me I knew everybody was asleep and I was even more scared thinking shit, I'm the only one awake that isn't asleep.

Yeah, there should be some sort of fire watch or something.

Thomas Heikkala: It wasn't planned. And another time we stopped for the night and crawled into a thicket of bushes, and laying around in there as it got dark, and I heard a mortar go off about I don't know, 10 times or more, and it sounded like it was landing fairly close to us, but they didn't explode. You would just hear the thunk, and then you would hear ss-sh. And it's like maybe somebody knew where we were but they didn't have good ammunition.

Yeah, that's strange.

Thomas Heikkala: That was bizarre. A lot of bizarre stuff occurred.

How did you get the assignment of being the RTO, were you told to do that or did you volunteer for it?

Thomas Heikkala: I think I was probably told.

Did you know at that time what a dangerous position that was?

Thomas Heikkala: No. Maybe it's because I'm smaller, I'm 5'5". I don't really know.

When you were over there going through all this, what was it that was able to keep you going? Did you try to isolate certain thoughts, or did you have some sort of faith, or just some sort of sense of if it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen? What was your kind of thought process during all of this because I think a lot of people have no concept of what that's like?

Thomas Heikkala: Well, like I said, I had to go over there to figure out what was right or wrong, well just about as soon as we landed I had a strong feeling of this is not good. This is weird. But I wasn't of much strength of conscience to be able to fight it. So I just figured I would put up with it and I didn't have that much time left. So amongst the guys, one of the always topics of conversation is how much time do you have left, how short are you? So you start counting your days, and what relief you find comes in a few different forms. It's mostly your friends that you hang out with that help you to cope with what's going on. I had quite a few good friends, and we hung out together and there was also the drugs. There was lots of drugs available, and I had started smoking marijuana just a little bit before I was drafted, and when you got there, it was just available everywhere.

Was it mainly through, did you get it through the civilians there in Vietnam?

Thomas Heikkala: Pay us, bubba. Yeah, different places you could get it in the brothels or different people would have it. You could either get it in a raw state, dry it out, or you could get a carton of Winston's or Salem's or Marlborough's in a carton, all wrapped in cellophane like it was a regular carton of cigarettes and you open it up and you get the little individual packs still wrapped in cellophane and unzip them, open it up, and it's got 20 marijuana cigarettes in it with a filter. And so you could get it that way.

Was marijuana the primary drug or were there other drugs being used, too, pills and things?

Thomas Heikkala: Mostly around the guys that I was with it was marijuana and amphetamines. There was a certain little vial of liquid that was some kind of amphetamine that we used a few times. I don't know how many times I used it, but I'm just guessing, maybe half a dozen or so times. And it was a little bit fun in that it helped you to think and process real quickly, but the conversations that you had were not much fun because everybody was talking so fast and nothing got completed, and then the next day you felt like shit. It just was a bad hangover from that stuff, so I gave that up. I didn't really like it. But having some marijuana was a lot more fun and it was more of a support, really, and it wasn't addictive and it wasn't hard to hide. The culture, I used to hang out at the fire bases sometimes with folks because I had a portable radio. For a while I was hanging out with a lot of the African American guys on the fire bases and we used to hang around and dance and smoke. It helped me to process any racism that I might have had lingering in my soul from growing up to be with these sweet, friendly, laughing African American guys who enjoyed me, too. So it was really a melting pot for a lot of racism in any places.

So during that time you mentioned that you kind of kept track of how many days you had left. Do you think in retrospect that helped you or did you think that kind of made things seem to drag on more?

Thomas Heikkala: Oh, I don't know if it helped. Sometimes it was a drag. After being in that recon platoon for a few months, it was getting, it was scary, and there was a guy – our recon platoon was part of a company in the battalion, that they had a recon platoon and a four deuce mortar platoon, E Company. So we had a captain who oversaw the mortar platoon and the recon platoon, although he never did anything. So he had an RTO, and his RTO had lost his brother in Vietnam sometime not recent, and I got to talking with him one time and he really wanted to get out in the field to avenge his brother or to be part of that, and so I told him I want to get out of the field. I do not like it. And so somehow we arranged a swap of jobs. So he went out in my job and I went in his job, which kept me in the fire base, and only out in the field once in a while. So being in the fire base, you didn't really need an RTO for the captain because he didn't do anything except when they sent him out in the boonies once in a while. So they made me the battalion soda jerk. They had a little hut that had beer and sodas, and it was my job to keep it iced up and stocked. So I did that for a while. We went out in the boonies a few times from there.

During this time, were you able to get much word from back home? I know 1968 was probably one of the most tumultuous years in American history. Did you know what was going on with the assassinations and the Democratic Convention in Chicago with the riot and all that, were you aware of that sort of thing?

Thomas Heikkala: Somewhat, because we got the newspaper, the Stars and Stripes, and it had some of that stuff in it. It had a little bit of news about those sort of things. And it had news about all sorts of stuff that was going on, and I remember reading about San Francisco and the hippies and stuff in one issue, and that started me feeling like that's more where I should be. So in the military, everybody was on some kind of drug, everybody. Either you were drinking or you were smoking or you were taking heroin or you were taking speed. Everybody was on drugs. So I just became kind of a hippie in the military, and found some identification with others in that, or a way to cope with my fears. I slept in a bunker not far from a battery of 105 Howitzers. I would wake up in the night hearing them doing their fire missions. I had so much anxiety in my body at times it was hard to figure out how to go to sleep. So I learned how to

close my eyes and just keep looking at what I could see which was often just a myriad of colors changing in front of my eyes. I don't know if you know what I mean when you close your eyes there's all this blobby, blocky stuff that happens, and that was enough of a distraction to help me sleep.

What about your family? Did you hear much from them while you were in Vietnam?

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah, I wrote to my folks. My mom would write to me. I called them once from a USO in Saigon.

What were their thoughts or what did they share with you about your service? Were they worried about you?

Thomas Heikkala: Oh I'm sure, but I don't remember what the letters said, to tell you the truth.

And then you weren't married or had a girlfriend at that point, right?

Thomas Heikkala: No.

So when you finally, when your time is almost up, tell us kind of what that's like when you're getting close to finally getting to leave.

Thomas Heikkala: Well the anxiety gets stronger and you start counting your days more, they become more apparent how many days left you have.

Were you back out in the field again at this point or are you still in the fire base?

Thomas Heikkala: Mostly in the fire base and once in a while they would move us to another fire base, either deep out in the jungle some place, and sometimes you would only be there for a couple of days and they would move you again. So we moved a bunch of times. The fire base was never attacked. It was actually not a horrendous experience as I've heard and read about with places like Caisson and other places where it was scary just to move around. But you learn a lot about what's happening no matter what. They gave me a combat infantryman's badge which I often thought this is weird. I only remember shooting once when we were, well the first place we went was on top of a mountain, a little hill that poked up on the edge of the jungle, and we were put up on the top of this hill and from the top of this hill that must've raised up a 100 meters or so into the air, kind of like a little dome, and on the top it was just a ring of foxholes and bunkers. And on one side and in back of you there was a jungle, and the other side it was a big, open plain that you could see for five miles or more, and a river that snaked through it. We stayed up there for a week just watching and doing little patrols. This was actually the first place that they sent me. This is interesting. So we were on this hill, and the river was called the Song Dong Nai, song meaning river. One time I remember that C-47 gun ship that they called Puff the Magic Dragon, it flew over in the big open area, and it opened up with its mini-guns, and nothing shot back at it, but I don't even know why they did it. And I could see way, way off, miles in the distance, tracers flying back and forth sometimes and you could tell because it was some kind of fire fight because the enemy's tracers were white or purple, and ours were orange. And one night while I was on guard at the bunker, I was looking out into the jungle and one of our companies, I think it was Charlie Company, was patrolling through the jungle at night in the pitch dark, no moon, dark, dark, dark. And I was on the radio, I had the radio and I could hear the RTO's talking a little bit, and as I was watching, looking out in the woods, I saw an orange

tracer fly up and then another, and then a bunch of them, and then a whole lot of them, and it was like a chain reaction. What had happened was a couple of guys got killed, but it was a mistake. Somebody because they were walking at night in the dark, the guys were really angry at having to do that, and they started throwing their equipment down and making some ruckus, and somebody got scared thinking that they heard something and opened fire, which caused others to open fire, and it was a little disaster.

Yeah, that's bad news.

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah. And another night we thought we heard something down in the woods and the lieutenant started calling in the artillery, and the shells started coming right over our heads, and shooting a little bit down into the woods, but nothing ever came of it. We were all green. We didn't know what the hell was going on. But it kind of gets to you.

Sure. So what was it like when you finally got back home? Did you arrive back at the airport in San Francisco?

Thomas Heikkala: No, they flew us to Osaka and then to Anchorage, and then to Travis Air Force Base near Sacramento, and then they bussed us to Oakland where they processed us out.

Was that a sense of relief at that point that you had that behind you?

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah, it was kind of a cold and empty feeling. It was not Vietnam. And I got a bus or something back to Daly City and arrived about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, to the great relief of my dad, who was glad I was there. And I think I slept for 20 hours at least. And I don't know, I don't remember too much about what happened exactly except I had friends that were living out in the Haight-Ashbury district and I was, they were my closer friends, so I went over there and hung out with them for a while, and then some of them were living in a garage apartment not far from that district, and I moved over there after a little while of being home.

Did you talk to folks that weren't your friends about how you'd been in Vietnam? I've heard a lot of stories about how a lot of guys when they came back home were called baby killers or they were spat upon and it was a lot of stuff that was put upon the individual soldiers and Marines and such, and they didn't ask to be there, but they came home and they were treated like they were kind of the personification of the Lyndon Johnson administration and that sort of thing. Did you have any experiences like that with people?

Thomas Heikkala: No, in fact most of the guys I've talked to think that that's a myth. It's some kind of propaganda myth, because they never heard of any of that either. To them it's some kind of made up bullshit that didn't really exist. It's not anywhere near as much as it's ade out to be. I had one close friend that was living with us, he'd gotten back from Vietnam before I went and he was a crew chief on a helicopter gun ship, so I'm sure he probably killed a whole bunch of folks, but we never talked about it much. He lost close friends. I got back into flying again and got my license renewed and he would never go flying with me. I asked him if he'd want to take a ride and he didn't want to go at all. So that's what I started doing. I said well, I'll just back and become an instructor again. So by the time I got my license back and everything, I had this feeling in me like I really screwed up, that having allowed myself to go and be part of all that atrocity was a blight on my soul. It was like something I really wished I hadn't done, but I had done it, so I was going to have to figure out how to process this, and I figured it was going to take me at least a year to get my head together. Because I felt so poorly about it and my self

esteem was so bad, I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to get involved with much of anything, but I got my license back and stuff, and by the time I had it all back, I thought I don't really want to do this. Partly it was because the people that I worked for were kind of oblivious to what was going on and joking and kind of pro-war, and it just felt like I don't really want to be around these people. So I stopped doing that and got a job at the post office and did that for a month or so, and then I got a job with a guy who was spray painting big commuter buses. I did that for a while. And then I hooked up with this group that was having a weekly meeting that was called Monday Night Class, and it was mostly, mainly the hippies involved, because you know San Francisco was kind of like a mecca, it was a place where everybody knew about San Francisco and they wanted to go there, and they came from all over the country to check it out and see what was going on. So and the Haight-Ashbury was there and the rock and roll music, and the drugs and all this stuff was going on that was very intriguing and enlightening to the young folks of those days. We had the civil rights thing happening. It was a big time of change. Women's liberation was on the rise and most folks knew that the war was a crazy atrocity that had virtually no meaning in reality, that it was of any value at all. It galvanized the whole generation to do things, to try and figure out how to live differently. That was exciting, and it helped me to be part of that, and not to get stuck in my own personal problems with PTSD and other stuff that gave me a way to explore, to try and understand who I was, to try and figure out what would be the best thing to try and do to make my life and my world a better place to live.

Did you get involved with any of the anti-war groups in the area?

Thomas Heikkala: No, not really. I was mostly involved with this class that I went to. When I first went to it, there were several hundred people going, and by the time I stopped going to it, it was a few thousand. It was a lot about exploring yourself and figuring out how to, not to see an angry, cynical person and to figure out how to, what was important. So it was an exploration of many, many things. Most of it was kind of religious and it came out of the drug culture, mainly not so much the hard drugs like heroin and amphetamines and downers and things, but stuff that was more enlightening or had helped others like LSD and mescaline, peyote, and marijuana. They were a whole different kind of substance.

Kind of more the Timothy Leary group.

Thomas Heikkala: Yeah, that's some of what Timothy Leary was about. He was a psychiatrist, him and Richard Alpert, and he was part of that. I never really liked him a whole lot although I saw him one time, but it was more interesting the guy that was teaching our class, and we explored a lot of the different religions and to try and figure out what things each of these religions had that was kind of a principle or thing that you could live by that would help you day to day through your life. As that went on, it eventually evolved into a whole core of us who were pretty close, got to be very good friends, and we would have dinners together and hang out together, and some of us had kids, people got married, and the guy who taught the class got to be pretty well respected around town, particularly by one church that had lent him their basement to use for the class for a while, and when he went and spoke to a convention of ministers at the Glide Memorial Methodist Church was what it was called, all the ministers liked him so much because he gave them some hope about their youth. Where they had come from around the U.S., there was a lot of dissatisfaction and estrangement from families that were causing a lot of families to become, have a lot of difficult things about them to live with, and he gave them some hope about how to look at it, the changes that these kids were going through, and they invited him to come speak at their churches. So we did this, he arranged a tour, that circled the whole U.S. in the winter of 1970, and he said if any of us from the class wanted to go with him, we'd

have to get a bus or something together, and we'd travel together. So we did, and we called it the Caravan, and it was about 30 buses that left San Francisco on October 12th of 1970 and we went up north through Oregon, across the north and on the east coast and back through the south and back to San Francisco over about six months. And we talked to all these churches and schools and different places.

How did you guys support yourselves during that time?

Thomas Heikkala: Well, some folks had money and in my case, it wasn't my wife at the time, the lady that I was living with and a friend and his wife, we just, if we ran out of money, wherever we did a gig, we'd search around town to see if we could find a job for a day or two, and we did. So we made it all the way around. By the time we got back to San Francisco, we had felt like we were kind of a little community, and we didn't really just want to go our separate ways. So we talked about it would be nice if we could create a community on the land somewhere, so it seemed like California was too expensive, and we remembered that when we went through Nashville, being kind of a Bible belt area that it was, we were very nicely accepted there. People were so nice to us. It was in January of '71 we were parked in this campground on the edge of Nashville, the Army Corps of Engineers campground, and we took up the whole place. By that time there was about 50 vehicles in our caravan, and over that weekend we had a line of cars coming into our campground, bumper to bumper a mile long, just people wanted to see who we were because it was kind of put on the radio that this group was cruising through and everybody wanted to come see who we were. And that was really sweet. So when we got back to the Bay Area, we said let's go back to Tennessee and see if we can find some land there. So we packed it up in March, still kind of winterish, and drove all the way back to Tennessee and started looking for land and spent about a month searching a little bit in Kentucky, not Kentucky, what's it called? Arkansas, and we sent out little groups all around Tennessee searching, and finally a guy who was in the group went to buy some guitar strings in a music store in Nashville and the woman had heard about it and said you guys are looking for land, well if you need a place to stay, I have some land down in Lewis County, go down there and park until you figure it out. So that was 70 miles south of Nashville, so we all just went down there and drove, had to cut our way into the woods. They had 600 acres or so to an open area, and we stayed there for a couple of months looking for land and we found some right next door, and pooled together our resources and bought 1,000 acres.

Wow. Would it be fair to call it a commune? Is that what you guys were going to set up?

Thomas Heikkala: We were a little bit opposed to that name because we felt like we were more of a religious group in a lot of ways, so we wanted to just call it community. So people would call it commune, and I don't shrink from that, but so we got that land and moved onto it and then we bought another 750 adjacent to it and called it The Farm, and it still exists today. It's still part of some places I like to go and visit and have friends there.

How long did you stay there?

Thomas Heikkala: 10 years. All three of my kids were born there, natural childbirth, and The Farm is known worldwide as a natural childbirth center where a lot of the, that's one of the women's revolutionary things that kind of came out of the 60s and 70s, too, was we need to bring the sacrament of birth back to home, and so midwifery has become an important aspect of American life now because of that in some circles, not predominantly. My daughter had her baby at home here in Austin.

Yeah, there's a lot of folks that have done that. So what was it that finally brought you to Austin?

Thomas Heikkala: Well after living in Tennessee for 10 years or so, my one son who was born a little bit premature, like three weeks, and his immune system wasn't fully developed – it wasn't abnormal but it was low normal, and he was sick all the time. They have like 50-60 inches of rain in Tennessee, and it was a lot of stuff. He was having ear infections and bronchitis and on antibiotics every month. So we thought we needed to take him to a drier climate, and we left there in early '81 and went to San Diego where they only have 9 inches of rain a year, and lived there for about a year. But a group of people who had come from the farm, we had little branches of it all around the country at the time, and he did well there. It was six months before he was sick, and then another six months. But it was hard to find work there to maintain ourselves. And so we had this other group here in Austin, so we called them up and they said yeah, there's lots of work here. Come on. So we came here in early '82.

That's great, and you've been here since?

Thomas Heikkala: For the most part.

That's great. I'm sure you've seen Austin change a lot over the years as well.

Thomas Heikkala: Yep.

Do you like the changes or not?

Thomas Heikkala: Well -

Was it a better town in '82 in your opinion?

Thomas Heikkala: In some ways. Texas politics is kind of oppressive, and the fact that we're at the bottom of the heap for so many different programs of social worth makes it kind of crazy, because I think it's really a wealthy place. Since I've been here, I've been involved with – the farm started a relief and development organization to help do projects in other countries to help people with their diet, mainly with food, because one of the tenets of our saying was vegetarianism. So we developed a lot of our diet based around soybeans and the multiple uses of them, and we just helped people develop soy berries where they process soy beans and make tofu and soy milk and ice cream and tempeh, and all the highly nutritious products that are available in soy. And I'm still involved with that. We're doing a project right now that, a nutrition program for some of the children of the families that work in the Guatemala city dump, some of the poorest of the poor in Guatemala, and people work in the dump pulling out the recyclable materials and live in shantytown squatter camps. So we just started a program this year and it's just getting going now where we're providing some soy milk and highly nutritious cookie-cracker or something or other to a couple hundred kids a couple of days a week, and it's going to be increasing as we figure out funding. And it's been many different programs in places over the years because that group started, and it's called Plenty, that started in 1974. And I've also been involved with veterans' issues here in Austin. I joined Veterans for Peace back in 1985 and have been a member ever since. And I've worked 9 years with a group in town here called Non-Military Options for Youth and we have an agreement with the city schools to be able to go into the high schools and set up a table of information to help young people understand what is

important about life and what the military is about that the recruiters won't tell you, both for men and women, and to help them see options that they may be able to access that aren't military-oriented. That's been a pretty successful program, because it just gives another side to the story. And it's important for a society that people seem to know as much as they can before they make decisions.

Nobody disagrees with that. The more information the better, the more open probably the better. Well sir, I know we've gone well over an hour, but I really appreciate you taking the time to share your memories with us. I don't know if I told you this, but we have archives here at the Land Office that go back to the Spanish Land Grant days. We have Stephen F. Austin's original Registro and the Land Grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo. So our goal is to add these interviews to those archives so potentially hundreds of years from now people can listen to all these different interviews and gain some understanding of what it was like to serve in the armed forces during particular different times, and I appreciate you sharing with us your story, and just from Commissioner Patterson and everybody else here at the Land Office, we want to thank you as well for your service. And in about a week or so we'll send you a copy of this interview on CD's, and then about a week or so after that, we'll be sending you a little certificate and a letter from Commissioner Patterson in a nice little commemorative binder. So it's just one little small way of us saying thank you.

Thomas Heikkala: OK.

Yes sir, all right, well have a great day, sir.

Thomas Heikkala: You too.

All right, take care, bye bye.

[End of recording]